

2021 Essays Spring



by Michael Erlewine

2021
Dharma Essays
SPRING

by Michael Erlewine

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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.

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MIND THE EMPTY GAP

Let's talk about the gap that we so love to ignore, the gap between one moment when we are being totally busy or entertained by something, and the next when all of a sudden, we are distracted and pop out of that busyness, only to find ourselves at loose ends, and without anything to entertain us, that is, until we can find some other form of entertainment to latch on to in which to absorb ourselves in. Now let's flip that.

My belief is that when we are totally just busy being entertained is when we are actually the most distracted, distracted from what? I don't mean to play with words, but the answer is that we are distracted from being "undistracted," which means just being present and resting in the moment. This is something most of us are not used to (being undistracted) and even go out of our way to avoid, thus the fixation on entertaining ourselves.

If we are not used to just being present in this moment and feel anxious or awkward, we madly try to find something else to entertain us. And that time between entertainments is the "gap" I am talking about here, something many people (without even realizing) seek to avoid..

Before I say more, let's differentiate interests that are in our path through which we learn or gather experience from what I am talking about in this article, which is busyness for busyness sake – entertainment which, like worry beads we involve ourselves in, just to feel comfortable.

That “gap” between our entertainment habit is what I am talking about, the time when we are totally without entertainment and thus subject to boredom, ennui, awkwardness, etc. Just being at rest in the present moment, many find boring or even unsettling, something to avoid.

Having nothing to focus on or be busy with in these empty gaps, meaning just resting without any object of attention, is unnerving for most of us. As to how I learned of this, This harkens back to my stroke experience a couple of years ago, and the extreme anxiety and avoidance I discovered when my “entertainment” habit was wiped out by the stroke for weeks and months, which left me looking directly into the bright light, this gap of “non-entertainment,” i.e., not being entertained whatsoever.

Being constantly entertained, like the baby that wants to be nursed all the time, is a symptom of the dis-ease I am pointing out here. It is a symptom so pervasive that it does not even show up on our social radar screen. In that department self-fixation on entertaining ourselves, we keep a tight ship on and are pretty-much sealed airtight, this, so that we have entertainment all of the time, with few timeouts or gaps.

In other words, we are immersed in busyness for its own sake, instead of Insight. It's not like we are not attentive; the question is: attentive to what? And the answer is that we are attentive to whatever entertains us, so at some point, there has to be (or we will discover) an extended gap, like the shock when a loved one dies and leaves us with a gaping hole in our busyness, one that signals (at least

temporarily) our complete distraction from our ordinary distractions. We wake up to gap or empty plain of non-distraction.

Someday, at such a point of loss, there will a migration or learning curve on our part, away from identifying with the busyness of entertainment all the time to instead identifying with the nature of this sudden gap that appeared through our loss. And this happens, however briefly, naturally at times of loss or through meditation practices like Insight Meditation. So, its not that our mind ordinarily is unaware, but rather WHAT we are aware OF that is at issue here. It's not like we are unaware, but that we are (and have been) misdirected all this time. We are habituated to busyness and the "worry beads" of entertainment.

And we either are totally unaware of our dis-ease or we fight like hell to suppress it. Even for myself, who had weeks-to-months of this open "gap" condition after my major stroke, even today I can but sample that memory of the "gap" from that time, as I scurry back to my busyness, to being entertained much of the time. In other words, my refuge is my entertainment, and discussions like this are but forays or safaris away from the entertainment I am used to, but always returning to the entertainment, before I turn into a pumpkin, so to speak. Lip service is a hard habit to break.

I don't or can't live there (in the gap) or remain constantly aware of that vast gap in my own experience. I can write and talk about it like here,, from memory, but I really don't enjoy being in that condition of non-entertainment or even bringing it to mind, though I know or believe it to be the truth.

That's how much we buy into whatever entertainment we channel.. And we tend to channel entertainment 24x7, with no breaks. Superficially, we like to think of "entertainment" as watching a movie or reading the odd book or two, while we completely ignore our heartfelt addiction to it, and that we subscribe to via full-

time entertainment. We don't want time on our hands, so to speak, so we keep our head down, entertaining ourselves.

I know this is a very difficult subject to be aware of, much less to take seriously, because I lived in and through it for weeks and months after my major stroke. It's deny, deny, deny and take refuge in what is habitual and more comfortable for us, which is whatever form of almost constant entertainment that will float our boat..

How to share this awareness of these gaps with others is not the issue here. I can't even get myself to go there, so habituated am I to sticking my head in the sand on this particular issue. In other words, I first have to free myself from this condition of avoiding the natural gaps that come up, before I can help others become aware that it even exists. I am working on it, but it is difficult.

I have floated this concept of gaps and tend to run it by anyone who will listen, in blogs, articles, and e-books, but either I get no real response or feedback that this is perhaps a medical condition that I suffer from. I get it, but since the condition continues to persist for me, and is undeniable, its hard to be quieted about it. I am still getting my arms around it, as it is, much less am able to convincingly describe it to others. I can but point it out. I take forays into that "gap" realm and struggle to be clear about it myself. Yet, once our eyes are open, it is hard to close them again.

I would appreciate some discussion about this if it rings a bell.

Apr 1, 2021, 5:55 AM

A LITTLE MAGIC IN THE SERENDIPITY

This is just a fun story of recent days. For reasons I don't exactly understand, in these last months I have had a resurgence of an old music love and that is of the Hammond B3 organ, a 425 lb. beast that has haunted me for 60 years. And in the middle the 1960s I owned one, meaning I bought it on time payments. I lived in basically one large room at 114 N. Division in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in a house that came to be known as the "Prime Mover House, after the name of our band.

How the delivery boys got up the stairs to install the B3 in my room was mostly because I was lucky enough to have double-doors that opened inward to what was basically one room, my bedroom. I managed the top two floors of the house and it was filled with musicians. And where one would normally find a bed, was my Hammond B3, right in the middle of the room. I slept on a tiny bit of a mattress that I had made for myself, little more than a mat on the floor.

Anyway, there sat my beast of a B3 with me trying to learn to play it. Well, unfortunately we did not make enough money playing as a band for me to keep up on the payments and before long, they came and took my B3 away. Painful.

Many years later, when I built a recording studio near where I live now in Big Rapids, Michigan, I managed to get a B3 once again, a used one, actually an A-100 in perfect condition, which is a B3 with wooden sides, made for churches. It was the same beast of a thing that I love and we managed to get it down the basement stairs of the studio, and it worked. Well, that lasted quite a few years, but since it was about a block away from my home, and I am lazy, I seldom

managed to play it enough, yet many others did and recorded on it at our studio -
- Heart Center Studios.

Well, our studio was mainly for our daughter May Erlewine, an up and coming singer/songwriter, yet as time went on the studio got less and less use, because larger studios were required for her work. Anyway, the Hammond just sat there, which was a bit of a sad thing. And so, I eventually traded my Hammond (all 425 lbs. of it) to my good friend Tyler Duncan down in Ann Arbor, who aside from being a legendary performer of Irish music, also ran his own studio. I traded the Hammond for studio time for my daughter May. May and Tyler are good friend, as well.

Anyway, time passes, as we know, but my love of the Hammond B3 never tired and I became an expert (in my own mind) on B3 players, especially in jazz, players I especially liked, including:

Wild Bill Davis, Joey DeFrancesco, 'Papa' John DeFrancesco, Barbara Dennerlein, Bill Doggett, Dr. John, Charles Earland, Richard "Groove" Holmes, Booker T. Jones, Charles Kynard, Ron Levy, Jack McDuff, Jimmy McGriff, John Medeski, Don Patterson, John Patton, Billy Preston, Don Pullen, Sun Ra, Mel Rhyne, Rhoda Scott, Shirley Scott, Jimmy Smith, Johnny "Hammond" Smith, Lonnie Smith, Lyman Woodard, and Larry Young, to name a few.

I am very fond of the jazz genre known as "Soul Jazz" or "Original Funk," which is not the same as Parliament Funk or funk as it is generally known. Soul Jazz is basically organ trios, small groups usually with a Hammond B3, drums, and sax or guitar. Bass is usually played on the B3 using foot pedals, and so on.

Anyway, in recent months that old B3 fever reemerged. Perhaps it is just part of spring. Well, certainly I was not going to find and purchase another 425 lb. Hammond B3 at my age, much less find a room in my house where it could rule. Nevertheless, my mind would not let the thought alone, probably because for some reason I was not done with my karma with the B3. I love that music.

And before I knew it, I found myself gathering some of my musical apparatus from here and there around the house and storage areas, like my harmonicas, amplifier, mics, and I had an old Yamaha keyboard, that was more a synthesizer than a funk organ. My mind kept wanting to penetrate my ears and mind with the that Hammond B3 sound that I loved so well. It is like medicine for me. Back in my drinking days, I was never happier at the end of a work day than sitting down with Margaret, playing some Soul Jazz, and savoring a quart of pilsner beer. We listened to a lot of funky organ music in those years, and we really enjoyed the times. My kids grew up hearing the best music in the world, IMO. That's how my daughter May was schooled in sound.

Well, I have no interest in alcohol anymore, yet as mentioned, my ears still long to be pierced to the brain by that funky B3 organ sound, with the exception that this time I want to play it myself. How silly, at almost 80 years old to decide to pick up an instrument I never learned well and learn it enough to quench that yearning. But that's what happened and is happening.

So, before I knew it, I found myself searching the Internet for Hammond organ substitutes. And, as it turns out, which I already knew, Hammond now makes a portable lightweight organ that still has that Hammond sound, or pretty close to it. And so, I looked at those. Indeed, I studied them. I also called my musical friends and picked their brains a bit. My friend Mike Lynch is a wonderful B3 player and he was kind enough to answer some of my questions.

At any rate, I finally I settled on getting a Hammond portable keyboard, which came in three sizes, 61 keys, 73 keys, or dual 61 key keyboards, and even an 88-note keyboard. I settled on the 88-note keyboard because I would have plenty of room for both the bass (left-hand) and also room on the right for melody. I threatened to order one, and before I knew it, I found myself pressing a key that sent my order to PayPal. I did it; I ordered one and waited. And waited. Life is short.

I also learned there was a new model just released, called the Hammond SK Pro, which came in 66 keys or 73 keys. The first batch was totally sold out and there was no exact date when a second batch would appear. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but read about it, watching many quite-long videos on this new keyboard. And here is what for me is the magic part.

I was waiting for my 88-key Hammond to arrive, but it just kept stretching out day after day. I would check the FedEx tracking, but the company had not even shipped it yet as far as I could tell. Hmm.

And I watched these wonderful videos by a Hammond artist named Jim Alfredson, who did these very thorough and fascinating introductions to this new Hammond keyboard, the SK Pro. I had questions that I could not answer, and I wished that I could contact someone like Alfredson, who knew about these new Hammond keyboards. And I even checked Facebook and sure enough Jim Alfredson was on Facebook. Did I dare contact him?

From his videos, he seemed like a very nice guy, yet someone like Alfredson must be totally busy, with no time to answer questions as simple as mine. Yet I decided to take a chance, so I messaged him on FB. I introduced myself, said a few things about my interest, and explained that I understood if he had no time

to answer, but that I appreciated and very much enjoyed his videos on these Hammond keyboards. They are really good, so very clear.

That done, I turned to other things. It was starting to get late, and I ought to heading for bed, supposedly being old and all. And to my surprise, only minutes later, up on my screen popped a message from Alfredson, answering my questions. And I was shocked to find that he lived right here in Michigan, in Lansing, where my son Michael lives and works at a legendary music store on the management team, Elderly Instruments.

I had asked Alfredson about the new Hammond SK Pro, and although he did not know me, he even offered to loan me the new keyboard to try out, just as a kindness. And it gets better. He was totally friendly and even knows my daughter May's music and loves it. We messaged back and forth, and I learned a lot. He explained that the internal music engine of these new Hammond keyboards was quite a dramatic upgrade, and that they had even tweaked the voices, sounds, etc. making them even better than before, and so on. We also have some phone time scheduled in the next few days. So, that was my first serendipitous moment.

I had called a large music store (Sweetwater), but found that the new keyboard was totally sold out and a new batch would be (perhaps) available as early as the middle of May, but no promises. Meanwhile, my 88-key Hammond was due to arrive in the next day or two. Alfredson also gave me a name of a man in California who might have one of these new keyboards. I messaged him, as well.

As it turns out, this man did not have that keyboard available. I then contacted the company with my 88-note keyboard and asked them to cancel the order and that I would pay to ship it back as a return. I apologized for inconveniencing them. They just cancelled it, and said "No problem," and probably had not even shipped it yet. That was some luck.

And then, for my final piece of luck, I set out to call various music houses around the country to see if I could find one of these new keyboards, but they all had sold out and had no idea when new stock might arrive. It is a hot item just now.

Then, I called one last company, and to their (and my) surprise, they had one that they did not know they had. They checked it twice and, sure enough, there was one available. They told me how amazing it was, even for them, to find one copy of the 73-note Hammond SK Pro keyboard, as they had sold out. This was from Vintage King in Detroit, and they shipped it yesterday, to hopefully arrive today.

And so, a lot of this was thanks to the encouragement of Jim Alfredson. And I later found out the he and I share 118 mutual Facebook friends, mostly local Michigan artists... and that my daughter May and Alfredson share about 700 friends. Small world.

So, I apologize for the length of this, but how it all fell together instead of falling apart was a bit of a sign to me that the force is with me on my journey to use up my Hammond B3 karma.

Video of Jim Alfredson on the classic Hammond B3 doing "Green Onions" after Booker T and the MGs).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR7m2muhoEk>

Video of our studio with May Erlewine (pregnant with my granddaughter Iris at the time) singing a song she wrote:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTOUNItKR1A>

Apr 3, 2021, 12:41 PM

LIFE AS MISDIRECTION

It is encouraging to remember that we all are in Samsara and have always been so. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was VERY clear about this, that we are not, like Plato (or Christians) suggest, “sinners,” and that we once knew the nature of our own mind, but through something like “Original Sin,” we fell away from that and are now trying to get back or redeem ourselves. That’s not it, say the Buddhists, and this is a very important point.

Rinpoche said that we never once-upon-a-time in the past knew and then somewhere along the line lost that awareness. Instead, Rinpoche said, we are only now, for the very first time, trying to become aware of our own nature. Rinpoche even went so far as to say that we, all of us in Samsara, are the stragglers, the ones who never until now got it, never woke up to the nature of our own mind. In other words, we are still working on it.

And what is Samsara? It is exactly the misdirection that we struggle under to be clear of and our refuge in distraction (constant entertainment) instead of clarity. So, having been this way forever up to this moment, through countless lives, as

the dharma states, is it any wonder that we have taken refuge in what is more than just a cottage industry of entertaining ourselves, both day and night.

Of course, we give lip service to awareness and becoming aware, enlightened, and all that. I do too, yet it seems hard for us to move even the least inch toward actually giving up and getting away from the shadow-entertainment in which we have taken up refuge for countless eons.

DON'T PAY ATTENTION

Playing with words is not my first rodeo as far as using Insight Meditation; that would be photography. In other words, I have something to compare to, triangulate, and have something of a 3D or stereo view.

Why I don't just immerse and rest in Insight Meditation and be happy with that, with no further activity I don't know. Perhaps that will come in time. It seems that I have to fiddle with something to be engaged and stay immersed. Working with words does that, well, perfectly, IMO.

Yet, I'm not doing crossword puzzles or playing Scrabble. That holds little interest for me. Instead, I'm working with the clarity or the lack of it in my own mind. It's dharma but a dharma that has strayed from where I started out. For me, dharma is not so "churchy" as it used to be, or perhaps I'm not thinking of dharma so much as an alternative to religion as that dharma is the truth of life and worth my paying attention to. What else is there as interesting?

In a way, I often know Insight Meditation when I come out of it, retrospectively, so to speak. The power of distraction back to what we can call “ordinary” day-to-day mind contrasts with the vivid awareness of Insight Meditation. I would rather spend time in the meditation rather than in awareness of not being in Insight Meditation. There is that contrast that is always there. Yet, is immersion in Insight Meditation some kind of escape? Is the ordinary world the “real world” or is the vivid awareness of Insight Meditation the real world?

And do I care? The simple truth is that, for me, Insight Meditation is where I like to spend my time, perhaps because Insight Meditation is timeless. There is no sense of time when we are fully immersed in something and, according to the dharma texts, no karma acquired when we are immersed in it. And no, immersion in Insight Meditation is not turning a blind eye toward reality. It is awareness of while we are immersed within reality.

Ordinary mind lacks that awareness. Or, our unaware mind wants awareness, perhaps a tautology. “Paying attention” is part of our language, yet I don’t like the idea of “paying” as a descriptor. Would “what demands our attention” be better, the idea as to what is naturally interesting to us? Then, I don’t like the idea of something demanding us. I like better the idea of following our natural inclination or interest, which then “holds” our attention or attracts our attention. That is closer to what feels right to me, our attention being attracted, what is attractive to our attention. There we are or at least there I am.

Our attention being inclusive until there is nothing left that can divide our attention. That is more like what Insight Meditation is like and about. And having undivided attention is freeing because of the total inclusion it requires... and complete letting go. Everything is free to be interdependent and to assume its rightful place in reality. Nothing is out of place or divisive. Yet just how does that work?

The byproduct of immersion in Insight Meditation is an increasing realization as to the true nature of Samsara, this world of cyclic ups and downs we find ourselves in. There is an ongoing process at work here that perhaps we can define. I like the image of the ancient city of Atlantis arising from the waters of Lethe, from unawareness.

And Insight Meditation is just that, vivid awareness.

Apr 5, 2021, 7:46 AM

WE CAN'T GET WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE

It is a question that I have, as to the “contrast” we depend on when beginning Insight Meditation. And by contrast I mean the contrast or difference between the clarity of Insight Meditation and the clarity (or lack thereof) of our walk-around ordinary mind. There is a sharp and vivid difference between the two, and the comparison of one to the other reminds us of just that and acts like a guide.

However, the more we practice Insight Meditation and incorporate it into our lives, the less ordinary mind we have to compare it to because we are finding every ordinary thing or process more extraordinary. And so, the contrast or signal we are used to, the “difference,” gets weaker and not stronger, which would mean we are using Insight Meditation more and more of the time, and thus our distractions get less and less. If that is the case, as the contrast or difference

dims down or slowly dies out, what are we to see with or depend on to guide us? On the one hand, we need the contrast less and less, but at the same time, if that contrast is pretty much an ingrained habit and something we depend on, what do we transition to? What's the next step, so to speak?

It is here that we might have some discussion about the levels or bhumis of the more advanced meditation practices, because at this point, there is a transition, but to where?

“You can't gain what you already have,” would be a slogan for this transition, yet we can become aware of what we have. We are now mostly in the driver's seat of our own practice and no longer just a visitor to Insight Meditation. We begin to identify with Insight Meditation more than we identify with what we could call our habitual or ordinary mind. This is a transmigration or reidentification.

I guess one thing that could be said to “loom” big on the agenda would be the need to further stabilizing our Shamata (Tranquility) meditation, meaning instead of perfecting it on the cushion or around the house, so to speak, as the dharma texts say, take our stability to the marketplace and see how that stability holds up in a more volatile and unpredictable environment.

I don't actually feel much like testing it, not to mention Covid, probably because my Shamata is not so stable that I feel like pushing that envelope just yet, although our Insight Meditation is only as good as the Shamata it stands on. I would say that I am still refining Insight Meditation and eventually closing out or finishing up the ordinary take on things, not depending or enjoying it too much. So, what to do?

Well, as I have been posting lately, instead of going outside to the “marketplace,” I chose to take on a very difficult and time-intensive immersion in actual musical performing, just for myself. And so far, I’ve done pretty well. I’ve had many days (and long nights) of trying to create a music workstation, complete with a keyboard, recording device, various microphones, monitors, and dozens of cables, and wires. It’s enough to drive me crazy, yet I have tried to be very careful and calm about it.

Each failure, each bad cable or connection, software that does not work, etc. led to the next, and I’ve done my best to take them one at a time, give them my complete attention, and not get distracted or upset when they didn’t work for hours and hours, which stretched on into days and still no solution in many cases. I had to go back and start all over again in some instances.

Never you mind, I tell myself. Just put one foot in front of the other and keep working on it, has been my motto. I’m in no hurry. And I have time. Instead of driving my blood pressure up, as I tend to do when craziness in life (like in myself) appears, I just work with it. I finally have the music workstation working, but right now I’m too tired this particular day to make any music. While I can’t do that now, I know tomorrow is another day. I am not putting myself directly in “harm’s way,” yet I am subjecting myself to a very steep learning curve that puts me to the test. Each moment I’m aware leads to each hour and each day.

[Tibetan sand mandala, not different than any detailed undertaking, IMO.]

Apr 6, 2021, 6:52 AM

ASTROLOGICAL CHAKRAS: INTERFACE NODES

There have been few astrologers who have immersed themselves in some of the more pithy astrological techniques that I have developed, and this is especially true when it comes to anything heliocentric, which it seems is just a bridge too far for most modern astrologers.

And at the heart of the depth astrology I have done, all perfectly based on solid astronomical facts, some of these facts remain unknown to all but a few astrologers. If you ask, what is the most essence-filled astrological technique I know (on which I published a book in 1976 called “Interface: Planetary Nodes”), it would have to do with the planetary nodes, where different lines, spheres, and coordinates intersect are seminal and potentially virile. We would almost have to say that astrology is nothing other than nodes, most of which the average astrologer does not even know how they are derived.

Yet, for me, the most profound (pithy) of these techniques is made up of where the different planetary orbits intersect one another creating an ascending and descending pair of nodes. And I’m speaking here not only where the various planet orbits intersect the orbit of Earth, but equally significant is where the planetary orbits of all the planets intersect one another.

For example, the powerful eclipses happen where the orbit of the Moon intersects with the orbit of Earth. Astrologers agree that, indeed, these nodes where eclipses occur are (and always have been) important in astrology. And so are all of the planetary orbits, each intersecting with one another AND each inclined or disinclined one to another.

In this presentation, I will indeed talk about that. However, I will also talk about what these planetary nodes, which are inclined and disinclined to one another, mean. And it will be pointed out how these created the astronomical or physical framework, which in esoteric astrology and other occult science describe, are called the chakras.

Folks imagine that the chakras are little energy points within our physical body, but (it seems) completely fail to understand that the various chakras are entire spiritual worlds in which we wander, being initiated into them one by one and graduating from one to another as time and development permits. The Chakras not only live within our body; we also live within them in a true sense. We will talk about that journey, what is called in the Christian Bible, the opening of the seven seals.

Apr 6, 2021, 9:26 PM

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

It's a bit crazy right in the middle of the launch of spring, not because its spring, but just because this is somewhat of a crazy time for me. Words escape me, but they are not too far off, and you know I will try. How to describe it?

Well, I could start with the title of this blog, that anything is possible. What do I mean by that? It means that suddenly I see or realize in a new way that (well, not anything), almost anything we set out to do is possible for us to accomplish. It only demands our attention, patience, and persistence and we can do it.

Our undivided attention needn't fluctuate, but can be locked-on, just as before it tended to be intermittent, sometimes on and also sometimes going slack and falling away. Yet, "always on" for me is a new experience, and I don't mean some kind of tunnel vision or undivided effort at something. All that's now automatic and takes care of itself.

Put it this way: I can take my computer mouse and place it on my monitor. If I take my hand away, the cursor just stays where I left it. It does not move at all. We all know that.

Well, something like that is now happening in whatever I put my mind to, meaning, when I turn to it or take it up, I am 100% right there, and that attention stays there until I turn my attention elsewhere. It's like magnets. And here is the interesting point to me. When I come back to it, the attention just snaps on and is still right there on it, with not as much as a hair's width of separation. Seamless connection.

And what is remarkable is that I'm totally patient with this, whatever it is, and just set about working it forward, if that is what is warranted. No gap, no loss of patience, and no worry about falling back or not moving forward, no matter how long it takes. I just pick it up where I left off and continue on with no gap.

And there is no ramping up or re-ramping, no getting up to steam. I'm already just right there. And here is what I find most amazing. I'm totally happy about this, whatever it is. I'm not discouraged, no matter how big a mountain is there to be moved. I know I can and will do it. All that is required is patience, persistence, and, as mentioned, I'm happy to do it.

As for me, I'm tired of the dharma "textbooks," my running to them and trying to look up and figure out what I'm experiencing. The heck with this, because it's always different from what they describe it as, probably because of my own filter on things. So, why bother?

It's like trying to drive a car while at the same time attempting to read the manual. Forget about that; let's just drive the car and leave it at that. I don't know exactly where I'm going, but I'm not worried about it.

I guess the glue that holds this together, whatever it is, I am certain it can be solved, and that I can solve it. As things come up that naturally distract or interrupt whatever I'm doing, that's not a problem. I just leave off and attend to the interruption, knowing that when I return, not a moment will have passed since I left, even if it is days, and I can continue from exactly where I left off, without missing a beat.

When I read about stability and Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation, I've imagined as something to be maintained, as opposed to just being there, maintaining itself. I'm not saying this is that, but whatever it is, it's there. With that kind of stability, anything is possible.

Apr 7, 2021, 8:31 PM

THE SPIRITUAL PIVOT

The feeling of gratitude that naturally arises in gratefulness needs no sponsor. Like the dharma texts say, it is like the track of a bird in the air flying across the sky. There is no trace; no residue.

So, if there is resistance, I tell myself to be patient. Turn toward something else, a path of no effort and walk there for the moment. This is not to say that perseverance is not beneficial, but if its only benefit is to define the walls of resistance we must negotiate, and that to better guide us. I guess the colloquial slogan would be “go with the flow.” As Shakespeare said, “Ripeness is all.” Allow things to ripen until they are ripe. After a certain age or level, don’t push it. That is what I have been taught and am learning.

There is a time for force and effort, and most of us have been there and done that. There is also and eventually a time for not making effort, but for actually taking “no” for an answer and learning to work around rather than through what confronts us, a time for Aikido and not Judo.

As my first dharma teacher would tell me. How do we know when it’s time to go to the bathroom? We just know, he would say. It’s the same with ripeness. No need to rob the cradle by anticipating. Trust that when the time is ripe, it will be very clear. We will know. That’s the whole point.

There are also some interesting analogies between the physical birth process and spiritual birth experience. For most physical births, pushing by the mother is required, but after the child is born, the pushing stops. There is no need and harm can result. It is similar in spiritual birth (or even growing older). After around thirty years of age, our physical body is complete and that is the time, or so I was taught, to stop pushing with such effort. And the same is true for spiritual birth. Around thirty years of age, or soon thereafter, is the time to stop pushing and start working “with” whatever we have to date. Again, as I was taught, Saturn

returns in the solar system to its original place, thus completing its cycle, at 29.4 years. Ice melts at thirty-three degrees Fahrenheit, and Christ died on the cross at 33 years, all cited as related to this transformation.

Any way you spell it, what is gained by pushing and effort reverses itself around the age of 30 (or soon after) and going with the flow, working and negotiating our progress begins. The dangers of pushing after that age are well known in occult and esoteric literature, just as “not pushing” before a child is born is dangerous. Rounding or crossing the nadir of physical density is common in spiritual disciplines, either crossing too soon, before the “body” is formed, or too late, too far past the opportunity for spiritual rebirth.

In brief, don't push beyond 30 years and don't “not push” before 30 Years. There is a trajectory centered around what is called the prime of life, before which we need to build and shape our vehicle purposely, and after which we rest and learn to work with the situation.

I had the good fortune to be introduced to this transition by an 82-year Scotsman, who had been a travelling Rosicrucian initiator named Andrew Gunn McIver. He trained me in the above before I was thirty years of age, so thanks to his help, I got to go through this Saturn-Return initiation with my eyes open.

[Walked today up and along Mitchell Creek, which is about a little over a block from our home. We discovered seven garter snakes in the sunny woods, courting one another. Garter snakes give live birth and in the spring gather and form a ball-like mass of snakes. I have seen such a ball of snakes twice in my life. Today, this was just foreplay.]

Apr 8, 2021, 1:39 PM

THE ALGEBRA OF ASTROLOGY

IF we think about it and actually study or look into it, we find that the great majority of astrological factors are not physical bodies, but rather Mathematically derived points, and almost all what are called “nodes.” And few astrologers could define how all these nodes are derived, much less actually calculate them. I’m talking about points like the Ascendant, Nadir, Midheaven, Vertex, East Point, any and all house cusps, and on and on. The only physical bodies are those of the planets themselves and the Moon. Even our much beloved aspects, at least geocentrically, are not based on actual gravitational attraction. Only the heliocentric aspects are related to a direct relationship or pull of the planets to their center the Sun.

I should know because I had not only to understand each and every node, but I actually had to calculate them by programing them all. Well, this talk I am about to give tomorrow on Sunday April 11, 2021 will not be about all these hordes of nodes, but just about a significant subset of them called Planetary Nodes, and heliocentrically at that, meaning they relate to the center of the system they live in, the Sun. I called these points “Interface,” because they are an interface between their outer existence and their inner meaning. They were developed by me in the early 1970s and published as the book “Interface: Planetary Nodes” in 1976. And they were first calculated, not on home computers, because there were none (and no programmable calculators, either), but on mainframe computers with the help of a friend of mine, David W. Wilson.

And no, I’m not going to dwell on all the trigonometry and formulas as to how to calculate these nodes, but rather I will show how these planetary nodes can be used and interpreted. And they are sublime, IMO.

Everything in astrology that I know has, as mentioned, what we might call a specific density of meaning, based on how physically connected they are to the solar system we live in. Planetary Nodes, while mathematically derived are almost like a special algebra, kind of the very skeleton of our Solar System, the set of fewest most significant points or nodes that accurately express the entire system and planets within it.

As for what they mean, I believe they are, as mentioned, THE most significant subset that correctly expresses the solar system because they correctly express all of the inclinations and disinclinations of planetary bodies each to the other.

I find that these Interfacial points are absolutely profound. Have I ever been able to talk about these points with astrologers? Not really, and only a few. My friend and the great astrologer/scientist Dr. Theodor Landscheidt and I have discussed them, and also astrologers like Charles. A. Jayne Jr., Charles Harvey, Axel Harvey, and perhaps a few others. Otherwise, nada. No one seemed to grasp their importance.

In my opinion, these Interface Planetary Nodes perfectly describe what are called the Chakras in spiritual disciplines, the single coherent set of nodes or points that literally interface the outer and the inner in our psyche and lives. They see both ways. They “interface.”

I will be explaining this live tomorrow morning at 11 AM EDT. I have written about it, of course, but few are interested enough to want to learn, although no single astrological technique has humbled me with its truth as these Interface points have; they are beyond my ability to appreciate all that they mean and point to. These Interface Planetary Nodes are the superset of astrology notation.

Sunday, April 11, 2021

AN ASTROLOGICAL MANDALA

In the dharma teachings we have what are called the “Pith Instructions,” being extremely boiled-down, compact, and key instructions. The only problem with pith instructions in my experience, is how to unpack them. They are so pithy that we almost have to have the actual experience in order to recognize what it is they are about.

It’s the same with astrological pith instructions, but perhaps in a less, organized fashion. In fact, with astrology, the astrological technique itself is itself also the pith instruction, but the “unpacking” remains to be accomplished. And how is this done?

This is done (hopefully) by the empowering of the student by the instructor, preferably the original developer of the technique itself. I find it worth considering what is a technique, any technique that works. A step-by-step technique instruction is kind of a boilerplate, the bare bones as to how the technique is reconstituted from the remains of the original illumination or experience. I consider techniques like freeze-dried realizations, to which we only have to add the waters of realization, yet that is not always easy.

In dharma teachings, this is accomplished by what are called “empowerments,” where the empowering instructor or “master” recreates the original insight and mental/spiritual space in which the student realizes the original technique,

illuminates it so that the student is empowered such that the technique lives again in their experience. It comes to life and becomes part of what we could call a lineage.

It is sad that in many cases (if not most), people are executing techniques they have learned by rote, yet have never been fully empowered in the particular technique to realize that technique in full. This is fairly easy to see in astrological techniques. IMO.

I have been fortunate to have found a number of new astrological techniques in the mind as part of my own experience, so I understand this process quite well. An insight inseminates the mind, a new astrological vision, and it has to incubate and develop for certain time, usually a number of years. When the insight is fleshed-out and developed to the point of full realization, then it is possible to reduce the experience to what we would call a technique.

I have developed a number of original astrological techniques and some of them are what I would call, “the low hanging fruit,” meaning they are relatively easy to share. My development of Local Space relocation astrology would be one of them. And others, Burn Rate Retrogrades, Phase-Chart Technique, StarTypes Whole-Chart Patterns, are examples of techniques that perhaps take a little more preparation by the student. And there are others.

Yet, the deepest astrological technique I have come across, the most diamond-like or adamant key technique that I have realized, is the one I am speaking publicly on for the AFAN astrological group tomorrow. And this is “INTERFACE: Planetary Nodes,” the actual set of nodal points that most perfectly reflect the actual structure of the planetary solar system. This is a diamond-like key to astrology, in my opinion. And, even in my case, I have only been able to realize it

for myself, and I feel that I have not exhausted that realization, because it runs so deep. The presentation is here;

Sunday, April 11, 2021

INTERRUPTING INTERRUPTIONS

Something to consider is how best to work with our interruptions, whatever blocks us or gets in our way, however that may be. It could be anything, a car horn, a slamming door, the telephone, and on down the line. That's one level.

A more troubling level is when we are attempting to get something done, especially something that needs to be finished today. And, right in the middle of that, we are interrupted. It happens to me a lot when I am doing something technical, like trying to install a program, and before I can complete the installation, I find that I must take a segue and get the license rights, download drivers, write for permission, update the files, spend days trying to get phone support, or any number of things. These interruptions can easily become a sidebar to a sidebar to a sidebar, until I'm sitting there looking at the clock and wondering how I got derailed, although I know exactly why.

It is this kind of sidebar pileup or perhaps avalanche that quickly gives me a headache and sends my blood pressure on a ramp. It's like my whole day spirals down to a dead stop sometimes.

At any place in the traffic jam of interruptions or distractions, I can stop (as a programmer would say) "pushing the stack" and interrupt that frustration. I can stop what I am doing and give my complete and willing attention to what I would

be forced to do anyway, which is take care of one distraction after another, one at a time, giving my full attention to the next link in the chain.

This whole linear life most of us life is fraught with problems from the get-go, so the ideas of a goal or carrot on a stick needs to be “re-thunk,” so to speak. Being retired, I have the luxury of spreading out my tasks, large and small, like fanning a deck of cards and choosing one and then another. But the reality is that all too often I am driven by a sequence of interruptions, something I intend to stop.

I have to keep in mind that all straight lines are, and I quote myself, “The straighter the line, the finer the curve.” Everything that goes around, comes around.

I have to learn to not play favorites, not have preferences, other than to prefer what each moment offers me. Nice talk if I can do it.

Tonight at 10:30 PM EDT is the New Moon, the start of another solunar cycle.

Apr 11, 2021, 7:54 PM

THE SHAPE OF WHAT'S TO COME

Our activity shapes our path and the way we walk that path. It's like a mold in which we are cast, so what starts out as “anything goes,” in time leaves its mark,

as too sloppy and slapdash. Yes, we got on the train, but we are not very comfortable where we sit, so to speak.

My point and certainly my experience is that while we do manage to cobble something together that works, there is going to have to be a lot of retrofitting down the road for a comfortable or even an acceptable ride. And that kind of refitting takes time and lots of it.

The task itself seems almost impossible to accomplish and coming in we have little to no idea how to go about it, yet bad habits always come home to roost and we are stuck with them, And, as mentioned, its not like they don't have to be worked out at some point, so, as they say "Straighten up and fly right" in the first place. Of course, hindsight is 20/20 and we have only ourselves to blame, but we didn't know better. Do we now?

And while the focus is anywhere you want to look for an example, IMO, a perfect example, at least for me, is dharma practice, although any kind of practice will do. We are the victims of our own habits and end up shaped by our actions and the care with which we do things. And yes, as mentioned, there is no blame because even going in, we don't know what we are doing, yet we have to live with the results, and I'm still talking here about our meditation or dharma practice.

It's not hard to pick up where we find ourselves in dharma practice and realize how did we ever get into such a contorted position with all the rote stuff we may find ourselves doing and trying to make rote stuff meaningful must be some kind of oxymoron.

In the end, we have to be free, flexible, and spontaneous, yet much of our practice is anything but that, and every mold we create shapes us, and not

always for the best, but perhaps as the “best we can.” And again, down the road, pliability is not only recommended, it is required, so prepare to un-rote the rote, unless you are just going to leave it like that.

I have wrestled with this, well, a lot and am still working through it. And I am learning all the things I just listed above, and while I understand how I ended up in the shape of a pretzel, I don't much like it and I realize that ultimately something has to be done to get straightened out, by which I mean freed up, pliable, and in the moment.

I laugh and understand that it is not enough to get “a” shape. I have to get “in shape,” and I'm still talking about our daily meditation or dharma practice. As pointed out, I do understand how I got here, yet I'm not sure how to unravel what is all raveled. Being bent out of shape, no matter the reason why, has to be redeemed or made whole or whatever words you want to describe it.

And the funny part is no one cares to do anything about it, except ourselves, and until we do, and this because a rote dharma practice, is its own reward or lack of it. The dharma and its practice, starts out as something we are trying to get together, yet ends up having to be extended everywhere and in everything. A death grip on our own dharma practice is another oxymoron, something of a no-go situation.

And it's a bit like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, in that we have to unpack or remove everything that's an impediment to fluid practice until there is nothing left, and then not be surprised when there is nothing left, which means everything then is included.

It would be somewhat funny if it were not so stiff and awkward.

Apr 13, 2021, 7:38 PM

AN ECHO

In the midst of what seems like chaos, the eye or our sense of wisdom peeks through. Perhaps it is just simple purity contrasting with the noise of life. At this early stage, it is a little hard to say. When I say “purity,” I mean the purity of my dharma teacher, since he is my reference point, short of being it myself. I feel we are all working toward that, the stability of being our own reference or gyroscope.

Or it's like, in the cloudy darkness of the night sky, the Moon peeks through for just a moment. Just the merest glimpse and then gone. Yet, it is a glimpse more than the sameness of darkness, at least enough for there to be contrast. It happened. It was permitted. It is a light at the end of the tunnel that blinks.

Is it an accident, an anomaly, or singleton? Because it happened more than one, I think not, yet how intermittent and how long between glimpses I do not know. This has only happened twice and the length between glimpses was a couple of days. That's a pretty good sign in my book that in the darkness of the distractions of this life, there is reprieve and an end. Since it has happened more than once, this suggest that like the raindrops before a deluge, it may increase until it is the default or norm, like the sun rising brings day.

I can only hope that this kind of guidance or reflection will become the polestar, since I dared to let go of the grip of rote obligation, which made more noise than

silence. To let go of the shore and be swept away in the current of the moment. How scary is that?

To relax our death grip on something we love and risk the freedom of non-attachment at the expense of the security of our crippled grasp on the known in the hope that nothing of value is lost. Is not that glimpse the echo that reflects I have waited for? And does not such a reflection bring certainty of equal or better value than a half-truth and paralysis?

Can not such a “nothing” acknowledged be stability anew, that like a compass sets our course in time, and in the direction of freedom rather than confinement? Is it a first walk in deep space?

Apr 14, 2021, 2:38 AM

NEW MOON REDUX

What if New Moon came and nothing changed? That’s what it feels like to me after this last New Moon, that it is still very much with us, or at least with me. I still feel a bit lost in a struggle and have yet to find or feel the start of a new lunation. Nothing seems different from before the New Moon. For me, no new leaf, so to speak, just a prolonged vigil for signs of another cycle beginning.

For example, I was on the phone for 3-1/2 hours this morning trying to sort out a simple installation problem on a computer. I went from company to company,

expert to expert, talking with folks in the U.S. (New York and Indiana), Africa, and the Philippines, difficult work because of bad connections, language issues, and straining to understand. We emailed, talked on the phone, took over my computer, and on and on, trying to solve a simple issue.

I got it solved, and it looks like more issues tomorrow. I have launched myself into this new venture of not being deterred by whatever adversity arises, but giving it my all and not getting upset, or allowing my blood pressure to rise. And so far I have done very well.

As for getting a lot done, not so much, but I have sure put the time in. Such days as today are great for training in patience. As long as I am not in a hurry to get somewhere, I am fine, taking each issue that arises and giving it my full attention.

I weighed in on this project voluntarily, so I have no one to blame. So far, so good. I have not had the time to put together blogs, so a simple report like this will have to do.

I am still here and totally engaged.

“GLEAMING THE CUBE”

[Super busy, but also not busy at all, if that makes sense. In the middle of that, took a walk with Margaret up by the spring ponds to hear the last of the spring peepers (tiny frogs) singing there. And then just walking. The sun was out, the air was just brisk enough that soon it will be too hot to walk in the tall grass like this, by the deer trails, in the hollows. And then there is watching out for deer ticks and Lyme disease.]

As for me, it seems like I have entered a time warp of some kind. I have been crazy-busy, at my own invocation and am learning patience, for sure. I am also learning to do what is in front of me and not play favorites, not look forward to goals, or to a “better” time than now, although I am aware, as mentioned, that I have entered a very concentrated time, and the days seem to go by like those old flicker-book movies we had as kids.

It also seems like I get next to nothing done in a day, although much of what I am doing is a learning experience, yet one of those learning experiences in which to process my main focus, the entire rest of the world has to be preprocessed in order to complete that. So, its like a drop of water falling in the center of a placid pool and radiating out until the entire pool is actively vibrating. It’s something like that.

Not sure this kind of oblique comment is worth posting, because it is so personal and private that it can’t be very useful to others and I have almost zero time to write lately. That’s just one factor as to how “in-there” I am.

And I have mentioned in recent posts also how out-to-lunch I am, ignoring what I usually and should do in favor of non-stop involvement in this music project I have been on. For one, I am learning the music-production software called Cubase, if any of you know it. If so, contact me by FB messenger as I have some questions I can’t figure out.

Yet, so far, I have not produced much music, because in order for that I have to do this, and before I do that, I have to do something else, until my whole day is like a hall of mirrors or the water in a fish hatchery at feeding time, meaning the waters surrounding me are at a constant boil, the opposite of peaceful, yet peaceful.

I have few lofty thoughts just now, because I am down there where the rubber meets the road, and the heart of what I am doing just now can't afford to skip a single beat. At the same time, I get whiffs or glimpses as to the purpose for all this activity, more like stepping on the accelerator to see if the engine can take it.

There is no inside out or outside in. There is nothing outside or beyond, behind, or under the awareness that just naturally is within us. It completely includes every last iota of anything, including the container it comes in and, why not, the horse we rode in on.

In other words, there is no back door, escape hatch, or other side to this. There is the inside turning inside-out, and the outside turning outside-in eternally. If I can just get that through my head until I am certain, then it does not matter what I do. And by that, I do not mean that is OK to do just anything at all; far from it. It means that no matter what the present moment demands or comes up with, I do my best to give it my complete attention and that attention holds it. It is a bit like $E = MC^2$.

When the smoke clears, when this blast of activity levels (equalizes) everything like some kind of an atomic bomb, and there is nothing left to level or equalize, and the speed (as all this massive activity reaches the speed of light) will slow down to slow motion, is my guess.

In the midst of all that I believe we should be able to see the dharma in everything we do as plain as the nose of our face, as the old saying goes.

Apr 17, 2021, 5:15 AM

THE POINT OF RETURN

I never know when the straight line that I seem to be on curves and comes back around, until it does. The phrase “open ended” says it all, a loop that has not closed as far as we know. It’s like heading out onto the open seas and not knowing whether there is land on the other side until there is.

My current journey of some several weeks or more has been a kind of vision quest, heading off ninety degrees from everything I know into everything I have known, but not knowing whether there was or is an end to it. Does it wrap and come around? How would we know until we know?

We sail the seas of the unknown in our lives to know it for certain, for the first time, once and for all. Those things that encumber us, that weigh us down, even if they are the most precious things imaginable have to be placed in the balance of all-that-there-is to see if they make sense,

I have always tested out and worried about the line between what makes sense and what is senseless. Even the senseless makes sense because it defines

sense. It makes us whole. Without nonsense and a sense of humor we are not complete.

When all is said and done here, I realize that I have built another shrine or mandala, which by definition marks the point of return. In the midst of going out I find myself coming back in, like birds on a ship far out to sea. I wrote this poem.

REST HOME

My thoughts,
Like birds aboard a ship,
I let go free,
As they fly away with me.

No need to follow on,
And here's the perfect test:
There is no place to go,
All thoughts come home to rest.

Apr 19, 2021, 7:04 PM

“NO PARTICULAR PLACE TO GO”

The above title being, of course, the song by Chuck Berry. Not having to “be there” or “have” this or that, at least not particularly. This frees us and not only gives us more time (more freedom from time), but the absence on our part of our usual clinging and grasping frees us up entirely; it entirely frees us. The restriction and constriction that results from our habitual grasping and clinging acts like a straight-jacket. This present moment is precious in its ability to be the point through which all the freedom comes to us. All we have to do is put aside (let go of) our distractions and receive each moment with an open heart.

Apr 20, 2021, 5:19 AM

LIFE BREATHING

To circumscribe and get to know the country we are traveling in, even if it is our home. Is there no end to it? Well, in one sense there is no end to it, and on the other, of course we eventually get our arms around anything with a return. What goes around comes around, as they say. We encapsulate it. That just seems to be the way progress progresses, at least in my experience. And we are talking about experience here. Realization of that experience is another matter. It seems we experience our spiritual experiences until we realize them, realize the nature of all experience.

And if all this kind or style of writing seems vague or attenuated, it probably is just that, and not something that matters to most folks, at least not consciously.

Expansion contracts, and contraction expands. That's called "life breathing." It seems that only by contrast can we be aware, by crossing and recrossing that "happy median," which would be us. Happy, sad, happy, sad, and occasionally just right.

The unknown is a challenge, if only because it is unknown. We don't know the end to it or even if there is an end. That's what we end up finding out, that everything has an end or limit other than (so they say) change itself.

If we wonder why folks read the American Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, there is a reason. His essay on "History" (1841) is a good example, and I quote:

"All inquiry into antiquity, -- all curiosity respecting the Pyramids, the excavated cities, Stonehenge, the Ohio Circles, Mexico, Memphis, -- is the desire to do away this wild, savage, and preposterous There or Then, and introduce in its place the Here and the Now. Belzoni digs and measures in the mummy-pits and pyramids of Thebes, until he can see the end of the difference between the monstrous work and himself. When he has satisfied himself, in general and in detail, that it was made by such a person as he, so armed and so motivated, and tends to which he himself should also have worked, the problem is solved; his thought lives along the whole line of temples and sphinxes and catacombs, passes through them all with satisfaction, and they live again to the mind, or are now."

BURN RATE: THE RETROGRADE PHENOMENON

The familiar retrograde loop that all astrologers are aware of, the idea that a planet (at least from Earth's view) moves forward and backward through the sky is what we are looking at here. The simple astronomy of it dictates what can be interpreted. That's what astrology is, the meaning or significance in our life of astronomy, what is called cultural astronomy.

Throughout all retrogradation, the relationship of each planet to the Sun, varies from being exactly aligned by Conjunction or Opposition aspect to the Sun (conjoined with the Sun) as opposed to running behind or ahead of the position of the Sun. Yet, there are limits between where any given planet is in the zodiac, moving back and forth through the retrograde loop, and this retrograde/direct movement defines a particular (and changing) point of emphasis in the zodiac.

The concept of "Burn Rate" came about from examining this difference in movement between being combust in the Sun (Conjunction or Opposition) and how far the two planetary positions for each planet differed (or could differ) between that (combust) and the extreme points where the planet turns retrograde or direct in the retrograde loop.

Accounting or interpreting for that difference astrologically (what does it mean or signify?), whether any given planet has the clarity of being one with the Sun (Conjunct or Opposition) as opposed to the cross-eyed difference between the heliocentric position of the planet at a given moment in the way it appears from where we stand here on Earth (geocentric position). Compensating for the "difference," accounting for that (interpreting), is the amount of change (Burn Rate) each of us has to go through in life relative to each planet.

For example, the planet Mars can vary (difference between the helio and geo Mars position (on average) about 41 degrees. I have a very high Burn Rate for the planet Mars (almost 45 degrees between the helio and geo positions), even more than average, with the geo position of my mars in Aries and the helio position of Mars in late Aquarius. Therefore, my Mars Burn Rate is around 109% (above average) AND Mars geocentrically is AHEAD of the Sun, in the FUTURE of the zodiac, where the actual solar-system (helio) Mars is journeying around the Sun, has not yet reached this orbital Mars cycle. The above is a lot of words, describing a quite simple phenomenon.

Interpretively speaking, I will have a very strong Mars (great activity) needed to bring the two positions of Mars into unity, go through a lot of changes in my life as to Mars issues. That's an example of what I will share with those interested in this subject this Sunday, along with providing you with an accurate free ephemeris so you can check out your planets Burn Rate.

Perhaps no astrological factor has more different opinions and less agreement among astrologers than the phenomenon of retrograde motion, the fact that from the earth's view all planets appear to move backward in reverse motion through the zodiac, one or more times a year. Expert's opinions range from there being no perceived effect whatsoever when a planet is retrograde, to their being a very dramatic effect. But then, even if an effect is indicated, there is a wide range of declarations as to what that effect might be.

Since "Astrology" is essentially cultural astronomy, astrologers have always looked to astronomy as for what to interpret. And in the case of Retrogrades, IMO, we have missed a lot of the obvious facts, which I find amazing, that we should know so little about something that we have known for so long. Like many things, when I took a more careful look at the facts of retrogradation, it revealed to me a story that is compelling, a way to accurately interpret retrogrades that

has never occurred to any of us. This approach and view makes interpreting retrograde and direction planetary motion very clear and easy to use.

OUROBOROS: CLOSING THE CIRCLE

What this is all about, for me, is “non-attachment,” yet what does that actually mean to the average bear? In simple terms, it means something like being happy to do some things and balking at doing others, or like trying to push a mule when it does not want to move. Over the last year I have become more aware of my “balking” all the time and being less than willing to do what I (nevertheless) have to do in a day. I’m fed up with all that.

And so, I went on a little binge of not-doing those things that I have do, those things “without heart,” all of the rote stuff that I march through with gritted teeth, however slight. All of that internal complaining, whining, protest, and resistance, and for what? No one and nothing. There is no one listening or if they are, they are tired of it, as am I more than anyone.

I recently pushed off from any shore that I was aware that I was clinging to and cast off into my own slipstream, with the intent to go with the flow, as we say, and not get hung up so much on my likes and dislikes. Neither alternative (lie or dislike) looked that good to me. And what I reified (liked too much) was just waiting for a reality check to cut me back down to size. And what I pushed away and did not like at all was, likewise, just more wasted energy, a protest to no one, nowhere, and about nothing.

At first, in the beginning, there was a huge rush of relief as I jettisoned just about anything “rote” I could think of, precious or not. And the time it took the pendulum to swing from one extreme to the other felt pretty good, real good. It became more troublesome when that same pendulum passed by what we could call an even-keel (the equanimous middle ground) and began to swing the other way, more into what I can only call the unknown. Even that was interesting, although I had much less of anything to hang onto, since I was already detaching. I could feel the wind whistling through my hair.

And after a while, I was certainly at sea and awash in the flotsam and jetsam of my life. I was too far from shore (where I started) to grab onto anything, so I was pretty much free-floating. Then began the feeling as to just how far out to sea was I drifting and how big is the ocean or sea I am in? Was there any return from this or had I reached the point of no return, where there is no returning? It seems I love to scare myself.

Well, time went by and I gradually realized that although I was not on familiar ground, certainly there was nothing unfamiliar about where I found myself. The sharpness of the profound break-away from all of my “rote-ness” began to settle out into a familiarity of its own. The “new unknown” became known and was not much different from previous unknowns, except that it was now known. In other words, as I have written in recent blogs, the ripples at the edge of the pond from a single drop of water were much weaker than those at the center.

I need not have worried about becoming lost in the unknown, because as mentioned, it was not “that” unknown. Nor could I continue breaking ground unless I was actually breaking ground. In short, everything was coming around again, already returning. There was an echo. And so, in a way, I have circumscribed my little universe.

Now, what am I to do?

Apr 22, 2021, 9:06 PM

SUBTEXT: READING BETWEEN THE LINES

The “glory of the subtext,” the inside or what is underneath and bleeding through into our conscious mind, the subtext. I guess it is subtle by definition, since most of the time it is unclear, at least until it eventually surfaces into a certainty and becomes some kind of “Realization.”.

Like reading braille, some of us become skilled at interpreting the subtext rather than just whatever is going on at the surface. Yet, to me the word “subtext” does not fully describe what I am referring to here. “Subtext” describes what is really going on beneath the surface or behind the scenes, while what I am talking about here, is not something quite as material as the gritty meaning of appearances, but rather what is just off in the future, and not yet quite fully apparent. It’s coming to us, but not yet and perhaps not for a long time. However, in rare moods we may glimpse it. And while it is hard to recall or remember, it is impossible to forget that it was something.

I’m talking about the advent of realization itself, our drawing a conclusion of certainty from experience, meaning “realizing” what is going on and taking place, what we have been going or passing through, and the forming of realization from out of the blue-yonder, which is in the future. So, perhaps I am confusing the

advent of certainty about something as it dawns on us via realization, from anything in the future that has not yet dawned on us. Or are they the same thing?

If the truth is the truth, then the truth will endure or last until the future, because it is the truth. And the truth is also the future. And so, realization of any truth, until it has dawned on us, hovers somewhere in the future for us, just out of sight of our being able to grasp it, although glimpse it we sometimes may.

There is only so much we can rob the cradle of the future, so to speak, and force realization to come before we, well, otherwise realize it. Yet, as mentioned, some of us are skilled by necessity in reading ahead of the present as best we can. Our eyes are peeled for what is still emerging rather than for what has clearly emerged, perhaps a bad habit or even a strain on the mind.

In our thirst for realization, we sit around the well of this present moment, not telling stories, but searching for those dim forms from the future to appear enough that we can recognize and determine them. Are those who do this what we call "seers? Do we see the future?

I'm not talking about Nostradamus here, the ability able to see far in the future, but rather being able to feel and perhaps better see what's already coming. Seeing into the future of today and perhaps tomorrow or, if nothing else, being able to describe what is going on in the moment.

Apr 23, 2021, 7:24 PM

CHANGE IN A BOTTLE: HAPPENING NOW

[I will be speaking tomorrow morning at 11 AM EDT what I call Burn Rate, how some of us burn more brightly than others in certain areas of life, or burn out completely. More details on this talk in previous blogs or in a blog I will post later today.

Meanwhile, scientists report that a solar coronal hole system (CME) is now moving past Earth, which promises what may be a geomagnetic storm from now and over the next 48 hours. While CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejection) from the Sun outwardly can affect GPS, power grids, and other service areas, what do these solar events mean for us internally.

Scientists have not really spent much time on these internal effects, but we all are impacted by them regardless. And so, it is kind of up to those of us sensitive enough to be aware of these solar influx events to tell ourselves and share these events and what they mean for us.

As for me, these and other solar events, are all about “Change,” whether external or internal. And change is not anything particular, but rather a force. Change causes almost anything in particular to affect us. And what that means in my own experience is that the force of change, however subtle, changes us. We change and often don’t even know it.

This recent wash (this particular event) of coronal discharge seems to be capable of overpowering our will or intention to get to the point or to think on a topic, with the result that the change pushes our thoughts out of the mind, making us not able to think about it now or just forget all about it altogether.

We might like to think out something in the moment, but we find that as we try to focus our thoughts, these thoughts evaporate and we are left holding a kind of foggy-mindedness. We can't quite remember what we set out to remember, and instead are just kind of pushed along down the stream of time.

This is happening now, these days, for those susceptible. See if you notice it.

OUR JUGGLING ACT

It's about balance, like riding a bike as a kid with no training wheels, but more like driving the car of the mind, or a little scarier yet, walking a high tightrope and trying not to look down. I was surprised at how many guardrails or comforting reminders there are that we don't realize until we are without them.

We are not so adventurous in reality as we might imagine we are. Shoving off from the banks of the familiar into the unknown is just that, not only unfamiliar, but unknown. Yet even the "unknown" does not last. We have relief from the familiar until we familiarize ourselves with it. And then, like the old saying goes, "Wherever I go, there I am."

And wherever we are, I find it is like juggling, if you have ever tried it; at first it is not so easy. On a good day or a good time, I can juggle a lot of things, taking each one in my stride, but on a "not-so-good" day, it is much more difficult, and that to the point where every once in a while (more than I would like), I stumble

and drop all the balls. If nothing else, dropping the balls is interesting because I can't help but learn something. If nothing else, I realize I have been juggling all this time. And I have to figure out how to rejugle what I already have on my plate or if I even want to.

Apr 26, 2021, 5:10 AM

ON THE EDGE OF REALIZATION

The idea that the dharma is so serious as to be severe or even harsh is a mistake, a wrong notion. None (or few) of the great rinpoches that I have met were so serious as not to enjoy humor. Very few. They laugh a lot.

And what is actually sacred? I know we are serious about what is sacred but is sacredness only serious? Or is there sacredness in laughter, smiles, and hugs? All of those seem pretty sacred to me. And how about the sacredness of family? Family seems sacred to me, and IMO it seems to be kept alive by humor, to a great extent.

I know; my family has a private Facebook chat going that is, mostly, all humor all of the time. It goes on through the day and some days I don't have the time to even read it all. And the pictures? Incredible, the lives of all the grandchildren in photos, not to mention the pets, and, of course, the food.

Having posted on the dharma for many years (at least fourteen years), it seems that the more austere and advanced dharma gets, the most attention. Perhaps

that's because we don't know it, don't know HOW to do it, or probably have not been able to do it properly, and so forth.

Yet, along with all that "authenticity," it seems inevitable that some fire & brimstone leaks in or arises, and the difference between suggestions and commands can get blurred, IMO. Beginners like suggestions; advanced dharma students can accept commands or direct instructions for their situation.

I was overwhelmed when I first discovered Tibetan Buddhism and even more so when I met the great rinpoches. I wanted everything Tibetan and lots of it. Yet, collecting Tibetan artifacts, surrounding ourselves with them, is a vain attempt and no solution. Then, some long time later, I realized that I was not Tibetan and never would be in this life. And this was followed by the realization that not only was I not Tibetan, but that the Dharma was not only living on the cushion, but was everywhere. It's all dharma, all the time, IMO.

And perhaps last, but the most painful of all, was the realization that while the perfunctory reciting by rote of dharma texts probably has some merit, realization of the dharma will only happen, not by rote, but by whole-hearted deep-felt devotion. And simply reciting prayers without feeling them, while perhaps a way for us to keep our hand in, is not a substitute for realization and enlightenment. And that dharma opportunities are not only everywhere, but they are the only situation in which we find ourselves.

So, if you are taking a step back, better get ready for ten more steps back just like it. The whole dharma enchilada means just that, the whole enchilada, including the container its wrapped in.

Apr 27, 2021, 5:59 AM

WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF LIFE

It's clear that my difficulties with the recitation of the daily dharma texts (for me) are MY problem and mine alone. This is not to say that other folks don't have the same problem; they assuredly do, but misery loving company does not alleviate the problem.

However, while diagnosis of the problem may lead to a cure, by itself diagnosis is not the cure. Why do I have such resistance to mindlessly reciting dharma prayers and sadhana? Well, my description describes my view on this. I don't like to find myself having just recited something that I don't remember word-by-word, but during which I just realized I was somewhere else. Obviously, a problem, but my problem.

It troubles me because, while the intention was perhaps good and maybe even some benefit accrues from rote recitation, I also sense or feel that if that was all I did, recite by rote, I would not be much closer to any kind of realization or enlightenment. How to approach this?

I have tried not doing any kind of reading-recitation whatsoever, but instead insisting on spontaneous, free, and off-the-cuff spiritual practice, and yet freedom has its problems too. Chief among them is a lack of confidence that, left to my own devices, I won't wander off the reservation of dharma practice and find myself drifting from what I consider dharma, which perhaps is the heart of the problem: what is dharma practice?

The operative words in the above sentence are “what I consider.” Who am I to be a judge of this kind of thing about myself, when I’m the one that does not know? At the same time, who else? That’s why I say this is very much a question of confidence on each of our parts. And that is a circular argument, or so it seems.

I don’t like reciting words (just by running through them) I don’t “feel” at the moment and imagine that they are beneficial for me. Benefit is as benefit does. Is that not what the historical Buddha taught, that we are a product of our own actions, our karma? In a very real sense, we ARE our karma, rebirth after rebirth.

If so, then why not act or find actions that we feel each moment, although that may be more freeform than we can be confident in. Or, that kind of true feeling may well be (and often is) absent from the moment. By virtue of feeling moved and devoted some moments, means that at others, we don’t feel that way. It would be nice to cherry-pick our moments, but so far, I have not found that life works that way.

And so, as regards this question of my formal daily dharma sitting on-the-cushion practice, I can’t seem to live with it or without it.

In summary, I have diagnosed the problem as my problem, my own resistance to performing actions that are not meaningful for me in the moment. I’m sure I am cherry-picking here and probably totally ignoring similar actions all over the place. After all, this must be a tempest in a teapot.

I focus on parts of my dharma practice because dharma is important to me in my life. And, as mentioned, I have the diagnosis but not yet the cure. For starters, I

intend to include those areas of my practice that I “feel” like doing, that is if I can trust my own feelings to be fair. If I may make an observation, it is that I don’t seem to mind any kind of physical action, but balk at meaningless mental actions. And I can tell a funny story.

Years ago, two of the greatest astrologers I ever met were John Addey and Charles Harvey from Great Britain. Both Charles and Addey became my friends, especially Charles. At some point, these two told me that they were part of a private (read: secret) brotherhood, a spiritual society to which you had to be invited.

Well, they invited me to join their brotherhood, and I was very humbled to be invited. Of course, I was interested and asked them what I had to do and what could I do to help?

In response, they gave me a list of Plato-like philosophy books and articles to read. Well, read I did, or at least tried to read. But the writing totally put me to sleep and seemed miles removed from where my head was at.

After an effort to read these, I told them this, apologized for the truth I was experiencing, but said I would be happy to do anything to help out, like prepare mailers, lick stamps, whatever help was needed on a practical organizational level, and I knew how to organize stuff. However, I did not find that this kind of abstract spiritual writing registered with me. As it turned out, helping out was not enough in their opinion. I had to decline the invitation. My point: I have some history about not liking to read/recite what I cannot find a real interest in.

I also have to add that, aside from my formal-recitation daily dharma practice, I do many hours each day of what is called post-meditation, meditative activity off-

the-cushion, mostly Insight and Mahamudra Meditation. This, I am happy to say, I love more than just about anything. So, there you have it, my dilemma and my diagnosis.

I blame this somewhat on my early introduction to Zen Buddhism, back in the late 1950s, when Zen was the only game in town (Ann Arbor). What I liked about Zen was this being immersed in every action that we do each day, no activity being more sacred than the next. That either sunk in or I was already of similar mind.

Apr 28, 2021, 3:57 AM

FOLLOW THE YELLOW-BRICK ROAD

I have never looked anywhere else in life for something to pursue other than in what I am interested in. It just never occurs to me because I'm not that interested in what I'm uninterested in. I know. That's a hard rule to follow because "seemingly" we have little choice and our interests are mostly relegated to the level of hobbies in life.

Well, I never got that email. From a very young age, I naturally was interested in, you guessed it, what I was interested in. As to that and what does not interests me, never the twain shall meet, so to speak.

And so, how did I manage that? My most concerted effort has been (and still is) in finding what naturally interests me and doing that. Why? Because, what

interests me, no matter how much work is required, is effortless for me. I don't consider devotion and effort to what naturally fascinates me to be work or effort. I hardly notice any effort in that direction and freely give it my heartfelt attention.

So, in my experience, the effort and grit goes into finding the vein of what naturally interests me, which once found, from that point forward is effortless, no matter how much effort it requires.

And if you ask: how does this apply to the dharma, the answer is to canvas the wide extent of approaches to dharma to see if any of them are more natural for you than others. It's worth the effort to investigate.

I certainly was like a stuck record with a lot of my early dharma practice. Yes, I did the practices, by the skin of my teeth and sheer grit, but not because love moved me to it. And yes, much like exercise and calisthenics can help to put us in shape, I needed to get in dharma shape. I did Ngondro twice, which I call "Dharma Boot Camp," and after that various Lojong, Deity Practices, and mantra completions.

However, in the ever-widening gyre of dharma practice, it would have been helpful to me if I had sampled some of the other approaches to the dharma. As it turned out, deity practices were not natural for me, for whatever reasons, but Insight Meditation and the Mahamudra Meditation approach were. I wish I had figured that out sooner as, while the various dharma boot-camp practices were beneficial, the actual deity practice (IMO) were... in truth, not so much. Of course, I believe this varies from individual to individual. That's the concept of the "Yidam" in a nutshell.

Just as it is endlessly stated that there are 84,000 kinds of dharma, there probably are. And we each have to find the particular form that suits us enough that we actually can achieve realization through or by way of it. The dharma is so new here in the West that we are kind of herded down whatever channel we come across, when with a little more exploration, we may find what is a more natural fit to the dharma.

Apr 29, 2021, 2:10 PM

FAMILY: THE TOPSOIL

A very special weekend here in Big Rapids. After a year and a quarter of seclusion we have had visitors in our home, part of my family, my daughter Anne, her partner Michael Lee, and their two daughters Emma and Josephine. They all were tested yesterday (or already had their shots) for Covid before coming and are clear. Both Margaret and I have had all our shots. So, we gathered in our home, which included hugs, laughter, and family dining. It was a wonderful time. I would like to do the same with all my kids and grandkids as soon as all are able.

This next July two things will take place here in Big Rapids. Margaret and I will celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary and a few days later I will become eighty years old. We are inviting the entire family to get tested and come up here for a larger celebration.

One thing that struck home with me after over a year of having no one in our house is the importance of family in our lives, and how fragile it is, what a thin

gossamer-like web our psyche weaves with those closest to us that overlays reality, the world as we see and experience it.

We know and it is historical that family and tribe are our strongest bonds, but I feel that our sense of “family” is also more fragile than we think. There are gaps and even gaping holes in our traditional family take on things and I feel that we are more delicate than we are aware of, more like the fragile wing of a butterfly that is in danger of losing some of its tiny scales. As I felt yesterday, this is never more clear than when it comes to family and friends.

Of course, we all focus on family and what seems (or we want to believe) is most precious to us as the foreground, leaving the rest, the bulk of it, in the background. Knitting those two together (reality and our take on the reality of family) seems a life-long task, if it is even possible. The fabric of family, as strong as it is, is also very fragile and tenuous.

And this web of family (and friends) is perhaps our strongest link or bond and yet at times we shake and rattle that family as hard as we are able. Like the caged bird with the cage door left open, we always come home to roost. For most of us family is home for us.

And in that sense of home and family, we act out our personal drama, a drama as old as time or history, and celebrate what otherwise will go unsaid. Who would care except those closest to us? My point is that the bond of family, as important as it is to us, should never be taken for granted, but needs to be underlined, reinforced, shored-up, and made whole or complete each and every day. It is also fragile.

With family, we dream a bridge to hold back what we have and re-weave afresh each night in dreams what preciousness life's struggles has erased from our memory that day. Family bonds are strong because without them, there is no substitute, no replacement. You can't replace what there is only one of, and IMO our psychological bonds with our family and friends are just that, irreplaceable.

And so, the cherishing of those we are close with (family and friends), those we love, and something we wish we could feel for all people and beings, is not an option, but essential to health and life.

I don't know of any better reminder (at least for me) than this song that my daughter May Erlewine wrote. It is called "Sweet Days." It says in song what I am trying to say.

May Erlewine "Sweet Days"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_z0Nxyu2Gk

Apr 30, 2021, 2:23 AM

THE PROCESS OF REBIRTH

To me, a lot of what is required to understand how the dharma works is to understand the difference between process and a static state. For whatever

reason, it seems that most westerners are brought up thinking in terms of states, rather than the ongoing process of states.

“States” are like snapshots taken from the stream of life’s processes, rather than something fixed in space and time that we can depend on or refer to. Time and life is a process, one which we can’t meaningfully freeze-frame and then expect those frames or states to persist or tell any kind of whole story. They don’t.

In the same vein, these same snapshots are not unconnected isolates that are unconnected to everything else. Rather, every moment or freeze-frame in a process are interconnected and interdependent with every other moment, much like a strand of rope can contain many interwoven strands, laid end-to-end, and totally interdependent. Yet, a rope can appear as a single thing rather than the multiplicity that it is.

In short, every freeze-frame or static “state” can be extenuated until its interdependency is clearly realized.

And the same goes for the ongoing process that leads to rebirth after death. No, our particular physical body and its accompanying Self or person do not continue on into rebirth in another life, yet the process of our karma apparently does. While some Hindu philosophies suggest that reincarnation is a fact, i.e. that we, the same person of this life, are reincarnated in the next, the Buddhist do not.

The dharma view does not indicate that I, Michael Erlewine, will subsequently be reincarnated and continue to add to my resume in the next life. That resume is abandoned at death, so to speak, yet there IS a process that continues from rebirth to rebirth. How does that work?

It is taught that the quality of “being human” that indicates rebirth and another life is “desire,” and by that I understand this to mean unfulfilled desire on our part. If we look around for where that desire comes from, it comes from each of us as we desire or wish for this, that, and the other thing. In a very real sense, we create our future lives as we go along in this life, by desiring whatever we desire. Seemingly, there is no end to this. In other words, we make up our next life as a montage of what we desire in this life. We continually lay the seeds for our continued rebirth. That is the dharmic view.

And no, as mentioned, the “person” of Michael Erlewine does not continue as a rebirth, in a future life, but the mass of desire that I have accumulated apparently does. That collective desire, those many desires, amount to a kind of consciousness that graspingly seeks to animate any life form it can manage and, so the Buddhists say, not just the human life form, but any sentient life form.

After death, that desiring consciousness will take rebirth in any kind of womb it can enter or animate and make that lifeform work or live. Depending on our karma and its urgency to fulfill our desires, it can be “any port in a storm,” so that this consciousness can end up animating not only a human form, but that of a dog, a butterfly, or a worm. The transmigrating conscious can make all those forms (aside from the human form) work, although all that this consciousness is capable of may be wasted on the body of a mosquito, as the mosquito cannot speak or think as we do now. Yet, the consciousness of all sentient beings is the same.

The important point, so I have been taught, is that the consciousness that “desires” is the same consciousness or awareness in all forms of life. What is limited, so I understand, is not the consciousness, but the lifeform. This is why, so it has been explained to me, that Tibetans (for instance) are so careful not to smash mosquitoes or step on ants but do their best to avoid such actions. Why? Because each being is a complete consciousness only stepped-down or limited

by the ability of the body of the life form in which they get ahold of and in which they are reborn.

As fantastic as that view may appear, nevertheless this is how I understand continued rebirth (not reincarnation) is achieved. It is an amazing and even somewhat terrifying view, at least initially.

In summary, and we could go into this much more in detail if there is the interest, while our Self or “persona” does not persist beyond death, our karma, or the collected mass of our collected desires does. And that disembodied mass of desire seeks rebirth in any kind of body that it can command and animate. If we have the karma for a human rebirth, that is possible. However, if we have amassed a different sort of karmic desire, we may jump into any lifeform we can find and make that work. This is why many Buddhists are so concerned about amassing the karma needed for another human rebirth and worry about falling into what is called the “lower rebirth” of an animal and so on.

May 1, 2021, 2:08 AM

“BORN AGAIN” AND AGAIN

The Buddhist view of consciousness (and awareness in general) is that one size fits all, meaning there is only one consciousness, one form of awareness, rather than that each kind of critter or sentient being has their own kind of consciousness. This may require time to consider, IMO.

In other words, the Buddhist view is there is one kind of consciousness and many types of bodies or bodily forms in which this one consciousness can operate in and it does. However, since each sentient being's body is limited (however the particular respective limitations), the overarching consciousness can only do so much, depending on the capability of any particular body. We are limited by the kind of body we take rebirth in, yet we are not a limited consciousness, which sounds a bit oxymoronic. Perhaps it is like only being able to wiggle our little finger.

This is kind of the reverse of the common way of thinking here in the West, not that we (society) are aware to any significant degree. That common view is that more limited beings and bodies (the ant, mosquito, etc.) have a lesser consciousness. Instead, as mentioned, in the dharma view, there is one kind or level of consciousness, which then is limited only by the kind of bodies available to it. It's like a race-car driver being limited to riding a scooter or something like that.

It's a little strange to be relating to a bug or a rabbit and understand that you are talking to the same consciousness that animated an Albert Einstein or Sigmund Freud. In the history of dharma, the idea of being imprisoned for a time in the body of an ant or grasshopper is not desirable, but rather something to be avoided at all costs. Why? My understanding is that once in a lower rebirth, "One" (the consciousness) has less means to convert or escape that form of life and regain our familiar human lifeform. All this is above my pay grade in understanding, but some sense of it seems to seep through, nonetheless.

And this stems from the Buddhist view that awareness and consciousness stem from what is called Buddha Nature, something that every sentient being possesses at core and taking on a fresh life form (at rebirth) determines how much of that abiding consciousness can be applied and used with a particular

body or life form, such as the body of a lower life form, such as an animal, etc.. Something like that.

And so, it is a recurring theme in the dharma, a struggle with practicing all-out to become enlightened on the one hand and, at the same time, to be sure to accomplish enough of the requirements needed to obtain another human body in our next rebirth. I find this urgency, distracting if not debilitating.

The gatekeeper, so to speak, is the fact that at the end of this current life, when we pass from this body, not only is our dead body left behind, but also what we call our persona, our personal Self that used this body. And that is why such a big deal is made out of understanding the difference between reincarnation, where the exact same person or Soul is said to continue into the next life (as some Hindu religions believe), and the very different Buddhist view that only our accumulated desires and karma are propelled forward after death, to seek out and draw around itself through rebirth a new body, Self, and persona, one based upon the DNA of the future parents, and the circumstances or situation of our subsequent rebirth.

In other words, our karma or desire-package is propelled beyond death and immediately proceeds to search out and find a new womb in which to take rebirth. This view is a little difficult for westerners at first, yet if you examine your own memory of past lives, most of us have no memory whatsoever. This current birth is a clean slate that is not very much colored by any previous personal memories but is very much influenced by our lower-grade desires and attachments that stem from our previous life.

Yet, the Buddhists state that our past desires or “graspingness” does continue on and is strong enough to precipitate a rebirth that embodies those desires and that

karma to continue on until our desires are exhausted, which may be a long time, since we continue to desire and attach more all the time.

I know. It is like science-fiction, kind of unbelievable, since most westerners do not believe in rebirth to begin with, although many wish for some kind of reincarnation, meaning that their Soul will go to heaven, hell, or somehow continue forward in time.

The Buddhist view offers a compromise between nihilism (no soul at all) and reincarnation, the concept that we (meaning for me, Michael Erlewine as a soul) go forward. The Buddhists state that the results of our own desires and actions in the form of karma does persist on and requires additional rebirths to satiate and exhaust our karmic appetite. And, as mentioned, there is the little fact that we continue to add even more desires each lifetime and probably every day.

And so, “me, myself, and I” don’t continue, but the desires and graspingness to attach and want (or don’t want) things does. Somehow, we get the opportunity to discover our Self, over and over again in each life or rebirth, much like the movie “Groundhog Day.” As to what happens to “us” between death and our rediscovery of our self in a rebirth, that is something we can worry and wonder about. And we do.

About the only hedge I have come up against that bardo or intervening time period, when we are all grab and no person, is the fact that here we are right now. In other words, we have gotten this far in the vastness of time and are kind of OK. What’s to stop us from continuing in this same vein? I ask that. Of course, I can only imagine what taking rebirth again is like, being within a womb, and then as a baby, and so on. An incredible thought, IMO.

May 2, 2021, 1:31 AM

“MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING”

A little Shakespeare never hurts. In the vastness of time, sitting well toward the edge of such a space, there is nothing to be seen and no interest in seeing it. It's like the old description as to what goes on inside a computer chip that, empty of events, is so fast that it seems like we can wait for a long, long time between instructions. In the case of the emptiness facing us, there don't seem to be any instructions coming along at all. Can we stand it?

I find that I'm nervous to be just doing nothing rather than to keep busy doing something, which is my normal habit. As they say, “the silence is deafening.” My dance card is empty. What then? What am I supposed to do with all this nothing?

Perhaps it's about attempting to remain still and take it, instead of fidgeting until I leap into the gap of time and get busy all over again. Why wait in all this nothing-going-on and for what? Might as well just turn on the noise machine and lose myself in the din and thick of things as I usually do. Why is “nothing” so painful?

Or am I learning something here? Is an uneventful space of time in life allowed? What do we do in such a gap or rather, what do we “not do” in a time empty of events, especially if these events are of our own making? If we stop making noise, all we hear is our own silence. Can we stand it?

Nothing is going to happen or is something supposed to happen in the nothing that is happening. That's the urge, to fill these gaps with activity enough so that we feel comfortable again, normal, until it is like there is someone or something there to distract us. We are habituated to distraction.

If we can't wait for it, how can we expect anything?

Does nothing always lead to something or is nothing enough in itself? And what do I do with myself if just nothing is going on? Nothing? It's tiring doing nothing, tiring enough to make me want to lie down and take a nap, anything but be on the spot like this.

After all, I am a creature used to the crowd of events in my life, to filling time with enough noise not to feel lonely or not to feel empty of feeling full. Are we alone in this vast cavern of time, banging pots and pans together to know that someone is there, if only ourselves? It reminds me of a poem I wrote about Parmenides, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, who is famous for saying "Being alone is."

PARMENIDES

Each to each the sorrow tells:

Find another.

Alone is borne the pain,

Alone the sorrow,

Alone the joy,

Today's tomorrow.

May 3, 2021, 3:05 AM

DHARMA: CUT TO FIT

“Give us this day our daily dharma insight” is kind of my mantra. As for day-to-day activity? I feast or feed on the well of the present moment and report what comes up through there as best I can.

I do believe that my daily and almost constant form of Insight Meditation is itself the key training I need and adds up over time. If nothing else, I am comfortable and used to meditating in this way. In fact, I love it, not something I could say about rote recitation.

And, even if I have trouble (and I do) feeling or getting into the rote recitation of various dharma prayers, this post-meditation practice, a Mahamudra style of meditation, this subtle mix of Shamata and Vipassana, stands me in good stead and amounts to a considerable amount of practice taking place each day. It certainly stands head and shoulders above my on-the-cushion practice. And, as you might imagine, this has become an issue for me.

In fact, there is nothing I would rather do in a day than practice Insight Meditation of the style I do in post-meditation. And I don't know why I even call it "post-meditation" anymore, because it has become my main practice for many years now, and I struggle with getting fully immersed in the more formal on-the-cushion dharma practice. In that way, things have gone topsy-turvy.

And this transformation or segue is not something that it helps to advertise, because the liability of misunderstanding what I am communicating here is so great. It is not that my more formal on-the-cushion has deteriorated or fallen away, but rather that I have never been that successful with it to begin with. Instead, the fact is that my Insight Meditation has become stronger and, once activated (years ago), I took to it like a fish to water.

So, I wonder why I should apologize for the obvious, the fact that I never was that good at rote recitation and being immersed in it, while I naturally immerse myself in Insight Meditation, by definition, because without that, it's not Insight Meditation.

I feel that almost fifty years of sitting meditation is enough for me to get a sense of it. LOL. And yes, I can sit, and for as long as I need to with little effort. That's not the point. The issue for me has always been, these last fifty years, being troubled through rote recitation with being able to mean what I say as I recite. Of course, my intention is good. I mean to be sincere as I recite, yet, as the words roll off the tongue, it's not like I am able to freshly "think" or vitalize all that text. For the most part, I recite it, but the meaning lags behind or often never arrives or is there in the first place. I reach for it, which itself is a bad sign This worries me and I can give you my reasoning why.

This worry was exacerbated when I had my major stroke and found out to my astonishment that a great deal of the patina of my many years of rote dharma

practice was wiped out along with my sense of self. It just was gone, vanished. And the takeaway for me at the time is that while rote recitation that is not particularly able to be said devotedly may have some benefit, I found that in my case, after my stroke, there WAS no residue or built-up cache or sense of dharma merit in it that I could find. This was not conjecture or imagination, but I looked and the cupboard was bare, so to speak. It was like starting over, and this after some 35 years of daily rather rote recitation. You would think that something would remain, but when the stroke tore through, I could not find it. And you know I looked.

That realization that there was no longer any “cache” of dharma from recitation alone was devastating to have and I was reduced to those parts of my decades of dharma practice that DID include whatever little realization I had managed. The rest, all that reified patina or imagined cache that had built up over the years, was simply no longer there. It was gone. As mentioned, it was like starting to practice dharma all over again. I wept. Is it any wonder that I question the value of simply reciting texts by rote? It was like the old Monopoly game and the direction “Do not pass “GO” and do not collect \$200.” There is humor there, but it took me a while to find it.

There is definitely the impression that after a while practicing dharma, we eventually take over (we have to) our own practice and adjust it to fit what actually works for us. All the more advanced dharma practice is a custom fit, IMO. One size does not fit all. For each of us, ultimately our dharma is tailor-made, and we have to make it.

It's not just a case of do as you are told, but we also must find and do what actually works if our practice is not working for us. Don't get used to being uncomfortable and not asking questions, but get comfortable with your dharma practice. Lean into it. Take over the wheel and drive.

My problem is that I was such a lemming that I blindly performed rote recitation for some 50 years before realizing or admitting to myself that it was not a good fit for me, not dharma itself, but rote recitation. I don't do well with purely conceptual things. Would I could have awakened to this insight a little sooner. No?

The big question is how do we know when to segue away from rote repetition to something else. In my own case, I did some 50 years of more-or-less rote dharma recitation and never had the awareness or the nerve to complain or do otherwise. I just did it and did not like it all that much, but I could not admit I did not like it, and that I was uncomfortable.

Don't get me wrong, there were years when I could have done little else other than follow along, whether I felt comfortable or not. There is dharma boot camp of one sort or another for most of us, and we have to work through it. I was so bad at it that my rinpoche told me to, after I had completed it, do the quite arduous Ngondro practice all over again, starting from scratch.

That, we all go through, so I am talking about after that basic getting into some kind of dharma shape is well along. I was so afraid to adjust my practice to be more comfortable that I didn't. I just did it as I understood it had to be done, with no exceptions and no real comfort or getting used to. I was afraid to ask myself questions, so to speak.

Ask questions and get comfortable is the key point. Do it sooner, than later.

May 4, 2021, 3:22 AM

RECENTERING: RETROFITTING OUR PRACTICE

How to get comfortable and take a new grip on dharma practice? Don't just swallow dharma instructions, hook, line, and sinker. Flex and be flexible about it. Take the tension out of any sitting practice as much as possible.

Yes, we can sit in Shamata meditation with furrowed brow and anxious shoulders, and not even be aware of it, but what's the point? We are such dharma-newbies here in the West that the best we can do is something like monkey-see, monkey-do, and not even get that right. In time, this has to change and will. It's just too uncomfortable.

In the purification dharma practices, especially in the early stages, when we are rough-cutting our practice, I guess it does not matter much if we are all that comfortable, because so much has to be carved away that who's counting. I get that.

Yet later, where we get down to the, so to speak, fine sanding, that's the time to get more comfortable, especially if you are in it for the long haul. At that point, everything seems to make a difference. In my own case, I wanted so much to do everything right and not to make waves for myself, that I kind of freeze-framed myself into an awkward posture that in-turn must have affected my mind as well as my body. Awkward is as awkward does.

I failed to notice (or I chose not to make waves with myself) that I was anything but comfortable with my sit-down on-the-cushion dharma practice. I just did it and

held that frozen kind of stance through it all, meaning for decades. And any pain that that was there, well, I thought that's just the way it is. Put up with it. Suck it up.

No, I did not stand on my head to practice. What I am referring here is to all of those bits of unfortableness that we don't know enough or are afraid to adjust and change.

And I'm not just talking about physical posture here. In fact, I'm just using the physical awkwardness like a metaphor to point at the mental lack of comfort. I did not dare to look at my situation and just say, "OK, I see what I have to do. Now let's get comfortable and work out the kinks and tone down the pain until I can't only stand it, but I actually like it." I didn't do that. And that comes with what is called "Recognition," being finally recognition the nature of the mind and working with it. In other words, soon or later what I am explaining here will arise.

We all know that few of us can physically sit in full vajra posture, with both legs crossed, at least not for very long. Try it and you know. It's no different with the mental correlation to sitting in full lotus. Pain and lack of comfort is just exactly that: uncomfortable. There is little need for it.

I'm afraid many of us are like the deer in the headlights when it comes to dharma practice. We love the idea of the dharma so much that, like taking a first breath in breathing, we try to hold it, to hang on to it. Of course, we can't, but perhaps no one ever told us to breath out and relax, and it seems we won't allow it ourselves.

That's how sincere most westerners are about the dharma, IMO. And, we don't know enough about the whole process of meditating to do what comes natural for us, which would be to make ourselves at home, to become familiar with our own

mind. Heaven knows that we have no trouble doing so with other areas of our lives, hence the idea of the “Ugly American” and all that.

My point, which should be obvious: take a careful look at your dharma practice, in particular to see if you are doing the equivalent of holding your breath, tensing your shoulders, forcing your body, making meaningless effort, and the like. Get comfortable!

Aside from making your body be at ease , which is only the tip of the iceberg, what state is your mind in? A little poem I wrote:

RESTING

Sitting quietly,

Properly,

With tongue to teeth,

My body invites,

The mind.

To be,

At ease.

May 8, 2021, 3:28 AM

THE DAMAGE DONE

Something that each of us will have to face, sooner or later, is to repair the damage we made (if any) learning to practice the dharma. All is not just sweetness and light, meaning not all of us slide into sitting meditation without a bit of strong-arming on our part. Given enough time and dharma practice, most of us will come to the realization that to the degree we have “made” or forced ourselves to practice, we will have to walk that back.

Of course, if you are deep in the purification practices like Lojong or Ngnodro, a little more effort to keep our nose to the grindstone is just a pittance. Just suck it up and move on comes to mind. However, I can assure you that the habits we build in the purification practices will either help us or hold us back when we graduate from those practices later on.

Perhaps the technical term for what I am presenting here is “staining” our practice with undue effort. Or, we could say, “burning” our practice through force of effort. And this is not a minor problem, IMO, although it may seem like it now.

We expend effort, often great effort, building a habit of our dharma practice. In the beginning, many of us have to remind and make ourselves do it, and that effort can leave a scar or mark on the practice itself. It can stain an otherwise pure practice. And, like the old laundry commercials, “getting out those stubborn stains” is not a piece of cake. At the least, they take an equal amount of effort (and more) to remove.

I know this from experience. We should celebrate that we even got as far as we have with our dharma practice. And the point here is that to go farther after the

purification practice, this often entails remedial work on our part to resuscitate those areas of practice that were damaged by our own efforts. If you have no effort scars, bless you, but I doubt that most could claim that, if any. In fact, taking the effort out of effort is standard dharma protocol.

And, in truth, most of us have a wasteland of wasted effort, the scars of which, sooner or later, will have to be removed, since they amount to an obscuration. They stain our practice and somewhere down the road, it will be clear that they are a limiting factor. And the worst part is that habits, once firmly learned, are very, very difficult to change, much less remove entirely. And yet, they will have to be removed or become a cataract on our practice.

As a hedge against this happening, we don't force ourselves. We stop our practice each day while it is enjoyable or at least doable, before we feel ourselves resisting or resenting it. My teacher always said, "...many short sessions." He also said that a session could be as long as it takes to raise a cup of tea and take a sip.

In other words, treat your practice with kindness and gentleness because, like a car or vehicle, it has to carry us a long way. And if we build a habit of resentment to it, working out those kinks is going to be very difficult to achieve. Trust me, I know whereof I speak. I'm working on that.

LET'S NOT GILD THE LILY

Below, the William Blake image of Moses reacting to the Golden Calf. A problem that invariably occurs in beginning dharma practice is that we imagine “dharma” as being something different or larger than life. In short, we reify it, meaning we make a bigger deal of it than we should. We become attached to it.

Early on we are very conscious of being “dharmic,” doing “Dharma,” and that the dharma is different and separate from everything else in this samsaric world. Of course, dharma is precious, yet to my understanding, when it comes to attachment, it is no different than anything else. We should not become unreasonably attached to anything, even dharma.

And later on in our practice, with the realization practices, as we begin to take the dharma out to the world and begin to “sacralize” all that is there in our mind and the world, the line between dharma and the rest of the world gets a little blurred. If the whole world is special, then what is special?

Eventually, we do realize the entire world is sacred or could be made so and that blurred line gets even more tenuous and begins to fade in contrast. As our formal on-the-cushion practice merges more with post-meditation (off-the-cushion) dharma practice, increasingly taking our meditation off cushion and out into the rest of our life, what then?

We can begin to see that reifying the dharma (pumping it up), which we might have felt was necessary early on, is not only no longer necessary, but that such reification is actually just another obscuration we have to remove. The dharma does not need us to pinch-hit for it or put a veneer of sacredness on. The dharma already is sacred because its function is sacred. When the dharma becomes both the viewer and the viewed, that kind of short-circuits us, thus canceling itself out. The dharma then is everywhere.

Dharma that becomes in our mind literal adherence is “fundamentalistic,” thus fundamentalism, no matter how we spell it. Aside from the release and increasingly letting go of our attachment to it as we become more comfortable with the dharma, there are all kinds of smaller “letting go” and releases that apparently have to happen as well. One of them, as mentioned, is to stop reifying the dharma, stop putting it on a pedestal and worshiping it, like the ancients say, as an idol. The dharma is and always has been fine just as it is. It does not need us to make the ends meet or protect it. The ends already meet naturally. That’s why the dharma is said to be adamantine – invulnerable and indestructible. If nothing else, the dharma is the truth, the most perfect illusion of them all.

In other words, attachment to dharma is no different than attachment (or aversion) to anything else. It obscures our natural nature that is already present within us. Sooner or later, as dharma students, we all learn this.

Getting rid of the veneer of reification, even of something as precious as the dharma, is part of the general progression of our dharma practice. Dharma already is special; we don’t have to make it special, and if we mistakenly do, we have to remove the unnecessary overlaying or gilding sooner or later. If you think that just because it is “The Dharma,” it’s OK to reify or gild it, think again. A gilded dharma is an oxymoron.

May 11, 2021, 7:20 AM

SPARE CHANGE: SOLAR INFLUX

[What follows describes in perhaps exaggerated terms what is really very subtle and that few seem to be aware of, so please take that into consideration. I am trying to describe what most of us can only sense as sub-text.]

The thing about pure concentrated “change” from the sun, change in a bottle, so to speak, is about how we view the various forms of intense solar influx (solar flares, CMEs, geomagnetic storms, etc.), i.e. that these concentrated packets of change (in their immediacy) are so overwhelming (and seminal) that solar influx floods our normal appetite for change as to what we feel like doing (or are busy doing) until we are pushed or pop out of that normal sense of change and find ourselves free-floating, with no direction known for a time. At least this is true for me. And it can last for days or at least until the solar influx passes and I am able to sort it out once again and find a direction to take.

With the suddenness of solar influx, which is subtly overwhelming, I don't feel like doing anything I was involved in like only yesterday. After a solar influx inundation such as a CME (Coronal Mass Ejection), instead of picking up where I left off with my plans from the day before, I come up empty-handed as to my usual sense of direction and seem to prefer doing nothing at all, other than just spinning my wheels; this, rather than picking up on my everyday ordinary list of things I usually feel like doing. As mentioned, at the point of solar-influx immersion, I find that I don't feel like doing any of those ordinary things I was engrossed in only days before. I have lost the thread I was actively following, and am not interested in what I was interested in. I've hung myself out to dry, so to speak.

It's as if the sudden solar change throws everything up into the air and I'm left waiting to see how things fall out, waiting for something (like a direction) to appear that I can seize upon and take. Or it's like throwing the dice of life to see what comes up for me, a reshuffling of the deck. This is what a sudden absorption of change from the sun can do. And, as mentioned, I tend to feel like

just doing nothing at all because I can no longer feel out any direction; everything seems to be in chaos for the moment.

Like the old theatrical play “Waiting for Godot,” with solar change I feel like I am just waiting for something to happen, but considering my age and situation, chances are that not much will change. Nevertheless, at the moment I no longer seem to “want” to do my regular fare or anything else for that matter. Perhaps this is a form of protest due to the unexpected process of change having flooded out my normal appetite for change and has left me grasping at straws. In a way, it is humiliating, the arbitrariness of it all. Change is like the gasoline of life and big chunks of it all at once are hard to absorb and assimilate, at least for me.

I end up sitting there in the silence, with my internal generator running, much like pressing the accelerator to the floor with the clutch in neutral -- the empty whine of nothing at all, no engagement. And for me, this kind of doing nothing is also exhausting.

I feel the thought to keep in mind is that we are used to accepting change one day at a time, with the sunlight reaching us in the day and the night spent absorbing that regular influx. This is the amount of change we are used to.

However, intense solar change influx (solar flares, CMEs, geomagnetic storms, and the like) bring much larger packets or bursts of change, which have to be absorbed all at once. Scientists point out how this change can affect Earth, power grids, radio transmission, and so on. They have yet to produce any research on how these burst of solar influx affect us psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, etc.

Sudden influx of solar change in much greater quantities than we are used to seems to throw us for a loop. We don't have time to absorb it gradually because it arrives all at once in a burst. How we absorb it differs between individuals as far as I can tell. Some of us take it in stride, others are upset by it, and many also kind of stick their heads in the sand.

To me, intense solar flux is like money, as in spare change, but a lot of it. And like cash, we each will use it in our own way. For some it will give us the energy or added boost to turn over a new leaf or rearrange our life. And for others, sudden change will be like anesthesia; we will just be confused and spend a lot of time sleeping through the change. It's like rolling the dice of life or at least reshuffling life's deck for us.

However, for most, the influx of sudden change will simply inundate us, immerse us in change so strong that it that will obscure our current plans and leave us at loose ends until we absorb it and find some direction again.

Because sudden solar flux inundates us, our current sense of direction is temporarily lost, and more troubling, in that loss, the whole immersed terrain of our plans can be reshuffled so that when the solar storm passes, we no longer feel like we did before, and we may find ourselves on a new tack, if not a new direction.

THE NITTY-GRITTY OF SOLAR CHANGE

It makes me wonder what does it take to push our envelope until we are uncomfortably just beyond what we could call our safe of comfortable limits and into new territory. Is that good or bad news? I guess it depends on the person, whether we like the unknown and the new or not.

And gradually, almost always gradually, as we are able to absorb or incorporate this influx of solar change into our system, we get a hold on the situation; we find ourselves back in the driver's seat, so to speak, and not lost in the flux of overwhelming change. It sorts itself out or rearranges our priorities, ready or not, while we watch or sleep in ignorance.

I see these large packets of solar change as a catalyst injected of adrenaline (change) into our situation such that it causes that situation to rearrange itself in response, like dropping pure sodium into water. It's like cash money, in the sense that, as universal change, what it does to us differs based on where we are at. It can propel one person to get their act together and another to disincorporate.

What can be difficult is to compare or contrast where we were at before the change hit us and where we are now, after the solar influx has subsided. We don't always witness the change because WE are what is changing and can't be in two places at once. When the change dies down, there we are again, kind of floating on top of it all, but perhaps wondering how we got there. In the worst cases, we get a whiff of ourselves actually in the process of change, as in see ourselves "changing," and can't fit the incongruities of before and after the change back together again. Perhaps we were not meant to witness our own change and when we accidentally get a peek at it, we are confounded by the comparison. Again, we have little control over sudden influx from the sun like solar flares. It's hot stuff.

It seems to me that intense solar change overcomes us quickly, but how fast we adjust to it varies, and can take a long while as we attempt to put the pieces back together, especially when those pieces have CHANGED and don't or can't fit. It boggles the mind.

This is why solar change affects people in different ways. For many, they just have to go and lie down and allow the adjustment process of change to play out. And others, like myself, just tread water and can't seem to find any thread of a direction to pick up on. Suddenly, everything seems washed out, uninteresting, or not a direction we seriously want to take. What were we thinking just yesterday?

And probably most folks feel something but never consciously enough to be aware that this is solar change and its effects, although change we all will, like it or not, aware of it or not.

For most, we have to wait until the change is done reconfiguring our situation enough so we can even see any direction, much less take it. It is often humiliating, IMO, to see the force of change put things on the shelf that only yesterday we were busily working on, leaving us with our mouths open wondering what to do.

It's like solar change not only reconfigures the way we play chess or checkers, but also the chess or checkerboard we play on, and while that shifting around takes place, we are at loose ends as to what or how we can play life's game.

Now, I've blown this up a bit so that you can see the outline, but in the flesh, this is very low-level internal change that we go through, meaning we are not aware of it. All we may remember is that we had a headache or that it was a confusing day. Some folks just have to lie down and sleep through it, while others are driven to be careless like the bull in the china shop. About the best advice I know when a CME (Corona Mass Ejection) takes place is to: hold onto your hats!

May 13, 2021, 8:02 AM

PRECURSOR TO SITTING MEDITATION

[This is a little longish, so it's probably more for my regulars, those of you with an interest in the dharma and its practice.]

The history of my sitting meditation does not just start when I discovered the dharma. My dharma practice was affected and directed by everything I had done up to that point in my life, so please note that and check how it was with you. This is true because what I did as a kid coming up very much affected my approach to learning Shamata Meditation, often called Tranquility Meditation. I will try to be brief, but will fail at that.

For me, as a young boy I was very interested in natural history, call it "nature.". Having been brought up out in the country with no neighbors in any direction, because of the isolation, I pretty much gave myself to studying and being in nature because there it was and I thought about nature much of the time. How did this affect my learning Tranquility Meditation many years later? That's what I want to discuss or at least touch on.

The way I went about learning nature is typical of how I have learned many things all through my life, in that I am very detailed when it comes to learning. By the time I was in my teens I was a herpetologist, specializing in amphibians, in particular salamanders. I was precocious enough to have my own little desk way back in the range of stored specimens in the University of Michigan Museums

building and I was working with grad students and professors. I was just a high school kid.

One year, in the very early spring, we fenced off six or seven rather large spring ponds near Ann Arbor, Michigan where I grew up. Around each pond, we placed a very low screen fence, with #10 cans sunk in the ground all around the perimeter, This was to collect salamanders trying to reach the spring ponds. And we collected and measured many hundreds of migrating salamanders heading for the spring pools to mate. We measured them and then put them back over the fence so they could continue on to the ponds. Later we took down the fences and pulled up the cans.

My point here is the detail. Early-on I was a collector of all manner of natural things, leaves, rocks, butterflies, pressed flowers, and on. Later, as a grown up I collected and archived data on music, until I (and a large staff) had assembled the largest music database on the planet, which remains the largest to date, the albums, tracks, composers, covers, biographies, discographies, etc. And I did the same with film and movies, aggregating one of the two largest film databases on the planet. And I also assembled the largest collection of images and data on rock concert posters, and other collections. My point?

The point would be that I did a very detailed gathering, documenting, and archiving of many hundreds of thousands of items, actually millions of data items. So, the amount of concentrated detailed tedious work was enormous. I did this with a staff of 150 full-time workers and over 500 free lance writers. The CD collection we assembled is now housed at Michigan State University, numbering more than 730,000 CDs. This is all background for what I now would like to discuss, which is how all of this very detailed archiving affected my dharma practice. I see it like this:

For me this early work also was all about learning Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), yet instead of sitting on a cushion and focusing on a stick or a twig to learn Tranquility Meditation, I focused on all the very detailed "data" work that I did over the years. I did not know that I was learning the kind of concentration that Shamata requires, but I was.

Note, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is a dualistic practice, in my case aided by some detailed objects, just like dharma practitioners use a mala (rosary) or a wrist mala (worry beads), prayer wheel, etc. and say mantras as a way to distract the unfocussed or wild mind. Let's talk about that.

My daughter May Erlewine has a wonderful song called "Heart Song" (from the album of the same name) that says this same idea in a lovely way. Here are some of the lyrics:

"And everything goes round and round

and up and down

and side to side

my heart

is a rodeo clown

distracting the pain so that I

can just ride,

ride on by.

so that I...

can just ride."

And the song itself is wonderful to hear and watch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzEAG2cPP-U>

This is the same function that worry beads, mantras, and malas (rosaries) perform in dharma practice, keeping the busy mind busy and distracted so that we can see beyond that more clearly.

This is also what all the detailed work I have done over the years and decades did as well, gathered the stray worried threads of the mind and entertained them, mesmerized them into distraction through this detailed practice, which allowed the clarity of the mind itself to shine through. Worry beads and mantras can be an aid in learning Tranquility Meditation, in the same way.

To me, all of this dualistic mixing of detail with the emptiness of the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra is lubrication of the path toward enlightenment. The byproduct of this kind of “mixing,” like the mixing of fuel and air in a carburetor, is the beauty of Vipassana (Insight Meditation), a welcome respite from the crush of time and Samsara.

I can't say what others experience with what is called Insight Meditation, only what I know of it. And that does not line up exactly, IMO, to how Insight Meditation is described in the books as I understand it. To be frank, I'm not sure what others take Insight Meditation to be. To me it is anything but conceptual.

I can't say my Shamata is 100%, but I have had some 50 years or so of intense concentration, often 12-16 hours a day, so perhaps I have learned something. What could that be?

Well, it could be (generally speaking) enough stability in concentration to serve as a base or platform for Vipassana, for insight. I'm not all upset about trying to squeeze every last iota of Shamata from my practice, but I seem to have enough to fuel my excursions into the Mahamudra style of Insight Meditation. And once Insight Meditation is enabled, and we understand how it works, it is easier for it to become habitual and automatic.

And its hard for me to separate advancing age from poor Shamata on my part. For me, it does not appear as a problem, but it may be. It's true that at the moment, this present moment, the light of illumination or insight does flicker a bit, as mentioned: is that just poor Shamata on my part or does the light of the mind itself flicker, sometimes revealing just a glimpse and at others much more. I can't say for certain, but I believe it is the second take, insight into the present moment is a variable star.

I do know that unless I stop and jot down what can appear at a glimpse through Insight Meditation, it often is lost before I can remember it. That is troubling, but I don't know why I should expect the depth of every insight to be the same. Some flashes of insight are deeper and reveal more (and last longer) than others that are more shallow and evaporate quickly, unless I fix them to paper, so to speak.

The beauty of the flickering firelight of the mind through the lens of the present moment indeed is a bit phantasmagoric, a little like distant lightning flashes lighting up the night summer sky late in the night. Indeed, some beauty is probably lost. That much I can see, beauty that I forget before I could remember to notate it, so to speak.

Still, the general shape or outline of the future as seen in the crystal ball of the present moment is generally coherent and seems stable enough to depend on, meaning each lightning flash illuminates the same basic landscape to view. However, the illumination may be shallow or vast.

And so, sitting by that fireside of the mind and gazing into the present moment is not a waste of time, but rather a movie-trailer or preview of things to come, IMO. Where else can I get such a view? What is more of-the-moment than that? Certainly not the past or the future, but seeing the future in the present moment seems to be the best I can do. And, as mentioned, it is like flickering firelight, shadows dancing on the wall of the future.

The present moment is also fresh, the most up-to-date insight we can have and perfect to mix with whatever we are considering, so concentrated that extraneous thoughts don't appear and the pure insight-ness, as mentioned, mixes with whatever idea or part of Samsara we focus on to reveal that it is connate with Nirvana. Everywhere in Samsara we look with Insight Meditation, what is seen is the Nirvana of that aspect of Samsara. Just what do we have to do to achieve this?

Well, that's easily said and harder to do. Just stop entertaining yourself for a few minutes and endure the silence of non-busyness. Don't suppress anything, but allow the present moment to be open-ended. Wait there for your mental arms to open wide enough to embrace something. But do embrace something, as this poem I wrote suggests.

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

Expect nothing,

Except nothing.

Accept something.

ORGANIC REALIZATION

What a blessing it was and how appropriate as well that, when I finally was introduced to Insight Meditation and the realization practices, it was not on the cushion (in sitting meditation) as I always assumed it would be, but rather out in nature, crawling around at dawn in the wet grass trying to take close-up photos of tiny critters with a camera and lens. Looking back, I can only nod my head, and say “Of course, that is how it would happen.” And why is that?

“That” would be because all of my young life and most of my teens, for me my life was all about nature and its study. Mother Nature was not only my main interest but also my closest friend and companion. I lived and breathed it.

And so, of course, when it came time for me to have Insight Meditation (Vipassana) of the kind practiced in Kagyu Mahamudra, it would not happen in the shrine room with me sitting on the cushion, although I always thought it would. Mother Nature wanted to empower me herself and did. Of course, all of this was arranged through the many years of working close with my precious human guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. He planted the seeds and grew me up, so to speak.

Yet, when it came time for something like a touch of realization, it was Mother Nature and a series of sudden untoward events that sobered me up and together, they took the veil away, so to speak. As I mentioned before, how very appropriate for a little child raised out in the country, in a house my parents had built that was lodged between two large farms. It was not until the 6th grade that my parents moved into a city.

I guess the point here is that in my case, there were two trains running at the same time, my beloved guru and Mother Nature, each at their own pace. And please don't misunderstand and get me wrong. I'm not enlightened or anywhere close. About all I can say is that I was introduced to how the mind works by my life teachers so that I could, well, work it. That was all, but that was enough to allow me to use the mind and set my own dharma course through life. That, my friends, is all I needed: to be placed in the driver's seat so I could see the path and be given a license to drive my own car.

Later, soon after my little breakthrough to insight Meditation, a visit from my close friend Lama Karma Drodhul told me that what I was experiencing is called "The Lama of Appearances." Mother Nature also perfectly reflects the dharma so that we can realize it.

May 16, 2021, 1:02 AM

THE INEVITABILITY OF SOLAR CHANGE

[The government reports: "Minor G1-class geomagnetic storms are possible on May 18-19 when a pair of coronal mass ejections (CMEs) is expected to hit

Earth's magnetic field. The two CMEs left the sun on consecutive days: One from sunspot AR2822 on May 13th, the next from sunspot AR2823 on May 14th. Individually, the CMEs appear to be weak and insubstantial; however, they could add up to a geomagnetic storm when they arrive in quick succession this Tuesday.”]

When the normal daily solar tide (not intense solar influx) is out, (nighttime) the natural orientation and mapping of reality with day sunlight and night recovery, at least as we see it, seems obvious to us. We can read the lines in the sand or map of time and find ourselves following this or that life path and direction. This is what we do.

And then a sudden burst of solar influx rolls in (solar flare, CME, etc.) and suddenly we are inundated with change in greater quantity and find ourselves totally flooded --overwhelmed. The life map or path that we traced only yesterday is no longer there and worse, the waves of change are busy rearranging the sands of time until, even when the solar tide rolls back to normal and we can see again, we can have a whole new map to sort.

I am surprised that few are aware of this enough to even comment on it, although to me it is pretty much a constant in our lives, this continual inundation and recovery we go through from bathing (or being bathed) in solar flux. It's almost like we are in a greenhouse and being irrigated by solar influx by day and recovery by night.

And almost never mentioned is the incongruence that can be obvious as we compare the before and after situation of the high solar tides -- sudden intense influx. Day and night we are habituated to the gradual exposure to light and recovery in the night. However, that is a far cry from the tsunami that a powerful solar flare and CME (Coronal Mass Emission) can bring.

With that scenario, real confusion can reign as we close our eyes and weather the solar storm, only to open them again and look around when they pass. We are always putting the pieces back together again in our own mind. Talk about the tides of Samsara, the cycles of our solar life are ceaseless. As the high tide of intense solar change roles in, we agree to forget what suddenly we find so hard to remember, like where we were and just what we were doing.

We cling to the life raft of our self and whatever we were doing as we fall asleep from the inundation of the sudden solar influx of change, only to awaken farther down the line of time to a world that has substantially changed since we passed out, yet as mentioned, one we find just too hard to remember. And so, we inherent the work of change (a changed view) and start all over to put all the pieces together. This is a puzzle that is never completed. I wrote this little poem about it.

TIME TO MIND

Lost again in the swing of time,

I agree to forget,

What I find so hard to remember:

This moment.

Always later,

Urged awake by impermanence,

I am back again,

But farther down the road.

Time takes my mind,

In small and larger bites.

The little ones,

I reconnect and can remember,

But the larger gaps,

I can only leap across,

Guess at,

And hopefully learn,

To say more in silence;

Than in words.

May 17, 2021, 7:01 PM

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR OF CHANGE

[The space scientists continue to alert us to possible CMEs (Corona Mass Emission) arrivals today and tomorrow, not to mention that a very large Coronal Hole (#59) will be directly facing Earth over the next several days, possibly leading to continued geomagnetic storms. With that in mind, I will continue here with some solar-influx related discussion.]

The possible takeaway here is the difference between the steady change implemented by solar radiation as normally administered, day followed by night, and solar change in much greater quantities as indicated by sudden solar storms and intense influx as indicated lately.

Change in any quantity is just that that “change,” and it is a great deal like cash money. Like cash, change can be used in many different ways, depending upon the individual and our particular situation. Change is going to be spent or impact nonetheless and often we have little to no control over it, in particular if we are not even aware that it is incoming.

If we have a weak spot in our life system, change can blow it out. On the other hand, change can be the impetus for us to break through or create something new or just have a lot of energy for activity. As mentioned, change is ubiquitous, experienced by all, but not always in the same manner.

And so, when sudden solar change arrives, I find it more than worthwhile to note it and attempt to be prepared for it because change will always have its way with us, yet just how can vary enormously.

For the most part I like change and am up for it, even when it shakes my foundation and rattles my windows. I welcome it. It is like a fire hose, in that it depends on which way it is pointing and who is pointing it, IMO.

Like the old Chinese saying “May you live in interesting times,” The times when intense solar influx is upon us are always interesting and sometimes a bit terrifying. That has been my experience. Change can be anabolic (building up) or

catabolic (tearing down). It all depends on our situation. We can take it for a ride (surf it) or be dashed on the rocks.

Intense solar influx is characterized by an enormous amount of change all at once. Like all change, it will work its way with through our situation, blowing out gaskets here and shoring up our situation there. And there is nothing we can do about it other than to be aware of it and act accordingly.

Some of us like an influx of intense change to help us do stuff, if we know how to use the forces of inertia with the help of something like Aikido.

Solar change can also pulse, especially when two CMEs (Corona Mass Ejection) follow one another in close succession, which is somewhat rare. This is happening right now, and the two waves somehow can set up a standing vibration that has more than the usual impact, not only physically, but especially psychologically.

Keep in mind that such a strong injection of pure change can push our limits beyond the ordinary. It reminds me of those little squeeze toys that kids have, where when you squeeze them, their eyes or ears pop out. A shot of pure change can project our mind (fears, joys, and what-not) all over the place, producing what amounts to something that amounts to a vision, real or imagined.

It can be important to kind of hang onto our hats and not be dragged around this way or that by the mind, especially if what is seen in the vision is strange or even scary. Take it with a grain of thought in times of intense solar storms. These storms will pass, but while they are with us, they can seem more real than life.

And what we see in those solar storms sometimes can seem like a vision of the future, but more likely they are just an errant insight into something unreal in reality. I can't say for sure, but IMO, looking in the mirror of change is always revealing.

NOTHING DOING: THE PROBLEM WITH EFFORT

Learning to be alone with no entertainment and constant busyness on the horizon is not something most of us know anything about. We keep busy, busy, busy all the time if only not to have to be alone with ourselves, IMO. Doing nothing is not on the agenda. The sound of silence does not register.

Very difficult, this doing of nothing, to refrain from losing ourselves in endless busyness, whatever we find entertaining. I know, because I have tried and am still trying. The freight train of our busy thoughts rattles on day and night, and in truth we make few attempts to derail it or do otherwise.

Everything that "is," our entire life, is little more than a series of impacted distractions, with no attempt to unentangle ourselves or sort it out. We speak and sing songs of freedom, but these are songs sung from within the habitual comfort of our bug-in-a-rug Samsara. We have no intention of doing otherwise, even though we think and say we do.

This hypocrisy on our part is quite innocent, in that it has never occurred to us (not yet anyway) that we are only dreaming of freedom, while fast asleep in our busy inattention.

I don't like to keep railing on this same theme, yet I continue to see it as the great obstacle that it is. And our talk of realization and enlightenment are just that, words of freedom, mostly without the ability to act or take one step toward realizing it. In truth, that is not our intention. I'm no different.

When it actually comes down to the nitty-gritty of living without our constant entertainment, its like, as I mentioned, just dreams we are having, much like when we dream at night of getting up and getting a drink of water, but seemingly cannot move ourselves to actually wake up and quench our thirst. That's the nature of Samsara, almost complete and constant distraction until we can't imagine anything otherwise. We wear our busyness like a badge of honor. In other words, we live distracted and in distraction. It's all we have ever known. We like it.

Because of this fact, talking about freeing ourselves from distraction is just the glue that hold our distraction together and makes it even more permanent. There is nary a chink in the armor of our distraction, much less a window. Even whatever window we manage to gaze out of is brought to us by Samsara Incorporated. Everything points to our continued entertainment, because as Rinpoche told us, we have never known anything else. Not ever.

Unfortunately, this is also true for much of the dharma itself, at least how we experience it. My point is that, even when we talk of realization and the dharma, we (by definition) talk from within the arms of Samsara, and not outside it, much less walking point. That's just the way it is.

My teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinoche made it very clear to me, because I asked him more than once, that the dharma is not like Plato's allegory of the cave (or Christianity's original sin), that we once knew and were enlightened and fell from that to where we are today, and are now seeking to regain that pure land.

He was very clear that the dharma states those of us not enlightened have never been enlightened, not in all the time there has been up to now. He went on to say that we, all of us in Samsara, have never been enlightened. We here are the stragglers, the ones who through all time never got it, not to this very day. We are not stained by original sin or by anything but our ignorance of our own inner nature.

In other words, we may make sorties beyond Samsara (or believe we do) but come home to roost each night in the comfort of Samsara's continued distraction and entertainment. It is all that we have ever known.

I grant you that I must sound like a crazy person, going on and on about this as I do. Why I do this is because I am attempting to get each of us to look under the cover of Samsara enough to realize how totally enveloping it is and has been for us. I believe that until we can do this, we will lack the energy that such a realization gives us to turn the massive ship of Samsara around. After all, it has been going on for us forever.

And I am no different. Because of some health circumstances in my life, I was forced beyond my samsaric comfort to experience what I am intoning here in real time. I have been to that mountain, but I am pretty firmly back in the arms of Samsara like any of the rest of us. Yet, I am unable to forget what I saw and experienced and it is potentially liberating.

I journey by day (or imagine I do) into the fields of the dharma, but return each night to the womb of samsara, where I sleep and make my home. Yes, it is embarrassing, but so far I am unable to do otherwise. It's not that I have escaped

Samsara's attachments and others haven't. I'm in the same boat, yet feel it is my duty to share my experience as to the nature of Samsara and its hold on us.

I feel that I have glimpsed our situation yet am also relatively incapable of turning that mammoth ship of Samsara around, although by writing about it, I am at least trying. That being said, I'm on the inside of Samsara looking out and not outside of it looking in.

I too am working to free myself at the same time and hoping that you will do the same. Yet, I have not freed myself to any meaningful extent. At best, I have had a glimpse of our situation and how difficult it is and will be for us.

As to what steps I am taking or am trying to take to rectify all this, so far they are relatively few. I struggle to extract myself from my addiction to entertainment, while at the same time enjoying being entertained. As mentioned early, I toil in the fields of dharma by day (or like to believe I do) and retire to my entertainments at night; not the best example.

As to what is the best antidote to our habitual entertainment, I can't say for sure, because I am still in the throes of it all. Learning to be without entertainment I find difficult and I soon scurry back into entertaining myself with busyness after any effort not to. All "effort" is a stumbling block. As mentioned, I believe and write about the price of habitually being entertained while being entertained myself, from the safety of my embeddedness within it. How's that for hypocrisy?

Well, I can't even afford to feel bad about that, so involved am I in this whole process. I mean well and I am working on it. Yet, being alone in the nakedness of non-entertainment is still very difficult for me. I continue to try out different remedies, yet at the same time know that by invoking remedies of any kind, I

miss the point. If I am looking for remedies, I've already lost the battle, or nearly so.

About the best I can do is remember how very difficult it was for me to extend and expand Insight Meditation after first being able to practice it. Perhaps this is similar. It will take extreme effort and patience to progress in undermining (meaning realizing) Samsara. I am a long way from effortless realization.

Because essentially it is a change of view that I seek, not of essence, changing our habitual view I find very, very difficult, near impossible, yet there it is. What else do I have to do?

I try to cold-turkey it, just attempt to remain "not entertained," but with these kind of things, "effort" is counter-intuitive and an obstacle in itself. And so, I can't pretend to have found an answer, much less "The" answer to this problem.

About the best I can do is share these thoughts with you to see if others find themselves where I do. Yes, I know that the answer may well be to distract myself from my distractions, as in two negatives make a positive, yet in the practical and real world, that is easier said than done.

Somehow, I feel I need to be alone in the silence of my own mind without needing or leaning on the habitual entertainments that make Samsara what it is. And while I can wish I would have some kind of sudden breakthrough, more likely it will take steady progress to overcome this, like putting one foot in front of the other and slowly turning this around, if possible.

And yes, I know that this approach may not work and that sooner or later some alternative approach may arise that effortlessly works. That would be nice, yet until then here I am.

JUST HEAT LIGHTNING ON A SUMMER NIGHT

[These are the musings of late-night reflection and not to be taken too seriously.]

A surfeit of sorrow is not helpful. A little of sorrow goes a long way. I feel we have to look up toward the light in order to see it. There are so many other things to consider that they would take up all my time.

The best I have been able to do is to take note of what is there around me, what I am embedded in or passing through, and then move on. Taking sidebar trips to consider each failing or fault only saps my energy and serves as but another distraction. As mentioned, take note, drop it, and move on.

Like walking the tightrope on a high-wire, it is not helpful to look down. The momentum of moving forward is not only barely enough, but is crucial, key. To a great degree, we create the very path that we walk on. We project it and then walk it.

Ovid's "rosy-fingered dawn" is enough light to see by and also very positive. I'm not blind; I see the problems surrounding us. Where folks may differ and find their differences is what to do about them? I'm of the camp that wants to waste

no further energy pissing and moaning, but rather use that energy to make a difference, to become the difference.

IMO, our heart becomes a highway over which our life can run. Again, we create the path we then walk on. And that path, can only be a bridge over troubled waters, as the song says. I can never forget the line from the German philosopher Hegel, that reads:

“We go behind the curtain of the Self, to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.” It’s like turning a glove inside out. Now you see it, now you don’t. There is nothing there or not-there, a mobius strip that is endless.

And it’s in that “endlessness” that we find and make our life, itself also a part of the endlessness. It too does not end. That’s a long drink of water, so to speak.

And we walk out on that illusion, an illusion that we begin to see through and still expect it to support us, which it always has. Seeing through and beyond our Self into the surrounding hologram of life I guess is what is called seeing through the back of the mirror in esoteric studies.

With the increasing tenuousness of age, we reflect rather than are reflected. You know, words cannot contain, but are like a leaky sieve, much like this poem I wrote long ago.

“Prose is like carrying water in our hands,

Poetry like drinking from the faucet.”

With moment's meaning only may we merge; flashes in the night sky, like summer heat lighting; that is our introduction to illumination.

I was always fascinated by the line from Psalm 91-12:

“They will lift you up in their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

I don't know about that, but I can subscribe to the idea that while we can't walk through walls, the reality that surrounds us is increasingly semi-transparent, sometimes almost like just a brief sketch or only a flourish, rather than something solid. I don't ask too much of it other than that it is just solid enough to keep up the illusion, so I don't fall through the cracks, so to speak. And what's beyond the illusion? That should interest all of us.

Talk about projection and the lens through which the projection is streamed, what's out there is exactly what we project from right in here, essentially a palindrome or in photographer's jargon, a relay lens. It is the same forward and backward and reads both ways.

Or is reality and what it means only for the very young. Does it not hold up as we age, but without intending to, do we find ourselves stepping behind the curtain as the projectionist as well as what is projected. Once this is finally realized, is that some kind of short-circuit? Does time essentially stop for us as we age or does time just become increasingly meaningless, lose its meaning or feeling. Do we gradually lose touch? And what's the difference?

Where we used to be the talent that was being observed, after a while are we now the observer, just tinkering behind the scenes? After all, is life more like a production, and our roll when aging just part of the theater of the absurd?

These are just musings after all, reflections like heat lightning in the middle of a warm summer night. Themselves, they don't mean anything, which is just the point. As I said, meaning is for the very young and seems to vanish with age. Perhaps we can't feel a thing due to the gradual anesthesia of age. We are gently put to sleep toward the end of our time here.

To me, the best tamari is that which forms on the top of the large vats of miso. That's a non-sequitur, yet does it make sense to anyone?

May 19, 2021, 8:24 PM

HOW TO USE "WORRY BEADS" AND MALAS

This is about Mnemonics, i.e. "Distracting Distractions." It might be more correct to say "Collecting" or "Binding" distractions and these dharma techniques are common, not rare. Or we could say magnifying our concentration level, by binding our somewhat wandering attention like strands are bound in a rope.

These are techniques any of us can use, at least until we don't need them any longer. However, most folks use them as long as they live, because they become a part of our practice and are essentially invisible.

In my own case, my teacher, the Tibetan rinpoche I worked with for 36 years, almost never gave me direct suggestions as to specific technique adjustments to my dharma practice, but this was the exception.

It has to do with what to do with our attention, especially when we are anxious or our concentration is not that stable. How do we bind or herd our wandering attention together, so they are rendered practically invisible?

And we do this by providing our attention with something to be attentive about, like throwing that dog a bone, so that with our attention occupied, we can then rest the mind, or to be more accurate, allow the mind to rest.

And this seldom realized secret is as simple as learning say mantras, use a mala (rosary), worry beads, a prayer wheel or any other mnemonic device.

Of course, and I am not belittling the fact that saying mantras and the like are beneficial. I'm sure they are. Here I am just addressing, not the merit of such recitation, but as mentioned, the mnemonic (awareness assisting) nature of repetitive things like beads and mantras.

My teacher, quite casually, which was not so casual, since he seldom said anything casual. What he did say always was a directive of one kind or another once I thought about it. And in this case Rinpoche mentioned that I might like to use something like a mala. It was not totally clear to me what he meant by saying that, and of course he knew I knew how to use a mala because he personally gave me the mala (pictured here) that I always used.

Anyway, I took the directive and began to use my mala for something other than just the accumulation of merit saying mantras is supposed to provide. And I had, which he also knew, that I had probably said millions of mantras, which I had, since the various deity practices each have what is considered a requirement for finishing that practice, saying 100,000 mantras for that deity for each syllable in the mantra. So, if I said a 12-syllable mantra, which I had done, that would be 1,200,000 mantras, and so on.

So, the directive here was not just the accumulation of merit, but the quality of these devices (malas, rosaries, prayer wheels, etc.) as mnemonic devices, their ability to mesmerize our wandering attention and bind it to a stability, so that we could allow the mind to rest and thereby see beyond our own distractions. This is what these mnemonic devices can provide.

Of course, I immediately set about following Rinpoche's direction. And how could I forget one other direction Rinpoche had given Margaret and myself, and I guess that is a fun story, so I will tell it.

It was 1997 and we were having our yearly short interview with Rinpoche while attending the annual 10-Day Mahamudra intensive which went on for 31 years in a row.

We are sitting there with Rinpoche and asking what questions of him we had, when all of a sudden Rinpoche kind of leaned back with a great smile on his face. And in the next moment is said to us that we should go to visit His Holiness, the young 17th Karmapa "Ogyen Trinley Dorje."

I had to do what amounted to a second take on that statement, stuttering something like.. that His Holiness was in Tibet and that, of course, someday I intended to visit there...yada, yada, yada. And Rinpoche simply said:

“No, now, this summer you must go.”

Whoa, that got our attention. And what could we say. This was our guru speaking to us in no uncertain terms. We had no choice. And sure enough, we did just that. Within a month, we had our shots, visas, passports and were on a plane to Tibet, along with three of our kids. But I digress. Back to the mnemonics.

I immediately began to use my mala as a mnemonic, as a place to focus my attention especially whenever I was anxious or nervous. This is why all over the world they call wrist malas “Worry Beads.” I soon also made a wrist mala which I carried in a pocket and was using it like all of the time.

When I was standing in line at the grocery store or talking to someone or just standing around idling my engine, I would have my left hand in my pocket stepping through my wrist mala. I did not wear it on my wrist because that was too flagrant for my taste, but I did use it regularly and very much benefitted from it.

It’s probably easier for you to try it yourself than to hear me describe the value of using such a mala, yet I will try.

Of course, there is some benefit in terms of merit to using such a mala and saying mantras, but that’s not my point here. And, anyway, often I found myself

moving through my wrist mala, bead by bead, without saying anything at all.
Why?

I don't know why; I just did, perhaps because the value (and why they call them "Worry Beads") is that they somehow capture our errant attention and thoughts (worries) and bind them together, so they are more stable, until they act as a kind of drone and by that become invisible.

And with our worries or thoughts pacified, it allows the clarity of the mind, which is always there anyway to shine through. Again, this is a simple mnemonic device to calm or pacify our thoughts in this manner.

I still carry my worry beads in a pocket all of the time, but have found them less useful lately, perhaps because of the pandemic. I don't go anywhere where I might be anxious. Nevertheless, I have my worry beads and they have been incredibly helpful.

It occurred to me that some of you reading this might like to know about this very inexpensive and low-profile way of calming the mind and at the same time allowing the natural clarity of the mind to be available to us.

[Photo: Here is a Tibetan-style mala (rosary) that was given to me by my dharma teacher of 36 years the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, my root guru. He had used it himself for many years.

During a visit to our center here in Big Rapids in early May of 1991, KKR told me about the various parts of the mala he gave me. First, the bodhi seeds were perfectly round at the beginning, as were all the corals. The seeds were never

stained or oiled but became the deep brown glossy-color they are today through use. Neither the corals nor the seeds were filed, flattened or treated in any way.

Referring to the included image, the red coral guru bead, the green slider stone next to it, and the red coral marker beads on the opposite side of the mala belonged and were used by the previous Thrangu rinpoche (not the current one), the two side red-corals belonged and were used by the current Thrangu Rinpoche. The silver mantra counters were a gift from the current Thrangu Rinpoche. So, there is some history to it. Needless to say, this is very precious to me.]

May 20, 2021, 12:16 PM

STAY TUNED: THE PHYSICS OF DHARMA

Science and the dharma meet in the present tense, that instantaneous moment wedged between the future and the past that holds all the promise that we have.

Imbibing or nibbling at the edge of eternity, this present moment, is like tuning in a finicky radio station, trying to get a clear signal. The clarity goes in and out of being heard and seen. It requires our attention to monitor it.

In other words, the present moment is fickle, or is that just us? We know or CAN know how clear the signal is at any moment by just using our own mind to tell. We have to look or tune into the pure signal, while a lack of attention on our part

gives a “bad” or poor signal that prevents us from doing just that. That’s what’s I call “choiceless.”

So, it’s not difficult to know if we are on signal or have tuned out for the moment. I believe the truth speaks for itself and we can hear it plain and simple by attention. When we hear it, we listen more intently and when we don’t, we realize we are distracted. That’s not hard. If the above is understood, then just listen or tune in all the time, which is what is meant by “Stay Tuned.”

The well of the present moment is not only deep but always there. It’s not like we have an alternative. Both the past and the future are not present, so tuning in the present moment is, as mentioned, choiceless. There are no other live stations. The past is previously recorded and fading, while the future can’t quite be tuned in. This leaves us with right now and here, a no-brainer.

The above is obvious, but here’s the rub. Even though there are no other stations than this present moment is no guarantee that we will not choose distraction and ignorance via busyness and entertainment over this pure instant moment. It’s our habit and it has been forever; it’s called Samsara.

To tune in requires space and time on our part, which boils down to not filling our mind with needless busyness and chatter. Give all that a rest and let the echoes of our distraction die out until only silence remains. Rest in and with that silence.

Like musical chairs, we are exhausted from our own busyness and don’t realize it until the music stops and we sit down, if we can find a seat.

Sipping on our future at the well of the present moment pays better dividends than mining the conflation of the busyness (sorting it) of all our distractions. Just give it a rest.

Be still.

Not so easy as it might sound, allowing the echoes of our busyness to fade and just, as the saying goes, “be here now.” What do you think the great yogis do sitting in their caves?

How about this? Right now, it seems that we do anything we can to avoid the silence of being alone with our own mind. Look and see if that is true and take note! It would be comical if only it were not so sad, to fail ignorance by a meter or a foot.

When we can't stand the silence of the present moment and being alone with ourselves, we go and lie down or lose ourselves in needless busyness. Dreams and daydreams are our fallback options when we can't take the heat.

Summing it up, it seems that we are caught between the devil and the deep-blue sea, as the saying goes. On the one hand we have this endless chatter and busyness and on the other, being an attempt to be silent and alone with ourselves – the deep-blue sea. I choose the sea, if only I could reach it and also be able to stand it. It is hard not being totally entertained all the time.

ROTE DHARMA

Dharma practice by rote has to be an oxymoron of some kind. Sure, if we are doing the 100,000 full-length prostrations that are part of The Ngondro (dharma boot camp), I understand the relief when our daily 100 or so are done, because I had to do the whole thing twice. However, and there is an “however” here.

If we feel relief to be done after reciting prayers like refuge, aspirations, and dedications, we are just adding further obscurations to our practice. In other words, if we come out of our daily sit-on-the-cushion practice with a “Whew!”... we have a problem.

It may not matter so much when we are marching through the various purification practices, yet when we come to the realization practices, that kind of sigh of relief after practice is a symptom of pain and a sign that we are busy staining our practice with too much effort.

I’m not saying that no merit comes out of such behavior, but how much and why are we counting? And what can we do about this?

It’s a difficult problem, IMO. We all know that these very important dharma prayers like the Refuge Prayer, Bodhicitta, and Dedication Prayers were written by an inspired yogi and are not really meant to be recited by rote, but to be said in as heartfelt manner as possible.

These classic written prayers can serve as a guideline for beginning dharma students, but are not meant to be rattled off just to fulfill a requirement we (or somebody else) sets for us.

With dharma practice by rote, we stain our practice every time we rattle off by rote what are meant to be devotional aspirations and prayers. As mentioned, there is an easy test. After your daily dharma practice, are you sorry to end it and go on with your daily life or are you relieved to be finished with the practice for the day. You decide.

However, I assure you that down the road, and not too far, that approach and behavior will not cut it and, worse, you will have to try to walk the effects of rote dharma practice all the way back and that is difficult. My suggestions?

When you come to those prayers and aspirations, don't read them by rote, but note what they are saying and say them in your own words and in a heartfelt manner. Make a point of slowing down and meaning each word, without making it effortful. Not so easy.

Better yet, if you dare take the risk of forgetting, wait until some time in the day when you spontaneously feel the spirit, then recite and mean those prayers in your own heartfelt way. That would be best.

Of course, it is your practice. Yet, just imagine that someone walked up to you, and in making some kind of entreaty, pulled out a written piece, and addressed you by rote with it. What would be your response? I once asked a Rinpoche if high lamas were heard by the saints of dharma in preference beginners like ourselves, and the response was that heartfelt prayers by any person, regardless of their station, were what were effective. That should tell us something.

If you ask where did I learn this, I have to say I learned it from actual experience and I will explain. When I had a major stroke and was hospitalized, in an instant I found that I lost all of what we call our Self, meaning I was limited (and stranded) in this present moment (and its pristine awareness) only and had lost contact with any historical Self to speak of. You would think I would be happy, but no such luck.

The main upshot of this was that I could not find my way back to where I usually was, comforted by my habitual entertainments and habits. Instead, as mentioned, I was limited to being stuck right there in the present moment. And, it was stark, as in stark naked of any entertainment whatsoever, all of the comforts of Samsara that I had always taken for granted and desperately missed.

You might think I would be thrilled to be in the present moment, but no, that was not the case. And this went on for days, weeks, and months in varying degrees. And it was merciless in its nakedness. It was stunning and I was stunned! Yet, that's a whole other story, which I wrote a short e-book on.

“The Spiritual Anatomy of a Stroke”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Spiritual%20Anaotomy%20of%20a%20Stroke.pdf>

But, one byproduct of that stroke was my dharma practice, the practice that I had done day after day on the cushion for many decades. And this next part is going to be very difficult to put into words, but I will try.

After a few days, when I left the hospital and was able to sit down and resume my daily on-the-cushion dharma practice, I was in for a further surprise. As I sat down, it felt like the very first time I ever tried to practice, and that was not a pleasant experience. All of the decades of cache I had built up with the dharma over the years was not there, including my sense of Self, also just wiped out, gone! There I was, naked of any entertainment or comfort and stuck in the present moment with no comfort entertainment.

There was no lubrication or patina that I had built up from all those years practicing dharma. Saying the various daily prayers were nothing but rote. There was no meaning conjured up at all, that is, unless I consciously meant it, word by word. Mouthing the words was like chewing dried bread.

Not only did I have to come up with my own words and language that evoked meaning, but as mentioned, there was no backlog or history to cushion and couch the repetition, no sense of context. All that was left, was whatever actual realization I had had realized over the years. That remained untouched, just as it was and still is to this day.

That, my friends, is the difference between actual realization and accumulated experience. The many years of accumulated (mostly rote) experience from dharma (sitting-on-the-cushion) practice was completely wiped out and had to be reassembled from scratch over the next weeks and months. Only what actual awareness from realization I had remained.

Trust me. I sat and wept. Yet, I saw in real time how little value simple rote experience amounted to and at the same time how adamant or indestructible actual dharma realization is. There was no question about it whatsoever.

Well, of course, after some whining and tears, I picked up my bed and walked on, and it took quite some time for me to gather enough patina to make my dharma practice on the cushion any more comforting.

And what this means for you, my readers, as the poet Hopkins put it, “Suck any sense from that who can.”

May 21, 2021, 9:38 PM

“SLEEPING SUNSPOT WAKES UP”

I hate to turn this blog into a internal solar-weather service, but the new sunspot cycle continues to wake up. Here is the latest from the scientists, in their words:

“After nearly a week of somnolent quiet, sunspot AR2824 is flaring again. An impulsive C4.8-class flare during the late hours of May 21st (1928 UT) was followed by an even stronger C6.1-flare on May 22nd (0256 UT). This image from NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory shows the UV flash from the C6.1-flare:

“AR2824 is now strobing Earth with pulses of ultraviolet radiation. Waves of ionization rippling through Earth's upper atmosphere have caused shortwave radio blackouts over North America on May 21st (map) and southeast Asia on May 22nd (map). Ham radio operators, aviators and mariners might have noticed unusual propagation at frequencies below ~20 MHz.

“So far there is no sign of Earth-directed CMEs from these explosions; no geomagnetic storms are in the offing. However, stay tuned for updates. Newly-arriving coronagraph imagery from SOHO could change the forecast.”

END QUOTE

What more can I say. We continue to be battered by high solar influx, meaning a sheer flood of “Change” in increasingly volatile quantities. With solar influx at these levels, there is no choice but to roll with it and to be creative with what we do. We either manage it or it manages us, is my view. Either way it is unavoidable: this increasing change in large surges.

For many, it means it is easier to get a lot done in a day, something like being a piece of fat in the frying pan. For others, it’s a stick-your-head-in-the-sand time. As for me, I try to use it as best I can and remain aware of it. That means putting one foot in front of the other, even I end up marching around in a circle, going nowhere.

As I have mentioned here before, I often have a slight headache which for me is a sign of increased solar activity. And perhaps a tendency to imagine and even hallucinate every so slightly, meaning various psychological activities. And I try to take everything with a grain of salt, as they say, accepting everything at face value without attempting to change or remedy what I am experiencing. Just note it and stay loose.

And I am active in writing things like this, although I have written so often and much lately about solar influx that I have little new to add. It’s time that folks,

including some of you, take note of this increased solar influx and the change that it requires and tell me what you are experiencing. It can be a very active and productive time, provided we don't lurch off into directions that go nowhere for us and are nothing more than the urging of the change we feel within us. We can be tempted to go off in any direction, meaningful or not.

I always tell myself in these times to not make final decisions about anything until the change passes and we can see the landscape of our life more clearly. The temptation is to seize these passing waves of change and ride or surf them. I prefer to wait them out and then see what change actually needs to be done, if I can. That's, if I can. Also, to attempt to NOT react without consideration, which is hard to do. That's what volatility brings, I suggest being careful with knee-jerk reactions.

Most often, it's not a "sea change," but rather, for the moment, a "sea of change," like a standing wave passing by us, unless we react and find ourselves on and in it.

May 23, 2021, 4:23 AM

THE NEED FOR SPACE

[I am trying not to go on and on about the current flurry of solar flares, but to briefly update, according to NOAA models, a combined CME will hit Earth's

magnetic field during the late hours of May 25th, potentially sparking G2-class geomagnetic storms.]

As for this blog, here I mean the need for space in order to have room to encompass or embrace what is. Perhaps why yogis always end up sitting on a cushion or in a cave is because there literally is no other place to go. And our need for space requires having less rather than more, doing less. Less is more.

Perhaps for some, the meditation cushion is a place of last resort, a refuge, so perhaps it is best to just go there first because we are going to end up there soon enough. Yet, that is not so easy for most of us.

Either way, we go there when we have to or able to, not unlike finding a refuge or shelter from the storm of Samsara. And if you wonder what those yogi adepts are doing in that cave and on the cushion, it might be the last thing you expect. They are learning to do less, perhaps nothing at all and doing nothing is not easy for most of us. We are so used to our “somethings.”

As for me, perhaps dharma on the cushion is not my seat or “cup of tea.” I tend to prefer resting my mind in writing blogs like this. And it took me years of dharma practice to learn to do so. If sitting in a cave is at all like my resting my mind out in nature or in writing such as this, then I understand why yogis spend so much time at it. I am doing the same with Insight Meditation, which is where I prefer spending my time each day.

Life can offer me food, entertainment, and the like, but looking back at the close of each day, it is the time spent in Insight Meditation that stands out. And I can't wait to do it again tomorrow. That's a sign of something.

And so, I best put aside my imagining what I would do on the cushion in the cave (or feeling I should), because obviously I have never felt like doing that, yet, as mentioned, unless it is similar to Insight Meditation, I have little idea what that would be like for me.

On the other hand, I do have the kind of Insight Meditation I mentioned above, which instead of ending me up in cave, I end up in a blog writing this. Yet, as far as I can see, this Insight Meditation is pointing me in the same direction as those yogis in a cave. It is my kind of refuge. IMO, all dharma leads in the same direction.

I really do believe the old chestnut “No wine before its time,” and in the meantime, each step of the way is filled with interest and challenge. I am still processing Samsara, bit by bit, and yet on the horizon I can perhaps dimly see the outline of what the yogis must see. If I could get close-up, I feel that the challenge of just nothing at all is more than enough. Less is more.

Like the title of this blog, “The Need for Space” to effect our “embrace” beckons to us all, i.e. finding for us the space or room to open our arms wide enough to embrace this world and all those and everything in it. That can’t be done when we are distracted by the sheer busyness of having no time for anything. I get that loud and clear. Now to just do it. LOL.

Its either “Timeless” (endless time) or “Less Time” (crowded by our own busyness), our choice. Well, we all can manage to have less time, but few of us can do the opposite, go timeless. “Timelessness” and doing “Nothing” at all seem to go hand in hand.

It seems clear to me that Insight Meditation, IMO, requires something like a form of dualism in that having insight requires having an insight into something. In my experience, it is always insight into the nature of some part of Samsara and the realization (what is realized), is that Nirvana is realized Samsara.

However, we don't (at least I don't) realize the nature of Samsara all at once, but gradually and incrementally, a bit at a time. And that incremental realization is not linear, meaning I start at one end of Samsara and realize its nature until I get to the other or far end. Rather, what is meant here by incremental is incrementally realizing Samsara as a whole "shape," the whole enchilada, so to speak. That organic shape is what arises and is gradually realized, a bit at a time. A short poem I wrote:

EMPTINESS

It's not just that appearances that arise are empty,

It's that appearances are the emptiness arising.

May 24, 2021, 7:23 PM

"I YAM WHAT I YAM"

[Solar Update: The daily rotisserie of solar radiation by day and recovery by night continues to be augmented by intense bursts of solar influx through events

like solar flares, CMEs, solar wind, and geomagnetic radiation, right now mostly the effects of combined CMEs hitting the Earth's magnetic field in the late hours or May 25th, possible sparking G2-class geomagnetic storms on May 26th.]

Well, I'm having a field day with the recent solar influx of change, after many years of very low solar activity. It's a little much at times, I agree, and I have found all of this even a little hallucinogenic. This world of appearances tends to flicker, shimmy, and shift at times.

The title of this blog, the words of Popeye the Sailor Man, stick with me. I finally am letting go of this wish I have had to make the accounts I read in pith dharma texts about Insight Meditation fit my own experience and realization. They don't quite do that.

What I am finding is that my own experience will have to be enough for me, no matter what fit it makes with tradition. I guess any realization I have is just my own experience filtered through me and whatever realization that comes from that. What's the point of trying to compare it? Like the old jazz classic with Les McCann and Eddie Harris "Compared to What?" If you have never heard this, you have missed something. Hear the whole thing, especially the words "Trying to make it real, compared to what?":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCDMQqDUtv4>

As for my dharma practice, which these days is mostly Insight Meditation as part of some form of Mahamudra Meditation, I consider myself lucky to be able to do it and so what if it is somewhat of my own amalgam, my own particular mixture or blend? It's my cocktail and I very much like it. What else could I hope for? Not much, so why apologize for my flavor.

So, this nagging question of “What exactly is this practice that I am doing?” perhaps is not really very important. Yes, I would like to get perfectly aligned or in line with the Kagyu tradition and have as best I can, yet that may be possible only up to a point, after which I am on my own, not that I ever have been otherwise.

If it were possible to do my “spiritual” DNA, they would find that I was mostly Tibetan dharma, but with a shot of Zen in there too. Zen was my earliest dharma influence, back in the late 1950s. At that time, it was the only thing around.

Either way, I have to stand on my own two feet, and do, however I find them and not try to fit into shoes that I am uncomfortable in. I have to flip that worn out worry and just be as I am, because that’s what I am.

All my life, I have wanted to fit in with society, but repeatedly I did not quite fit. I love the image that I read somewhere: Out on a farm, they watched a line of cats marching along the lawn at twilight, all head to tail. And behind came one skunk, head to tail with the rest. I’m afraid I’m like that one skunk, but I would prefer to fit in. I just can’t quite do that. After all, I’m a bit of a maverick, but by default and not by intention. Choiceless.

Is it because I was such a naturalist and first learned nature’s laws and not society’s or perhaps because I have a touch of the poet in me... or the mystic? Perhaps it is just the Irish in me? I can’t rightly say, but I just have to be what I am and not apologize for that, because that’s what I am.

I'm not the kind of dharma student that the dharma texts I read say that I should be, no matter how much I wish it. LOL. And I guess I am at the end of my apology for that. As Popeye the Sailor man said, "I Yam what I Yam and Dats What I Yam!"

Me too.

BUDDHA IN THE PALM OF OUR HAND

[Lunar Eclipse today. Lots of rain, at last. Recently, on a morning walk, insights come. Yesterday, it took me 19 minutes for my average mile, which is good for me. Still some effects from geomagnetic storms seem to linger.]

Expanding and extending "Realization" never stops if we keep at it. It may be gradual and totally incremental, but IMO, revelation is endless.

It is clear to me, at least for the moment, that my efforts to separate myself from my many habitual cloying entertainments is probably doomed, because of the effort it takes to detach that is involved. Meanwhile, my Insight Meditation is and has been for years effortless. It's what I look forward to doing each day and has been this way, as mentioned, for a long time. It is what I most like to do in a day.

Should I regret that, for me, Insight Meditation was born out in nature and not while sitting on my meditation cushion as I always assumed it would be, but who is counting other than me? I'm grateful to have found Insight Meditation, however that was permitted. Very grateful indeed.

And so, at least in this moment, I see that increasing (if possible) my Insight Meditation sessions each day is probably a better way (karmically) to deal with my busyness and habitual desire for entertainments than punishing them with my attempting to shun them as in purposefully trying to avoid them.

Of course, in retrospect, I already knew this conceptually, which has never been my problem. Experiencing and Realizing the conceptual is where the rubber meets the road for me, especially that last part: realization.

Something to be aware of, at least I found this true, is that as we become proficient or master (to whatever degree) a technique such as Insight Meditation, the “newness” or unusualness of it compared to what we might call our ordinary awareness, begins to fade as we spend more time doing Insight Meditation and use it in different areas of life. It blends in until the contrast between the two (Insight Meditation and ordinary awareness) is less and less sharp – a loss of the contrast between the two. This is called “mixing.”

Yet, “Insight Meditation” is just that, Insight Meditation. By definition, Insight Meditation is one of the realization dharma practices, an integral part of Mahamudra training. The intensity and pureness of Insight Meditation seems to naturally exclude or hold back any dualistic thinking and thoughts. In my experience, Insight Meditation is a direct shot of certainty, to the exclusion of any doubt or second thoughts, a wonderful friend to those of us learning dharma.

In a single word, Insight Meditation is a “revelation” of all that is, incremental, yes, but a revelation, nevertheless. For me, Insight Meditation punches a hole in Samsara and its habits (realizes it incrementally) and offers a window into the timeless and the certain.

May 26, 2021, 4:37 AM

SOLAR BIOLOGY: ABSORBING SOLAR CHANGE

Here is a free book on Solar Biology, including many articles plus an introductory essay on intense solar activity.

SOLAR BIOLOGY: MONITORING SPACE WEATHER

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/SOLAR%20BIOLOGY%20pdf.pdf>

An overlooked but seminal part of modern astrology is as close to us as the rising and setting sun. When the normal sun goes rogue, erupting in intense explosions of solar plasma through flares, CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejection), energetic particles, and solar wind, this intense solar energy has a whole different effect on us than does the normal sunlight of the quiet sun.

This short e-book is a collection of articles I have written about intense solar activity, with a brief introduction to the subject as a foreword. I don't have time to polish off these various pieces, but offer them as they are, so those of you interested in this subject have something to read and refer to.

This whole subject as to the effect of intense solar influence on sentient life deserves our attention. Even more interesting to me personally is the role that intense solar change has on human creativity at all levels. We are used to the regular sense of change as brought to us by the quiet sun, where the solar radiation of each day is followed by a night in which to absorb it.

However, when the sun emits huge packets of change and hurls them at Earth, we are affected accordingly. This is about that.

In the last 20 years, there has been an increase by scientists in what we can call Solar Biology, also termed Heliobiology. This amounts to a new field concerned with solar activity and its effects on human psychology, health, and the various solar mechanisms that may be responsible.

This research is centered on solar activity, what is called “Space Weather,” caused by solar flares. CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejection), geomagnetic storms, solar wind, and cosmic rays.

The effects caused by increased influx of solar plasma and the like can be distinguished from sunlight, the electromagnetic radiation that bathes the earth in light much like a rotisserie, alternating with daylight exposure and nighttime recovery. We all know that the Sun as source of all this light is what allows life upon Earth to exist at all.

This solar energy as generated by the Sun through nuclear fusion reaches Earth, not only by electromagnetic radiation (sunlight), but also this also includes a variety of wavelengths from gamma rays and X-Rays all the way down the spectrum to radio waves and UV radiation.

Aside from sunlight (electromagnetic radiation), the sun continually emits solar plasma and magnetic fields, called “solar winds,” which have a mean velocity toward Earth of about 400 km/s and a mean magnetic field of some 5 nT.

The sun, like all variable stars, has a cycle of solar emission that is variable. In the case of our sun, it amounts to a periodic variable cycle of 11-years, with some deviation. This is often called the “sunspot cycle,” during which the sun is quiet (no or few sunspots) increasing to an active sun with many sunspots, and back again.

It is a fact that during the peak of the 11-years sunspot cycle, the outpouring of solar energy blocks and keeps at bay cosmic rays from deep space from affecting Earth, while during the trough of the sunspot cycle, when the sun is quiet, cosmic rays are much more free to inundate Earth and they do.

And so, it is interesting to note that the Earth is either dominated by intense solar influx or by cosmic rays. How each of these affect Earth and its inhabitants, we don't exactly know, but we can be sure there is a difference between the two kinds of radiation cosmo-biologically.

Solar radiation peaks should be more familiar to us, while cosmic rays peaks bring information from deep space, far beyond our Sun and coming from massive events happening in the universe at remote distances from Earth.

The Earth is surrounded by an atmosphere which shields us from the more dangerous electromagnetic radiation through an electromagnetic field called the magnetosphere. The magnetosphere protects us from X-Ray overdoses and all

of the energetic events like solar flares, CMEs, particle events, and the variable-strength solar winds.

The major physical events stemming from the effect of intense solar influx have been adequately described in the scientific literature, IMO. These would include major disturbances in the Earth's magnetosphere, geomagnetic storms, perturbations in the upper atmospheres, and so forth, particularly the ionosphere.

As for the duration of sudden solar influx, this ranges from one to five days for the existing solar wind emission from the sun to reach Earth, while more energetic particles can take a matter of hours, and our normal sunlight takes about eight minutes to reach Earth from the Sun.

Space Weather is a branch of science that is busy with gathering solar-related data from wherever it can. This includes a variety of kinds of satellites as well as ground stations, including X-Ray, Gamma Ray, Neutron Monitors, and various global networks of observatories.

SOLAR BIOLOGY

What interests me as an astrologer is what we could call Solar Biology, sometimes called in the scientific literature cosmobiology. Back in the early 1970s, when I first took an interest in the subject, very few astrologers that I knew shared that interest. Of those who did, would be Theodor Landscheidt, Charles A. Jayne, Jr., Charles Harvey. And there were others, I'm sure.

We were interested not only in the physical effects of solar radiation, but in particular the psychological, health-related, and spiritual effects of this solar

energy. This would include such things as mental illness, neuro-system diseases, cardiovascular effects.

As for me, my primary interest has been in the spiritual and creative effects attached to intense solar effects. In this regard, my main compatriot was Theodor Landscheidt, who wrote the seminal book “Cosmic Cybernetics; the Foundations of a Modern Astrology,” published in January of 1973.

Landscheidt also wrote “Sun-Earth-Man: A Mesh of Cosmic Oscillations” in 1989.

And last but not least, Landscheidt published in 1987 “Wir sind Kinder des Lichts” (We Are Children of the Light: Cosmic Awareness as a Source of Life Affirmation”

Of the above books, the book “Cosmic Cybernetics” is now almost impossible to find. You may write me at Michael@Erlewine.net and I may have some suggestions where you can find a copy.

As for “Children of the Light,” it is in German. My dear friend astrologer Bob Schmidt agreed to translate the book and he did. Still working on the footnotes. This book is concerned with the confluence of great discoveries in history with sudden solar influx. Landscheidt is very detailed, but says not much about the psychological and inner reaction we have to strong solar influx. I have tried to remedy that.

We are talking about the influx of sudden change due to solar flares and other phenomena. Please note the kind of change. Most often, it's not a “sea change,”

but rather, for the moment, a “sea of change,” like a standing wave passing by us, unless we react and find ourselves on and in it.

For me, this is the danger of sudden solar influx, that we will go off half-cocked as they say, and find ourselves making decisions and taking directions that we may regret or that we cannot live up to after the surge of change passes, something like “Queen for a Day,” and little more.

Or, we feel like having a sit-down-and-work-it-out conversation that essentially wears itself out like a dust devil and amounts to the status quo all over again. In the spur of the moment, by way of sudden solar influx, we launch ourselves off in directions we cannot maintain or ones that we (normally) never would or want. And then we have to live with it or walk it back because we can’t sustain it.

Again, such large packets of change are like cash money. We can spend them however we will on whatever we want or, more likely, will be driven to do so by reaction rather than forethought.

The daily rotisserie of solar radiation by day and recovery by night is suddenly augmented by intense bursts of solar influx through events like solar flares, CMEs, solar wind, and geomagnetic radiation.

PLIABILITY: THE PURIFICATION PRACTICES

These are some notes on the dharma purification practices and how to approach them. There are layers on layers of preparation, various dharma practices that

prepare or lay the groundwork for our seeing through the distractions of Samsara and recognizing the actual nature of our mind.

What may look like too many techniques is not, but rather different ways of working the mind, exercising it, pulling and pushing it this way and that, until by constant kneading we are pliable enough to naturally respond.

For most of us, the mind as it comes right out of the box, so to speak, is not “workable,” not pliant or flexible enough to respond to the more subtle awareness that is required for more advanced practice.

For that, we have to exercise and otherwise work the mind until it is pliable. In dharma terms, these are what are called “The Preliminaries” or purification practices, practices both physical and mental. It’s no different than getting our physical body in shape through exercise and training. We are all familiar with that and those needs.

Without such exercise, our mind remains stiff and inflexible, unable to respond naturally or bend with the subtler winds of change. We may try our best to avoid the actual arduous dharma exercises, until we understand that without pliability, we are just too stiff to respond. We are not responsible enough.

I can well remember when I first read about and understood the extent and effort required to accomplish the various purification dharma practices. Just one look at what was required was enough for me to decide not to undertake them. They sounded downright Medieval. There must be another way, thought I.

And yet, all of the workarounds and alternate paths I sought out ended up with my facing these same quite arduous series of purification practices, just a little farther down the road. I finally understood that they are there, not to confront us, but as a means to make actual meditation possible. Hating or avoiding these exercises only makes them more difficult, IMO.

Of course, we don't have to do them at all, and the only downside of that is how long it will otherwise take to actually meditate, probably longer than this lifetime. I didn't like that idea either. It took me a long time to look favorably upon these preliminary dharma practices.

And so, I went around and around for quite a while, always ending up where I started, facing the actual doing of any of these purification practices. Not only do you have to do them, you have to want to do them and with heart, because just doing them as fast as you can, does not work. Ask me, because that's what I did, got through them post-haste.

My reward, when I presented my accomplishment to my dharma teacher, that I had finished the arduous Ngondro purification practices, and told him I was now ready for the more advanced deity practices, was for him to ask me to do the whole thing all over again.

He was very gentle about informing me of this by saying. "Michael, do you want to know what I would do next if I were you?" What could I say? Of course, I wanted to know what he would do and he said. "I would do another round of Ngondro."

And so, I did, starting again from the beginning. The point is, when we are serious enough to actually be guided by an expert that we respect and ready to

do what is necessary, then we do what is required, but with heart and not just by rote in order to put it behind us properly.

Most of us are not naturally pliable enough to figure out how to make ourselves more pliable. I have been around the dharma long enough to learn something about all this. I've seen enough mistakes made, mostly my own, and I finally gave up and just did it the correct way. Even then, we wait upon the blessings of the guru.

The process itself is forgiving, at least enough to include our resistance to doing it at all. The actual practice amounts to our beginning to round off our rough mental edges, a rough cut, so to speak.

After trying every which way but loose, I finally did it the way I was told instead of trying to find shortcuts on my own. I didn't know diddly about these practices, and it took me time even to be willing to be instructed. After trying everything else on my own, I finally got in line. I am a stubborn thing.

And so, my advice (if your dharma process is going too slow) is to do the purification practices with as much heart as you can manage and follow the advice of those who actually have done them and know from experience. If you can do them with heart and get finish them properly, you will be ready for the non-purification practices, what I call the realization practices. And they are a whole other kettle of fish, IMO. However, doing the purification practices JUST to get them out of the way will have you doing them again, especially if you have a good teacher who cares about you.

[Photo of dharma practitioners in pilgrimage doing prostrations which was taken on a trip by Margaret and me to Tibet and China along with my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. This photo was taken by Andy Yeh.]

May 27, 2021, 9:18 PM

NOW

The old saying that “Coming Events Cast their Shadow” is but a skip and a jump from the idea that we also project the future path on which we are destined to walk.

How amazing is this present moment from which all else comes. The past no sooner passes than it sets about reconfiguring itself in vain attempts to remember. And the future never quite gets here, which leaves the present as the window through which all things are seen and experienced.

Nothing is more fresh than right now. As the great poet Gerard Manley Hopkins intoned in one of my favorite poems “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo:”

“Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,

Do what you may do, what, do what you may,

And wisdom is early to despair;”

This present moment remains so close to us; nothing is closer, so that to ignore it makes no sense, and turning a blind eye is simply a futile gesture or perhaps a fit of pique.

If there is a hearth that warms us, a place to gather around and gaze into, it is this moment now that is never later and never sooner. How uncanny and other-worldly, this pure oxygen vent from which all breathe.

And it is resting here in this moment that knows not the duality of past and future. The present is timeless, beyond time's duality and fresh, fresh, fresh. Abandon hope and fear all who live in the present and rest in this source of all and anything.

Whatever issues from the present moment and its source is anonymous, unencumbered yet by time and name, and only too willing to be of use "as is."

Resting in the gusher that issues from the well of the present moment, held open by the inevitable is, indeed, a window into eternity. The advanced meditation techniques simply say: rest there.

INSIGHT MEDITATION: THREADING THE NEEDLE

When I say that Insight Meditation, which is billed as a non-dualistic practice, has an object, I guess that has to be explained.

We could ask, with Insight Meditation, “Insight into what?” and that sounds dualistic. Yet, in my experience, it is not quite like that and it would be misleading to say it is.

Insight Meditation keys on or can be launched or triggered by any kind of detailed attentive work. In my case, that tends to be either close-up nature photography or writing like this. I first discovered Insight Meditation through photography and for a long time, could only meditate that way via photography. And I had to train for over a year to mix Insight Meditation with writing, learning to extend and expand this kind of meditation to something other than photography.

I suppose I could expand beyond these two subjects and imagine I am, but I can't think of anything else to focus on other than anything and everything, and that seems too broad for me at this point – to go global. I have found out that you have to be interested (at least I do) to expand Insight Meditation beyond what you know.

At the same time, the contrast between the awareness with Insight Meditation and ordinary awareness is slowly losing contrast for me, so I may be generally becoming more aware as time passes (or less).

As to exactly what happens to launch or trigger Insight Meditation, I am at pains to say, because it is very subtle and I'm not as subtle as it is. Nevertheless, I will try anyway. With photography, perhaps it is easier to describe, so I will start there.

I will set aside the special circumstances, what I call the “perfect storm,” that I was in when I first managed to enter Insight Meditation. It included a very sobering incident in my life, one that popped me out of my normal sense of the security for my Self and left me digging much deeper in life than I was used to. It caused me to throw caution to the winds. Yet, that’s another story.

Suffice it to say, these conditions found me out at dawn for about six months straight, crawling around (soaked to the skin) in the wet morning grass, watching the sun come up, and photographing tiny critters and small worlds, using ever finer camera lenses. There I was, peering through special highly-corrected close-up and macro lenses, while waiting for the incessant Michigan winds to die down long enough to snap a photo. I had to hold very still, be very patient, and often was very uncomfortable, to get that photograph. And I have taken many hundreds of thousands of nature photographs.

And later on, I learned to stack focus, which involves not only all of the above (especially not moving) but creating a series of still photographs at various distances from the object and combining them into a single image, so the resulting photography appears to be in perfect focus, rather than having one point of focus (as most photos do) and the rest of the photography more blurred, as is the usual case.

Anyway, somewhere in the midst of all of that, perhaps because of the exactness required by the photographing process, I stopped seeing just me seeing the object (a bug or plant, etc.) that I was photographing and began, also, seeing the larger process of “Seeing” itself, if that makes any sense.

In other words, rather than “Me,” the subject, looking through a lens at “Them,” the objects, I suddenly saw (non-dualistically) the seeing “Seeing” itself, and taking in the whole enchilada. It unfolded, the “Seeing” itself, without referencing subject, object, or process. It just happened. And as with any realization, you can’t undo it or put the toothpaste back into the tube.

And it was so unifying and startling, that I ended up out in nature at sunup for something like six-months straight watching the sun come up and taking photographs. I could not get enough of this form of Insight Meditation and, when I went back home each day, I would find that my mind was just ordinary again. So, that is why each morning before dawn I would grab my camera and lenses to head out into the woods, fields, and streams. It was totally addictive.

I liked this form of Insight Meditation so much, so very much, that this was all I wanted to do, and pretty much all I did. That was stage one, if you are still following me.

Over time, especially as winter came on and I could no longer go outside with a camera and crawl around in the grass, my daily ration of Insight Meditation dwindled. I did learn to and was able to do close-up photography inside, so I built a tiny studio in my house to do just that. And I was soon back, doing Insight Meditation once again. However... and there is an “however.”

It dawned on me that I really wished that I could do Insight Meditation other than just through photography. And what I wished was to be able to do this form of meditation while at my desk writing articles like these. But I was unable to do that, try as I might.

Of course, I tried. I willed myself to do Insight Meditation while I wrote. It didn't work. My mind remained ordinary and that was disappointing. In other words, I could not just transfer whatever I learned in the way of Insight Meditation from photography to creative writing. And I tried and I tried and I tried... I could not just will it.

I did not let up with trying and after about a year and a quarter of constant wishing and trying, I managed, like scaling a sheer rock face, handhold by handhold, to transfer or transmigrate my Insight Meditation so that it now included writing as well as photography. It has to be one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life, and I have done a number of very tedious projects, like catalog all recorded music, all recorded films, and things like that.

Anyway, after great effort and considerable time, I can do Insight Meditation with writing. Now, it remains for me to describe what THAT is like for me. And this perhaps may just be something peculiar to me, because if there is one thing I have learned about the dharma is that ANY realization we come up with is always going to be peculiar to each of us, if only because "realization" by definition comes from within us, through the filter of our own personal history, and not from outside in the world.

Here is an analogy: It was like I use to wait by the door for the dharma mailman to deliver my realization from outside, while my own inner thoughts were the only way that they will ever come and in the form of my own speak at that.

By the time any realization is filtered through our person and personal history, who else would recognize it or be able to use it. The answer I came up with is that there would be no one else but me and it would appear only in my own colloquial wisdom, that of my family and upbringing.

With writing, and I am speaking mostly about writing about dharma here, although after a while it did not matter. I can write about anything at this point and remain in the envelope of Insight Meditation. Training is the reason.

And this is where it becomes difficult to describe in words, so please bear with me, as I try to explain how Insight Meditation sounds dualistic, but yet is not.

Just as with photography, where I leapfrogged suddenly from me seeing the object I was photographing to me seeing the “Seeing” itself as a whole seeing itself, inclusive of all and everything, there is something similar when it comes to writing, but also different.

It is almost like me asking questions of the ether or the unknown. If there is something I don’t understand conceptually in the dharma, and there are untold examples of that, I can kind of inquire or ask the mind and gently push deeper into that question for an answer.

And, using Insight Meditation, I can touch upon a sincere question that I have, and here is another analogy. It is almost like when we pull a strip of polymer plastic at both ends it reaches a point where the long-chain polymeric molecules which were randomly dispersed in the plastic material, when stretched, suddenly become more and more aligned in the same direction they are being pulled, with the result that the entire piece of plastic extends and at the same time becomes very clear. Sorry if this is kind of an elaborate example, but it does resemble what happens when, in Insight Meditation, we gently push a question deeper than we now know. And this is what happens:

We go beyond or are launched beyond our normal dualistic experience of subject and object and find ourselves singularly alone, without any second thoughts or critical thoughts bugging us like mosquitos of the mind. Everything is suddenly clear and unified. And more important, the answer to our question is above all clear and certain, and not subject to discursive thought of any kind. We seldom get that kind of clarity and almost never that degree of certainty. Insight Meditation provides that.

In that special chamber or space of Insight Meditation, there is no dualism; all is unified and of one taste. And while, when writing essays, Insight Meditation can be triggered by a question or any part or area of Samsara, and that trigger is like a launching pad for Insight Mediation. And so, Insight Meditation is not dualistic, but it does seem to require (at least in my case) a trigger, question, or shift in consciousness to launch into it.

However, once launched, there is no subject or object, but just clarity and certainty. Yet, as mentioned, Insight Meditation is triggered by touching on something -- a question or area. Or it could be triggered just by juggling words in a sentence until they are rearranged (or rearrange themselves) through Insight Meditation into an order that I find intuitive and natural.

This is not to say that the order of words that please me will please you, only that they please me. Insight Meditation can take place in moments or we can enter a more extended time of this kind of clarity and lucidity. I often look up and an hour has passed without my knowing it.

Summing up: the ability of have Insight Meditation depends on the stability of our Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). Here is an analogy. Its like trying to thread a very fine needle with shaky hands. The Tranquility Meditation steadies the hands, so that the Insight Meditation can thread the needle.

May 29, 2021, 5:00 PM

FRIENDS IN TODAY'S WORLD

I have a bunch of Facebook friends, almost 10,000 if you count Followers, which act the same as having FB Friends; you get the daily blog from me. I tend to not entertain for entertainment's sake and choose or follow my own interest on these blogs. I prefer that to catering to my readers, not because I don't appreciate all of you, but rather because I respect you. It seems the best I can do is to stay close to my truth and actual interest and let the chips fall where they may. That way, what I offer is fresh and not an attempt to leave breadcrumbs. I'm looking for company, not followers. Always have been.

Many of my friends from old have passed on. I am surprised at how some of you Facebook folk have become actual friends, dear to me. I develop a friendship with those that we manage to develop a friendship with, one based on our walking day-to-day together through our comments. Most of you don't comment, which is fine too. Interactive Friends here are mostly few and far between, but if there is a friendship there, it is based on actual shared ideas and kinship.

I know. I am going in circles here, yet that does not mean I am not saying something, that something is not being said. If nothing else, I try not to leave any trail or sign of effort in writing my blogs, not by intention, but like a bird flying across the sky leaves no trace. To me, that is the sign of interest in what we do, effortlessness. I enjoy writing my blogs, but they may be too esoteric for many.

Where I go, you are free to go. We may meet on the blogs. We may not. We may wave at each other from across a canyon. It is hard to say.

If we are on the same page, at least for the moment, we see the same thing. I see you. You see me. We resonate to the same sound. We are in tune. What we share rings a bell if only for the moment.

The wonderful thing about the dharma is that we all see the same thing, only in different ways and through different practices. I am glad to get to know those of you who actually talk with me.

THE “ME, MYSELF, AND I” IN US

[Solar update from AN OFF-TARGET CME MIGHT SIDESWIPE EARTH: Minor G1-class geomagnetic storms are possible on June 1st when a CME is expected to sideswipe Earth's magnetic field. The storm cloud was hurled into space on May 28th by departing sunspot AR2824, shown here in a movie from the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory.]

The problem with the Self, as I see it, and that would include myself, is that our dharma experience is very personal, and yet we are told (in order to be polite?) not to talk about or go on about ourselves. Yet, as mentioned, we have no one else's experience to talk about other than our own. So, IMO, that's a conundrum we face, if not some kind of Catch-22. Heaven knows that I am not alone in having this problem.

If I talk about the writings or experience of other dharma practitioners, even quoting the great dharma saints, I'm just parroting what I probably know little to nothing about. This is not my experience. However, if I talk about my own dharma experience, as limited as it is, I am talking about myself again, yet this is the only experience I have. So, go figure that please.

I do know that when I am talking or chatting with you personally, one to one, when you tell me something from your personal dharma experience, it registers more deeply than if you just quote someone else, so that is a hint as far as I am concerned.

Anyway, I don't like posting anything (I try not to) that I have not personally lived through or with, the experience and/or realization that comes from my own life experience. I feel I'm on firm ground with my own realizations, such as they are.

On the other hand, I don't want to raise my hand only to say "me, me, me" and my experience, yet I have no experience to draw upon other than my own. Also, within my own experience are all the many questions I have that I feel need answers. You get the idea. Now you see the Catch-22. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't, if we get personal.

On the plus side, I feel I can back up anything I post from my own experience, yet I have no way that I know to discuss other practitioner's experience other than to just point it out as helpful to me or not. Yet sometimes I feel everyone quoting others or even one another is like a hall of mirrors. I used to post quotes of great dharma saints, but mostly I have stopped doing that. We all have books and libraries. What we don't have is enough exchange with one another about our dharma practice, IMO.

So, please do talk with me about dharma or your life, yet have the courage to speak about what you have experienced, even if it is very little. That's solid ground and I will do the same. I know you can quote the masters; I can too. I'm not saying that's not helpful; it is, but I am not much interested in that here on this blog. However, when we talk to one another from the heart about what we experience in the dharma or just in our life and where we are at in it, it registers with me, big time. And I try to do the same in return.

May 31, 2021, 7:02 PM

UNPACKING SAMSARA

[Today, while out walking, I first heard their cries in the distance. Then I realized that they were way up high in the sky right above me, a large flock of Sandhill Cranes in a flying "V" formation, calling to one another. What an eerie cry.

For me, there are few things in the world more haunting than these great birds in flight. They were heading due north. How do they keep flying like that? Do some drop out? Such plaintive calls, these huge birds, with a wingspan of five or six feet across.

I felt like just sitting down and weeping. I have no reason why. It's all so choiceless for them. I wonder about us. Later, a second formation came by. I

can't help but ask myself where do I go from here, after such an experience? I didn't have a camera so I just did an Illustrator mockup of sort of what it was like.]

As for this blog, to realize the nature of the mind, we first have to see through the opacity of Samsara's distractions. It would be nice if we could, flash!, see through Samsara all at once. They say this is potentially possible, but very, very unlikely. Most of us find ourselves realizing the mind's nature incrementally by first getting some insight into Samsara, and realizing it a bit at a time.

There is nowhere to run and hide our face or as my first dharma teacher used to say, "I've got no pot to piss in." This is where the idea of refuge comes in. Where can we take refuge? Look around you. Search everywhere. Where would that be? That is why, sooner or later, at least in my case, I find that the only refuge that holds true is in the dharma, the Buddha, his teachings, and those who hold those teachings, the realized Sangha.

When it comes right down to it, for me at least, there are no other refuges. The historical Buddha did not invent the dharma; he realized it and shared that with all of us. The dharma was there all along.

When we exhaust our interest in and distraction with Samsara, where do we turn for refuge, not back to Samsara. That's where it gets difficult, but difficulty is the home of the possible, and the dharma is the key to unlocking and unbinding our unwavering attachment to Samsara.

We first have to understand what Samsara actually is. What is it? In brief, Samsara is everything that obscures the true nature of our mind. And enlightenment is no other than the process of removing these same obscurations.

The problem with such a simple explanation is that it does not communicate the depth of Samsara and the absolute hold it has on each of us. IMO, that is practically impossible to fathom, if only because it not only involves deciphering Samsara, but also unpacking the one (or lack of one) who does the deciphering. We can't see our own eyes except in reflection and the finder in all this is never found. It's like the fox inventorying the henhouse; no final count is complete other than zero.

HOLOGRAM: THE EMPTINESS ARISING

Well, it's not actually summer yet, but the temperatures have been rising again and, coupled with the solar energy bursts of late, it feels pretty nice. We have been busy putting the screens in the doors and in all of the many windows we have, not to mention washing the windows; obviously something that happens twice a year.

I have been holding my horses, so to speak and not lurching here or there due to the high solar influx, also considering my options, yet not in any earth-shaking way.

I like the idea of gently guiding myself as opposed to being driven by the force of change, and so am keeping my head down, so to speak. And yes, I'm doing my best to set aside any current plans while I take a wait and see attitude. I'm waiting to see what remains in the wake of the recent solar influx and only then attempt to sort it out. Meanwhile, the solar influx is still streaming.

I like change and especially philosophical realization, which for me translates to dharma realization. Same thing. And I'm trying to go lite on advice these days, because I have little to offer other than "hang on to your hats," not that most people are tuned into the solar activity. Regardless, everyone experiences it fully, whether we are aware of it or not.

It was late 1972 and early 1973, when I had a realization (actually a waking vision) that I experienced consciously; I realized that when sudden change erupts, most people close their eyes (internally) and pull in their feelers and wait it out. Only, when things get down to a gentle roar again do they open up and look out. We all do this together at the same time, like a bad thought arises and everyone winces and pulls in their feelers, etc.

And what has happened between closing the eyes and reopening them, as far as most are concerned, never occurred. We edit it out. Most agree to forget what they find too hard (or painful) to remember. And that's a potent idea. I saw this acted out in real life before my eyes during a few days when the veil was lifted. My eyes stayed open.

Moving through space and time in a kind of trance is not something we realize, much less remember. When the world turns holographic and shows its illusionary face to us, it reminds me of a midsummer night dream, when the air is the same temp and feeling as the bath water. We fail to recognize that these holographic appearances are nothing other than the emptiness the dharma texts speak of itself appearing -- the visible illusion. I try to keep this little poem I wrote in mind at these times. I share it again here.

EMPTINESS

It's not just that appearances that arise are empty,

It's that appearances are the emptiness arising.

AT THE EDGE OF ACTION

Here is something that I wonder. At the edge of action, where things just don't quite happen, effort just short of action is just that. We feel it, but don't quite rise to the occasion of acting on it, and so it remains latent but somehow still very much present. These things we are set to do are left floating out there.

Or a project of initially great momentum is stalled by ourselves for reasons we don't quite understand. We wanted to do it, were doing it, and we said we would to ourselves, but every time the urge to act and do it comes up, we consider it and just let it pass. It remains undone, not fulfilled, and in the offing. Again: we are not moved to act. We are waiting, but for what?

Is it that the further effort it requires at the moment is something we don't feel that we have? Or is it that this project or perhaps any more projects are just too much, more than we have the inclination to? It's hard to say.

Perhaps the answer simply is that we don't want to be committed to the degree of involvement it will take just now, at the moment. We are waiting for that larger wave or surge of momentum in order to surf again. And also possible, we don't like the idea of being so involved, not only because of the effort involved, but the

whole idea of the commitment and the effort and tunnel vision it will require on our part.

It's happened to me, not a lot, but often enough to make it remarkable, which I am here doing, remarking on it. Or perhaps we just wanted to see if we could do it, the project, and once we see that we are prepared to do it and could actually do it, we hit pause and hold there from further action while we just contemplate the whole thing.

And last, perhaps because the next phase in the project requires more of us personally and we have to get up for it. That's also a very real possibility.

I can't say because I don't know. I don't quite feel like it, which shows me how powerful my feelings are. And let's not forget Shakespeare's Hamlet:

“And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.”

THE FORM OF NOTHING

I am told that there are two kinds of sculpture, start with clay and add on until the sculpture is seen or start with a block of stone and cut away what is not needed. I favor the second type of sculpture, where from a block of stone, we remove the pieces until the truth of the form in our mind is revealed. To me, the dharma purification practices follow the “removal” approach. It’s like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where sticks are individually removed from a pile, until there is nothing left except the natural mind itself.

Yet, what is the form of this “nothing” that’s left?

The form of nothing (no more attachments) is its ability to accommodate and savor something, anything whatsoever. Cherishing is the word. “Nothing” cherishes everything. And, of course, I’m reminded of a little poem I wrote:

MEDITATION IS NOTHING

The books say:

Seek a place of solitude,

And meditate,

But it’s just the other way round.

When meditation,

Naturally occurs,

There is no place in the world,

That you feel comfortable,

Try as you might.

Not here or there,

Not doing this or doing that.

Only nothing feels right.

You just want to hold real still,

Let the mind rest,

And then park yourself,

Somewhere out of the way,

Like on a cushion,

Or

In a place of solitude,

Because:

Nothing is going on.

BLADE RUNNER: CHECKING DHARMA AUTHENTICITY

This blog may be a reach, perhaps a bridge too far for some; perhaps not, but I'm going to try for it anyway because (at least IMO) I find this kind of understanding important.

It has to do with how we tell whether a person that could be a dharma teacher for us is authentic. Do they have actual realization and what is that? In many cases, their reputation precedes them, but that does not guarantee that they are the right teacher for us.

For example, years ago, I spent personal time with the Dalai Lama, before he was very famous and he was wonderful, yet nothing ever clicked. Sure, if we can read auras really well, that might help, yet, in my experience, "all that glitters is not gold," and it pays to check our sources of dharma.

And, while we can look for realization in the form of a halo or a nimbus around the person's head, fakers probably find that easy to emulate. A better bet is to examine a prospective dharma teacher carefully in everything they do, including the nitty-gritty of their personality and Self, although there is no accounting for taste. See if their dharma sparks you.

This does not mean we have to agree with them or them with us on everything, yet we can look for things like: Are they coherent? Does everything about them all hang together and seem to be of one piece? And let me explain how I approach it. Again, my question is: How do I tell if the dharma person I'm meeting and talking to has dharma-realization enough to help me prepare to recognize the true nature of the mind?

It's not always that easy and the process reminds me very much of Richard Deckard (Harrison Ford) in the original movie of "Blade Runner," where Deckard

used what was called a Voight-Kampff Test to distinguish “replicants” (androids) from human beings, which consisted of a very complex testing process involving various questions and the coherence in the answers that came back – i.e. that they all added up to non-human.

Or another way of saying this might be that a realized person (to whatever degree they are realized) presents with their mind and actions something that coheres (is coherent), meaning it is inherently aligned in a way a non-realized person does not and cannot do. Here is an analogy I found useful, Try it on:

Imagine a large number of fish swimming deep in the ocean or lake. In the case of a person with some realization, like the blade-runner’s questions, that group of fish can “school,” so that suddenly all the fish end up pointing in the same direction. With a non-realized person, the orientation of the group of fish is pretty much random. And with a realized person, they school or are inherently coherent. All the answers agree with one another and point in the same direction. If we can’t keep a running count, we can feel or sense this coherency.

That’s a complex image, I agree, but quite an accurate description in my experience. The school of fish refers to whatever the prospective teacher says and how they act. Does everything they do somehow cohere and stand out? Do their answers “school?” I find that it does if there is realization. IMO, everything an authentic teacher says wakes us up a bit, if we listen and are aware carefully.

A realized person (to whatever degree) exhibits a consistency and certainty that non-realized people, IMO, do not. All the parts of their knowledge are coherent; these parts cohere and it all fits together (their actions, comments, words, etc.) like pieces in a natural puzzle. In other words, like fish that suddenly school, their every action all line up and point in the same direction, in this case, toward realization of the dharma.

That coherent-clarity and lucidity (somehow) is detectable (or perhaps sensed) by those who are looking for an authentic teacher. It may not work for you; I can't say. People differ. And don't mistake conceptual (intellectual) understanding for realization.

A person may have a good conceptual understanding of the dharma, yet still not "know" (have experienced, much less realized) what they are talking about. They can only talk about it, but they may not realize this is what they are doing. They assume they have realized what they are talking about, but have not yet. In time, they will figure it out and they don't seem to take kindly to any disavowal of their "realization," although it is crystal clear to any one with some realization.

I'm a musician, so I have found that I can also hear the consistency (the realization) in a person's voice. When I scan the voice (and what is being said by a dharma teacher), there is what I would call a coherent hologram that arises (which I just naturally sense) and it comes into view through all the words, comments, ideas, and what-not they express.

I find that sort of hologram or coherent image to be a good sign. I don't know if others can do this. Yet, all the above are just signs. And let's not forget just "feeling" a connection with a proposed dharma teacher. More important (and this is something anyone can do) and amounts to another way I know when I have found an authentic dharma teacher; I find myself learning from the individual. It is that simple. I may not like them personally, but for whatever reason, I can learn from them.

And let me reiterate here. A candidate for a dharma teacher for me may not be a candidate for you, anymore than the Dalai Lama (for all his authenticity) was for

me, even though I met him up close, offered a white scarf to him, and all of that. It only matters if YOU can learn dharma from them. It's like the old rhyme:

“Tinker, Tailor,
Soldier, Sailor,
Rich Man, Poor Man,
Beggar Man, Thief.”

The teacher may be a pauper or a prince. That does not matter. It only matters that we are able to learn dharma from them and find that they expand our own realization of the dharma. We don't have to like them or they us. We just have to learn from them. And it does not matter if they are a friend or not. I have never tended to “hang out” with my dharma teachers. They are not my personal friends although they may be (and usually are) “friendly.”

DHARMA DEBATE

In the olden days, great dharma masters debated not only other beliefs and religions, but especially different sects and views within Buddhism itself. It has sometimes been called “dharma combat,” in particular with Zen Buddhism, where the risk of encountering the Roshi has to be taken into consideration. And, if you have even been to Tibet, you will find young monks debating one another, not only one-to-one by themselves, but particularly in front of their peers. In a word, we don't have that here in the West; why I don't exactly know.

As I came up in the dharma in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, those of us learning to meditate did not debate or even discuss our “personal” practice with one another, much less in a group. Meditation was private. We did not ask each other about our dharma practice any more than we did about our sex lives. Yes, we acknowledged that we practiced dharma and were very proud of that, but as to what we actually did off there on the cushion, that didn’t happen. Mum was the word and often those of us practicing did not know what we were doing, other than just sitting there.

And that was why I was so surprised when I actually went to Tibet to find all of the monks, especially the younger ones in free discussion and even debate about their practices and view. I was also shocked to find out in Tibet that, at least in the Kagyu Lineage I belong to, that practitioners did not even start learning Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) until they had finished the arduous Ngondro, the extensive purification practices. How then did we manage over here in the West to get that just backward? Well, that is another story, but there is one. Here I would like to look more at the fact that in the U.S., we don’t even discuss our dharma practice with each other, much less debate over them. At least this was the case back in the 1960s and 1970s.

With that in mind, the following may broach on what seems to be a taboo dharma subject, the comparison and discussion of own dharma practice and realization with another practitioner, much less a group, so please bear with me or avoid this blog altogether if you feel private in that way.

“Realization” can mean so many things, so let us at least provisionally define how I want to use that term here. In the course of our life, including dharma practice, we realize this, we realize that, and the other thing. In actual dharma practice, official “Realization” comes along with a major event in our practice called “Recognition,” where the student is introduced to the true nature of the mind by an authentic guru so that he or she recognizes it.

As mentioned, when we talk of this major realization, this is called "Recognition," meaning the recognition of the true nature of the mind, and there are different degrees of realization of the Recognition that range from shallow (a glimpse) to "not-shallow." I heard this directly from my Tibetan Rinpoche that I trained with for 36 years. A glimpse is different than an immersion, and so on.

And so, not only do we have different degrees of realization, one to another, but we also have different paths to that realization. In other words, while the final realization (Enlightenment) that we all realize may be of the same stuff, the way we arrive at this realization (the path, which is called the "yidam") can be (and usually is) very different -- individual. This can make it very hard to compare dharma realizations between two students of the dharma.

In my own case, I may not have known exactly how realized another dharma practitioner was, but only that they appeared more realized than I am, or less. And there also seem to be different styles or approaches to the Dharma, which I guess is saying the same thing as mentioned earlier. And let's not forget the old Latin phrase "De gustibus non est disputandum," meaning literally regarding taste, there can be no dispute or the more modern saying "'Every one to his own taste,' said the old woman as she kissed the cow."

So, are our differences in dharma realization such that they cannot be compared? I would not go that far, either. The main problems, as I have experienced it (and what comes across through others), is differentiating "realization" from common conceptualization, where in the minds of many, conceptualization is mistaken for actual realization, when it is only intellectualization.

This, my friends, indeed can be a can of worms, which is NOT to say that there is no truth to it, but rather that one almost has to be enlightened to separate the two modes: realization and conceptualization. And why would we even bother? That's a good question, IMO. There are probably several reasons.

If, for whatever reason, we can clearly see that a dharma friend is speaking conceptually (intellectually) and not from any actual experience, much less realization from experience (and this is common), what are we to do with that? If they believe they have realization, which they have concepts, do we just nod our head and keep walking or do we have any obligation to point out the discrepancy?

My guess is that depends on how much we care about them. Certainly, the wise thing politically and socially is to, unless invited to comment, keep walking and allow time and change to bring our friend around to the realization that they are now only talking about something, and that the conceptualization that at the moment they believe to be actual realization is not. What they don't know is that anyone with a little actual realization can tell the difference between that and intellection conceptualization right off or at least quickly.

In my own training, my Rinpoche who would put us on the spot, often in front of a whole sangha and kindly ask us questions that demonstrate that, practically speaking, we don't know what we are only able to talk about. We have not yet experienced, much less realized, what we are conceptualizing. I have done this or had it done to me (and my sangha), yet I have been told that this kind of direct confrontation by a Rinpoche with our ignorance is very rare in the West, although not so rare in Tibet.

Or does what we feel seems like a lack of realization on the part of our dharma friend's conceptualization from our view, actually is realization to our friend. We

may see they don't get it, have not attained realization as we may know it, yet what are we to do about that? Mention this to them? Keep quiet about it? Avoid the subject altogether and walk on... or what?

As mentioned earlier, dharma debate or combat, pitting realization against realization (or the lack of it), is as old as the various historic dharma texts, where this or that master debated one another until one view was seen and acknowledged as dominant, as an improvement on the other. This is no different today, other than we have students today bumping heads in the dark, so to speak. Have we not practiced dharma long enough yet to discuss it with one another? Few of us ask to have our ignorance pointed out to us. Most go on alone with no discussion and no discourse. I don't find that healthy either.

In my experience, it appears apparent to me whether I am talking to someone with less, equal, or greater realization than myself. Yeah, it goes unsaid, but at the same time getting in line and in synch with one another and noting this cannot be avoided. And, of course, it remains the obligation of the more realized student to be compassionate to the less-realized student, if only because, as the old saying goes, "If you can't see the phenomenon, then you (at this time) lack the faculty," and the converse, if you can see the phenomenon, you have the faculty. If you know, you know. If you don't, you don't. No blame.

And we can't force realization into another, especially if they don't know what we are talking about, even through they think they do because they conceptually understand the idea. There always seems to be, in the dharma texts that I have read, these three stages: Understanding, Experience, and Realization. This is classic dharma terminology.

We conceptually understand a dharma principle, we subsequently experience it for ourselves in flux (it comes and goes), and finally we realize the nature of the

experience we are having. One of my favorite sayings from the pith dharma texts is “In the midst of experience, realization can arise.” Just so.

As mentioned, these three phases are principal stages in dharma training, and apparently, we can’t rob the cradle with impunity, meaning we can’t force the bud of one stage to flower into the next stage, but as Shakespeare said “Ripeness is all.” We have to wait for time, which is said to wait for no one, to mature us to the next stage.

Is this perhaps why many dharma folks don’t talk with one another about their practice, much less their realization? It can’t be because we are not interested in the differences, but rather because it is so very difficult to do so, IMO.

Yet, I clearly know when I am speaking with a peer, someone on the same page dharmic-ally as I am and when I am not, i.e. when I am facing a mass of conceptual non-sequiturs filled with intellectualizations rather than realization. What can we do with this problem?

Is the whole thing like brain or heart surgery, and even to approach the subject takes a dharma master and we students had best hover in the shadows until that day comes when we are capable. The problem as I see it is that if we point out, which is exactly what Rinpoches do in the “Pointing-Out Instructions...” If we point out to a student-friend that what they are saying is simply conceptual and not true realization, does that shatter their confidence and impede their progress in the dharma? That would not be good.

Or by pointing this out, are we ultimately doing dharma friends a favor, although more often than not they won’t see that at the time. Or is that something that only Rinpoche’s can do and if we bungle around with that it is like the bull in the china

shop. Something may be broken for which we may be responsible. I am just asking the question.

If we have built a house of cards and someone points this out to us, are they our friend or immediately perceived as our enemy, because they would take down or ask us to, the house of cards that's got to come down anyway. Again, I am just asking the question.

Of course, I believe each dharma student will have tried all of the above solutions at one time or another with more or less success. And perhaps this is why the whole subject is taboo and found to be off-limits, the proverbial hot potato here in the West.

Or is "Live and Let Live" always the best solution, not mentioning the obvious. Here is another way to look at the same problem, raising children.

Trying to raise children is filled with scenarios where the parent has to disavow a child of an idea that is unrealistic, as in "unrealizable," and what thanks do we get for that? Nada, until much later on, if ever. It is a tough call my friends, IMO.

I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on this topic or better yet, talking about this with each other.

When I ask myself: would I be willing to learn from someone more advanced than myself on this or that point, the answer is "Yes." And if asked would I be willing to point out to others things they may be blind to, the answer is also "Yes," if asked. I try to do that in a way in these blogs, anyway.

A SONG FROM THE CYCLE

[When it gets warm out as it has been, I feel it pushes me more out-of-the-body than I usually am. Perhaps our consciousness is like the atmosphere surrounding planet Earth, in which case here is a little song that is more "out there," from the equivalent of the ionosphere, a song of the cycle of our inner breath.]

At the very edge of nothing coming in, running out of influx is always interesting, perhaps a little terrifying too. For me, it all seems to come in waves, feast or famine, like breathing, in and out, just like any cycle. The inspiration is always OK, but the expiration, a little more difficult. I remember in February on 1974, serving as a chauffeur for Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, he took me into a room and taught me to do Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation, although he never said what he was doing or gave it a name. He just sat me down in a chair and began instructing me. No questions asked.

In the process, he had me breathe in and out. And as I sat on that old wooden chair, hands on knees, looking straight ahead, he was worried about my outbreath. Apparently, I did not let the outbreath go far enough out, so Trungpa said "Michael, let the breath go all the way out. Don't worry, it will come back." And as he said that, all of my habitual fears of death and dying rose into my mind and evaporated, just like that. And I have not been as afraid of death ever since. Trungpa was a siddha, IMO.

Yet, perhaps I am still troubled by that turnaround point in the process, where the outbreath of life turns into a new inbreath. Of course, that would correspond with the point where we die, are forced to negotiate the bardo, and come up with a rebirth, so probably I am not alone in all this “outbreath” stuff.

My point is that we come upon these times of nothing-doing as frequently as we want to keep breathing. With every inbreath there is an outbreath, and we ride the breath. I don’t know why these outbreaths of life should worry me or even be a surprise, every time. Yet they still do, or at least they give me pause.

I should be thrilled to come upon a vast plain of stark awareness and I guess I am, sort of, with an accent on the “thrilled,” but it is more like the thrill of a rollercoaster. Life has its surprises, and I can still feel them.

It seems that I have to work up to the emptiness of sheer awareness. It is so vast and the thrill of that emptiness just shines out. I have never quite managed to get used to it, yet. I have warmed to it slowly, but I am getting there, nevertheless.

And so, as I roll up to nothing, it takes my breath away, but does not kill me. It’s just the breathing going all the way out that’s back again, and it comes just before the inspiration. At least, so far.

Take a deep breath.

AWARENESS THAT IS TOO VIVID?

Just how vivid IS that vivid awareness that the dharma speaks of, and what if that vivid awareness is so bright that it is over the top and off the charts, so to speak? What if there is a place so naked and bright right in front of us that nobody dares go there or even look, including us? Yet, sooner or later, certainly after death, there we may find ourselves just the same. How does it feel to “not be there” in the sense we like to believe we are? Could we get used to being absent from this implied sense of permanent “being” that we insist on and cling to?

More important, are we willing or able to undergo that kind of direct approach to this light, this vivid awareness? Do we like it? Can we stand it?

Wordsworth’s “But trailing clouds of glory do we come.,” becomes “But trailing clouds of ‘who we thought we were’ do we come.” And, as mentioned, how long can we stand it, this being stark naked and not quite being there in the sense that we originally imagined, but instead we find this world more illusory than that, more of our own projection? Or do we yearn to once again be wrapped tight (bound) in form and duality (Samsara) and just forget about going without and beyond those bounds?

This is a problem only we can solve, one that few know even exists, one that opens out to beyond what we insist is permanent existence. Who would know we are gone if we don’t? Step out into that light, will you? And do we have to then step back into form (and duality) to even know we have been gone and have now returned? How does that work, please? Do our mistakes simply erase themselves?

In learning dharma, I came up assuming that any kind of realization, any step toward enlightenment was desirable and would be welcome, even savored. It never, not ever, occurred to me that the very vividness of awareness might be glaring enough that I had to shield my eyes, that it might make me feel uncomfortable so that I would instead seek out the shadow realms of Samsara, where I have always been and in which I have felt so comfortable or habituated. And, the most horrific thought, that I prefer Samsara to the ardors of becoming enlightened.

Of course, all I had to do was read in the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol) about the bardo realms to see that this exact scenario is spelled out in black and white in considerable detail. Historically, we come from (and are in) this shadow world of Samsara, even now, and the sage advice is that we would do well to prepare for the bright lights of the bardo, lest at that special time after death, when these brilliant lights appear, they startle us so that we fear the bright lights, turn away, and once again seek out the shadows. And by that act lose choice in our rebirth, but instead are cast around by our karma, seemingly willy-nilly,

The humor in all of this is that this vivid awareness, this brilliantly bright light of the mind, like the Sun in the sky, is right there illuminating the mind even now as we speak. After all, we use it to read this page. The only thing we habitually have learned NOT to do is to look directly into that bright light of the mind. Just as we cannot look directly at the Sun (or risk blindness), so it seems we cannot look directly at the light of the mind without turning away. And we never have looked. We can't stand the purity. Just why that is and how to avoid turning away is part of what interests me. Moreover, I need to learn this.

Jun 7, 2021, 7:00 PM

THE ILLUSION OF REALITY

[Solar Update: Strong stream high-speed solar wind flowing from a large hole in the sun's atmosphere. G1-class geomagnetic storm on June 7-8th. Solar Eclipse Thursday June 10th.]

The dharma is not simply a thesis we must write or read, not only something scholarly to study or quote, but heart-beating real, like the taste of blood in the mouth. Yes, words of wisdom count, but we can only really count on our own experience and the realization of that experience if we can achieve that.

Speak from experience and go from there. Tell your truth and things will happen. What you need added will be added; what you need taken away will be taken away. The truth sets things in motion.

In Dharma, the illusion is more real than the Samsara view of what we call "reality."

And I am not the boy who cried wolf, beating the drums of alarm for no reason. There is a reason I find this information so startling. And that is because we are unaware of it, almost entirely! Samsara is so tight that it fits like a glove, one we have never to this day seriously attempted to take off. Otherwise, we would be enlightened.

Yes, I know we can't do much about it, at least initially. What we can do is to TAKE NOTE of it. That is all that is required to set in motion a seed that will eventually lead to the unravelling of the grip that Samsara has on us.

And all we have is the one oxygen vent of right now, this present moment. Everything else is frozen, busy getting lost in the past or floating out of reach somewhere off in the future. I'd like to say "Be Here Now," yet just try that, to be here now. Our being is "becoming." It has never been and never will be. We find ourselves living in something like a hologram, an illusion and path that we have projected, this bubble of Samsara, a cocoon wrapped so tight, it is a miracle if we can ever emerge from it.

Yes, I guess I am urgent about this. Why? Because no one else (or few) are. I am shocked by my own premonition, such as this poem I wrote in the 1960s. Little did I know what I was saying, or did I? Actually, I did. This is what I call a mantra-poem, that if read aloud and clearly, brings with it a vision of, what in western esotericism is called "The Monad."

EVERLASTING LIFE

What will in words not wake,

Clear sleeps,

And clear, sleeps on.

What wakes stands watch to see that sleep as sound.

What wakes will serve to set asleep,

Inset a sleep with standing words,

That wake,

If ever, last.

And on that last,

In overlay,

Our life.

Yes, to lay at the last a life that ever lives,

To ever last that "last" of life,

And in ever lasting life,

Everlasting,

We have a life that lives at last.

Jun 7, 2021, 9:08 PM

RECOGNIZING REALIZATION

It may seem odd that we may need to recognize realization, when realization itself is already just that, realization. Let me better define this. We may realize that we are realizing or have realized, but still be unable to place our realization in the panoply or hierarchy of realization. Where does our realization fit in? What does it mean for me?

This may be unclear, even if we are studied and familiar with all of the various general types of dharma realization. I have a friend who stated that they know exactly what kind of realization they have had and exactly where it fits in. In that case, no problem. Read no further here. This article is for those who can't quite place their realization and want to know where their realization fits in and how to go about learning this. Let's back up a bit and look at the history of dharma realization as I understand it here in the West.

How do we learn about the dharma? Back in the late 1950s and on into the 1960s and 1970s, at least in Ann Arbor Michigan where I grew up, learning dharma was mostly through books and the occasional speaker or practitioner on Zen Buddhism. In the beginning it was just Japanese Zen Buddhism through which the dharma was presented in Ann Arbor. Tibetan Buddhism came later, in the 1970s, mostly through the influence of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, especially through his writings and his books with their striking covers.

Yes, there was the occasional traveling speaker on Zen to Ann Arbor, people like Alan Watts, and I sat only a few feet from Watts and listened in rapt attention to him. Yet, the bread & butter of the dharma came to us through printed media, primarily books. And it was through books that people like myself built up our idea, not only of the dharma, but of "realization," word by word and book by book.

Yes, of course we tried to meditate. I can remember Roshi Philip Kapeau from the Rochester Zen Center visting Ann Arbor and offering a sesshin, an all-day sitting marathon, and of course I was there for that. Going from sitting maybe a few minutes to sitting all day was a bit of a challenge for me, yet I happily did it. I can also say that I never did that again, so arduous for me to sit all day was it.

And I am slowly picking my way along through some history here to get to a point. And that, at least for me, is the dharma (at least early on) came though

reading and words. And as those words poured into and through my mind, it got all mixed up into one conceptual mass, and I looked (mostly in vain) for any dharma results that were to come or appear, and in the form exactly as described in the words from the various books and texts I was exposed to and read. I scoured dharma books for this.

In other words, I looked outside in the world of books and teachings, especially through the verbal images that I had absorbed, for results. And I expected them to appear to me like they were described in the books I had read or through the rare teachings in person that I attended. This proved problematical.

The problem as I see it is that any and all dharma “realization” does not come from outside us, through books and teachers, but rather our own realization of experience with the dharma comes from deep within us, as filtered through our personality and Self, our DNA, personal history, memories, and so on. This personal filter is important to include in the mix because it is the only avenue for realization to arise..

Because, when it comes down to it, “WE” personally realize as we happen to be able to realize, warts and all, and not as someone else’s description of dharma in a text or lecture. There can be a basic confusion here.

We tend to expect our realization to arise or appear just as such realization is described, as we heard and read in the texts and books. Yet, if you think about it, that’s not how realization works. Realization does not come from outside, it can’t, but always from inside, from deep within us. Not only does it come from deep within us, but actual realization (as it arises) come through and is filtered through our personal mind, experience, personality, and take on things. That’s why it is OUR realization. This personal filter is the wild card here. Realization comes from inside us and in our own speak and tone, not necessarily in the form of the

results as described to us so neatly in books and teachings. In my experience, far from it.

In other words, dharma realizations come to us as our own take on things, from inside us, and not as we read about it. And in my experience, my take on realization not only does not often match the textbook description, but tends not to be even recognizable in relation to those descriptions, at least at first. It has to dawn on me that we are talking about the same thing. When they say getting familiar with our own mind, they mean familiar with OUR take on the mind.

Many times, I only gradually grasp that what I am realizing is what the textbooks described, but as filtered through my upbringing and own life experience, usually two quite different things. I don't seem to give myself credence, trust, or equal time as I do the classic dharma texts. I don't have that kind of confidence in my own internal take on the mind. See the problem?

And I also come to realize that this is not a one-off or accident that I am realizing, but that all realization will be my own rather than fit a textbook definition and that I should always look inside myself for realization and not outside, not trying to match what I feel happening to me to what a dharma textbook describes. As they say, "Keep your eyes on the prize."

Organic means natural or native to us, in our words, and through our personal filter and history, not with me trying to match what I think the books say I should experience. That's a big distraction, big enough to hide or confuse a realization. Turn away from reading and taking from the outside and get used to reading from the book of dharma from the inside, from within yourself. That's the dharma book we should be reading from, our own realization, slim as it may be, as it arises from within us. We can learn to trust that too. In fact, we have to.

And that sort of personal realization is natural to us, not somehow foreign or not to be trusted. Trying to bend our natural realization until it is in-line with or to fit what we read as classic is futile. Our (and all) realization is filtered through our history and person and we should allow it to be free to be what it is, since it already is just that. Where is the choice?

The dharma according to you or me is the issue here. As a wise dharma friend pointed out to me recently, all of the great quotes we find from the dharma masters within the various pith instructions point out to us that they were enlightened, but not (usually) how they got there, the method they used to become enlightened.

That we are going to have to figure out for ourselves by becoming enlightened, by enlightening ourselves. The dharma is not a cookie cutter, turning out carbon copies of the great dharma saints. While the end goal of enlightenment is the same for all, we each differ in how we get there and require our particular individual dharma path in order to become enlightened, which is called the Yidam. The yidam is our personal path or way to enlightenment.

Speaking for myself, I imagine my particular dharma realization requires courage on my part to be (and recognize) what I already am and have become. It's more a matter of telling our truth, rather than trying to change our truth to be this way or that. We have already changed. Realization by definition is a done deal if we have it. We must just recognize and be certain of our own truth, not try to make it fit in. That's our realization.

In summary, learn to be true to what we are, the realization that we have, rather than try to figure out exactly what we are or attempt to make our realization fit

some cookie-cutter template, if that makes any sense. First, we have to actually look at and trust our own realization and not apologize to ourselves for it.

Jun 8, 2021, 5:58 PM

THE MYSTERY OF THE YIDAM

Why is the concept of the Yidam so hard for beginning dharma practitioners to understand?

Traditionally, the yidam is defined as “The means of accomplishment” (siddhi). Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche referred to the yidam as a “choiceless choice,” a choice of the heart.

Unfortunately, I feel that when it comes to the yidam, there is a lot of misdirection thrown about, probably unintentionally. By misdirection, I mean looking outside oneself for our yidam, as this deity or that, and so forth. I am sure everyone has their reasons, yet if there is anything secret about the yidam in your mind, then you have missed the point, and have been, as I mentioned, unintentionally misdirected.

The yidam is not so much a “thing” of any kind, as a path, literally the way or path through which we, when all is said and done, will ultimately become enlightened. Yes, it could be through working with a deity, but that deity not as an entity or “deity,” per se, but rather a deity as the means of pathway to our enlightenment.

In other words, I don't find it helpful objectifying the yidam as something outside or other than our own heartfelt interest in enlightenment. We all have this, but it is not outside ourselves, but rather it is inside us, in our heartfelt desire to be enlightened. It literally is the means or eventual path that we each must find and tread that will lead us to becoming enlightened. It is the way we will finally be enlightened. That is our yidam.

I am sure that other approaches to the yidam have their value and reasons. I just have never found that value useful. I have to laugh when folks tell me that their yidam is secret. The yidam is nothing secret whatsoever, but it is "individual," meaning it will only work for us and probably not for anyone else in the particular form that will work for us. In that way, it is unique to us, individual, but not any kind of secret.

I can tell you about my yidam and have many times in various blogs, but while it might be interesting to you, my guess is you could not use it as your path or yidam. Why? Because you have your own yidam, based on who you are, your karma, personality, DNA, history, parents, and the situation you were born into. Think of it as your unique key or dharma "fingerprint" that will open the door to enlightenment for you, but that same key will not fit in my lock, or my key fit in yours.

And so, we all share the concept of a yidam, whose nature is the same, but the individual path to our yidam is each unique and personal to us. If that makes it secret, then OK, yet IMO, there is nothing secret about it. Here is the way I used to explain the concept of the yidam to those who asked me. Try this.

The dharma we all share is like a city bus on which we all are riding. We are all traveling the city streets of Samsara together. However, when I reach my bus stop, and I get off, the path from that bus stop to my front door is my yidam, unique to me because only I live at my home and that sidewalk only leads to my doorway. You may live next door, but you have your own path and walkway. Those unique walkways represent our yidam. Hope this analogy helps.

In summary, my intended takeaway here is, if you don't know what your yidam is, stop looking outside yourself for a yidam and instead, look inward, look to your deepest personal interests and heartfelt loves in this life. Look for that and follow that out, well, religiously. That will lead you to your yidam without fail and more timely than any other method, IMO.

Jun 9, 2021, 12:48 PM

THE DARK AGE OF THE DHARMA

[Happy New Moon this morning, an annular eclipse of the Sun. I walked out to the local fairgrounds and watched the Moon pass over the lower edge of the Sun.]

It is said that right now is part of a “dark time,” a time when the dharma is on the decline worldwide. The times we live in now are said to be the “Latter Day of the Dharma,” when the teachings say, “Iron birds are upon the sky” and the dharma is declining and entering “the Degenerate Age of Dharma.”

How is that? The sun is shining, this morning is bright, and things seem to go on as they should. What is dark about it?

What is dark about it is our own mind and awareness and the degree of distraction we all suffer in this samsaric world we find ourselves in. Apparently, it is not as easy to find enlightenment through the dharma in these times as compared to the past.

What that can mean for us is that we are not so much present and accounted for, “Aware,” but find ourselves more naturally distracted and, in a word, not present. We may require special conditions to wake up to the dharma, conditions needed that help to hold our feet to the fire to make that happen, so to speak.

And what I mean by that is that it may prove difficult or more difficult to get serious enough to create the conditions for our own realization of the dharma to take place. We may be unable to get ourselves down-to-earth enough for the dharma to work on us as easily as it apparently did centuries ago. Against this downward trend, we should prepare, and at least be aware of our condition.

Based on the old saying “Any port in a storm,” it may be that we have to wait until life precipitates us with untoward circumstances and “bad luck” befalls us before we can sober up enough to be present enough to have dharma realizations. This seems to be true in my case.

It is sad that we may require sobering situations and hard times in order to get our attention enough that we wake up and are fully present. To me, this is an example of what is meant by the dark times for the dharma. The dharma is still

right there, but our access to it is dimmed by a darkening of these times we live in and our group consciousness, with the result that it may take extraordinary personal events to bring us to our senses to be present and aware enough to become realized or enlightened.

In other words, instead of just waking up to the dharma naturally as traditionally happened, today we may have to be first brought down to earth and sobered by external life events before we can take notice.

It could be the death in the family, the loss of a job, the injury of a friend or of ourselves, and so on, whatever it takes to make us sit up and take notice. Hard times are wake-uppers, times when we snap out of our ordinary train of thoughts and events to find ourselves vulnerable and at a loss. That's what I mean here as examples of hard times.

And as difficult and upsetting as these times may be for us, they also may help us to break free from the rat race of samsaric life, look around, and smell the roses, so to speak.

If I look at one of the main dharma breakthrough that I have had, it coincided with a very hard time I found myself in, a time so difficult that I threw caution to the winds, so to speak, and was more present, albeit in a troubled way, than I had been for many years.

It took that kind of upset in my life to push me beyond the normal and out into a rarified space in which waking up dharmically was possible. The event was a very upsetting and unpleasant time, but apparently this is what it took to shake me out of my mundane life enough for the sacredness of dharma realization to be possible. And I am not the Lone Ranger in this.

The untoward event was not something that I would have volunteered for or welcomed into my life, yet it was permitted to happen to me. And in the midst of the anguish of the event, I let go of where I thought I was headed in life long enough to let some light in.

My point is that these are the times we live in, times where we may have to be shaken out of our normal routine enough for basic dharma realization to take place, so troubled times and hard events may be the cloud with a silver lining of dharma.

AMERICAN DHARMA

What is American (or Western) Dharma and how does it differ from Tibetan and other forms of dharma? The textbooks say that it takes something like 300 years for the dharma to come into a country. We are not really even 100 years in.

I can well remember asking a high Rinpoche when can we stop doing our practice in Tibetan and instead use an English translation. And to my surprise, his response was: that won't happen. Realized Americans will arise and bring with them their own sadhanas, prayers, and techniques. LOL, I never thought of that. So how are we Westerners doing so far?

Well, I would say that we are chugging along here, still laying the groundwork for the 300-year transition. And if you want to see a template as to how that will take

place, look no farther than your own realization such as it is. We take from books and teachings, until from within our own consciousness realization arises. Yet, it does not arise as Tibetan or Indian, but as American dharma. We try to emulate the Tibetans, but can't help but revert to our American take on things, due to the nature of how realization arises.

In other words, in America dharma realization will not arise from a Tibetan culture, but from American culture and American consciousness. Right now, our dharma here in America has a distinct Tibetan, Japanese, or whatever flavor because we try so hard to emulate that, but this will soon be forgotten and replaced by American karma, consciousness, and realization. We are not Tibetan. It took me a while to realize that. LOL.

We need only to look at what happened when Indian dharma came into Tibet. It was soon Tibetan dharma, and it will soon be American dharma and American-style realized practitioners. That would be us.

And the main reason is because all realization by definition comes from deep within the individual. And our realization kind of bubbles up through and from our own unique filter, and that includes our language, upbringing, parents, DNA, personality, Self, and locality. Although all realization has the same nature, no matter what country it comes from, it will have an American flavor and style here in America. It's happening right now, only we can't see it because we are too busy looking to use an imitation of Tibetan dharma to be our template. That won't happen, try as we might.

Even as we speak, American realization is forming, and by the time we think to actually look for it (or at it), it will already be established. As mentioned, it's even now becoming well rooted, yet we have never considered it or been willing to recognize it. Yet, it's already happening organically.

It's not like the dharma actually goes anywhere or comes to America. The Dharma is already everywhere and always has been here. However, when Americans begin to realize the dharma, it will have a distinctly American flavor because it will be realized in America and through American or Western minds and lands.

The dharma is not an invasive species because it already is right here with us. We have only to realize it and that is starting to take place, and can spread like wildfire without our ever having to go anywhere at all. And that's because the dharma is a view or way of seeing, not a virus. Of course, the dharma is a universal language, but it has flavors. Here in America, it will be distinctly American. That's happening now.

Jun 11, 2021, 2:25 AM

THE TERMINATION EVENT

[What follows is a very interesting article by Dr. Tony Phillips on June 11, 2021. Rather than try to paraphrase it, here it is in its entirety as given on SpaceWeather.com.]

“Something big may be about to happen on the sun. “We call it the Termination Event,” says Scott McIntosh, a solar physicist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), “and it’s very, very close to happening.”

If you’ve never heard of the Termination Event, you’re not alone. Many researchers have never heard of it either. It’s a relatively new idea in solar physics championed by McIntosh and colleague Bob Leamon of the University of Maryland – Baltimore County. According to the two scientists, vast bands of magnetism are drifting across the surface of the sun. When oppositely-charged bands collide at the equator, they annihilate (or “terminate”). There’s no explosion; this is magnetism, not anti-matter. Nevertheless, the Termination Event is a big deal. It can kickstart the next solar cycle into a higher gear.

“If the Terminator Event happens soon, as we expect, new Solar Cycle 25 could have a magnitude that rivals the top few since record-keeping began,” says McIntosh.

This is, to say the least, controversial. Most solar physicists believe that Solar Cycle 25 will be weak, akin to the anemic Solar Cycle 24 which barely peaked back in 2012-2013. Orthodox models of the sun’s inner magnetic dynamo favor a weak cycle and do not even include the concept of “terminators.”

“What can I say?” laughs McIntosh. “We’re heretics!”

The researchers outlined their reasoning in a December 2020 paper in the research journal *Solar Physics*. Looking back over 270 years of sunspot data, they found that Terminator Events divide one solar cycle from the next, happening approximately every 11 years. Emphasis on approximately. The

interval between terminators ranges from 10 to 15 years, and this is key to predicting the solar cycle.

“We found that the longer the time between terminators, the weaker the next cycle would be,” explains Leamon. “Conversely, the shorter the time between terminators, the stronger the next solar cycle would be.”

Example: Sunspot Cycle 4 began with a terminator in 1786 and ended with a terminator in 1801, an unprecedented 15 years later. The following cycle, 5, was incredibly weak with a peak amplitude of just 82 sunspots. That cycle would become known as the beginning of the “Dalton” Grand Minimum.

Solar Cycle 25 is shaping up to be the opposite. Instead of a long interval, it appears to be coming on the heels of a very short one, only 10 years since the Terminator Event that began Solar Cycle 24. Previous solar cycles with such short intervals have been among the strongest in recorded history.

These ideas may be controversial, but they have a virtue that all scientists can appreciate: They’re testable. If the Termination Event happens soon and Solar Cycle 25 skyrockets, the “heretics” may be on to something. Stay tuned for updates.

ABOVE: The official forecast for Solar Cycle 25 (red) is weak; McIntosh and Leamon believe it will be more like the strongest solar cycles of the past.

BELOW: Oppositely charged magnetic bands (red and blue) march toward the sun’s equator where they annihilate one another, kickstarting the next solar cycle. [full caption]

END OF ARTICLE

FINDING OUR WAY

I don't lack for dharma books; I am surrounded by them, literally, and have an entire room in our dharma center filled with them. Yet, like many of the vitamin supplements I take, my body (and here the mind) can only absorb so much at one time, and with books, even then only once in a while. Otherwise, these books sit on the shelf and even if I open them, very little sinks in.

However, when I am tuned and in synch, what could be easier than following the breadcrumbs of the great written dharma teachings, yet while I can perhaps follow the books today, when tomorrow comes, that window may have closed, and I might find myself just staring at the ceiling, wondering where all those breadcrumbs went.

My point here is that insight into the dharma, like almost all things, is cyclic; it comes in waves with peaks, but also with troughs or valleys. What goes up, comes down. That kind of thing.

And in this article, I will barely touch upon how it is with me when I've lost the signal, much less if I manage to tune out the station that I try and stay tuned to. This also happens and there I am, parked out on the edge of the void, legs dangling down, and wondering how I got there, again.

At those times, what I fail to keep in mind, but need to keep in mind, is the direction of the flow of my life. Usually, most often, at these times of “signal loss” I eventually wake up to the fact that I have stopped taking from inside myself, and have fallen (once again) back into the habit of (like a deer in the headlights) reading and taking from the outside world into myself, rather than from the inside out.

An outwardly directed gaze (at least with me) easily falls into some kind of misdirection, similar to what the photographers used to say when they said “Watch the Birdie” as they took our photo. Before I know it, I am mesmerized and, to use an analogy, I forget to breathe. As mentioned, I am no longer taking from inside me and following that out, but instead I find myself taking from the outside world and trying to somehow “Get It” and stuff it here inside.

This never works. It never works and somehow I have to wake up enough to restart my life cycle, so that I am breathing in and out naturally again. And I manage to remind myself to take from within and bring it out, and not just take from the outside and try to fit it in or emulate it. Just as Earth has an atmosphere that protects us from outside radiation, so do we have the natural aura that comes from taking from within us and breathing out. This flow protects us.

For me, the first thing I have to do if I am disoriented like this is, as all the books say, take a deep breath and relax. And the only place to be at that time is right here in this present moment. Everything else is secondary, like the past and the future. This present moment is THE oxygen vent to breathe from. There being no other.

I sometimes think of myself as in a deep swimming pool, where the only air is when I come up for a breath in the present moment. All time spent lost in the past or speculating on the future is time without oxygen. I can't breathe there.

To repeat, this present moment is what we are in right now. If we are not aware of it, that is because we are either noodling in the past or speculating about the future. As Thumper the rabbit said in the Disney movie "Bambi:" "Wake up friend Owl."

Jun 12, 2021, 11:25 AM

TOUCH ONE, TOUCH ALL

In my life, when I reflect on what made the most difference, it has to be following my heart, no matter the cost. From my point of view, I had no choice. I was following my heart, my interest from the time I was a young boy, perhaps around six-years old. Whatever moved me at heart was what I tried to do.

And what is it that moves any of us to any real degree? How are we supposed to be moved? Are we to be moved ourselves or just move others, or both? The sage advice as I was taught is to first be moved ourselves and that alone may move others as well. However, moving others without being moved myself for me was a no-go. I found it difficult to be like a sales rep who does not like their own product. That has always been good advice.

I have made a point and spent many years honing my ability to be moved and directed by my own interests, meaning that I mine the veins of interest (what I am really interested in) that I find within my own life and mind. I have search those interests out and ride them until they run dry. It's like finding water in a desert, IMO.

This is hard to do and also live a normal life, because most normal lives are set up to take care of business, so to speak, to pay the bills and only in what time is left over in a day can we spent on our interests, which by then are relegated basically to hobbies. While I understand this only too well, IMO, to not follow our interests is a recipe for life disappointment. I have fought this social tendency, and that has meant taking the long way around, the very long way round.

By that I mean, instead of sublimating my natural interests while I tread water making the ends meet (as society often demands), I sublimated the practical (working to live) while I follow out, as best I can, what interests me at heart and by that process, I eventually built a career in hobbies and interests that also pays the bills. In essence, I lived for my work, and not just to get by. However, I had to be interested in what I did. Can you see how difficult that might be?

In my case, it meant riding the razor's edge, and that cut both ways. I chose not to finish high school and not to spend most of my time working to pay bills and keep up with the trends, but just the opposite. Instead, I worked the fewest hours possible, giving me the most time to contemplate my future and cultivate my natural interests. I did this for years and risked my future doing this. My parents were aghast and my friends teased me, saying "See you at the car wash," while they went on to college. I never finished school and just travelled instead, usually by hitchhiking.

An example of minimal work is that for some years I worked taking care of the public bathrooms for a building with 5-6 stores in it. If I concentrated and worked hard, I could be into those bathrooms and back out in about 30 minutes a day, plus a weekly trip to the dump. That left me some 23.5 hours of free time each day, which is exactly what I needed to consider my life options, so to speak. I loved every minute of my free time.

I did this for years, until I was able to create businesses based on my actual interests and hobbies, jobs I actually loved doing, ones that I could not wait to get up each morning and get on with them. I am still that way, even though I am retired. In that way, I managed to keep my dreams alive and did not have to bypass or void those dreams in order to pay the bills. And I did this when I had a family as well, although I got kind of a running start at all this before our first child. I was always this way, following my interests, even from a young age.

Can I recommend this approach to others? I can and I have, but since I know how hard it was for me to accomplish, I cannot suggest it without serious fear and trembling for your wellbeing. It takes commitment and sacrifice, yet I could do no less. I felt I had no choice at all. I had to follow my heart, come what may.

What I had a commitment to was not taking any work (or just minimal work) that I did not want to do. In that regard, my commitment was very, very strong, to not sell out my interests in favor of a job I did not love. I just refused to do that. I would rather live on fumes (and did) than go that route. Margaret and I were of the same mind.

As Shakespeare said, "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day." Following our heart and natural interests may not be an easy route through life. It started when I was quite young, so by the time I came of age it was all I had even known and I could not imagine any other way

to live and was unwilling to compromise my work ethic. The price was steep, but the satisfaction deep.

Jun 13, 2021, 6:19 AM

TAKE IT TO THE PATH

[Every so often I manage to paint myself into a mental corner with no way out. This is when I learn.]

Here I am in the present moment, where I like to be and spend my time. I'm down to writing about the very process I am going through because, so far today, I have not found a train of thought or a single thread of interest that I feel like following enough to write about it. I know. This is also just another train of thought, i.e. the thought that I don't have a train of thought. And I don't, other than to examine this process itself. It's come down to this which is obviously a sign!

And this is not just what they call "writer's block," and hopefully not just another distraction, but rather just the reverse, an opportunity to stop endlessly going on

anywhere or to no place at all. In other words, I've screeched to a standstill and it's all properly terrifying but wonderful.

Sure, I pick up a thread, what feels like it may have a future, but soon find myself putting it down again in favor of waiting for another thread that has more freshness, more of a future, more of something. Yet even this whole process of thinking, itself, has a shelf-life, has a point of no return, an inflection point or inversion, where the glove has to turn inside out, where all is lost and there is a visible gap or void in my comfortable progress. May I glimpse it while it flashes by and not just avoid it as best I can.

And what is more confounding than to run out of future hopes and be stuck here in the present moment while all my comfort-cover and absorbing entertainments scatter, leaving me alone with this very naked awareness that makes me so uncomfortable.

"Take it to the path," is the dharma advice and that includes when the path turns on itself, inverts, and begins devouring itself. Especially then. It's rare and has to be an opportunity, but for what?

That point of inversion is awkward if I am used to always progressing in one direction or another, at least going somewhere, and suddenly find myself treading water or spinning my wheels in the "right now." "Take it to the path" means resting in whatever the present moment delivers or "presents" to me, especially if it makes me uncomfortable or forces me (almost kicking and screaming) into new territory. As I like to say, "It is permitted." What's the point?

When my narrative (my talking to myself) turns and begins to describe the process itself I am going through and seems to be moving so slowly that I seem

at a standstill, then is when the present moment has no choice but to devour or absorb itself, while it is busy occupied turning the inside out or the outside in. This is a turning point. I have to look!

There has to come a point (there does come a point) where Samsara begins to cancel out and absorb itself. Ouroboros, the snake devouring its own tail. That is what dharma realization is all about, the transformation of Samsara (or an aspect of it) into Nirvana, the realization that Samsara and Nirvana are connate, co-emergent, two sides of the same coin. There is nowhere to go other than here in this present moment, a fleeting moment longer than eternity. And why would it be in the last place I would ever care to look, or is that just the point? I flash on this line from one of the artist Michelangelo's poems:

“What if a little bird should escape death for a long time, only to suffer a crueler death.”

Obviously, if we have not yet been enlightened and if, as Rinpoche once said to us, “We are the stragglers, the dregs, so to speak, the ones who in all the time up to now never got the point, never got enlightened...”

It must take real skill in ignorance on our part to avoid the obvious nature of the mind, what is called Buddha Nature, which has been (so the texts say) totally present within us through all of our innumerable lifetimes. Yet, in all that time, we have been unable to look directly at our own awareness even though it has been the single brilliant Sun shining in the mirror of the mind, this Vivid Awareness by which we read this sentence. We have never seen this awareness as more than a flashlight we have learned to use. We cannot stand to look directly at it. Never have, anymore than we can look directly into the Sun.

And even as clever as we are, we cannot sneak up on a mirror. When we finally have ourselves cornered and find ourselves suddenly without the comfort of our endless entertainments, we have no choice but to catch at least a glimpse or the briefest reflection of the problem with Samsara.

Linearity eventually confounds itself and its duality collapses, leaving us stranded at the station with no train of thought. It is there and then that opportunity knocks, when we are shedding or losing our hopes and fears; that is when we are forced to LOOK.

As the old saying goes “Things are not what they seem.” Samsara is nothing but pure distraction, and we have been caught up in it like a deer in the headlights until now. “Take it to the path,” even if (especially if) suddenly we can’t find the path. That is the path.

THE BARDO: “I SAW THE LIGHT”

I just finished listening to a long teaching on the bardo realms by the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche. I can’t resist identifying the after-death bardo descriptions with what we go through right here in our life before death. Perhaps that is because almost everything happening in the bardo is also happening right here and now. We just don’t notice or realize it.

Especially on point is when they clearly state that in Bardo of Dharmata we are confronted head-on with that brilliant awareness, that “white light” that is a combination of lucidity and emptiness. And if we can’t look it in the eye and

recognize it for what it is, this then is followed by a string of dim colored-lights tempting us to take cover or refuge in them. The difference between the two types of light has to do with being in control of our rebirth as contrasted with taking refuge in any womb possible just to avoid the brilliant white light.

I know. All of this seems very abstract, but according to the teachings, which I am inclined to accept, when we come to this individually, in person, there will be nothing abstract about it. Against this fact we best make at least some preparation, if only we get a heads-up.

Of course, that identical brilliant light (Light of Dharmata) is here with us now while we live; it's also called Buddha Nature and has been with us all along. It's just that we avoid and ignore it as best we can, looking every other way but at it. In other words, this whole scenario is not only playing out after death. It is with us right here and now, only masked by our five senses and the other consciousnesses. The big difference is that in the bardo, our senses and consciousness, our sheath or cover, are gradually taken away leaving us with much greater sensitivity and clarity, but also face-to-face with that vivid awareness, the Light of Dharmata.

After death, so the teachings tell us, the heaviness of our fleshly body is gradually lifted, and we come face to face (without any shielding or place to hide) with the Light of Dharmata. As mentioned, we no longer have the heaviness of flesh, but neither can we take refuge in that heaviness, take cover, so to speak, as we do now. We have no choice but to look directly at the light of Dharmata. In our life before death, we can hide in the distractions of Samsara and our various entertainments (which we do) and thus avoid any direct confrontation with that brilliant light, which we are unable to look at directly.

However, even in this life before death as we are living now, we are not completely inoculated from close encounters with the Light of Dharmata, although such a glimpse may be very brief. These robes of flesh, so to speak, can be rolled back, thus exposing (or providing a glimpse) by any very sudden shock to the system of the self. Just how it works, I can't say, yet it does work.

I know, because when I suffered my major stroke, I found myself facing that light, stark naked, so to speak, and all I could think of was to get away from it, but for a long time that was not possible. I have personally experienced how terrifying that light can be in person. And sharing this with my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, he explained that such an experience was good practice for the bardos.

The loss of a loved one, a serious illness or diagnosis or something of that level of import can shatter or thin-out the self, which then remains vulnerable until, with time, the self can again reanimate and seal up where it has broken down. In those times of sudden loss, there are rare opportunities to get a better sense or a closer view as to what it may be like after death in the bardo realms. It's not like an idea, watching a movie, or a conceptual thought. Trust me.

And it is also not like after death there is something interjected that is not present here and now in our life before dying. The only real difference is that something is taken away when we leave our body behind (like the body itself!), after that veil of flesh is lifted. And as our time in the bardo lengthens, more and more obscurations are peeled away, until we end up facing and confronting the vivid awareness of the Light of Dharmata head-on, with little to no filters. Indeed, there is a moment of truth.

Whether in that direct confrontation with the "white light" of the Dharmata we can recognize its nature depends on (or so the texts say) the training we have had

and what realization we have achieved before death, so that we are comfortable in the direct exposure to the bright “white light.” It’s quite a difference, painting a story from reading and the teachings about the bardo and actually facing such an experience in real time. Making some attempt to get ready for this is, IMO, imperative.

What we don’t realize is that what is described as a “bright light” in the teachings is not actually a light as we know it. Instead, that description is more a placeholder for the vulnerability we may feel from no longer being unable to access the buffer or shield of flesh we are so used to in our comfort within the cocoon of Samsara. According to the dharma teachings, we have been in the Samsaric sheath not only for this lifetime, but for innumerable lifetimes before that. Samsara has been our home and refuge, like it or not. We are used to it.

Samsara provides cover in which we dwell, and a sense of comfort, not to mention being entertained and distracted with busyness almost all of the time. Strip that away, and we are left quite naked and vulnerable, unable to stand such direct exposure to this so-called light. In reality, that light may simply be the lack of entertainment and refuge we are addicted to, a lack so bright and deafening that we flee from it and seek refuge anywhere else other than in that vulnerability. This is how, in the bardo, we end up taking refuge in the dull colored lights and thereby fall into a rebirth not of our own choosing. This is what the teachings present.

Picture yourself as in a many layered coat, like the lead-cloth shield laid over us in the dental chair for X-rays. Imagine that shield gradually (or suddenly) taken away, leaving us exposed to the pure radiation of the Dharmata. We have instinctively and habitually avoided this vivid awareness all our life (lives), preferring to take cover and refuge in Samsara. Take that away gradually or in one fell swoop, exposing us, and instinctively we take refuge, not in the bright light, but in the comfort of Samsara or its equivalent. It’s a habit.

This is a very brief description of what you may find in the various bardo teachings, in whatever detail you can tolerate. I relate it here for those who have not and may not seek these teachings out, to offer you a heads-up. This is also what I personally experienced when I had a major stroke, and my self broke down and went void. In that time, the theater of this present world was stripped away, all of the actors had gone home, and even the props removed. There is only me, that light, and an empty stage.

FAMILIARITY WITH THE LIGHT OF THE MIND

I have heard from a number of you about your interest in what happens to us in the bardo realms after death, so I will add a few more remarks here. The closest I have come to finding dharma inset in the English is with William Shakespeare. There is a reason that Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer in the English language. He has mastered the language as these quotes from Hamlet's soliloquy suggest:

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.”

And...

“But that the dread of something after death,

The undiscovered country from whose bourn

No traveler returns.”

There are at least two reasons dharma practitioners might want to study-up a bit on what will happen to us after death, the first being when we wander in the bardo, there is our innate fear of the naked awareness, the so-called white Light of Dharmata and the second reason, our habit of seeking out the shelter and comfort of Samsara at all costs, this vicious cycle of ups and downs we find ourselves in whether we like it or not, yet according to the dharma teachings, Samsara has been our home from all time up until now.

Clearly pointed out in the key dharma texts are the sheaths of Seeing, Hearing, Smell, Taste, and Touch, Mental Consciousness, the Defiled Mental Consciousness, and the Store-House Consciousness. When those eight sheaths of consciousness start to fade or be withdraw after death, what is revealed to us what is called the Light of Dharmata, a true revelation. The closest we come to seeing that brilliant white-light during this life is the following:

My dharma teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche would repeatedly point out to his students that when we experience a sudden shock, like the loss of a loved one, a diagnosis that is possibly fatal, or any strong whiff of impermanence, our sense of our self can be instantly shattered, and we can find ourself stripped of all sense of our self and a gap or hole appears in our normal lifeline of “busyness as usual.” Rinpoche would point out that these times of sudden shock are times when we can break through the bonds of Samsara and achieve perhaps a glimpse of realization to one degree or another.

While the gap is the result of the shock, suddenly we have lost our normal routines and are (at least for the moment) plunged into or pushed into that gap or

void, where we will remain open until our self can manage to pull itself together again and seal up the gap. We are vulnerable or naked as we never have been and should take advantage of that precious time.

In other words, our whole illusion of normalcy can be rendered void by this sudden sense of loss, and we find ourselves out there peering off the edge of the void, sober and as serious as we get. What I am pointing out here is not only what a difference a day (or a moment) can make, but that the glamour and comfort-cocoon of this samsaric life can vanish in a twinkling of an eye, leaving us exposed and vulnerable. When something untoward occurs in our life, all our usual cover and comfort is withdrawn, leaving us, as mentioned, isolated, feeling naked and exposed. Most of us have experienced this state of mind. And it takes time for us to heal and our feelers to come back out so that we feel normal again. Those times of loss, as painful as they can be, are also times where true realization can take place.

All of the eight kinds of consciousness, which the Buddhists point out, serve to shield or hide what they call the Bardo of Dharmata from us, this brilliant luminous emptiness that we ignore and have ignored since time immemorial. The dharma teachings also point out that our essence, Buddha Nature, is apparently usually unrecognized by us, even though it is right here with us this instant as it always has been. And yet we don't or can't see it.

The same goes for the Bardo and Light of Dharmata, which is no different than Buddha Nature. It too is here now and as the poet William Blake put it:

“How do you know but ev'ry bird that cuts the airy way,
Is an immense world of delight, close'd by your senses five.”

And aside from our five senses, the dharma teachings would add to this, "... plus the other three forms of consciousness" or sheaths.

Normally, we are caught up right in the middle of all the distractions of Samsara, with nary a gap or a glimpse otherwise, unless we are abruptly shocked out of our normal ignorance, and left high and dry as our various consciousnesses roll back to reveal to us the Vivid Awareness of our own naked mind which has been there all the time. However, we have never looked at this awareness, but rather use it like a flashlight, an example of which is reading this page. It's the light or lamp of the mind that we are reading by. Yet we have never looked directly at this light.

In other words, we apparently dream a bridge to cover over the very nature of the mind itself, unless we are somehow forced out of our comfortable cocoon within Samsara and thrust of forced out into the gap of naked awareness. If or when that happens, knowing what to do would be important.

And what can we do about this? That's the question that occurs to me. It's nothing that can be taken by force, so I understand those who say why attempt or bother to do anything at all, since we have no preparation. We are unprepared for the bardo, so we might as well just throw caution to the winds and let gravity take its toll. I, for one, am not comfortable with that solution.

Having experienced something very much like what I am describing here after a major stroke, I have experienced this first-hand and also watched it gradually feather back into life as usual over say, days, weeks, and months, doing its best to fade that memory of the stark light. However, that memory is a little more vivid and terrifying than that. I'm have been unable to forget a truth so riveting as that. It was utterly remarkable and I am remarking on that here.

At the same time, I can't force myself back into that state or, for that matter, don't even want to. I am comfortable from my little cocoon here in Samsara, while I try to make day trips into the reality of that Vivid Awareness. However, I have made little progress and I come home to roost in Samsara every night, which is almost a kind of hypocrisy.

However, just as we have to expose a tender plant to strong light very gradually, becoming familiar with something such as the hard brilliant Light of Dharmata can't be forced, IMO. And so, the first step is for each of us to understand the problem, to read about it as you are doing now, and most of all to take note of it. Taking note, registering it, I find very important, key.

I believe that taking note sows the seed of realization, a seed that will, in time, begin to grow on its own. Wait for that. In the meantime, it helps to become aware when we are pushing the envelope and coming up against what can only be called a "hard stop," meaning beyond that point we cannot at this point go without forcing ourselves, and forcing goes against the grain and should not be attempted, IMO. I have tried it to no good effect.

And the easiest of the hard stops is boredom, finding ourselves feeling bored and perhaps vulnerable, having reached a point where we want to reverse direction and find our way back into something more interesting, entertaining, and comfortable. Gently, avoid giving into that feeling of retreating from the boredom. Like pain in the body, boredom is a messenger that we are on the right track.

Instead, learn to put up with and weather the boredom, to go without our usual entertainment, and do that without ginning up interest or losing ourselves in sheer busyness. Instead, try to relax and rest in the boredom itself. Get used to

it. Things like boredom are just a cover, a threshold and warning sign beyond which we never go. Gently go there, meaning relax and rest in the boredom itself. Put up with it. Get used to it. Find out what boredom actually is.

Whether this is a form of meditation we could discuss or even argue about, yet the bottom-line IMO is that we each have to (or will have to in the bardo) negotiate the Light of Dharmata. And, as far as I have been able to determine, what we call “boredom” (and do our best to avoid) is the ring-pass-not or threshold of what in the bardo after death we each will have to face.

In boredom we have an inflexibility that we habitually avoid with great determination, instead preferring the comfort, interests, and entertainment (the distractions) of Samsara. If we, through gentle practice can learn to allow ourselves to rest in the midst of boredom, that is one major step toward facing the Light of Dharmata after death in the bardo.

The fear of that brilliant light, IMO, is nothing more than our complete addiction and habit of taking refuge in Samsara and not galvanizing ourselves through the familiarity with the Vivid Awareness which is our true nature.

Jun 17, 2021, 10:58 PM

“A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME”

The above line is from Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet. In English, we pretty much have just one word for meditation and that is "meditation." This term literally can mean hundreds of things here in the West, while in places like India and Tibet there are scores of words for meditation, all the different types of meditation, yet as mentioned, here in the West one word has been enough so far: meditation.

So, if I ask you what the historical Buddha taught as an introduction to meditation, in Tibetan or Indian Buddhism, this is called "Shamata" in Sanskrit and "Shiné" in Tibetan. As to what this is now called in English, that would be "Tranquility Meditation." For the sake of convenience, in this article we will just call it Tranquility Meditation. And so, regardless of the name, what is Tranquility Meditation?

As the name itself suggests, "Tranquility Meditation," this form of meditation practice is about calming or resting the mind. Getting a little more technical, we don't say "resting the mind" (as if we could rest it by will or force), but rather it is more accurate to say that through Tranquility Meditation we allow the mind to come to rest, to become calm. Another way to say this is that we to allow the mind to stabilize.

And while this stability (this Tranquility Meditation) is valuable in itself, stability alone is not considered meditation, because the mind has to first be stable in order for us to meditate in the first place, so Tranquility Meditation actually provides that stability. However, Tranquility Meditation is not an orphan either because in the later more advanced forms of meditation, Tranquility Meditation is the handmaiden of Insight Meditation to effect Mahamudra Meditation; both are an essential part of that technique.

In other words, Tranquility Meditation is a prerequisite for most forms of actual meditation, the base or platform on which meditation is launched or practiced. And so, what does Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) involve? I will look at that in the next blog.

Jun 18, 2021, 7:51 PM

GURUS: SIGNAL AND NOISE

Chances are that the guru or holder of the teachings (so that we can hear or access them) is most often a human being, although Mother Nature can also fill in. And being human, they are just that.

The dharma teaching, the message they carry we could call the “signal,” and all the other qualities of the teacher, visual appearance, habits, flaws, persona, and whatnot we could call the “noise.” If we tune in a radio station, we try to tune into the signal and tune out the noise.

If instead of monitoring the signal we end up distracted by the noise, then of course we are losing the signal. This is why it is helpful if the various personal qualities of the teacher (the noise) do not overpower and drown out the signal. This is not just on the teacher to not have too much noise, but also on the student to be able to concentrate and receive the signal and, as mentioned, tune out the noise and ignore it.

It is unfortunate if someone who carries a teaching or part of one offers too much noise so that the student or recipient of the teaching is distracted by the noise and ends up concentrating on that, finds the signal too weak to take in, and ends up focusing on the noise. It is also the responsibility of the student to have a receiver that can tune out that noise, and so on and etc.

It is my great fortune that my root guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (36 years I worked with him) was all signal and zero noise. Rinpoche's person, appearance, manner, presentation, and so on never distracted me from his signal, the teachings. I would like to say that I was a good receiver, but it was clear that there was no noise to distract me, and I could see this by the reactions of other students to Rinpoche. For me, he was impeccable. Period.

Of course, there are different strokes for different folks, so I am only speaking for myself here. And what little teachings I have been personally able to carry of the dharma teachings of Rinpoche, I probably may have not been able to communicate, because as a person, I have to say I am very noisy. The signal is there but sorting it out from my preponderance of noise is probably difficult.

Of course, I have seen that personally. I may be doing my very best to present the signal, yet I can see whomever I am speaking to is focused on the noise of my person. Who do I think I am? There is just an old man, with all kinds of distracting qualities, trying to pass on or communicate these precious teachings to anyone who can listen. That can be a problem.

The Buddha said that the reason for our respect for any teacher of the dharma is not their idiosyncrasies, their persona, their physical shape or form, but rather for the precious teachings they hold and are able to share. And despite any defect in your guru, the dharma they hold has no defects whatsoever. That is why those who can teach us have our respect.

Jun 19, 2021, 7:01 PM

TRANQUILITY MEDITATION

[Today, the first day of summer 2021 is June 20 at 11:32 p.m. EDT, the longest day of the year and the heart of the midsummer-night's dream.]

This is the second of two articles on Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), the basic sitting meditation that most dharma students learn and practice. Tranquility Meditation is nothing more than a basic or foundation technique, a part of what is needed in order to undertake stability-training prior to actually meditating.

Like most techniques that are taught and that we train in, it can be somewhat mechanical, as in first you “do this,” then “do that,” and so on. What if we don't learn easily from this kind of step-by-step learning? Is there an alternative or more natural way to stabilize the mind? There is and I will try to present it here.

It is important to understand what Tranquility Meditation is trying to accomplish, which is easy to understand, and that is to calm the mind (allow the mind to rest) so that we have a stable platform or base on which to practice Vipassana, commonly called in English “Insight Meditation.”

When I explain these two parts of meditation, Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation, I use this analogy. If we are trying to thread a very fine needle with shaky hands, then Tranquility Meditation steadies the hands, so that Insight Meditation can thread the needle. The two work together and in advanced practices like the Kagyu Mahamudra Meditation, Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation work seamlessly and for all practical purposes, in Mahamudra, are indistinguishable from one another, meaning: they are a dynamo.

In general, Tranquility Meditation is introduced to the student first and only when the mind is stable enough does Insight Meditation then get taught or is enabled. Typically, with Tranquility Meditation, the student sits quietly and takes as the focus of this technique an object like a stick, stone, or often just the breath itself. One is mindful of the object (focuses on it) and does their best to sustain that mindfulness. When the attention strays, we at some point become aware of that, and gently bring the mind back to being mindful of the object and start again. Be mindful, and when we stray, we refocus, and repeat until the mind eventually stabilizes.

Of course, there is a lot more to it, mostly due to our inability (at first) to remain mindful of the object (the stick, stone, etc.) for more than a moment. To give an example of the goal of this practice, it is like when sitting at the computer screen, we take the mouse and place the cursor somewhere on the computer screen and take our hand away. The cursor remains on the computer screen until we put our hand back on the mouse and move the cursor.

Tranquility Meditation is like that, allowing our attention to remain focused unless we decide to move it. This is easier said than done, but you get the idea. What is not often explained is that there are many ways to learn mindfulness and we may have already learned to do this in the course of whatever hobbies or interests we have, hobbies like building models, memory games, puzzles, timed activities,

sequencing, cooking, chess, fly-tying, hearing sounds and music, spoken language, writing, and on and on.

There is nothing particularly sacred about being mindful and this is also true for training in Tranquility Meditation. In my experience, what is important in all this is to be interested in the process of being mindful, as opposed to just trying to learn mindfulness by rote practice. Our natural sense of interest is sacred and is the key to sacredness, IMO.

As proof that we may already know how to be mindful is what I believe is the most common act we all perform that resembles mindfulness, and that is watching a movie on a computer or TV screen. We sit very still, focused exactly on a small area, and thanks to our interest, do this for a very long time. In this sense, we already practice something like Tranquility Meditation a lot. We could not do this were we not able to be mindful. But how to transfer this “TV skill” to sitting meditation? It can be done.

As mentioned, the key, IMO, is the interest. Because we are interested, we can do that, sit quietly while focused on a rather small area of a screen at a given distance and watch a movie. This should set off some flashbulbs in the mind as to what is possible, and that we are already doing something like Tranquility Meditation and that this technique is ubiquitous. Everybody already does it.

As for me, how I found out about this is a rather sad (or is it humorous?) story. I wanted very much to be able to accomplish Tranquility Meditation, and I worked at it. Yet, I really did not know what I was doing or what it was like to master this technique, which must be true for all of us at the beginning. Anyway, I worked away at it.

And I worked and worked on this as the years rolled by. Yet, I was never any good at it, try as I might. Meanwhile, I was marching forward with other areas of the dharma, like Lojong and Ngondro, Deity Practice, and so on. However, when it came to Tranquility Meditation, it was embarrassing, but no go. Perhaps, it was just too boring for me.

As it turned out, that was the key, the boringness. I was not interested in sitting there and minding a stick or a stone. My heart was not in it, and if there is anything I have learned about dharma practice is that your heart has to be in it. Mine was not. I am sorry to say that this went on for a good 32 years, with no noticeable success. Just imagine that. I was stymied by the first dharma task I ever tried! Of course, I did not mention it, except to myself, but that was something I noticed and shook my head about every day! LOL.

Well, the long and the short of it is not that I could not do it, but rather that I was overqualified. I already was an expert at detailed mindfulness, and this I never thought to think of until I realized it. As a computer programmer, a video editor, and a serious archivist of vast amounts of data, millions of items, I was so long trained in mindfulness, that trying to be mindful of a stick or a stone was too simple for me to take seriously. I was bored yet did not realize that my lack of interest was the problem. I had the stick, but not the carrot.

And I had been used to having intense interest in the detailed stuff I was involved in, not only for decades, but since I was a young child. And so, practicing Tranquility Meditation by rote was like salting the salt, so to speak. I had accomplished that, in spades, many years before.

Well, this did finally dawn on me, but oddly enough it happened AFTER I achieved Insight Meditation and not before, as most folks are trained. The moment I could do Insight Meditation well, suddenly, like in a flash, it occurred to

me that I already knew Tranquility Meditation very well indeed. Bam! It was that fast. I was already interested with my interests. That was a given.

And so, the point here is that, at least as I found out, the key to learning Tranquility Meditation is dependent on the degree of interest we have. I had zero interest in minding a stone but had always had a keen interest in whatever I was interested in since a child.

And so, I was grandfathered into Tranquility Meditation courtesy of Insight Meditation, by finally realizing that all I needed was to add interest and I was right there, present and accounted for. So, those of you reading this, take a lesson from that who can. Check through your Curriculum Vita or résumé for those detailed things you have done in your life that interested you. Once you have confirmed that you have this, it should be relatively easy to transfer those talents to dharma practice. Knowing that you have mastered this technique (certainty and confidence) in other areas of your life is the first step. Now find the areas of the dharma that you are most interested in and pursue that. My two cents.

LANGUAGE HAS TO MAKE SENSE

Conceptuality vs. Realization.

Many of the more advanced dharma teachings, at least as they are written down, can be very technical as far as language goes. For many of us, these arguments may be way over our head and we could have difficulty following the logic involved. Yet, no matter how precise and technical these conceptual

explanations about dharma realization are, what they are trying to express is not expressed. It can't be. Perhaps, some aspect of realization may be highlighted, yet at the same moment other aspects are necessarily suppressed. That's the nature of "relative" dualistic truth in language.

And what these conceptual explanations are trying to express is not correctly expressed, because, as mentioned, language itself is dualistic. Even then, all the verbal gymnastics in the world fail to express what they are trying to express, realization. At best, all these words can but point in the general direction of their meaning. Yet that meaning is still illusive because language is dualistic, subject and object. The unity and non-duality of the two is missing. Language can't bridge that.

Words, all and any words, not to mention the sentences they comprise, in order to mean anything at all, have to make sense. Otherwise, they make no sense and are what we call nonsense. And by sense, I mean just that, "sense." And sense is, well, sensual, an actual experience, something we experience and can feel.

And so, language exists to make sense and for no other reason. Unfortunately, I am not a dharma scholar or anything close to it. I can follow and sing along a bit with some of the dharma pith texts, but often I peak out after a short while, after which all that language might as well be Greek. It usually takes me a few days to recover before I can take another turn at the more scholarly dharma texts. And I don't believe I am the Lone Ranger in this. I am part of the rule rather than the exception.

Mostly, I live for the experiencing of the dharma and do my best to realize what I am practicing and experiencing. I know, that's more like panning for gold, but I do

it every day in an attempt to expand and extend what little realization I have. I am very happy doing it.

For Westerners, so much of our access to dharma is through the written word, with some in-person teachings from authentic teachers if we can find them. That being the case, it is all the more important to learn the relation between written or spoken dharma and the realization of these. Both writing and speaking dharma are examples of taking from the outside and reading it into our mind. Yet, any realization from that reading-in has to come from deep within us, so there you have the contrast.

The operative words in the above sentences are “our mind,” because that is for us the ultimate arbiter. The state of our mind is what we are trying to work with when it comes to dharma. The point is that if all dharma (spoken and written) has to pass through the filter of our current samsaric state of mind, there is no telling what gets through, what does not, and what is garbled or rearranged from what we take in. How do we even take in if we are mostly distracted? This is due to the nature of Samsara and our living in it, our distractions, obscurations, habits, constant entertainment, and so on. I term this our filter.

That’s the general idea, that we are trying to train or educate our personal filter or “intake” of the dharma, and at the same time, everything we take in or try to understand is filtered through the filter of our persona and diminished capabilities. So, there is a bit of a Catch-22 happening here. I feel it is important to realize this predicament clearly.

In my own case, averaged out over some fifty+ years of dharma exposure, what I took in from the outside (books, teachings, etc.) and what came to me as actual realizations were filtered by my person, self, breeding, history, family, DNA, etc. and were for the most part quite or widely different.

As mentioned, what I intellectually understood to expect from the dharma teachings and the realization that surfaced or resulted through my personal filter were quite to very different. In fact, it was mostly like I had this very clear picture of what to expect from dharma practice on the one hand (books, teachings, etc.), while on the other what resulted is what I can only call my own realization, such as it was. It was “my” realization or take on all that conceptuality.

I am not saying that my own realization was comical or a weak-sister to what the books pointed out, because realization, even if personal or shallow, is still realization. However, on the one hand there was the textbook image of realization that I held conceptually in mind as a guide, and then there was my own home-grown take on the dharma (my realization) that does not quite match up to the conceptual understanding. There is often a very wide gap, both in time and realizing.

Yes, after a while I could perhaps dimly see that my take, my realization, was related to what the textbooks say, but often only as through a glass darkly as the old saying goes. And this is not unusual, but is rather usually the case, thanks to our obstacles, obscurations, and what-not. Those that claim their realization matches the textbook description of realization, one to one, probably are reifying a conceptual understanding rather than puzzling out their own filtered realization and making sense of that. Now, this may not always be the case, but I can't imagine it being otherwise for most of us. Samsara is our filter and if this were not the case, we already would be enlightened. Let me explain that.

We can agree that we are not enlightened, yet. This is Samsara. We still have plenty of obscurations, kleshas, and the like. A key thing to understand is that any realization we have does not come from the outside and probably does not match a textbook definition of realization. And the reason for this is that realization comes or bubbles up from within us and is totally filtered through all of

the quirks, obscurations, kleshas, etc. that we have. When it gets through all of that, realization then by necessity appears in our own vernacular, so to speak. In other words, realization does not just spring full-blown like Athena from the head of Zeus or from dharma texts definition. And it works its way up from deep within us. We cannot help but make it our own.

Realization does not just filter up and around all of our internal filter and then shine out as realization. In order for realization to “shine,” it first has to realize and remove all or most of the obstacles and obscurations we have from our samsaric life. So, as I see it, we have a two-step process. Why, because all our mental detritus is what is obscuring us. Then, after it has been removed and we are cleared of all that (or rendered as neutral), then and only then will we have significant realization, as I understand it.

Then it might look and act a bit like textbook realization, but only as processed by our filters, background, and so forth. In other words, until that day, what realization we have is punctuated (or stamped) with the filter it has to pass through, our own individual samsaric filter. Our actual realization may only vaguely reflect our conceptual expectations, yet nevertheless it is authentic and real. All realization is, and that by definition.

I can only properly speak of my own experience and what realization has come out of that. I feel that our own realization will uniquely be ours and perhaps will be hard-won at that. At best, it is all very interesting, and at worst it is like feeling for differences in the dark of the mind.

And the why of that is because, until we are realized, we have no actual realization to compare to. If we want to learn to play music, for instance, we can always put on a CD and listen to the result we a striving for. However, in the case of realization, we have no way to try on realization to see if we have it right or if it

matches the conceptual description of realization in the dharma texts. We are more or less shooting in the dark. IMO, this is a gnarly reef on which many dharma students founder.

As all the pith dharma texts say, language, the implicit dualism in words, cannot express non-dual realization. It is said to be impossible. So, we can try and hold up the verbal poetry of dharma to somehow light our way, but the light of true realization is beyond the light of mere words, or so they say. I for sure have found this to be true.

For those who may need it, let me review some of the above. I will try to say this again, using different words. Holding up the mirror of conceptuality for its reflection is just wishful thinking. Conceptuality is not a mirror, no matter how you spell it. Therefore, it cannot be or act like a template to match against our personal realization. At best conceptuality is like an outline or skeleton of realization. Personal realization is realization and not conceptuality. We need to be clear about that point. The included illustration speaks to this.

Conceptualization is not ever going to beget realization, and that by definition, at least not one-to-one. Conceptualization is dualistic, a relative truth, while realization has, by definition, to be just that, realization, and thus is non-dual by nature. Any duality is merged into one.

All of this duality, this relative truth, is conceptualization coming in, being taken in. And out of that, as processed by us, eventually comes whatever realization we can manage. And that personal realization has to come from inside us and negotiate or come up through our personal filter of kleshas, obscurations, personal considerations, and on down the line.

And so, by definition, realization cannot mirror or be a one-to-one reflection of conceptualization (our expectations), even putting aside all of the mental debris (kleshas, etc.) it has to be filtered through. It's OUR realization and will bear our flavor or imprint. Because of the difference between conceptualization and realization, the two can't just simply match up, at least until realization arises.

And if they do immediately match up, IMO, this suggests that what we may want to call "realization" is probably not realization at all, but just reified conceptual understanding and not actual realization. If we dive into the swimming pool here, we are going to come over there, depending on how many obscurations we have.

Trying to make those two meet or match seems unrealistic, if not impossible. At least, in my own case, my expectations can be and always are very different, i.e., my conceptual expectations of realization and the actual realization that comes from my expectations.

Expectations are always conceptual, dualistic, while realization, by definition, is always non-dualistic, two very different qualities. Thinking that they mirror or reflect one another is wishful thinking. They are related, but not one-to-one or even close, IMO. If they were, we would already be enlightened.

Check for yourself.

Jun 21, 2021, 7:02 PM

THE TRUTH IS THE FUTURE

The truth is the future because it will last until then. And we each can find the truth for us now in this present moment if we will look. And this present moment is like a pure oxygen vent through which we can breathe in an emerging future. Right Now!

Here I am again, as I do most days, searching in the present moment for what, for me, is most fresh, the particular thread of interest that ties my life together, that leads me or points on. I follow that religiously, as if my future depends on it because it does.

While the present moment is always fresh compared to my searching in the past or guessing at the future, within this present moment is the eternity I have travelled. There is no other entrance point or intake I can find. Everything in history, every thought, word, or deed starts in and has appeared through the present moment. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

I don't want to follow after or pick up a thread that is no longer fresh, one that leads me directly into the past, or one that still belongs to the future, but is not yet ripe. Like the old story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," where they tasted their porridge to find out that one bowl was too hot, another too cold, and the third just right. I'm looking for the one thread in the present moment (in this moment right now) that is just right. Yet the present moment itself does not lead to the past or the future. That's our doing. We choose that, to be distracted. We can also choose to remain in the present moment and rest there, but we have to learn how to do that.

As mentioned, every day (even right now) finds me searching this present moment for what to me seems most fresh and viable, a vent or scream of oxygen through which I can breathe in the future of this present moment. It is not always obvious what for me has a real future and what does not, yet I am learning.

Just like I feel the avocados in the grocery store for those that have the degree of ripeness I am looking for, so do I sort through this present moment, this instant, for what I feel is viable, life giving and sustaining. I don't follow every thread of interest I find but have learned to feel out those interests that for me seem to have a future.

This is not always an easy process, picking up on one thread of interest and letting other ones alone. And I have made mistakes. Some threads lead directly to the past and no longer have any future whatsoever. Dead ends. They won't last long enough to bother with. And other thoughts are pregnant with future, but they are not ripe enough to work just now, but will take time to become ripe. As Shakespeare said, "Ripeness is all."

And that leaves those threads of interest that in the present moment seem to me to have the promise of lasting long enough to bother with. Again, as mentioned, I have made mistakes in this and end up trying to follow what has no future for me. They are already spent. I wonder who else does this? Do you?

And I'm doing that as I write this, feeling out this present moment now to find what for me seems to have some future, enough to even bother with. And right now, I'm not finding much, not finding that thread of interest into what I consider my future. It reminds me of how racoons feel with their hands in the waters of a stream for food.

If you ask why the Dharma so interests me, it is because it always seems to have a future. The dharma is so true that for me it is the future or contains the future. When life gets thin and all else fails and falls away, the truth of the dharma will still be there. Why? Because the truth of dharma is our future; it will last until then, until the future, while much else will not and just fade away. This reminds me of the Rolling Stones song “Not Fade Away:”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJKfN3CuFXA>

Jun 22, 2021, 5:08 AM

DHARMA: RINSE AND REPEAT

It comes up again and again, that when learning and practicing dharma, repetition is required.

One Rinpoche told me that there is only one point to the dharma and that point has to be expressed over and over and over. And my own experience proves this. Something I practice a lot, every day, all day, and whenever I am awake is to monitor my own reactions. Some strong reactions have taken me years to neutralize, an almost innumerable taking note of my reactions to certain events, people, or thoughts, etc.

And after all those years, some reactions still find me reacting, although the reactions get less and less as time passes. That’s how long it can take to whittle or pare down our most deep-seated reactions.

As you know, those who read here, I am big on repetition and my blogs tend to be long ones, often presenting the same point from a dozen different views. And I find that is what it takes. I have a good friend who is the Roshi of a well-known Zen center who told me I should not repeat so much or write so long. This may be part of what Zen Buddhism is all about; I don't know. I can't help but want to repeat and repeat and repeat, always from a slightly different pass or view of a single point.

I don't apologize. I know from my own dharma practice that it takes almost endless repetition for me to get my mind right about this or that insight. I think of it as reinforcement. As for myself, I have spent many years studying, practicing, and being reenforced through Mahamudra practice. This includes 31 consecutive years, each lasting ten days of intensive teaching on Mahamudra and related topics. This involved driving 800 miles each way to our monastery near Woodstock, NY. Margaret and I also did two years of Mahamudra training with H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, and many other Mahamudra teachings.

My point is that none of that time or effort was wasted or superfluous. IMO, I needed every moment of it. I need to hear it again and again and again for it to sink in and seem certain to me.

HAPPY DHARMA

Dharma is a serious thing, so perhaps "Happy Dharma" might sound like an oxymoron or something, but it is not. I have met many Rinpoches and while most

of them laugh a lot, some of them seldom laugh at all. Yet, all of them seem happy, nevertheless.

I take (and took) the dharma very seriously, so some of that seriousness rubbed off to the degree that while I was happy to be doing dharma, quite seriously, I could not say the dharma I did was happy. Much of the Preliminary Practices, like “The Ngondro” are arduous. Often the difficulty overrides whatever happiness we can manage. This is a simple mistake, one of many I have made.

And so, when I finally found myself actually becoming happy with the dharma practice I was doing, this was a first. As mentioned above, I was always happy that I was doing dharma, but I could not say that for me the particular dharma practice that I was doing was “happy” practice. Perhaps, so I thought, it was a steppingstone toward happiness. Do you see the difference?

And so, when I found myself completely happy in my dharma practice (when I was able to do Vipassana -- Insight Meditation), I didn't know if I was allowed to be this happy doing something as “serious” as dharma. Of course, I did it anyway because it made me so happy. In fact Insight Meditation was what got me up in the morning (it still does). And while Insight Meditation is not touted to be the pinnacle of dharma practice, but rather one step along the way, I felt I would be perfectly happy doing Insight Meditation for the rest of my natural life. I still feel that way.

And so, my takeaway here is that it is possible to find a form of dharma practice that made me totally happy. I didn't know I was allowed to be that happy in the dharma, although it makes sense. Gradually, I realized that this was a meditation that was, IMO, perfectly made for me, one that made me happy.

I am not saying that what made me happy will make anyone else happy, but rather that perhaps for each of us there is a kind or style of dharma practice that does make us happy. Yes, I wish that from the very first practice (Shamata) I could always have been happy, but it took quite a while for me to reach that happiness point, which I now am at. I still don't laugh a lot. LOL.

So, of course, I can't help but suggest that everyone find the kind of happiness in the dharma that fits them, rather than trying to imitate what the textbooks say you should be and do. What kind of dharma practice gives you joy and frees you? Follow that path and not just what it says you are supposed to do according to the textbook instructions. As for The Ngondro, which I found so difficult and did not always make me happy, my reward for not being happy was that I had to do it all over again. LOL.

The dharma in us is so very individual and delicate, that finding and tuning it is very special. It has taken me a long time and having to go the other way round to admit to myself that it is OK to just be happy in the dharma that I am happy doing. You would think it would be obvious and easy, but I found myself fighting just doing what comes naturally, what makes me happy, because it was perhaps not considered serious enough. It is only rather recently that I've allowed myself to be happy in my practice, or admitted that I was.

Yes, I am serious about the dharma and the dharma is serious enough indeed, yet a Christmas tree has many ornaments and they all can be different, whether they are at the tip of the top of the tree or anywhere else. What we take joy in is not just a path to somewhere; it is somewhere all in itself.

[Photo of the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, whom I met many years before he was very famous, was able to offer him a white scarf and receive his blessing. He seemed like a happy guy.]

Jun 24, 2021, 6:21 AM

AN INTEREST IN BEING UNINTERESTED

I don't think I worded the above right. I am not interested in not being interested, per se, but rather I am interested in getting some rest from the whole rat-race, letting the whole clock-ticking mechanism of samsara run out and come to a stop. I don't mean "Rest in Peace" either, but to take a break from or over-arch the merry-go-around and the Ferris wheel of samsaric life.

Even though Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is one of the realization practices (non-dual), at least the way I practice it, Insight Meditation has to do with insight into something, so there is at least something that this form of meditation pings off of in the process of realizing Samsara as Nirvana as the texts state.

This is not true of Mahamudra Meditation where nothing at all is going on, nothing meaning "emptiness," but that "emptiness," itself, is not empty like a cup is empty, but is actually really something, a combination of clarity and lucidity. It is in that sense that my quote "Interest in being uninterested" is meant, coming to rest in what "Is." Whether the mind is moving or still makes no difference.

I guess I am world-weary tired of the clickity-clack of my own train of thought on the tracks of Samsara, but at the same time I am also being rocked to sleep by the cyclic motion of it all, the beat of cycles on the sands of time. Yet, all of these words are "big talk" because part of me is terrified of the deafening Silence I

hear. How much is just my own ineptitude and unfamiliarity with the mind, fueled by fears echoing down the hall of time. I wonder. I just don't know and therefore can't say.

The dictionaries get all excited to point out that the word "ignorance" and the word "ignore," although they have the same root, are worlds apart, meaning they parted company long ago. IMO, there is a disjunct here, and the "dictionarians" prefer to "ignore" the obvious, that these two words do have the same root.

On the one hand "ignorance" simply means a lack of awareness on our part, while the word "ignore" suggests we willfully pay no attention to something. The word "ignore" suggests that while we do know the truth, we pay no attention to it. In other words, we willfully ignore it.

Perhaps the best I can come up with is that we ignore (or turn away from) what we cannot stand to pay attention to. In other words, we don't know or admit and are unaware of what we cannot bear to be aware of. In other words, we are not ignoring something that we know, but rather we are aware of ignoring what we believe (or imagine) must be definitely something and have never been able to know or stand to look directly at what that "something" is. That's my reasoning.

And so, ignorance is being unaware of the truth, and thus innocent, while to ignore is perhaps to non-innocently ignore, if there is such a thing. And yet, we all know in real-life what it is to purposefully ignore something or someone.

This topic is something I have asked my dharma teacher about more than once. And he made it crystal clear that when it comes to dharma and Samsara, it is not that we humans used to know, but have somehow forgotten or fallen away from the truth and are now trying to get back to that truth. That's not it.

The idea of once having fallen is the doctrine of Original Sin that the Christian religion supports and so does Plato with his allegory of the cave, again suggesting that we once knew better, but thanks to the Garden of Eden (and the biting of the apple,) we have since fallen away and are now struggling to regain our innocence.

As mentioned, the dharma teachings do not support that view, that we used to be pure, have fallen, and need to be saved and somehow return to our original state of grace.

Again, the dharma teachings claim that in all the time there is (and has been) we sentient human beings have never known and are even now still trying to enlighten ourselves for the very first time. How does this relate to the dictionary puzzle of “ignorance” and “ignore” having the same etymological root?

In my opinion, the idea that we willfully ignore the truth of the mind, purposely, is incorrect. “Purposeful ignoring” is just another example of innocent ignorance. Such attitudes are also just ignorance, even though they may have sharp corners. The truth is we don’t know and are innocent from realization.

IMO, this is perhaps related to the dharmic idea that there is no permanent being or existence, but that at best our being may be becoming, but that “becoming” has never arrived at actual “being.” At heart, our attachment or grasping at being itself is just more ignorance. “Being” may appear to be becoming, but that is another miss-take, using here the meaning of “becoming” like the phrase, “Isn’t she wearing a becoming dress?” In other words, a sense of “being” only imagined and pointed at, one that in all the time there is and has been, is but an

illusion, a gossamer hologram of imagined existence that is an illusion that we project from within ourselves and can't seem to let go of. It's called Samsara.

As Shakespeare said: "We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep."

Jun 25, 2021, 6:57 AM

DHARMA CYBERNETICS

"Cybernetics" comes from a Greek word meaning "The art of steering or navigation" and has been described as the science of accomplishment, purposeful activity, and effective organization. And this very much affects learning dharma and its practice, so there is a cybernetics of dharma.

Ernest von Glaserfeld: "Cybernetics is the art of creating equilibrium in a world of possibilities and constraints."

With dharma cybernetics, instead of invoking traditional "linear causality," where each cause or step in a process has and affects the result, but that result does not reciprocally affect the preceding cause, "Dharma Cybernetics" involves what is called the process of "circular causality," rather than that of traditional linear causality. Circular causality involves acting and reacting to feedback, where the

result of our dharma practice each day, through mindfulness and reactivity, is taken as the input for our continued practice on the next day, with the result that recursively, we arrive at successive approximations of meditation, etc. through effective action, reaction, its stability, and effective organization.

Cybernetics has also been described (and this very much relates to dharma practice) as the art of establishing stability given the constraints and possibilities of the topic or organism involved -- self-regulation. Call it equilibrium. This involves managing the transition from the system which initially was being steered or directed externally (by a teacher, teachings, or guru) to a system that eventually becomes stable and self-regulating, stable enough that it is able to steer itself, a kind of gyroscope.

To repeat: the non-linear nature of cybernetics means that instead of linear causality, where we start “here” and work until we get to “there,” non-linear cybernetics uses circular causality. Circular causality, unlike linear causality, means that the result of each step of our practice also affects the preceding step or cause, and the resulting feedback of the result with its cause changes the dynamics of the interaction, and this circular (feedback) process moves forward in a more organic fashion, everchanging, each result modifying the preceding cause. The two steps are linked and affect one another, much like two feet walking while chained together. The result is to bring the process to stability and maintain that equilibrium.

IN PRACTICE

Somewhere along the path of dharma, we have to learn to practice the dharma using specific techniques like Tranquility Meditation, which is not the same as simply meditating. Dharma practice takes time in our day to learn, and then, eventually, it takes time to actually meditate.

And this is not like juggling oranges, but some coordination on our part is required. It's easy to blend practicing meditation and actual meditating, so that perhaps, in time, they are mixed. In fact, to a significant degree, practicing meditation and actual meditation are mutually exclusive. The goal of practicing meditation is to stop practicing and just meditate.

Yet, starting out and until we master something like Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), they are quite distinct and not the same at all. Almost every student of the dharma will tell you they are "doing their practice" each day, "practicing" meditation, and this should not be confused with actual meditation. Moreover, we are not actually meditating until we stop practicing, have mastered meditation, and just meditate, which can take years. In my case, it took 32 years, but I was a very slow learner in learning Tranquility Meditation.

The point of this article is that the process of learning the dharma is recursive, an example of circular causality, where through feedback we inch forward, while the whole situation is in constant change through a feedback loop, the mutual interaction of cause and effect. This is an example of the non-linear (circular) causality that is involved in the cybernetics of dharma stabilization.

Ultimately, our meditation, like a gyroscope, becomes stable, a self-regulating process or equilibrium.

Jun 26, 2021, 2:01 AM

Jun 27, 2021, 2:20 AM

WEARING OUT SAMSARA

As if!

“The Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma” historically has often been translated as the “Revulsion of Samsara,” which I always thought was a little heavy-handed, yet perhaps not. It probably was designed for committed dharma students who were well beyond handling imperatives with kid gloves. Some of us need to take it straight and get on with it.

We could all agree that Samsara is like fly paper, designed to capture and keep us until we die, and it has done this for all the lifetimes and rebirths we have had. If we ever expect to reach escape velocity from Samsara, somewhere along the line we will have to become aware of our attachment to samsara enough to give it up and separate from it. While we perhaps can agree on this in theory, my guess is that most of us say that mañana is probably the best time for actually doing this, and certainly not today. And that’s not a helpful attitude if enlightenment is our goal. As long as samsara is our refuge, here we will sit.

We seem so concerned in recent years about political correctness, which I understand, yet going on right before our eyes one of life’s greatest liberties is being gradually taken from us and we do nothing. And that loss would be the purity of our own mind’s natural attention span and ability to focus and be interested.

And while I know that Samsara is famous for entrapping us, what's currently happening to most of us, as to the purity of our attention, IMO, is just adding insult to injury. Modern media like the Internet is distracting our ability to focus our attention with its endless interrupts.

Samsara may appear to never get old, but it can and does. That's the "Revulsion of Samsara" the dharma points out. For me, Samsara shows its age or loosens its grip primarily through a combination of two factors, one is the positive effect of dharma practice and two, my advancing age wears out interest in much of samsara. In fact, I have had to wait until I am quite old to wear samsara out much at all.

Perhaps we can most easily see it in today's media and in all kinds and ways. Where I used to take note, at least when something caught my eye, now, at the distance of eighty years of age, less and less of the bling and glitz interests me anymore. It's not about to get a rise out of me and just doesn't much register as it used to. I look right past a lot of it or worse, I just consider it sad that our mind and attention are treated this way by so much of our media. And while I do understand, it's not anywhere or anything I want to spend time on or in. Much of the current Internet media preys upon our attention, constantly interrupting it.

As mentioned, my growing immunity to modern samsara is partly because dharma practice makes me simply less reactive than I used to be. I have learned to neutralize my reactions. And advancing age finds me walking right past what I used to stop and take a gander at. "Fuhgeddaboutit" is how I now feel.

Of course, all this is very obvious while watching TV ads and commercials, which I have avoided for decades, And I try not to see any more of them than I have to.

Nevertheless, I do come across commercial ads, not only on TV, but especially on the Internet almost constantly. And of course, there are magazine and newspaper ads, as well. We all are used to those.

Yet, I notice that my reaction to all these interruptions via ads becomes less and less and I ignore them more and more. And so, samsara can and does lose its luster. In my case, it seems to do that very, very slowly. It has taken a long time for me to wear out even a little of samsara's grasp. As they say, we are "too soon old and too late smart."

Our susceptibility and exposure to constant ads and interruptions, the unwanted draw on our attention is like taking antibiotics. We become inured to it and no longer even react, but just ignore or look past all of the tasteless ads and greedy attempts to attract and prey on our attention. Yet, it takes and draws down our energy to a significant degree. Our attention is no longer free to rest but is constantly buffeted and interrupted.

In other words, today online time is constantly interrupted by popups, overlays, drop-downs, etc. and now some sites have even begun to deny access to us if we do not allow them to store their cookies on our computer. That's a breaking point for me.

Having run a couple of good-sized companies, I know just how this happens. It is not enough for media ads to take a fair share of our attention. Someone in a cubicle somewhere is paid to figure out yet another way to jam more and more attention-getting demands into our finite amount of time. Online viewing and Internet use increasingly is like having mosquitoes buzzing around our head – endless distraction.

In this way, we are nickel and dimed until the original purity of our attention span is fractured and slivered by more and more interrupts, attempts to get and hold our attention against our will. We never asked for this. Of course, we just tune it all out and become immune to more and more of it, yet that insensitivity on our part also costs us.

I don't watch video with ads and I find myself not responding to demands of sites to place cookies in my computer. I just delete the links and don't care about what they offer at all, even if I need their product, especially if I can't freely enter their sites and see what they offer on equal terms.

As mentioned earlier, like marching ants, somewhere someone is trapped in a cubicle searching to whittle down our attention in more and more devious ways, when what our soul wants is to be free to use our natural attention uninterrupted. And, until relatively recently, for the most part, we all were free. This pollution of our personal attention is criminal, IMO.

It's worth our mental life to watch commercial TV or to browse the Internet. Our natural attention is currently now under constant attack, and at an ever-increasing rate. Trying to read a simple post or article, struggling to read while the page in front of us bobs and weaves, trying to cram all of the advertisements in. Pop-ups prevent us from reading further until we dismiss them. And, all this from a site with a smile-on-its-face, one that is hamstringing our attention, moment by moment. Obviously, it cares more for money than for us.

So, it's no wonder that we are increasingly drawn to the now very popular series shows. It may be the only place we can have a long, uninterrupted stint of resting our focused mind without being constantly distracted.

Jun 28, 2021, 9:17 AM

ENDANGERED SPECIES: UNDIVIDED ATTENTION

One of the last private refuges, that of our own mind and attention, is under siege, with our natural thread of interest being endlessly interrupted. On the Internet, we can't even rest our eyes on something we are interested in (and trying to read), without having our attention nickel and dimed, constantly fracturing and distracting our focus. How invasive is that?

Ultimately, this kind of distraction can only drive us away, which is counter to what these ads are designed for. Obviously, they could care less. If we value our own attention span and the purity of our interest, we must either train to ignore these distractions (while we absorb the information we seek) or give up and turn away from this kind of media entirely. It is the Vajrayana way to take everything to the path, yet for beginners this raises the bar or threshold more than a little.

I'm not saying we can't tough it out. What I AM saying is look around you at the environment that is being created on the Internet. If you want to be tough, help clean it up and be sure to find areas in your life where you can stretch out and experience your own undistracted attention. If we are walking into deep water, step by step, and don't realize it, eventually we will drown or learn to swim.

Many of us (for years, if not decades) have increasingly turned away from tolerating commercial ads to interrupt our entertainment, but that was not enough. Now, these ads are sucking our attention in ever more micro ways, here,

there, and a thousand sidebars and minute distractions that we have not requested.

For me, all of this is a perfect example of the “revulsion of samsara,” disgust at having the purity of our attention hacked and misdirected. These advertisers should be ashamed and they will eventually regret this down the line.

MICRO-INTERRUPTIONS

Being hammered by micro-interruptions, millisecond by millisecond, this has to be a fad that will in time fade, as more of us realize the invasiveness of having the purity of our attention sideswiped, razor-cut, and drawn off in directions we have no interest in.

Yes, we have no choice but to become vigilant in having our attention violated parasitically every micro-second. We can avoid the sites that encourage this, but if we are just gathering some data on a topic, it will mean somehow ignoring or not supporting this behavior.

To me, the epitome of all this, a worst kind of bait and switch, are all the paid advertisement (a lot on CNN news, bottom of the page) where they show you rather stupid stuff that you click through, where each click sends the page madly reorganizing itself in hope that when you “Click for the Next” page, you will mistakenly press on a link to an advertisement. This is pandering at its finest, IMO.

Anyway, this attempt to divide our attention by endless micro-distractions is not helpful. If you think it is good training, have at it. For the rest of us, be aware of

what is happening and be sure to have time, somewhere, to just rest your attention with no more than the normal amount of distractions.

Watching a movie is a good way to do this. As I have come to understand, as amazing as it sounds, watching TV is the most popular meditation method and the closest most folks come to mastering Tranquility Meditation. I used to avoid the many series that are springing up these last years, but now I am converted. A longish video series binge is good for my mind.

Jun 28, 2021, 2:44 PM

WAITING TO BE FOUND

Waiting around to be found or discovered for who we really are is not the exception on this planet; it is more like the rule. Almost all of us (at least secretly) dream of being found and cherished, of fitting into just the spot that exists somewhere for us, and with just the life partner and group of people who will love and accept us as we are. And there is a reason we all share this dream.

Most of us find it hard to rest in this life until we have either discovered our self or have been discovered and valued (and at the deepest level) by those around us. This is not just something to hope for; it is something that needs to happen in our life for each of us to feel whole. This is a dream we all share.

Yet there is not much day-to-day mention by society about this dream we each have of being found and recognized, but the dream still exists, nevertheless. It seems that society is embarrassed if any of us dare to mention that we want some attention, at least enough attention to know that we belong somewhere and to someone – and that we are here for some worthwhile purpose. It is funny that we seem (socially) to be embarrassed for others to get what we each yearn for ourselves. Most of us don't mind getting a little attention once in a while, at least I don't.

If we have been waiting a long time to be recognized, and just can't wait any longer to be found and discovered, we just have to get on with the business of discovering ourselves. That is the way it works. If you are not being discovered and are tired of waiting, you can always learn to discover yourself. That's what I have had to do, not that I am anywhere near done with that process.

And if we are tired of waiting for the right life partner to come along, we can do something about that as well. The best way I know to cause the universe to send out a partner tailored just for us is to get busy discovering something about our own self.

It is almost a law of nature that those who find or discover themselves in this life are the most attractive to others. As we find ourselves, others can suddenly see us too. Finding out something about who you are is like a magnet when it comes to attracting others. This technique is about that: finding out who you are.

Jun 29, 2021, 4:29 PM

PUSHING THE TIBETAN ENVELOPE

There is only so far that you or I, as Americans, can penetrate the Tibetan culture. I have been to Tibet twice and worked for decades to absorb what I can of the dharma that is embedded in Tibet and its language. Tibetan is not my native language or anywhere close.

There is no disrespect here, yet simply acknowledging the fact that my language is English and I am of the Western persuasion to boot. The dharma was here before Buddha and as a friend of mine, astrologer John Townley recently mentioned to me, if Tibet had never existed, the dharma would still be right there staring us in the face.

And so, it's becoming familiar with the dharma and our own mind that is the issue, not sucking whatever sense we can out of Tibetan culture. Our respect and attention are the homage we offer, and just as Tibet paid homage to India, so America pays homage to Tibet. Yet, after that, because we can only get so close, we have to turn to our own recognition and work to develop that.

Like perfume, a Tibet-flavored dharma is impossible to avoid in these times, but it can only last so long before we begin to realize the dharma not through the filter of the Tibetan culture, but through our own, peculiarly American or Western, culture. Not because it's not there. It is, but because our future is not to speak dharma with a Tibetan accent, but as we lose all of that, we will be speaking in our native American English. It's already happening if we look closely.

Those of us who stuck it out with the Tibetan until the last dog dies are, ourselves, beginning to pass on. And as we shuffle off our Tibetan patina, we will find our peculiarly American brand of dharma realizable.

In summary, it's the dharma in Tibetan dharma that we seek and we will gently set aside the Tibetan culture that we reverently respect as an historical artifact, but also as an unnecessary filter and obscuration that we just have limited use for. Of course, we will glean every last iota of dharma from the Tibetan heritage we can. Yet, there is only so much that we can do, until it is more convenient and makes more sense to just draw from own realization rather than through any filter.

However, as it came to mantras and certain other "special" texts, Tibet did not translate into the Tibetan, but took these mantras whole-cloth from the original Sanskrit, although they did kind of put their own accent on it. So, I imagine we will do likewise, draw from the Sanskrit for mantras, although we already are trying to remove that Tibetan ring to it and revert to the classical Sanskrit, but I digress.

Tibetan Buddhism without the Tibetan influence will be American Buddhism and it's probably not quite that simple. My Tibetan dharma teacher said we will be writing our own sadhanas and practices, as well.

In this article, I've been on fast-forward, and if I slow down to where we are today in all of this, it is still early-on and we are just at the verge of realizing the dharma in an American fashion. It is kind of an exciting time, IMO, especially for those of us who have been tiptoeing into the Tibetan dharma since the late 1950s.

Looking back from 2021, Tibetan Buddhism at first seemed like an impenetrable jungle, one totally eclipsed by our Western state of mind. However, gradually, year by year and day by day, we have become familiar with both the Tibetan culture and the precious dharma inset within it.

I would not have imagined that we could ever get to end of the Tibetan influence, much less emerge from the other side. Yet, it's happening, IMO. Beyond Tibet is the dharma itself, not Tibetan, not Indian, and not American. I am not able to translate the language of Tibet into English very well, yet each of us is able to reach beyond Tibetan-ized dharma and become familiar with the dharma in American terms. It's happening. We don't have to be a linguist to do that, just a yogi.

My point here is that it is not all about the language, but more about the dharma. As we become familiar with our own minds, we realize that the language barrier fades and what remains is just the realization process itself. And that, as all the pith dharma texts point out, is beyond the dualism of language or culture, or we could say that becoming familiar with the dharma and the mind is the same in any language.

Jun 30, 2021, 5:06 PM