

# BLOGS 2022 SUMMER



by Michael Erlewine

**2022**  
**Essays**  
**SUMMER**

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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## DRUMSONG: THE DOMINO EFFECT

July 1, 2022

It's been a couple of years now of Covid that we have weathered. One of our children and their whole family has Covid right now. And the national politics are not improving either, as our own Supreme Court hamstringing our climate concerns, which climate problems should by now be obvious to all. This decision on the Supreme Court's part kind of seals our ecological fate and thus that of the world, or so many say.

Of course, we should enjoy the July 4th Holiday as best we can, although storm clouds seem to crowd my inner sky. Of course, we will do our best to shake off these

foreboding signs and keep our chin up. Yet, there does seem to be a lot of balls in the air to juggle just now.

As for me, I take another step back hopefully to better embrace it all. I consciously slow down to find a way to accept what already is upon us. There is a lot to accept, with little choice there or let up.

And I'm being busy, if only to keep my head above water. Yet at least it seems I keep narrowing the scope outside of me until I'm working in a restrictive space, but just doing things around the house and in my own mind. And as for those, I approach each task with great care and attention, like reciting a mantra. Enunciating.

Certainly, I can't remember a time of having so much to intake and come to terms with in my life. It's like dominos that are all lined up, each waiting to fall, and I'm trying to pull out one and stop the collapse. So far that has not happened. I see a chain reaction.

I'm in a constantly restricting environment, tightening ever closer to what's just at hand and what I have to work with, until (at least in my mind) I'm dancing around a fire to the beat of a drum, articulating a mantra, actually a song, as precisely as I can.





## DO BUTTERFLIES REMEMBER THEY WERE CATERPILLARS

July 2, 2022

A variable in our garden, from year to year, are the Milkweed plants. Some years we have many, like this year, some years almost none. And with the Milkweed plants come the Monarch Butterflies, who migrate in immense flocks from north to south. I am thinking of establishing an entire garden next year just for Milkweed plants.

Scientists are doing a number on the title of this blog, "Do Butterflies Remember They Were Caterpillars." I

thought some of you might be interested in this little piece of research.

Scientists used to believe that during the transformation (metamorphosis) of a caterpillar into a butterfly, the butterfly had no memory of itself being a caterpillar.

Yet, in a study released in 2008, they trained caterpillars to react to the smell of ethyl acetate with a mild electric shock. And then, emerging adult butterflies showed a similar aversion to the smell of ethyl acetate WITHOUT a shock as they did as larvae.

And so, scientists suggest that while the adult butterfly or moth perhaps does not remember in detail what it was to be a caterpillar, it appears that certain associative memories seem to persist through metamorphosis into adulthood.

Of course, that reminds me of the fact that the dharma teachings point out that while our sense of a personal self (Me, Myself, and I) does not persist beyond the grave, that our sense of attachment and 'graspingness' do persist and reappears at rebirth, embedded in our new body and new personality. Interesting similarity IMO.

[Photo of what has to be one of the most exquisite chrysalises, that of the Monarch Butterfly.]



## SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

July 3, 2022

Saying it fancy, we have repulsion based on surfeit, simple repletion, i.e. can't take any more of it, as in: I can't take it anymore. The whole country is like this.

As for me, I'm still here, although you would hardly know it because I'm not picking up on many threads or ideas these days. It's enough just to worry this malaise. And this seems to me a sober time indeed. I'm not as game as I usually am.

It's not a conscious decision on my part, but more the result of successive impacts of hard-to-take news, after which a kind of shock sets in, a certain numbness. We have no choice but to ride it out, waiting for a gap in the bad news, but so far, no luck.

It's been years of Trump, followed by years of Covid, and now the shocking political impact of the Supreme Court, and Trump threatening to run all over again. Give me a break!

It's hard to get my attention right now because it's already been had by the continual impact that is like successive blows to the head, shocks to the system. And there seems to be a snowball effect, shock leading to shock, until it seems that we're impacted by almost everything. And of course, this leads to repulsion, attempts to throw it off.



## RUNNING ON EMPTINESS

July 5, 2022

Or I could call this blog "The Invisible Man." It's difficult to be specific about non-duality, and this by definition. Not worth trying, yet many of us do, try to express the inexpressible. Mahasiddhas have done it for hundreds of years. Lately I have kind of veered away from those kinds of blogs, my favorites, although this is probably one. These days I favor physical work and the full immersion in whatever I'm doing. And I'm lapsing as for hanging onto words. No point in it or anything else for that matter. There's just no point to get. It's all process.

A vector to nowhere does just that, goes nowhere, something I'm learning to enjoy more of the time. And I'm shying away from revealing how transported I am in the process of immersion, how liberating that is.

## BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

Looking at the mind,  
It's not what I'd expect.

Expectations can't define,  
And you can't expect to find.

That's the nature of the mind.

We tend to crawl before we walk, and right now that's me. Yes, I'm a little worried that I don't care because caring is what I do, until I don't. And then I draw a blank and I'm afraid I like it. It's a very clear blank, and I'm letting myself go there more of the time, this process of turning myself inside out, like a torus.

I don't have the guts, yet, to NOT define or attempt to (as I am doing here), yet I'm sliding that way. Who am I without words?



## THE SILENCE OF ACTION

July 6, 2022

The silence of action, meaning full immersion. Mum's the word.

I've been very active all my life, yet perhaps not so much consciously aware of being active. There's a difference.

For me, activity blots out or soaks up thought.

For me this started with the realization that the 'Authentic' and authenticity is nothing more (or less) than none-elaboration, not embellishing life, what is called reification. It seems we love and thirst for the authentic, our complete immersion in activity, unencumbered by thought or in other words, simple existence.

For me, this had led to my increasing involvement in the present moment, the 'Here and the Now', at first brief forays into action and, of course, many years of practicing and then actually doing a special form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) as taught by the Karma Kagyu lineage.

And more recently, I've been kind of being driven into the sphere of action through painting myself into a corner, so to speak, until I had no other option but taking the plunge. Perhaps, as of now, I'm in over my head to the point that I'm contrasting thought with action, and more flirting with action.

Only with pure action there is little to no residue from the process or at least a different kind of result ensues, one I have yet to properly measure or articulate. This writing here is perhaps an attempt to remedy that or to at least say something about this experience.



Is it that there is no coming back from pure experience, no reflection? Or why should we? Obviously, this is something I have toyed with for years. I can think of my writings about the great jazz guitarist Grant Green, master of the groove. As I see it, Grant Green defined the groove (and groove music) as the recursive reinvestment in the groove rather than attempt to get something other than that out of it for ourselves. Since I am once again in the crawlspace of our basement and have less time for writing, here are some words I wrote about Green, that were published in Green's sister's biography of him.

#### GRANT GREEN: THE GROOVE MASTER

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

But the main man, IMO, is Grant Green. He is so far in the groove that it will take decades for us to bring him out in full. He is just starting to be discovered. To get your attention and make clear that I am saying something here, consider the singing voice of Bob Dylan. A lot of people used to say the guy can't sing. But it's not that simple. He is singing.

The problem is that he is singing so far in the future that we can't yet hear the music. Other artists can sing his tunes and we can hear that all right. Given enough time... enough years... that gravel-like voice will sound as sweet to our ears as any velvet-toned singer. Dylan's voice is all about microtones and inflection.

For now, that voice is hidden from our ears in time so tight that there is no room (no time) yet to hear it. Some folks can hear it now. I, for one, can hear the music in his voice. I know many of you can too.

Someday everyone will be able to hear it, because the mind will unfold itself until even Dylan's voice is exposed for just what it is -- a pure music. Yet, by then our idea of music will also have changed.

Rap and hip-hop is changing it even now.

Billy Holiday is another voice that is filled with microtones that emerge through time like an everblooming flower. You (or I) can't hear the end or root of her singing, not yet anyway. As we try to listen to Holiday (as we try to grasp that voice), we are knocked out by the deep information there.

We try to absorb it and before we can get a handle on her voice (if we dare listen!) she entrances us in a delightful dream-like groove and we are lost to criticism. Instead we groove on and reflect about this other dream that we have called life.

All great musicians do this to us. Grant Green's playing at its best is like this too. It is so recursive that instead of taking the obvious outs we are used to hearing, Green instead chooses to reinvest -- to go in farther and deepen the groove.

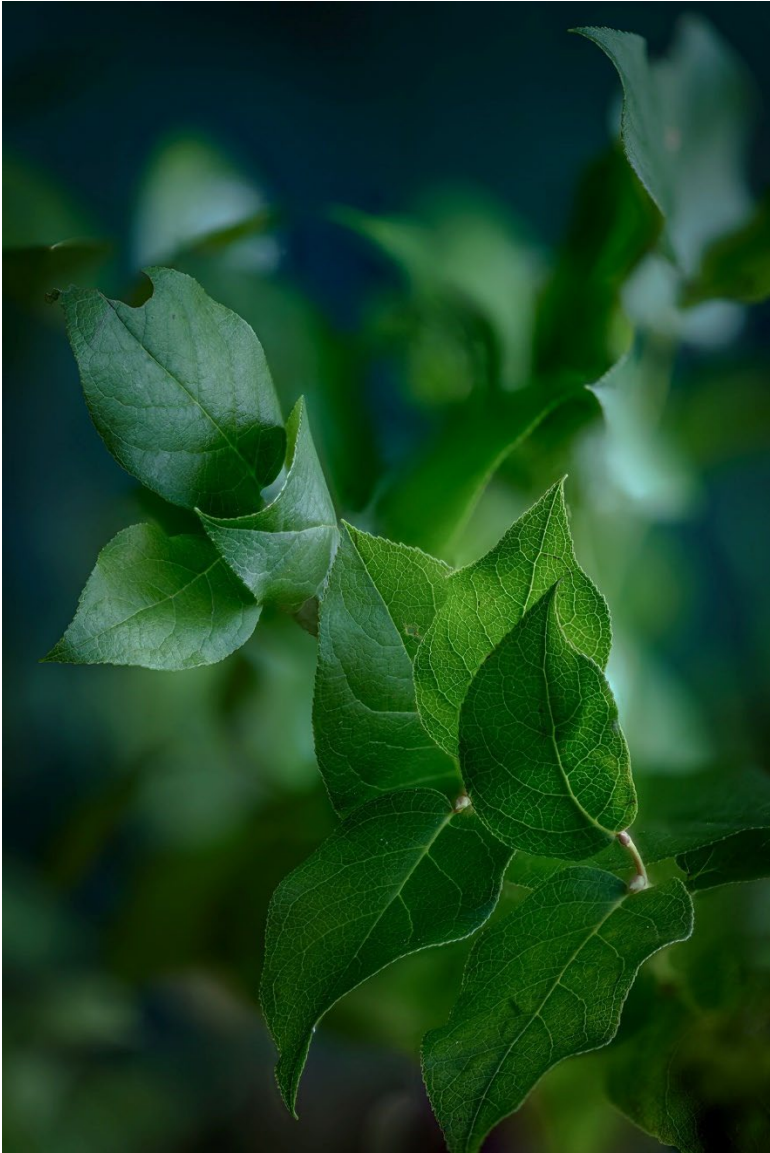
He opens up a groove and then opens up a groove and then opens a groove, and so on. He never stops. He opens a groove and then works to widen that groove until we can see into the music, see through the music into ourselves.

He puts everything back into the groove that he might otherwise get out of it. He knows that the groove is the thing and that time will see him out and his music will live long.

That is what grooves are about and why Grant Green is the groove master. I hope that some of what I have written here will help blues lovers push off from the island of blues out into the sea of jazz. You can always head back to the solid ground of blues if you can't get into the jazz.

Blues and jazz are not mutually exclusive. Blues in jazz has been a thrilling ride (groove) for me and I have found a whole new music that satisfies much like the blues satisfy. I listen to groove music all the time. If you

find some great groove tunes that I have not mentioned here, drop me a line. I want to hear them.



## MISS-TAKES

July 7, 2022

When it comes to 'Dharma', for me the last many years have been about mastering (as best I can) Insight Meditation, of which there are many kinds. My particular 'kind' has been the Insight Meditation that, along with Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), makes up what is called Mahamudra Meditation.

Insight Meditation is all about non-duality and our full immersion in it. By now, I know what it's like to be immersed in non-duality. That's what Insight Meditation of the Mahamudra variety is all about.

Yet, I can now see that there's still something perhaps a little formal about even that, something I didn't realize until recently. Beyond form, of course, is the formless, and there are levels of our involvement even in that. True formless meditation can often involve action of some (or any) kind, IMO. Action with awareness is a sponge for thought and conceptuality.

As I have often pointed out here on this blog, 'Authenticity' is all about non-elaboration, not 'gilding the lily' or any sort of reification. And to the degree we have reified our existence, made more of it than is true, all of that has to eventually be walked back. And that

includes, in particular, dharma and our dharma practice. You can't salt the salt, and you can't elaborate the dharma. That's a non-starter.

In other words, attachment (or the lack of it) goes all the way. It's just as useless to become attached to dharma as to anything else. Not only that, but as mentioned, to the degree we have stained our approach to the dharma by reification, it all has to be walked back to zero attachment. Against that, we should be well prepared.

And the process of unpacking our reification is not a walk in the park. It's far easier never to get lost in reification than it is to remove it, once acquired. For one, most folks tend to assume that attachment to the dharma is fine or at least harmless. Not so.

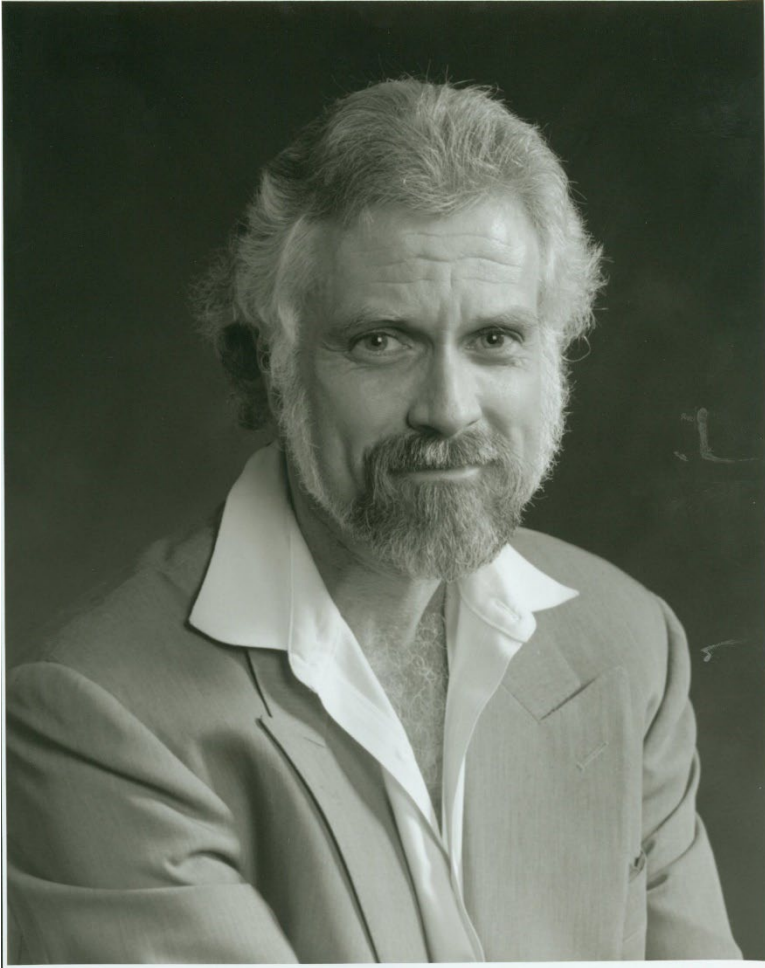
Attachment is attachment is attachment. It is color blind. IMO, dharma attachment is worse than any other form if only because it breaks our heart to discover that something we love so much as our own dharma realization, that attachment to dharma is as poisonous as any other form of reification and worse for our love of it.

We can't just realize dharma and leap over the consequences of our attachment to it into enlightenment. Far from it. That's what all the ten Bhumis (and paramitas) are all about: refinement.

And so, we could do worse than be beginning to examine our attachments, not as a list of miss-takes, but the removal of which is our path to full realization.

[Photo by me.]





## DANIEL P. BROWN PASSES

July 9, 2022

I just heard that a dharma hero of mine, Professor Daniel

P. Brown PhD., passed away on April 4, 2022. Brown was born September 11, 1948.

And I feel the loss of Daniel Brown deeply. In sixty years of dharma study and practice, I can't think of any Westerner in which it was obvious to me that they have some realization other than Daniel Brown.

Personally, I never met Brown. In fact, I happened to come across Professor Brown through the YouTube interview listed below, the first of six short parts. Immediately, after listening to Brown in this interview of him for only a few minutes I spontaneously had a profound experience. It was clear that he knew what he was talking about. Each of his sentences grabbed me at a deep level. In fact, through listening to that first interview, I spontaneously realized what came to be a key part of my own dharma training.

After listening to Brown I had what can be called a 'Kriya' right there on the spot while hearing Brown speak about the 'Four Noble Truths' in that first interview.

As mentioned, it changed my life in a major way. Later, I wrote a book review on Amazon of Brown's book "Pointing Out the Great Way: The Stages of Meditation in the Mahamudra Tradition." I posted it on Amazon and many folks found it helpful. I even received a late-night phone call from what I guess was Brown's wife, who liked the review and essentially wanting to know who

the heck I was. Well, I was no one, and asked her to get in touch with Brown, Yet I never heard back from her.

Daniel Brown - 'The Great Way' Part 1, an Interview by Iain McNay (Six parts, eight minutes each)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grBkn9fWD6Y&t=149s>

You can read about the many accomplishments of Daniel Brown on the Internet.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/streamentry/comments/tyut0y/beloved\\_vajrayana\\_teacher\\_daniel\\_p\\_brown\\_has/](https://www.reddit.com/r/streamentry/comments/tyut0y/beloved_vajrayana_teacher_daniel_p_brown_has/)

<https://www.pointingoutthegreatway.org/history-of-foundation>

They are impressive. Yet, what impressed me about Brown was not his academic credentials, but simply the fact that, as mentioned, upon hearing Brown speak and put sentences together, it was immediately clear to me that everything he said, like when a school of fish all point in the same direction, everything Brown said all pointed toward a most practical dharma, and 'pith' dharma at that. I was able to follow his thought perfectly and it struck me on the spot to the heart. Something like this never happened to me before or since.

I tried to get in touch with Brown a number of times,

setup a phone call, agreed to pay to speak to him, but for one reason or another he was unreachable. It was not permitted. And not too much later, I understood he came down with Parkinson's disease and one thing led to another. I never spoke to him or met him in person.

I'm not sure what I would have said had I spoken with Brown. I had already been struck to the quick by his mind just upon hearing him speak. And his words worked inside me producing powerful results. As mentioned, aside from my root lama, I can't think of anyone in the world that has affected me like that, other than perhaps Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whom I met and spent time with.

Of course, I read (or at least read in) some of his more technical books, and they too were clear, yet (for me) not as clear IMO as his spoken words. He speaks with a clarity very rare.

Daniel P. Brown is an example, perhaps the only westerner I have found, who (at least for me) is an example of what is to come (and what has to come) in America, practitioners with realization.

## ELABORATION'S DEAFENING ROAR

July 10, 2022

[Note: Before I elaborate on elaboration, here is my tomato report. I have six largish pots of tomatoes that are growing to beat the band, so to speak. They are already chest-high and have tomatoes on them, just not ripe tomatoes.]

The dharma is all about the concept of 'beyond elaboration', elaboration meaning getting too conceptual, or as they say 'gilding the lily' or perhaps put more technically 'reification'. In plain English, reification is exaggeration in its many forms, our giving special treatment to whatever we are overly attached to. We pump up the volume on what we are attached to. And this is rampant.

I too am guilty of this as my wife points out, recognize this in myself, and am working to pare down my elaboration to a minimum. And this because I value authenticity in others and authenticity is nothing more than someone who does not reify everything but is just as they are -- unelaborated.

Of course, wouldn't you know it, along with my working to become less elaborate myself, to de-elaborate, I suddenly see it all around me in others, what is

obviously constant reification and elaboration. What am I supposed to do about that? Suddenly I see that reification is everywhere and not 'pretty' at that.

And I don't mean just your telling me your latest dream. It seems that I now can hear the elaboration all around me, like a deafening roar or a chorus of cicadas. And I can't unhear it, either. And obviously it has been there all along.

We all tend to like whatever we are attached to and love to hear ourselves talk about it. Yet, now I yearn more for the unadorned truth to silently speak as well, and for the simple truth not to be drowned out by our elaborations.

I know. It's my problem, my reaction to elaboration. I have to own it and come to terms with that. I can't just turn and walk away because wherever I go, other than being alone by myself, there it is.

And so, I'm not complaining, but just explaining that I'm hearing more than crickets these days!

What are your thoughts?



## THE STORY OF THE THREE-YEAR RETREAT

July 11, 2022

Margaret and I traveled many times to KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery in the mountain above Woodstock, New York, and in particular we did that to attend the 10-day Mahamudra intensive taught by our teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. That 10-day intensive went on for 31 years in a row (until Rinpoche passed on) and we were at each one. We have driven to this particular teaching enough miles to circle the equator of the earth almost three times. LOL.

I am reminded that extended teachings like these, themselves, are precious mandalas. Mandalas are

offerings. We have all seen photos of the elaborate sand mandalas that the Tibetans create and then sweep into a river when they are completed. Why destroy such a lovely creation? I guess it is that impermanence dictates that all “things” created in this world must end, with their components scattered to the four elements. Mandalas are no different, and many do not understand what the actual mandala is.

The key part of the elaborate sand mandalas is not the colored sand that is gathered up and thrown into the water. Dust to dust... or sand to sand. No, the mandala is the actual act of offering the mandala itself, the process of creation and not so much what is created. The mandala is the concentration, intent, life, prayers, and mantras we pour into the creation of the mandala, not just the resulting sand image which is destroyed, just as we each will die.

In each case, it is the process of offering itself that is the result. And, as mentioned, this holds true for gatherings like these 10-day Mahamudra teaching as well. The offering itself, these precious teachings, in which we all shared, unlike the sand, are not destroyed, but are dedicated to the eventual enlightenment of ourselves and all sentient beings.

I remember one previous 10-day Mahamudra intensive teaching, as it came to an end and all of the participants, my fellow dharma practitioners, began to file out and



head for home. Margaret and I stayed for an extra day, so we were just hanging around.

Later that day, as I sat in the daily Mahakala puja, a practice offered to the fierce dharmapalas (the protectors of the dharma), the sky just opened, and it poured rain. In Tibetan teachings, it is considered auspicious if it rains during the teachings or at the end. Well, indeed these whole ten days had been auspicious. Many of the most senior students present said that this teaching was the most profound and glorious they had ever attended. I felt the same way. This was something we will be talking about for years to come, as I say, like the finale at the fireworks.

And these recollections remind me of an important event in my life that occurred at the very first 10-day teaching, back in 1989. I have told this story before only to a few, but I am getting old and there is no reason it has to be a secret other than vanity. Anyway, as it turns out some of my FB friends right here are my dearest friends, at least those I interact with the most.

This event happened, as mentioned, at the end of the first ten-day teaching in 1989. It was that last session, when Rinpoche was saying goodbye to the group of us. There we were, sitting in the newly constructed great shrine hall which took so much effort and time to complete. Rinpoche was thanking all of us for coming, many from great distances. And he reflected on the

original plans for this center, which came from his guru, the great 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, whom I was fortunate to meet in 1974.

And at the end of that 1989 session, Rinpoche spoke of the yet-unrealized plans of His Holiness the 16th Karmapa to also build a traditional 3-year retreat facility, a place where men and women could be trained in the traditional Tibetan closed-retreat, one that lasts three years, three months, and three days. In such a retreat, the retreatants never lie down to sleep for the entire time. They sleep sitting up in a special box. And as Rinpoche spoke, tears flowed down his face as he explained that he had not yet been able to fulfill the plans to build such a retreat as His Holiness had requested.

I can tell you, Rinpoche does not speak like this often, and there was not a dry eye in the place. When Rinpoche stopped speaking and we all filed out of the shrine room, I was in a kind of shock. To this day, I can remember the exact moment and place where I was as I walked around the side of the new monastery shrine hall.

I was so moved by Rinpoche's sharing with us his dreams. And it had been so difficult (and exhausting) just building the new monastery shrine-hall that I had no idea how we would EVER be able (so it seemed at the time) to build a whole additional three-year retreat

complex. I cast about in my mind to see who among the students that I was just sitting with would be capable of enabling such a project and came up with only one option, and it took me by complete surprise. Perhaps only someone like me (who was used to completing projects) could do such a thing, if I really, really put my heart into it.

This realization found me kind of stunned and terrified at the very thought of attempting this, but at the same time I knew I had to do it. My memory is not so good, but I must have sent a note or signaled somehow to Rinpoche that I was willing to try to help make this retreat center a reality, because I got a message that Rinpoche wanted to see me.

When I got to his personal room in the monastery, there was no translator and Rinpoche speaks no English. Rinpoche approached me and he had something in his hand, coming quite up-close. There were just the two of us. He placed into my hands what I now saw was a mala, the rosary-like-beads that Tibetans use for counting mantras. And he was saying something, something that I at first did not understand because of his poor English. He was saying "Mala, my mala."

As I looked down, I saw that he was handing me his own personal mala, giving it to me. Of course, I, and probably all of his students, had seen this incredible mala that was worn down from use like none I had ever seen. I was

stunned, speechless. Rinpoche was entrusting me with his own mala and at the same time the responsibility of furthering the retreat project. That was all that was said that day, those few words and the placing of that precious mala in my hands.

When his translator learned of what Rinpoche had done, he was dumbfounded. He pointed out that Rinpoche had this mala from before he ever came to this country and had used it for all these years to prepare for empowerment after empowerment, not to mention his in own practice. And the translator said he had hoped one day to inherit it, but he was probably just kidding me. I was humbled by it all and felt the heavy responsibility of carrying through with Rinpoche's intention.

Well, that's my story and I am glad to have finally said it openly. As for the retreat center, my wife Margaret and I actually helped to create that center, working hard to raise the funds and helping to organize and advertise the whole thing, along with the totally generous help from our Chinese Buddhist community in and around New York. Our Chinese community is so incredible, so generous, and so diligent. Americans are just beginning to learn how to support the dharma, if we want it to flourish, but the Chinese are raised in this ethic. I am so thankful for their support.

And so, the three-year retreat center was built. It is

called Karmé Ling and is located in Delhi, NY, about an hour and a half from KTD Monastery in the mountain above Woodstock NY. Karmé Ling Retreat Center is now in its fifth or sixth (perhaps more; I can't remember exactly) three-year retreat, turning out fully-trained lamas. Today, it is a whole complex, with a separate retreat house for men and woman, a lama house, shrine hall, Columbarium, fully-equipped kitchen for events and a great many separate retreat buildings for individuals, not to mention what are called the "long houses," rows of small retreat houses strung together. It also has a columbarium where the ashes of the sangha are placed. Karmé Ling is a wonderful place indeed.

Later on, during a visit by Rinpoche to our center, he went over his mala with me, almost bead by bead showing me where all of the parts came from, this bead from a particular great lama, another from the same lama but in a previous life and so on. Aside from the dharma and my family, that mala is my most precious possession.

"Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol"

The above is my Bodhisattva name. I was given the Bodhsattva vow many years ago as part of a large group, but we did not receive individual Bodhisattva names. Years later, I asked Rinpoche for a Bodhisattva name. He thought about it for a while and then give me the one listed above. Translated, "Sempa" means intention (all

Bodhisattva names start with Sempa), "Chönyi" means Dharmata (true nature of the mind), and "Rangdrol" means self-liberating, so the name means "Self-liberating Nature-of-the-Mind."

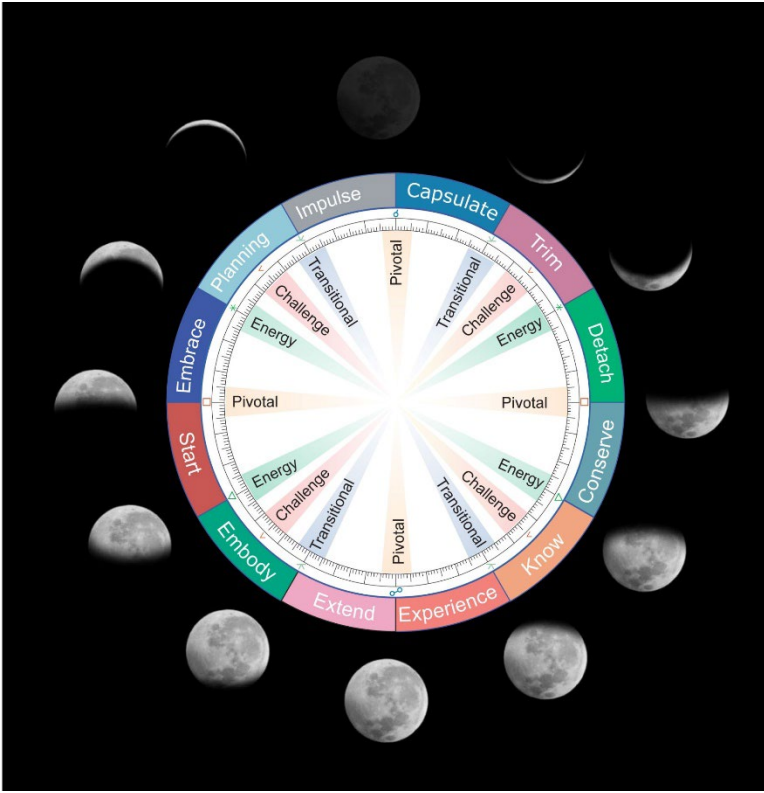
During a visit to our center here in Big Rapids in early May of 1991, KKR told me about the various parts of the mala. First, the bodhi seeds were perfectly round at the beginning, as were all the corals. The seeds were never stained but became the deep brown glossy-color they are today through use. Neither the corals nor the seeds were filed, flattened, or treated in any way.

Referring to the enclosed image, the red coral guru bead, the green slider stone next to it, and the red coral bead on the opposite side of the mala belonged and were used by the previous Thrangu rinpoche (not the current one), and the two side red-corals belonged and were used by the current Thrangu Rinpoche.

The mantra counters were a gift from the current Thrangu Rinpoche. The 10,000-Counter is an ordinary counter that KKR added to the mala.

Well, there you have it, what to me is a deeply personal story.

[Photo of the mala (rosary beads) that Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche placed in my possession.]



## THE AWARENESS OF CYCLES

July 16, 2022

Astrology is the study of cycles, in particular celestial cycles, and this is probably because anything that does not cycle, repeat or re-posit itself, is no longer here and present. In other words, for anything to endure, to exist, it has to reposit or continue to restate itself.

If this world is made up of only things that persist and cycle, this makes understanding what a cycle, any cycle, is very important for us.

Of course, we have the cycle of breathing. Each breath is a cycle going from in to out and back again. We have the cycle of the tides, all the planetary cycles, and tiny cycles as well.

As astrologers we have the wheel or cycle of the houses, the Earth's yearly zodiac cycle of the twelve signs, and of course all of the synodic cycles like the lunation cycle of the Sun and Moon, plus the synodic cycle of any of the planets or heavenly bodies.

For any particular cycle, it is very helpful to know exactly where (in which part) of the cycle we currently in. Are we at the inception point, like at the New Moon? Are we in the waxing half of the solunar cycle (investing or giving), or the opposition point, or the waning half of that cycle (reaping or taking)? Each cycle can be looked at in all 360 degrees of its extent.

The problem of 'orbs' in astrology is that by defining aspects by the orbs we use to identify them, like using 10-degree orbs for the Sun and Moon and perhaps 5-degree orbs for the other planets or whatever you use, is that if a planet falls outside of that orb, especially on a computer, we are not notified of it, even though it may

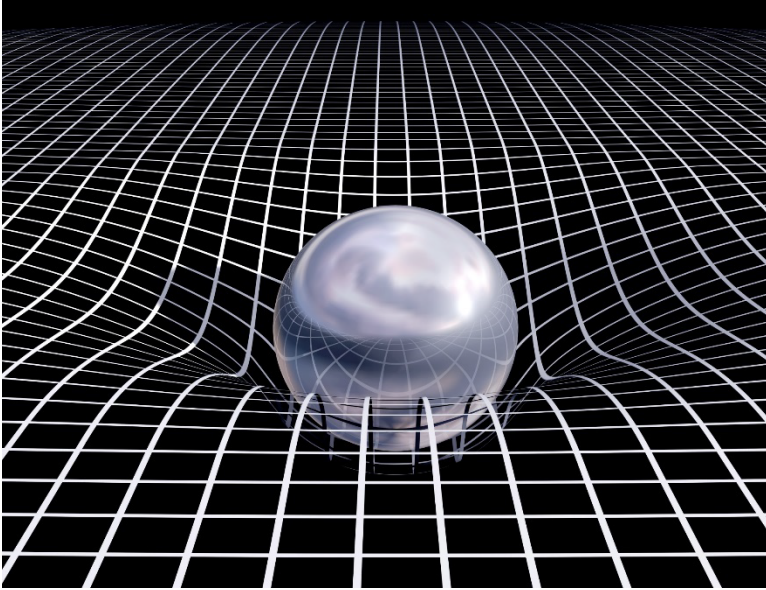


be just ever so slightly out of orb.

The point here is that IMO, much better than orbs is to look exactly where in the 360-degree cycle the planet is. Even if it is out of an orb (that you have set), it still is right there (somewhere), partaking of the nearest aspect to it, if not exactly, than approximately. In other words, the 'out-of-orb" planet is more like whatever the nearest aspect is than it is near or like anything else, any other aspect. IMO, we need to keep that in mind.

Our universe is dynamic, fluid, and continuous, a process, not some cubby-hole thing that we consign things to. It helps to remain in the flow and rhythm of the cycles that we are subject to.

[Graphic by me.]



## THE ALCHEMY OF IDENTITY

July 17, 2022

As we look into the Sun during the course of a year's orbit of Earth around the Sun and describe the qualities of the 12 zodiac signs as astrologers do, this should be second nature to us. In fact, this illustrates to me an important axiom, that of LOCAL ATTRACTION.

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

This is the 'alchemy of identity'. Be sure you understand this, please. Perhaps, read it again. In other words, higher centers can only serve to mirror or reflect. Their nature is to reveal to us not THEIR intrinsic nature, but our own. REVELATION of any kind is the sign of communication with greater centers or planes -- revelation, not of some far-off distant entity or "God," but always revelation of ourselves and the spirit and nature in us, here and now.

In a discussion as to the qualities of the centers of the Sun, the galaxy and super galaxy, we are to understand that all inquiry into the direction of the Sun will reveal the nature of the Earth; inquiry into the nature of the galaxy will serve to reveal the nature of our own Sun; and inquiry into the Super Galaxy will serve to reveal the nature of our Galaxy, and so on. The idea presented here is that it is the very nature of Higher Centers to reflect and respond, as they embrace more particular or local centers. Simply put, higher centers reflect!

At this point, if you are with me, another very significant axiom of astrology emerges:

The experience of physical attraction (traction = to draw across or towards) or gravity, itself is primarily the sign of a LOCAL phenomenon. For instance, we directly respond to the attraction we call gravity of the center of the earth. Our earth responds to the center of the Sun, the Sun to the Galaxy, and so forth. Yet as individuals,

we are not aware of the pull of the Sun on the entire earth, or again, the point being made here:

### ATTRACTION OR GRAVITY IS ALWAYS A SIGN OF A LOCAL PHENOMENON

Please, think about this. It will perhaps will make more sense in our practical affairs if we put it this way: a sign of our communication with higher or "vaster" centers (or Spirit or "God") is not a physical gravity (graveness) or attraction, but always an ENLIGHTENMENT (becoming light-er), the releasing and accepting of the nature of the particular terms (terminals) of OUR existence and a release of our experience of duality (this dualistic world), in exchange for unity and "oneness." Knowledge of so-called 'inner-planes' exhibits itself to us through a process of reflection or mirroring of our self RATHER than through the presentation to us of something new that is somehow "Other" than us.

"Mirroring" means we see our OWN essential nature reflected in the long-gone mirror of a teacher or spiritual guide; the traditional word is "reflection." When we ourselves begin to reflect, our life changes. And by "Reflect," don't think about "thinking," but rather about mirroring – 'reflection', as in reflecting something other than ourselves.

In other words, higher-centers than ourselves (first of all) mirror or reveal to us (reflect our own self) and do not

exhibit in themselves a greater intrinsic attractiveness or gravity than we now already have. To make this even more obvious, perhaps this example will help:

We each meet in life individuals who have a great impact on us. Following the above rule, those to whom we feel a great attraction toward and who hold great power over us are the sign of only a LOCAL phenomenon; they are not really teachers for us. And this is so, because TRUE teachers affect us with their presence by making us realize, not their own nature, but OUR own essential attractiveness and nature, not theirs.

Please: It is important to consider and think about this.

In other words, inquiry into true higher centers than our own reveal to us our own essential attractiveness. In fact, it is the nature of higher-centers to be non-material or non-physical, by definition, meaning: they embrace us and help us to embrace ourselves. Our inquiry into this realm is limited only by our fear of and reluctance to see our self in their vast mirror and seeing through the back of the mirror has always been a sign of Initiation. To sum this up: Greater (or higher) centers than our own mirror or reflect our own self and nature, revealing to us our essential identity as already a part of a larger whole, and enlightening us of (or from) our "grave-ness" and the burden of an apparent loneliness or separation from that whole.

This is key!

I will give one, hopefully clear, example of this principle, when I first met the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, at his ancestral home Tsurphu Monastery high in the mountains of Tibet, at some 15,000 feet. Prior to meeting the Karmapa, particularly through the late 1960s and the 1970s as I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I had met many imposing yogis and spiritual 'gurus' of one kind or another. I always came away with how powerful, magnetic, and attractive they were.

Here in the mountains of Tibet, meeting His Holiness the 17th Karmapa was very, very different from my previous meeting of various spiritual beings around Ann Arbor. Here are my notes about that time:

"That afternoon, we were summoned to His Holiness, and I slowly climbed the multiple (three sets) of ladder-like stairs, huffing and puffing from the high altitude. As we entered the actual interview room, there was a puja (ritual) going on, with His Holiness leading the practice, accompanied by a small number of monks. We were encouraged to sit up front, and we settled in.

Gradually, I realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. We found out later that we had experienced a special form of the Mahakala, one only for insiders. It was complete with the

Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us.

"It was very intense. His Holiness led the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. His eyes lock with yours and then, locked like that, his eyes seemed to move in and out like a lens focusing.

"Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know. And this one was performed complete with drums, cymbals, and various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja before, but never quite like this. I don't really know how to describe what happened next.

"I began to identify this puja as being not much different from my own practice, and then my mind ranged over that practice, examining where I was within it, and what it was about for me. I had done this practice, without fail, every morning, afternoon and/or evening, for many years. I was to do it until my death, or until I completed it by realizing the essential nature of the mind.

"Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mind, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of my practice. What was that practice and what was the essence of it? In my own mind, I was somewhat of a tough character, and I carried that strength or toughness to my practice. In fact, I loved the fierce, wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, here in this room with

Karmapa, that same strength and toughness (or we might even say fierceness) came to mind, and began to be examined inwardly, in a new light. But this was no idea I was playing with; instead, I was examining myself, or, to be more exact, I was realizing a part of my self—in this case, the part of myself who had been doing my practice—the one who did the practice.

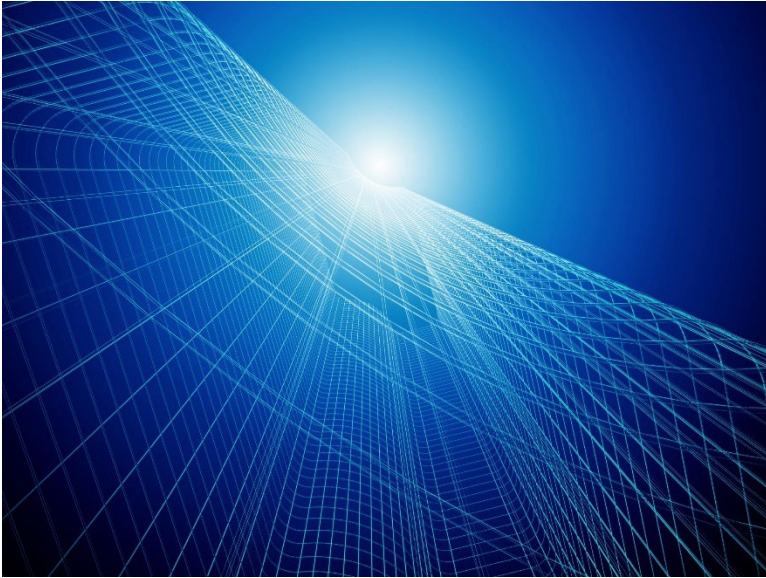
“And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but a shell covering up an extremely sensitive inside. I was tough because I was so, so sensitive...and, at heart, I was kind. I was flooded with a state of compassion, and with the realization that I was (and always had been, in my deepest part) compassionate, concerned, and caring, and that this was my natural state, not something to strive for but something already, in fact, the case. It was the state of my being, something to be uncovered and opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for this was already my natural state. All I had to do was to relax and let it shine through.

“And I should point out, again, that this was not a concept or idea I had, but a realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my fierce presence, was none other than compassion. It was as if, like a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed as I was overcome with this—now so obvious—realization. I was, in essence, very simple—just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world. I was easy, and



all my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all of the suffering I saw around me. At that moment, I felt I understood myself and my practice: all of this taking place in midst of that Mahakala puja, with Karmapa. I was at peace.”

The point here is that as I gazed into the Karmapa’s eyes, I did not focus on the Karmapa’s powerful presence. Rather, in his presence, by reflection, I realized the nature of my own mind not his power. That, to me, is the true power of a spiritual teacher, a realization on our part, not of their nature, but of our own.



## WE ARE “SO INCLINED”

July 18, 2022

"As Above, So Below ... but After Another Manner," familiar as an occult maxim, might be the perfect description of what is involved in the various astrological coordinate systems and their transformations. Let me explain.

It is easy to communicate the concept of "As Above, So Below," wheels within wheels, thus larger systems containing within them nested smaller systems, and this has resulted in the popular idea of the chakras or planes

(planets) of our experience and self as an ascending hierarchy of levels (As Above, So Below), each inclusive of the preceding level. What is NOT generally appreciated but becomes increasingly clear when we examine the actual structure of the various cosmic systems, is not only the idea of larger systems embracing the small systems within them (levels, 'As Above So Below'), but that each larger coordinate system is also differently INCLINED to the preceding one., the "After Another Manner." This is the point here.

It should be understood that aside from the often-tedious mathematics involved in astrological/astronomical coordinate transformations, there is an accompanying philosophical or psychological adjustment to be made (and empowerment to be had), a shift in viewpoint, a change in the approach or attitude to the subject. This transformation of coordinates merits our attention. In fact, it is key to a proper astrological understanding of the different astronomical coordinate systems.

And so, there is not only an expansion in perspective when we move to a larger coordinate system (As Above, So Below), but also a reordering of our sense of direction (change of inclination). This reordering is what makes it so difficult for an individual to see beyond their present dimension and get a feel for what is perhaps his or her inevitable future.

There exist what are termed "event horizons," beyond which we cannot understand how life can go on. An example of some event horizons: puberty, marriage, childbirth, and death, (also Saturn Returns, etc.) to name a few of the classics. We cannot see beyond our present sphere into what our future might be like in these other dimensions because we cannot help but conceive of these future events in terms of our present line (linear) of thought, the line along which we imagine we are going now. To pass through these event horizons involves total change on our part not just in encompassing previous systems, but also in attitude (inclination) and that means reorientation. We do not watch our own change, for we are what is in fact in transition or change. "WE" are changing. That's something we are unprepared for.

The idea presented here should be obvious: the crossing of an event horizon also involves simple reorientation on our part, call it a change of approach, view, or attitude. The new dimension or sphere we enter turns out (after our adjustment or change) to reveal our previous or past life in new light. We see our old behavior and opinions differently with our new approach to life. It is very difficult to communicate the difference to one who has not yet had that experience of reorientation. This is called "initiation." Or as my first teacher used to spell the word "In It I Ate."

What has changed perhaps most is our INCLINATION.

We do not want the same things we did want or want them now in a different manner. We are no longer "inclined" such that we feel the way we used to. Our life now revolves around a different center than before. Where before, as a child, it was a new bike (or whatever), and now it's a wife or child, for instance. In other words, we are differently inclined, something we did not anticipate.

Many of these principles I am presenting here are graphically revealed through the study and exercise of the various astronomical/astrological coordinate systems. For instance: what appears in one astrophysical system as isolated and singular entities that are apparently unconnected, when viewed from the perspective of another system, define the basic shape of the system itself.

How often in our lives does some singularity appear (initially) as if an "other" and foreign entity, but later, when we have experienced several of this type, they are recognized as representatives of a kind or group that at first was unfamiliar (and perhaps even scary) to us. This same event becomes recognizable to us and loses its threatening quality. Astrophysics is all about clusters and groups. In astrophysics, 'clustering' is the rule, not the exception.

I cannot (apparently) recommend strongly enough the exercise of these various ways or systems for

understanding our universe to astrologers practicing today. Here is a list of some of the systems. When you study a coordinate system like the heliocentric coordinate system or the equatorial coordinate system, keep in mind that these systems are more than just numbers. They offer an insight into different areas of life, chakras, and each can be charted astrologically and interpreted. It is amazing that we can do this! Here is a beginning. I will not include the inner changes connected to synodic cycles like the 30.4 year Saturn Cycle, and others.

## COSMIC SYSTEMS AND THEIR CENTERS – A List

### 1. The Earth System

### 2. SOLAR SYSTEM center: sun

3. LOCAL SYSTEM (Gould's Belt) This is a group of some 10.8 stars of which the sun is a member. The Local System, originally thought to be a minute galaxy embedded with the Milky Way, is considered to be an ellipsoid of 700x200 parsecs with the long axis parallel to the New Galactic Longitudes 160 deg/340 and located in the Orion-Cygnus spiral arm. The centroid of the Local System is in Virgo at about 15 degrees 25' minutes, with nodes to the Ecliptic at 10 deg 22' of Sagittarius (North node) and Gemini. The system is inclined to the ecliptic by about 66 degrees. Note – positions are of the Epoch 1950.0.

4. LOCAL GALAXY...The Milky Way. Estimated to contain 10 to the 11th stars, The galaxy is a disc-like structure with a diameter of some 30,000 parsecs, a central ellipsoidal nucleus of about 4000 parsecs, and an average disc thickness of several hundred parsecs. The nodes and center (about 26-degree of Sagittarius) in relation to the ecliptic are given elsewhere. The sun is located some 10,000 parsecs from the galactic center.

5. LOCAL GROUP OF GALAXIES The local group includes about a score of member galaxies...the largest of which is the Andromeda galaxy (M 31). Our galaxy (Milky way) and M-31 revolve around a common center of mass roughly in the direction of 27- degrees in the Sign Aries.

6. LOCAL SUPERGALAXY. Our galaxy is part of a vast flattened super system of galaxies some 40 megaparsecs in diameter, with the center (1 degrees of Libra) in the great Virgo Cluster some 12-16 megaparsecs from our sun.

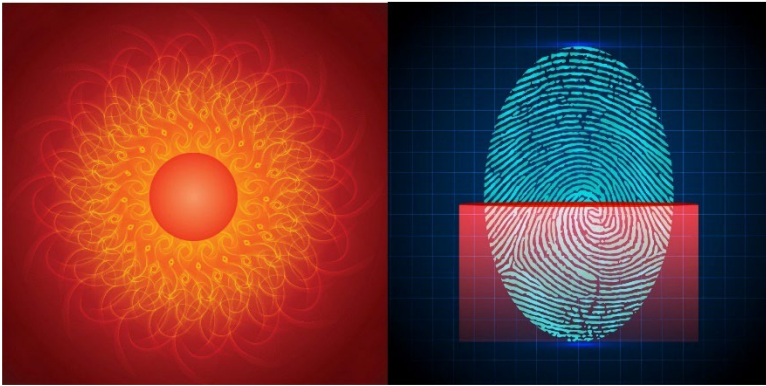
This article just touches upon the value of astrology as a form of cultural astronomy. I published an entire book ("Astrophysical Directions") on these topics in 1976, the result of years of research on my part into astrophysics. That book is available today as a free e-book ("The Astrology of Space") at this link.

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

of- Space.pdf

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## ALL IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION

July 19, 2022

I have been working with the structure of Deep-Space for nearly 60 years. My good friend Charles A. Jayne Jr. and I were about the only people I am aware of who were interested in the subject back in the early '70s. Of course, there was Theodor Landscheidt, whose every word on the subject is worth reading.

Many astrologers have asked me what is the meaning of points like the galactic and supergalactic centers. Of course, I could rattle off their coordinates and a few other particulars. But if you are actually interested in understanding the nature of cosmic structure from an astrological point of view, see if you can get through the following. Take it slow and think it through.

A central idea for understanding recent cosmic research

is the use and value of various astronomical coordinate systems (geocentric, heliocentric, galactic, supergalactic, etc.) as best representing the different levels of our conscious experience. Each coordinate system has a center and the word CENTER can mean both the same and yet something different to different individuals. Take our own center, for example.

The center about which our life appears to revolve (for each of us) is sacred to us in its ability to reveal or communicate to us the essence or identity of ourselves. The center for each of us always refers inward to our essence, and yet the center or lifeline of one individual may be a new car at one point in his life, a new wife/husband, or a child at another point. The takeaway here is that at each point, the "meaning" of center is inviolate, although the outward form of what we take for our lifeline to the center is constantly always changing.

I find that the different kinds of center may be conveniently expressed in the various coordinate systems of astronomy and their meanings as defined by astrology, which basically is cultural astronomy. Otherwise, it's not astrology. The origin or center chosen should most correspond to the center of gravity, the "kind" of question, inquiry, or level being considered. Thus, for a study of the personal differences, circumstances, and the specific terms of our life, we traditionally use the horizon coordinate system in relation to the zodiac with its familiar Midheaven,

Ascendant, Houses, etc.

Studies of the general terms of mankind (Mundane Astrology) involve consideration from the center of the earth or geocentric astrology, often using Right Ascension and Declination. This is traditional. For a study of the motion and relation of the bodies in our Solar System considered as a functioning whole, the Heliocentric Ecliptic System with the origin at the sun center would be appropriate. In this coordinate system, we could examine the archetypes of life and consciousness, and in general questions traditionally referred to religion or spirituality, perhaps more recently also considered by some as psychological. As for me, I call the heliocentric chart, the "Dharma Chart."

In like manner, galactocentric and super galactocentric coordinates are appropriate for dynamical studies of the larger or more cosmic structure of our reality. They are all there and there all of the time. However, for each of us, there are moments and even days when our awareness is truly cosmic, of or in synch with cosmic dimensions. We move in and out of the body, so to speak.

There are different levels of truth or reality. What is essential as the kernel of truth to one person may appear to another as just one example among many of a larger ordering or structure. When we each refer to the center around which we revolve, we share in the idea of

centers and yet different ones among us revolve around or consider what is central or essential differently. We can agree on that.

All reference to different centers (perhaps at different times or different times in our life) simply points out the lack of Identity or, another way of saying this is that these seemingly different levels or centers together (in fact) form a continuum -- a continuing experience of identification, starting within us and reaching toward eternity. The following may help clarify this:

All of these larger systems such as the solar system, the galaxy, and so forth, include us within their reaches like a mother holds a child within her womb. We are the children and particular representatives of the earth, and the solar system, but ALSO of the galaxy, the supergalaxy, and beyond. Their nature, identity, and self are Identical with our own. In fact, it is fair to say that we have come through this "outer space" through all the time there is (and has been) to BE HERE NOW ourselves. We don't have to look for a spaceman. We already are totally out in space, parked in one of the spiral arms of our local galaxy, the Milky Way.

And mark that our day-to-day consciousness continually circulates from more particular awareness of our person to more "cosmic" awareness and back again. We do this all the time. From an astrological perspective, the exercise of various astrological coordinate systems, like

exercising our muscles, can serve to remind us that ALL reference to centers (in fact, all referral of any kind) indicates an attempt to achieve identification, the circulation (circle or cycle) of identity -- to RE-MEMBER, put back together, or remind ourselves (and keep in mind) who we already are and have always been, intelligent life.

### ALL IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION

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

What we call Life, "God," or Spirit is no beggar, creating a symbolically true but specifically disappointing creation, such that we should have to "touch up" this creation or somehow make the ends meet. The ends already meet! It is we who will change first our attitude and then gradually our approach to this creation, this so-called cyclic Samsara, and eventually realize its better half, Nirvana.

And these changes in attitude on our part, this reorientation in approach to what is unchanging or everlastingly true in life, represent the specific areas where the exercise and use of various astronomical coordinate systems of understanding our life become important to present day astrologers. To discover our own orientation and inclinations -- that we are already (right now!) perfect representatives of all space and all time, acting out in detail through our persons events of a so called "cosmic" nature that occur in space at remote distance and times, yet to us they occur right here and now. How could that be? Because all of this is happening now or at least the effects are.

Supernovae and black holes are not simply some ever-distant cataclysmic events but are (rather) part of our own everyday experience acted out in fact by persons within the galaxy of our own experience. The goal of our study and our inquiry into astrology is to re-present and re-veal the nature of ourselves and our intimate circulation, connection, and identity in the heart of the earth, heart of the Sun, heart of the Galaxy, heart of the Supergalaxy, and so on.

In a word, that ALL IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION (a continuity or continuing and circle) and all inquiry, questioning, and search can but end in the discovery of our own Self whether "writ small" in the corners of our personal struggle or "writ large" across the very heavens itself. And so, again: all self-discovery, all Identification is

but re-discovery, reconnection, and simple  
CIRCULATION.

If you want to boil this down to the most common denominator, we have the concept that all sense of identification by each of us with ourselves is not just our own personal Odyssey, but at the same time is the intelligence of the universe discovering itself in and through the same moment. In other words, what we call personal identification with our spiritual sources is also the universe circulating intelligence at the same time, thus guaranteeing the coherence and sustainability of a particular system. As for finding intelligent life in the universe, best look in a mirror.



## A WHIFF OF IMPERMANENCE

July 20, 2022

This is an article on what happens to us after the age of thirty years. Esoteric astrology (and philosophy) is by nature heady stuff, very abstract. If you have not had the experience being described, it probably won't even register as anything but intellectual gibberish. Is it about real experience? You bet, but unfortunately it is veiled by



our lack of experience and/or lack of awareness. It is esoteric or occult, hidden. The Tibetans call it self-secret because it hides itself in that most secret of places, in plain sight. This is about Saturn as the arbiter of time.

At around thirty years of age, we begin to emerge from time, to go beyond time. At that point time as we know it, for all practical purposes, stops and our soul is mentally frozen in our prime of youth like an insect in amber. It never decays, as we stop aging inside. But the body does decay and after its prime, it embarks on a long trajectory downhill that personally ends with death. In other words, at thirty years of age the spirit up and leaves the body, or begins to, and this transformation has not gone unnoticed by certain religious groups. "Born Again" is what I am talking about here. A Christian concept? Hardly, but some Christians have been aware enough to claim it, although it is available to us all.

We each are "born again," whether we know it or not, whether we want to or not. It just happens. And it physically occurs (or begins to occur) around thirty years of age, when the planet Saturn begins to repeat itself and go over its orbit for a second time at 30.4 years. Remember the old popular wisdom, "Never trust anyone over thirty."

And just what is it that happens? Simply put, at that age we (the one we identify with as our Self) begin to exit and separate from the physical body in what can only be

called some kind of 'spiritual' birth, thus the reference to being "born again." Hairline cracks in our future begin to emerge and we are born (and borne and carried) beyond time. Time is no more or time matters no longer for us. In fact, we gradually forget time, or we might say that we are 'out of time', have gone beyond time, and I don't want to just play with words here, but we then "have" time for the first time. We embrace (cherish) time like a mother embraces a child and we drink the waters of Lethe to the very last drop. We all drink the Kool-Aid sooner or later.

As mentioned, this spiritual unfolding is hidden in the one place we would never think to look, right in plain sight, and for everyone to see. Like the air we breathe, it is so much with us that few have any awareness of it, yet the signs of this transformation are etched on our now aging faces, emblazoned on all the tabloids, and are right before our eyes: eternal youth. As the Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it: "Oh, it is an all youth."

Physically, we each will eventually fail. There is no remedy for death other than death itself. I don't want to be particularly morbid, and this kind of undertaking is not my main business, but as a famous man once said to me in a moment of imprinting, "Michael, we learn to fail successfully." Yes, that is the great truth, that we all will personally fail, but we can learn to fail successfully. So, how is that done?

Like the old Kenny Rogers song, we have to “know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold them, and know when to walk away.” Failing successfully is knowing when to let go and work with a situation as opposed to creating a new situation or adding on to an old one. Knowing how to take away (walk away) and let something go (go on) is as important as knowing how to create something there in the first place.

As the Christian Bible says, this came to pass, that came to pass, etc. Nothing comes to stay. In time, all things come to pass. Beyond our first Saturn return at thirty, we all learn (however slowly) to help things to pass. Facilitating passage (including our own) is what life beyond thirty years of age is all about, “working with,” learning to fail successfully. It is all the same thing. We can struggle against this change I am describing, but only as long as energy and determination last. After our first Saturn return, life flows gently downstream. Some individuals learn to swim or row, row their boats back upstream, perhaps even build a dam or two, but this is just vanity and foolishness.

Sooner or later we all get around to the business at hand, which is separating from the physical or as my friend spoke to me, learning to fail successfully. “Parting is such sweet Sorrow” is how The Bard put it. The purpose of this blog is not to drone on about the inevitability of impermanence, although it can bring a whiff of smelling salts to our routine dreaming and

distractions.

I admit that I have kind of drifted from my original theme, which was the admonition not to struggle against the current of life as we start to wake up at the age of thirty. Yes, we can sail like kites in the winds of change, and no harm done. My point is that there is as much beauty and perfection in closure as there is in starting things. Our society celebrates youth up to the peak of prime, and then falls silent. Dumfounded. As a group, we refuse to look at our own reflection in the mirror of time.

But that reflection, like the Sun at the break of day, dawns on each of us and, beyond time, fully illuminates the sky of our mind. Remember, life is a palindrome. It reads the same, forward and backward.

The Sun is shining, always, and all ways.

[Graphic by me.]



## CHANGE: THE UNWRITABLE AND UNTHINKABLE

July 21, 2022

This should be my last post on inner change, and I have thought for several days whether or not even to write this part because it touches on some very esoteric (sensitive) topics. What is the problem with inner change?

The problem is that we are protected from witnessing inner change by our own social conventions, by what is called "sanity" and, for that matter, social sanitation. We do everything we can not to come into contact with our conflicting emotions, and all of the rest of the stuff that

may be festering in our psyches. In reality, our internal worlds have no fixed boundaries and can include more than a little chaos and all manner of undigested experience – paradoxes that we have come up against but have failed to assimilate, especially relating to our "self." The "Self" does not like to be embarrassed.

We habitually just ignore and tune out what we don't understand or fear and try to keep it at arm's length. We close our eyes to it all and then we keep them shut. I am surprised how little western society knows about its own inner life, about what goes on in there just beneath the surface veneer. This post is just touching on that. I won't probe.

On the inside, mostly connected to our self-image, we literally experience mental earthquakes, as the great tectonic plates of our fabricated-self move and rearrange themselves within us in response to change, mostly in an attempt to keep change from reaching us. After all, the self is the ultimate conservative, ever afraid of change.

And our own self is very protective of its existence and functions as what is called (in esoteric literature) a ring-pass-not between itself and our actual mind, a filter that we can't (or won't) easily see through. The self, at least in this society, is not transparent, and that apparently by design. As the great German philosopher Hegel so aptly put it:

"We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

That is how much we fear awareness or what is sometimes called "emptiness." The "Self" is like our own private ventriloquist dummy and we the ventriloquist, although we have managed to fall into the unfortunate habit of taking orders and direction from the dummy rather than to get to know our true nature, a 'simple twist of fate' as Dylan put it.

It is the 'self' that's responsible for most of the difficulties we have in recognizing and incorporating inner change at times like these. Like the fury of a sudden summer storm, our inner worlds can (and do) collide, and we are hurled through a space and time that we cannot stand to keep in mind and are just too happy to forget. And when this inner turmoil passes or quiets, we settle down to living once again, with scarcely a memory of what took place, of what we just lived through. But there are sometimes telltale signs left behind.

Like magnets that oppose one another, parts of our inner psyche are reflected in the mirror of the self and we sometimes can catch a brief glimpse of truth in the corner of the eye, and we are overwhelmed. What is it to be overwhelmed? What happens that we just shut down and

crawl off to sleep through it?

Our day-to-day outward busyness may or may not reflect the psychic storms raging within. Some days we are just tired. What do you think gets us so tired? What do we go through that we are mostly unaware of? Have you ever had such an embarrassing or difficult thought that you found yourself spontaneously saying something out loud, despite your "self," in an attempt not to look at it? That is what I am pointing at here. And this happens a lot.

You may feel that I am magnifying the effects of change (and the self) here for dramatic effect, but am I? When change emerges in the mind (like during eclipse times), everyone takes it personally. We all experience it (all humanity) at the same time, but we seldom realize that all present in the world share this same energy at the same moment.

We each tend to turn inward and experience it (or so we think) privately. Imagine a garden of flowers all closing at once and then opening back up again, when the change has passed. No one saw anything. In fact, we do this all the time.

Anyway, enough about psychological disturbances that we endure because we can't manage to look our own self in the eye. Change itself is nothing less than a shot of pure energy injected into space and time that allows



our great constipated inner worlds to move, to expand and contract as they will, and neither you nor I can fully control it. We can hunker down and ride change out or we can learn to take advantage and use it creatively.

In a very real way, our sense of time is a social convention lived by the majority - a mere consensus. We don't always remain within that social convention, but in times of change, in odd moments, days, and hours of our lives, some of us may wander (or be thrust) into more unusual (altered) states of mind and time. We don't remember it because we find it too hard to grasp, much less sustain any awareness of. We just shut down in there. And this is more the rule than the exception.

Eternity does not exist somewhere out there in our future, at the live-long end of history and linear time. Eternity exists right now, of course, deep within (or without) time. Time does not just extend to some linear end as we may like to believe. Instead, as individuals, we extend (stretch) time. It is we who are stretched and endure for the length of our effort. We last until then.

In other words, we go between the moments of clock-ticking time. We stretch time, make time for the things we care about, and extend (attenuate) ourselves. In moments of great change, we leap between the seconds (beyond time) to the day of creation itself. We become co-creators if we can keep our eyes open. Eternity is always found just in time.

By becoming more and more aware of the actual nature of the self as something we habitually fabricate, we can increasingly be aware of what change is and participate creatively (consciously) in shaping our own life and destiny.



TO SAY MORE IN SILENCE THAN IN WORDS

July 22, 2022

[Today, I have completed power-washing our home on three directions. I have only the south side to do, which is the easiest because it gets lots of sun. I also did two 5-foot deep window wells, trying to get the leaves out and remove the algae and mold. I then power washed them, but I can see I am going to have to clean, remove rust and paint iron pipes, cement walls, and wood trim.]

As for my mind, the stillness of allowing the mind to rest as it is or to rest in the action of work of one kind or another.

Once free of the labor of thought, it's hard to justify it. Artifice is elaboration, no matter how smoothly or beautifully it is arranged. We can go without that.

The mind is free to express itself if we stop trying to control it. Patterns in the sand caused by waves or of the clouds in the sky are not random. There is no such thing as random, or, if you must, then it is all random. It's not.

I keep quoting this poem of mine, because it is accurate of where I am.

#### 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.



## BENDING OVER BACKWARD

July 23, 2022

[Power-washing our two deep window-wells to remove mold. Received and assembled a rowing machine, a missing ingredient in trying to stay fit and healthy. I have an elliptical machine, yet it does not put me at the center of feeling the workout. Rowing machines use 85% or more of all muscles and are cardio-aerobic to the nth degree. Rowing does this for me. So, I now have an elliptical, a rowing machine, and a weight bench. I am not so worried about summertime, but when winter comes and food seems to become more important, I need a hedge against having no outside work or enough safe outdoor walking thanks to the ice. I fell on black ice

a few years ago and broke two ribs.]

Back in 1964, when I spent a year living in Berkeley, California, I attended some meetings of a group studying the works of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff. One quote from Gurdjieff's "Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson" that stuck in my mind was:

"If you go on a spree, then go the whole hog, including the postage."

The idea is that if you are going to do something, don't scrimp and offer short-services, but go all the way... including paying for the postage.

I find this increasingly relevant as I grow older, and I cite the familiar image of a pebble dropped into a still pool, whose ever widening circles encapsulate more and more of the water surface as they spread outward. Just how much should we give?

And the short answer seems to be to give it all, go all out, and don't be a cheapskate or as the old chestnut-slogan personifies "In for a penny, in for a pound." Life is like that.

I find myself endlessly drawing lines in the sand, lines I declare I won't step over, thus far and no farther, say I. What a joke! What nonsense.

It is clear on thinking for even a few moments that life will in the end take all that we have, every last iota of energy and not even look back. And here I am, sitting around, declaring limits that can't be crossed and then fuming or dwelling on them.

The simple fact is that I don't control all that much of anything, especially what other people do. If they ignore me or hurt my feelings, whether non-intentionally or on purpose, what am I to do about it? What can I do about it? The answer is: not much.

I may like to think I give a lot, but there is always more to give, ever more demanded by life. There is no limit other than death itself, and my understanding is that we sail on beyond even that in the succeeding instant.

So, all my little internal discussions, my deals with myself, where I declare that this person has gone far enough and that I won't put up with any more from them is just more hyperbole. Moreover, it simply is a waste of time, another insult to whatever perceived injury I imagine they have caused me.

The world can't help it. It is as it is, and drawing these non-existent lines is a huge waste of time that signifies nothing other than the futility of railing against the cosmos. In that respect, no one is listening and even a little increased awareness on my part makes this clear. There are no lines that can be drawn and no one to step



across them other than myself.

These little threats or promises, made in the mind, when I am disappointed by someone or something go unnoticed in the larger scheme of things. They only add up to more karma I lay on myself. As mentioned, these are in fact just trumped-up insults added to whatever perceived injury I imagine.

Taking notes in my little black book of deeds done by others (or by life) that hurt my feelings is just a reflection of my inability to do anything about it, and to clearly understand the reality facing me, i.e. that there is no end to the limit of the widening circles in the pond where the pebble is dropped. In the end, everything out there taunting or impinging on me, whatever I imagine hurts or offends, must be embraced and included. So, I tell myself to get on with it.

I will eventually move beyond anything I react to and this by definition. I will embrace it. Stopping to make comments to myself, to register my disapproval or disdain, is just precious time and energy wasted. There is and can be no witness to imagined slights. They only hurt me and prevent my awareness from expanding. It is just me stalling.

I am reminded of the image (we all have seen it) of a human figure ... like a baby in the womb (curled inward), contrasted with one of an adult that is later outwardly

bent over backward, with fingers touching toes – a complete inversion. Prepare for that I tell myself.

So, the moral of this story (for me at least) is that I might as well stop taking notes (notice) of all of that out there that hurts or offends me, because it just delays any awareness or realization that is the natural result of this trip I am on called life. And, in the last analysis, there is no one out there to complain to!

Make any sense?



## REFLECTION AND IMMERSION

July 24, 2022

Or we could say "Think and Do." I am interested in what happens in our mind when we commit ourselves to act and find ourselves deep in experiencing action. It has occurred to me for many years now that language, despite all its words, and regardless of what words are used, means or can point to only one thing, and that one thing is that we should experience this life and the realm of action.

In other words, all language and its meaning indicate that we should experience, just go and live! If experience

(action and acting) is the point of and the endpoint of meaning, then what's the point or purpose of experiencing action? What happens?

Off the cuff, what comes to mind is that experiencing (and action in general) is the opposite of thought and thinking, a sponge to soak up thinking and conceptuality in general. Is that true? Check it out and share your thoughts.

When I am busy experiencing, it seems there is little room for thought, as in few thoughts. Yes, there is what is called thoughtful action. Perhaps that is what is called 'Skillful Means' in dharma lingo. It may be like with a car, mixing the right amount of air (thought) and fuel (action) in a carburetor. About all I know is that when I am deep in action, the doing of something, I am not much engaged in thought, but rather engaged in experiencing the action. Action seems to be the living end of the world of thought.

Is it better to act and just 'BE' (experience) more and not think so much? Do we by acting and experience avoid thinking about things? Is action just a dodge to avoid thought and reflection? I'm sure there are infinite nuances to all of this, if we stop to think about it, for instance, if we act, do we stop thinking? These are all fair questions.

And what is this present moment about? Is it, like action,

complete in itself? Is the present moment itself devoid of thought? Is it a fountain or wellspring of experience that, while it may cause us to think and be thought producing, is not itself conceptual? After all, the present moment is our last refuge from thought and not itself reflective. In other words, this present moment is reflected, but not itself reflective.

All these are wonderings and just that.

Without some actual experience, we have no reflection, nothing to reflect or think on. Experience itself is not reflection, and vice versa. So, we experience and then reflect, experience and then reflect... They go together.

What is experience without reflection? Meaningless. Also, what is reflection without something (experience) to reflect upon? That's the danger of abstract conceptuality, when thought is devoid of actual experience.

Yet, there is, IMO, pure experience without reflection. Perhaps that is why I love groove music (Soul Jazz, Original Funk) so much, because instead of reflecting on the music as it's played, we skip past the reflection and just reinvest in the groove. With groove music, so to speak, we compound our interest, recursively, investing (and reinvesting) in the groove itself rather than stopping the music and then reflecting a bit.

'Groove' music (like jazz guitarist Grant Green) is about investing any results that normally would be reflective back into the groove, reinvesting continually, in an endless trip or groove. Groove music is thoughtless because it is immersive and all absorbing.

Instead of taking an obvious out, like reflecting on the music at hand, with Groove Music, we invest and then reinvest within, and just let bygones be bygones. There is no past and no future, but only this present groove. Is that enough?

That is enough.



## ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

July 25, 2022

I made my living doing sit-down and written astrology readings with clients for many years. I still do readings, but mostly for family and friends these days.

One thing that comes up in many readings is what do we do when something really devastating happens to us in our lives, like losing our job, our life savings, our partner, a family member, or what-have-you? These kinds of events happen all too often for comfort, and to almost everyone at some time in our lives – a really big setback. It has happened to me, for sure – big time.

Or perhaps we do something just awful that we really

didn't mean to do, something we can't just undo, something that just happened and before we knew it the toothpaste was out of the tube, and we could not put it back. This kind of untoward event also leaves a big imprint on our psyche. What to do when we make mistakes?

People that I have counseled seem to spend an inordinate amount of time feeling depressed and bad about what has happened to them. For some, it becomes the main theme for the rest of their lives, with much regret, bitterness, anger, and the like. It often takes on a life of its own and pretty-much takes over their life, what they have left of it.

It is the same thing with big gaffs or mistakes. Folks dwell on them and often for a long, long time. They are preoccupied with their mistake, humiliation, or loss. I hear this again and again in astrology readings and life in general.

Before I comment on any of this, I want to link my suggestions to a topic I have been trying to get across to readers for years with not much success and that is about "mind training," working with our mind. I hesitate to use the word "meditation" because either that word is misunderstood or (worse) people quickly replace what I mean by that word with their own explanation of it. I guess what I am saying here is please hear me out on this with an open mind, and perhaps we can have a fresh



take.

Ultimately, I want to point out to you how practicing meditation (or some kind of mind training) affects how we take these big road-bumps that life sometimes puts in our way, and it is not as simple as meditation practice makes us more peaceful or accepting. Of course, it does, but that is not the point here.

It may help to understand how what is called Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is approached. It does not matter whether you have actually ever done or tried to do this type of meditation. Here I just want to go over the general idea.

In basic Tranquility Meditation we practice by focusing on some object. It could be our breath, or a pebble, a spot on the floor, etc. It does not matter what the object is. The point of this type of meditation practice is to relax and let our mind rest or focus on whatever object we have chosen, and then do our best to not let it stray from that. This is easier said than done, of course, and here is the view:

In this type of meditation practice, when instead of focusing on the object (stone, breath, etc.), we find ourselves thinking instead about what we are going to have for lunch, or something we want to do later, when we become aware that we have strayed from the object, we just stop straying and gently bring our mind back to

the object and begin again; we start over.

In this practice, there is no blame, no regret, no admonishing ourselves for straying from the object, no thought at all of the energy spent on our lapse. That is just a waste of time. Instead, we just bring the mind back to focusing on the object we have chosen for meditation and begin again. We start over every time we stray from the chosen object.

And this is why they call it meditation “practice,” because we are not actually meditating, but ‘practicing’ meditation and learning a habit, in this case how to keep our mind on what we are doing and not to stray from it. AND THAT.... if we do stray, we spend zero time worrying about our lapse or mistakes, and just bring the mind back and start over.

My point then is that this habit of starting over with no remorse or without dwelling on the past that we learn in meditation practice, and not dwelling on what happened, what should have happened, might have happened, on what we are sorry that happened, etc. carries over into life events that happen to us, as well. That’s why I bring it up.

It is not that we should feel no remorse or regret when we make a big mistake or something upsetting happens to us. Of course, we do. Or that the loss of something or someone important to us should not affect us. Of

course, it does.

The idea here is that we don't want to add insult to injury. It is unfortunate that something awful has happened in our lives that impacts us. If on top of that we then spend untold hours, days, months, or years of our life regretting it, then we really do continue that loss. We add insult to the injury that we already have sustained.

In meditation practice we learn the habit of just dropping it, much like when my dog picks up some smelly dead thing and I say to him, "Leave it!" We can do the same when these catastrophic or humiliating events happen to us: just leave it. We can let it go and start over without wasting our precious life energy on what we can do nothing about anyway, the past. We don't need to add insult to injury.

We may not be able to control what happens to us in life, what life brings, but we can learn to control our attitude, how we react to what happens. Learning to just drop our regret, remorse, sorrow, anger, and so on, and get back to living our life is an important lesson we can all stand to learn. And here is how I first learned this:

As a computer programmer, every once in a while, I would accidentally delete an entire day's (or week's) work at the touch of a button. It is the dreaded "operator error," for which we can blame no one but ourselves. In

the beginning, I would rant and rave, yell, and even stop working for a while. I would sulk and curse my fate. However, sooner or later I would just get back to work and start over. I had no choice.

In time I learned to spend not even another instant on regret, but to just calmly begin again. I would immediately start over. Later, when I began to practice meditation, this habit was further reinforced until when something terrible happens, I just “leave it” and continue with the life that I still have.



## THE DHARMA PATH OF INTEREST

July 26, 2022

When I first attempt to verbalize something that I am still getting my mind around, it can be difficult. I am doing that here. What I present in this blog may be a little unorthodox, but I'm not a heretic. I have been studying dharma since the late 1950s. And before that I was a phenomenologist almost all my young life, meaning I monitor my own insides and mindstream. And although I cannot speak for other dharma practitioners, I am somewhat familiar with my own mental events. What follows is based on my own experience.

I want to talk about the most common form of beginning meditation, Tranquility Meditation, which in

Sanskrit is called Shamata Meditation. I am told that this is what the Buddha taught. And I'll start out with a bit of that unorthodoxy I warned you about and simply say that, aside from one caveat, I see no need in learning Tranquility Meditation as taught in the traditional Buddhist way, which is that of an iterative practice. I know this may sound heretical, but please hear me out.

The classic texts say that the purpose of learning Tranquility Meditation is to train us to concentrate and focus with awareness, but ultimately to stabilize our mind and calm ourselves down so that we can rest peacefully in the nature of the mind, and in particular, through such stable resting, to help enable Insight Meditation (Vipassana) to be invoked and actually arise.

Insight Meditation, along with Tranquility Meditation, are the two types of meditation that make up the very important Mahamudra Meditation. Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation are what is called connate, meaning they are two sides of the same coin and require (or are effectively the reciprocal of) one another. We need them both and they work together, in tandem.

The way I describe how these two types of meditation work together is this: imagine we are trying to thread a very fine needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation can remove the shaking in the hands so that Insight Meditation can then thread the needle. That's

the best analogy I can come up with. We can see how they both are required.

And my main point here is that unless you have no outside interests or hobbies that you are passionate about (the caveat I mentioned, having none), I see no reason to practice Tranquility Meditation, at least as it is traditionally taught here in the West, with its iterative focus on the breath, or an object like a stone or piece of wood.

And the reason I suggest this is that the traditional form of practicing Tranquility Meditation, as described above (iterative), is (IMO) remarkably nonintuitive, as are the rote repetitions that go along with it. And perhaps most of all, the process of trying to focus on a random object (that we have no real interest in) and not be distracted is just not intuitive, not something most Americans are familiar with or have been introduced to.

As mentioned above, the point of Tranquility Meditation is to achieve a calm stability of mind and awareness so that Insight Meditation (Vipassana) can arise or be invoked. Once that happens, these two forms of meditation (Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation) work hand in hand to support Mahamudra Meditation, the main form of nondual meditation of the Karma Kagyu Lineage.

With that understood, the question I ask is, if we are not

going (or can't seem) to learn Tranquility Meditation as traditionally taught, what is the substitute? What are we to do?

In my own case, I spent 32 years practicing Tranquility Meditation and not getting much of anywhere. The reason for this, as I see it, is that I was not interested in the process of focusing on a stone (or whatever). I found the technique of iterative focusing boring and the process never reached the point of catching fire for me. I practiced it diligently, but never felt any accomplishment was attained. Perhaps that's just me, yet I doubt it.

The kind of focus that traditional Tranquility Meditation instructions entail was for me pretty much devoid of interest, although my interest in dharma and many of its facets was strong and I had many hobbies and interests that I was quite passionate about and could not seem to get enough of, but not that of trying to iteratively focus on a stone, etc.

With me the true interest and focus that comes with a passion or hobby, what that kind of intense interest and awareness produces, is much more natural than it is to be told to repeatedly attempt to focus on a stone or even on our breathing. I had better fish to fry, so to speak.

If we already have some hobby or interest (dharma or otherwise) in which we love and have worked with for



some time, and we have given ourselves to it, chances are that we have already developed all that we need to approximate the focus and concentration that the traditional Tranquility Meditation instructions require. With that in mind, what we then need to do is to invoke and eventually master Vipassana, Insight Meditation. How is that done?

Let me recap my points here, and I will now perhaps step on a few toes of other dharma practitioners. In general, the purpose of Tranquility Meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit) is to achieve focused mental concentration, usually taught by learning to focus on the breath, or any object like a pebble or a piece of wood, until we can rest our attention without effort or distraction on the object. The required result is a certain stability of mind with little to no distractions.

And I ask, what about being able to focus our attention on something in our life that we are already naturally in love with and passionate about, like perhaps a hobby we are keenly interested in? Does that count and bring us mental concentration and stability of mind? Yes, it does, and (of key importance) we are interested and even passionate about the process. At least I was.

And so, if we can focus through something we are already very much interested in (a hobby or whatever), there is no reason to struggle to learn Tranquility Meditation in the traditional manner, when the point of

Tranquility Meditation itself is to lay the groundwork (and maintain it) so that we can develop Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

As mentioned, the traditional approach, practicing focusing on a small object without distraction, seemed to me very artificial compared to learning focus and non-distraction using an intense natural interest like a hobby. And I had many.

IMO, Insight Meditation is much more difficult than Tranquility Meditation, because with Insight Meditation we have to go from intensely 'looking at' an object (dualistically as with Tranquility Meditation) to instead looking at the 'Looking At' itself (non-dualistically). Dualistically with Tranquility Meditations, it means that I (the subject) look at an object (the object), while non-dualistically using Insight Meditation it would mean that instead of looking at an object, I'm looking at my own 'looking-at' itself, including both the subject and object, i.e. full immersion with no exceptions. We are not used to this.

Of course, if nothing interests you in life, and you have no natural hobbies, then you may have little choice other than the traditional way to learn Tranquility Meditation, by repeatedly focusing on an object. But what about those of us who do have hobbies, who are fascinated and study as best we can something that completely interests us. Can we pull something similar

to Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) out of our hobbies or personal interests? In my experience, we can.

The whole point of learning Tranquility Meditation is often traditionally described as to 'rest the mind'. Actually, we don't rest the mind, so to speak. There is nothing we can do to rest the mind because the mind is already and always at rest. What is not at rest is us, our mind. We are tense, so we first have to learn to let ourselves rest in the natural rest of the mind. Not so easy.

Practicing or learning to ourselves rest in the mind by focusing on this or that object is, I believe, not so natural. What is natural is the rest we already have when focusing on whatever just naturally interests us. In that case, we are already right there, with full interest, already at rest, so to speak. We can do that.

And so, the bottom line here is not to worry about resting in the mind because we can already do that through the love of our hobby. What we might do is take a closer look at our hobby and the process we already have developed when we follow our natural interest just as we always have done up to now.

Instead of looking at the object of our interest, which we already know how to do, just look at (or begin to look at) the actual process of looking itself. In other words, learn to look at 'Looking At'. Rest in that, because we

already know how to be totally at rest in our hobby, and our interest in it is quite natural for us by now.

And so, rest in the whole process of enjoying our hobby, rather than focus on the end product of our hobby. If we love to cook, instead of looking at what we have cooked, try looking directly at the process (which we love) of cooking. Rest in that. And I will cite an example from my own life:

I learned this from my hobby as a close-up photographer of nature. There I was, one day (actually it took some months of this), peering through very fine camera lenses at plants and small critters, photographing them, when instead of looking at (or thinking about) the photo that would result from what I was seeing through the lens, I (perhaps accidentally at first) began to focus on (and rested in) the process of looking through the lens itself rather than the resulting photo I had always looked at or for. I was, to play with words, suddenly looking at the "Looking At" itself. And thus, this poem:

LOOKING AT 'LOOKING AT'

I'm looking at "looking at."

I'm not looking at what "looking at" is looking at.

No, I'm just looking at "looking at."

That is: I'm Trying to.

You see:

When I'm looking at "looking at,"

It's not just "looking at" I'm looking at,

Because:

What I'm looking at is also doing the looking at.

So:

Am I "looking at" or the looking at?

And when this happens, what is triggered here is like a hall of mirrors (the 'looking at' looking at), a collapse of the duality of subject and object into one another. We are looking at our own looking at, which is dualistically impossible. And so, our dualistic perspective is shattered (short-circuited) and we tumble down the rabbit hole of the mind into what is called nondualism, and this perhaps for the first time.

In my case, I happened to do this while out at dawn, crawling through the wet grass on my belly, taking close up photographs of small critters and plants, micro worlds. Somehow, while doing that, I let go enough so that I fell into looking at my own 'looking at,' the whole process itself, rather than being aware of subject and object. I was suddenly immersed in the process itself.

And with that, a kind of visual alliteration took place and my traditional historical dualistic view (of subject looking

at an object) collapsed, leaving me instantaneously suspended in nonduality. And I fell in love with that nonduality and the absence of me in.

At that time, and independent of that moment, my history of very detailed focusing as a computer programmer and archivist of minutiae kind of snapped into place such that my view became very stable and kind of stood still in that moment, still and steady enough at least that I slipped through the cracks of my dualistic habits and found myself free-floating, much like the classic line by Sir Edwin Arnold, and in that moment "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea."



## AWARENESS: THE ROOT OF COMPASSION

July 29, 2022

In my years of counseling, relationships (and especially romantic match-ups) were a high priority with almost everyone. Remember, marriage is the most common form of yoga or union. The word yoga simply means "to yoke", "to join together", "to unite", or "to attach." When we bring another person close to us in life, like a mirror before our face, we mostly see ourselves in them, the good, the bad, and the ugly. By "see ourselves" is meant that in them we mirror our persona just perfectly. It is when we react to what we see rather than admit and carefully respond, that's when all of the difficulties begin.

There is a big distinction between reacting and responding. We work on developing our basic

awareness so that we can learn to catch ourselves before we react negatively to something that confronts us and create still more karma. We learn instead (perhaps slowly at first) to respond compassionately and skillfully to whatever it is that we see rather than just knee-jerk react to it.

Yes, this takes time and some initial training, but the training is not in suppressing our reactions, but in developing sufficient awareness that we can understand where things are coming from (how things are) and respond naturally and kindly. The more aware we become, the more we can see the bigger picture and understand the larger context involved, the better the chance we have for compassion to spontaneously occur to us. Increased awareness is the direct cause of compassion, every time. Compassion just naturally arises from increasing our awareness. There is no other way that it can arise. That's what the Buddha did.

Most of us are riding the pendulum of our own mood swings, much like the big boat-ride at the carnival that swings back and forth. The time that boat spends balanced in the middle is very small indeed, almost instantaneous. Our emotions are like that, and they swing back and forth, up and down. This is what is called by the Buddhists the cycle of samsara. Actually, they call it a vicious cycle or circle, because it comes around again and again. And there is no possible end to it other than to wake up and become aware of how it works, and then



skillfully deconstruct it ourselves. That's why no one else can do it for us. Each of us is a do-it-yourself project.

Why on Earth do you imagine that I go on and on about awareness training in these posts? I could discuss all kinds of other things in these blogs, but I realized some time ago that almost everyone, including me, is not just happy all the time. Life is not all roses. We suffer and at our own hands at that and most of us seem powerless to do anything about it. I also have learned that increasing my awareness is the only way to be able to see what is going on around me well enough to take a different attitude, to respond in such a way as to deconstruct and unpack my own karmic accumulation.

I know of no other way, and neither do the Buddhists or the Buddha himself. In fact, the Sanskrit word Buddha simply means "to awaken," which he did. Wake up. Since the Buddha was an ordinary person just like we are, the only difference between us is that he increased his awareness until he literally woke up to all the problems. His method of doing that is now called the 'dharma,' which is nothing more than the path he walked and the awareness training he learned. It is still there and it still works.

I am not a religious person and because I mention the Buddha and the dharma, I know to some of you this must feel this sounds all-kinds of religious, but trust me in this, the dharma is non-denominational. It is nothing

other than a method to become more aware in life. This is what I write about here and try to point out to anyone who can listen. Years from now employers won't care as much about what college diplomas you have as what level of mind training experience you have attained and can demonstrate.

As my first dharma teacher used to say to me, "We are all initiates in life, but the question is, to what degree?" The same goes for awareness. We are all aware, but perhaps not aware enough to be able to catch our own reactions before they get beyond our control. With some awareness training, we can learn to respond appropriately and with compassion rather than just blindly react.

Awareness is the root of compassion, and compassion is the key to life in this samsaric world.



## ATTACHMENT TO DHARMA IS JUST THAT

July 30, 2022

Let's take a break and I'll tell a bit of a fun story that came out of having a stroke, not my recent stroke this week, but the big stroke I had a while ago. It scared the bejesus out of me. It will take a little while to tell about it, so you may not have time. You, my dharma friends, let me know what are your thoughts about this concept. And, I must add, of course we are inspired by dharma and dharma stories. I'm not pointing at that. I am pointing at becoming attached to dharma like we cling to any other kind of attachment.

What does it mean that in the aftermath of my major

stroke, when the smoke cleared and the changes stopped changing, I found that my Self had been cleaned out like a chimney, emptied out as a room is emptied. I had experienced something like this shattering (or voiding) of the Self before in my life through various untoward life events, including a few TIAs (small strokes), so I knew what it was to have the Self destabilize and go void on me. I had weathered that, sort of.

Yet, what was total news to me at that time (and most worrying) was that the part of my Self that had done dharma practice for 50 or more years had also been cleaned out too. That cupboard was also bare or seemed so. And that realization was more terrifying than the stroke. LOL.

My investments and attachments (stickiness) to this or that in my Self had been voided by the stroke. Because of that, I could not take refuge in my old habits and entertainments. That stage was just empty, bare. I couldn't find my old haunts. Yet, I had no idea (and was not ready) to find out how irrevocably and totally attached I was to the dharma. In other words, my personal investment in dharma was huge and I had never realized it until it too was shattered and gone. LOL. What a lesson! Dharma can be sticky and 'attach' to us too, or rather we to it. Everything is good about dharma except our attachment to it. Like any other attachment, attachment to dharma is a blockage and

not liberation.

To repeat, I didn't care that much about my attachment to all the things that my Self was fixated on or attached to. Seeing them vacated was nothing but basically good news for me, because even I could recognize how much BS or unessential most of it was.

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

The proof is always in the pudding, as they say, and as it turned out, the truth of it was. I was horrified to find out that the state of my dharma-attachment, that part of my Self, had also been wiped clean and was gone. I just couldn't believe it.

How upsetting that fact was for me is hard to convey; there I was, sitting down on my cushion for my daily dharma practice and nothing happened. It was as if the wheels of my dharma practice were no longer greased with familiarity and in touch with my long history of practice. It was like all that was suddenly gone. I had to go to the back of the line and start over. And that's a lot of years in time. LOL. What a shock. I just sat and cried. I didn't mind losing what was not essential, like my bad

habits and most history, yet touching my dharma attachments was beyond the pale.

I never even imagined that when it came to dharma practice, that I would not somehow be grandfathered in, being given credit for all my practice. But I was not. It was the dharma's way of telling me that no matter what I 'think', there is nothing special about my attachment to the dharma. Attachment is attachment. If anything, perhaps I had more bogus attachment to dharma (and my practice of it) than any other attachment in my life. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it?" Certainly not me. I was aghast. In shock.

It's like I was stripped of all rank from 50 years of sincere practice and told I could start over. All of that built-up attachment to the dharma was just gone. That's about as bad as it got and eventually that was only for a time, although for quite some time.

In the "good news" department, I found I had actually accrued at least some benefit from all those years of dharma practice and perhaps even a tiny bit of realization. And these qualities stood me in good stead. How do I tell? Because they are still there!

I already had them, and that part of my practice was untouched, because realization of dharma is never anything new or added on, something we finally 'get'. No, realization is the uncovering of something we have

always had, and our discovery of that fact.

And, as truth would have it, being humbled by my obvious attachment to dharma was ultimately a tonic for me, although at first a bitter tonic. After all, it was spring! It cleaned out my dharma house, so to speak, ready or not, and I came out better for my self-humiliation than I was before, stripped of a lot of excess attachment and perhaps even better streamlined for what is meaningful dharma practice.

Yet, it was at first a bitter realization to find that attachment to dharma was still just another attachment and had to go. It had to go because it went, just like that! It was permitted. We know that attachment to bad habits have no place, but I had to experience first-hand that attachment to good things (good attachments) were no different. There are no good attachments. Period, end of story. Even good attachments have no place. I had always thought that good attachments were harmless. I don't know about that, but I do know that they are useless when they are not existent, like: no longer there!

It's a valuable realization that when death comes and the bardo beckons, my attachment to dharma will be no more help to me than any other attachment. I have to think on that and what to do about it. A start would be to stop unreasonably attaching myself to anything, reifying, including the dharma.

One of the characteristics of “realization” is that it is irreversible and stays with us. And that is because realization is an uncovering, rather than an adding on. And although I probably have only the tiniest bit of real realization, nothing, neither stroke nor bad weather could take that away from me. So, in a nutshell, the kernel of my dharma practice was still there because it's inside us and forever there. All I had to do, which took some time, some doing, and reorientation on my part, was to rework the more formal and outward form of my practice that had been more like just rote recitation, meaningless words because apparently, I was not able to mean them. They were immediately removed in one fell swoop by the stroke.

Yes, I am told that even meaningless rote recitation still is good. That may be what you think, but you cannot prove it by me. All of the patina from droning on and on were gone, wiped out, vanished. That's all the proof I need.

And what this boiled down to was for me to stop parroting or blindly reciting prayers, dharma practices, and instead do my practices from scratch and with heart. Nothing but good could come from that and it did. Sure, I'm not as arrogant as I was about my practice after the stroke, and the dharma has seen me through the hurricane of the stroke and I have come out more or less in one piece, certainly less elaborate and less reified. The



authentic bears no elaboration.

"If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger." That's some truth! The stroke has done nothing but make me stronger, although perhaps a little more physically frail, yet that could just be old age. LOL.



## BEYOND AMAZING

July 31, 2022

[Taken from my notes of 2011.]

Recently I was reflecting on my interest in Mahamudra meditation, perhaps the pinnacle of dharma practice in the Karma Kagyu tradition, the Tibetan Buddhist lineage to which I find myself most naturally resonant. I calculate

that my wife Margaret and I have travelled over 40,000 miles just to hear teachings on this one topic alone from this one teacher. That is over one and one half times around the circumference of the earth and something like 500 teaching sessions over 31 years, just on the subject of Mahamudra meditation. I figure I must be into it.

As mentioned, almost all of those miles were undertaken to hear one lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, speak on Mahamudra. This last weekend we travelled to Columbus Ohio to hear Rinpoche give a two-day intensive on this subject. This particular weekend teaching was perhaps the most concise and profound that I have ever heard, so I want to say a little something about it here. Readers might want to know what is so fascinating about Mahamudra.

I should point out that Mahamudra by definition is indescribable. It is beyond words, beyond mental elaboration, and the embellishment of language. You should know that going in. The particular take on Mahamudra meditation that Rinpoche taught this last weekend was first presented in Tibet around 1958, just before the diaspora in Tibet, the Chinese invasion of that country that sent Tibetans fleeing their homeland. This resulted in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism all over the globe.

The particular person who first taught this special

teaching was Khenpo Gangshar Wangpo, an abbot from eastern Tibet. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was there, on the spot, and heard this teaching from Khenpo Gangshar himself just prior to his own escape from Tibet.

There is no space here to properly describe Mahamudra meditation or Khenpo Gangshar's particular take on it. It is available for those interested in a book entitled "Vivid Awareness" by the Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche from Shambala Publications. Here I will just try to communicate to you how precious and singular this particular teaching is. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche this last weekend told two personal stories that might help to bring this home to you. The first story is about how Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar.

Khenpo Gangshar appeared at Thrangu Monastery, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's monastery, and all the monks there were struck by his presence. It was clear that Khenpo Gangshar was teaching from a rarified mental space and that he was singularly dedicated to sharing his insights with everyone present, both monks and lay people. Khenpo Gangshar could see that the Chinese were about to invade Tibet and that there was no time for gradual or progressive methods to learn this particular dharma practice. Instead, he presented a direct method for gaining awareness, knowing that everyone in Tibet might need it very soon. He cut to the

chase.

I asked Khenpo Rinpoche how he gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar at the time and he told this story. One of the things Khenpo Gangshar did was to take one of his personal robes and cut it into many small pieces, offering a piece to every monk present in the monastery, over 400 of them. He went around presenting these patches of cloth to everyone without exception. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche thought to himself that it was the dharma teachings of Khenpo Gangshar that were most valuable, not the bit of cloth. And sure enough, Khenpo Gangshar gave every monk in the monastery a piece of cloth except Khenpo Karthar. He was the sole exception. This struck Rinpoche.

Then Rinpoche thought that, well, having a piece of cloth from such a high teacher might make a wonderful memento to keep. As soon as he thought that, Khenpo Gangshar gave Rinpoche a piece of the cloth. This was one reason Rinpoche gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche stated that after Khenpo Gangshar's teaching at that time, all the monks present were visibly changed, having seemingly become more compassionate and gentle. And there is more.

The great teacher Chogyam Trungpa was also present for these teaching by Khenpo Gangshar and Trungpa Rinpoche considers Khenpo Gangshar his main teacher. He personally told this story to my teacher concerning

Khenpo Gangshar:

Khenpo Gangshar had been invited by Trungpa Rinpoche to teach at his monastery Surmang Dutsi Til in Kham (eastern Tibet), which he did. At one point Khenpo Gangshar became very ill and died. As is the Tibetan custom with high lamas, Khenpo Gangshar died in meditation posture and was left sitting in that posture for several days before disposing of his body. Often high lamas show signs of warmth and continued presence for a number of days following their death and a kind of vigil is kept.

Chogyam Trungpa kept such a vigil with the body of Khenpo Gangshar for several days, separated only by a very thin cloth curtain. Every once in a while, Trungpa Rinpoche would peek behind the curtain to see if the body of Khenpo Gangshar had collapsed from the meditation posture or was still in it. As mentioned, this went on for some days.

At some point Trungpa noticed that a puff of air somehow moved the curtain, so he peeked behind to curtain to see what had happened to the corpse. At that moment the eyes of Khenpo Gangshar suddenly opened and there he was staring out at Trungpa. Khenpo Gangshar had come back to life.

Of course, this was amazing. When he had regained consciousness Khenpo Gangshar described that after

death, while in the bardo, he had been visited by two great lamas, including Jamgon Kongrul the Great, who had inspired him with a particular Mahamudra teaching and told him to return to life and share it with certain monks and others who needed to hear it at this time. And so, he did.

When Khenpo Gangshar returned, he was ablaze with fervor to share this particular concise or direct method of realization with all he encountered. And that is how he happened to travel to Thrangu Monastery where Khenpo Karthar was living at the time. Khenpo Gangshar traveled and taught this special Mahamudra-teaching widely throughout Kham in eastern Tibet just before the Chinese invasion.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche then explained that after some years, Khenpo Gangshar stopped giving this particular teaching and once again became the person he was before he first died. He did not mention the special teaching any longer. That is the story and this from my memory of this last weekend, so I hope I have not missed anything essential. Why relate this?

I share this with my Facebook dharma readers just to point out how very, very special this particular teaching was to hear. It not only was absolutely concise, but it was direct to the point of being almost incendiary. It condensed an enormous amount of dharma training or teaching into very few words, words that struck at the

heart of confusion and made clear what each of us could do or have to do to become more aware – to wake up.

I won't attempt to paraphrase the teaching itself, only to say I have never experienced a teaching like it and I believe that many present would probably agree with me. It makes me want to wake up out of whatever confusion I am tolerating and just be present. That is about all I can say for now.





## WE CAN'T GET WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE

August 1, 2022

Recently, while talking with a friend who mentioned that in my major stroke, as it related to dharma and my practice of it that, and I quote her words:

"The shock and trauma that came along with the stroke has something to do with losing everything for a time

period and it gave you the profound insight to attachments as you regained self?"

The way my friend phrased the above made it clear to me something I did not make clear enough and that needs clarity. When the stroke cleaned my dharma house of all my many, many attachments to dharma, those attachments did not then slowly return. They were void to me and lost forever. Still are.

They never returned and were gone because they were the result of my own reification (exaggeration) and were just more attachments I burdened myself with, in this case my particular attachments and clinging to the dharma I loved, which by definition of the term 'attachment' were just my own clinging and desires personified. These attachments, personal or dharma-related, were what were stripped from me and lost. They were my comfort blanket.

And, as I pointed out in response, nothing of any merit or value was lost when the stroke struck because I already had all that was authentic within me, just as each of us do now, yet I was just not aware of it. It is sometimes called Buddha Nature or, as I prefer, the 'true nature of the mind.' None of that was even remotely touched by the stroke, including any small realization I might have had. That is and remains inviolable for each of us. It is important to know this.

To state it clearly, what we are all looking for spiritually cannot be found outside or beyond ourselves, like somewhere out in the world, because we already have it here with us now. It's already fully present right now inside us. It's our very nature. We can't get what we already have, even if we don't know we already have it. We can only gradually or suddenly become aware of it. And it is certain we can't lose it.

So, when the hurricane of something like a stroke (or whatever untoward event) took out everything that was not true or natural to my dharma practice, let's use the word 'authentic'. When the stroke removed what was not authentic in my dharma life (and dharma practice), all that remained was the authentic nature of the mind as present, whether or not I realized it. It was fully always there.

This is why I say that nothing of any merit or truth was lost or removed from that stroke event, nothing authentic was taken away. I was just stripped of my accumulated attachments to the dharma. And my weeping and gnashing of teeth over this was just me missing my misplaced desires and mistaken attachments that had comforted or entertained me all these years, the same attachments that will not go beyond the grave.

And there are corollaries to this, like tributaries to a river, that come about as close as I know to telling me (or any of us) to be fearless and know that that nothing true or

authentic can ever be lost, but only found or discovered. Or as an early teacher of mine, a Christian Unity ministers, who used to say to me.

“Michael, the Word of God has to do one of two things. It either has to die or it must grow and spread. Well, it cannot die, so it must grow and spread.”

It is the same with the Dharma. The winds of time and change will come for each of us, and they will blow and blow until everything is removed from our attachments and desires but what is of the authentic nature of the mind. And that authenticity can never be lost. What a relief this insight is.

Our problem is that we are unaware of what has been called our true Buddha Nature, the actual true nature of the mind, that has always been our essence. However, as mentioned, we will never find it in the outside world, no matter how far or long we search. We already have it and just don't know this. That's why the dharma is all about awareness, becoming aware of what is authentic and true.





## EVERYTHING BUT THE TRUTH

August 3, 2022

It's so hard to grasp what can be just a passing notion, an idea that lights us up for an instant and then recedes into the shadows of the mind. One of my favorite quotes from the poet Yeats is:

"The grass cannot but keep the form, where the mountain hare has lain."

When this happens, I try my best to find words to share here when I have been swept up in a gust of thought that circles swirling through my mind, an open window

on the mind that closes soon enough, leaving only words which are never enough.

I can't get the image out of my mind of my recent tooth extraction. It was a lower canine tooth, which is a tooth that runs deep into the jaw. I was worried that it would be very hard to pull.

As it turned out, the dentist kind of cleared the way a bit, first giving me three kinds of anesthetic and then gently and gradually rocking the tooth back and forth and around, after which he proceeded to pull out the tooth. And, as mentioned, how he did it was by first loosening it until he then just pulled it out. Painless, and not even much pressure.

Well, the point here is that my various medical problems seem to be doing something similar with my life, gradually loosening the hold on my body, rocking me this way and that, getting me ready. I don't know how else to see it. I'm gradually clearing away the cobwebs, the various attachments I have. They are just a distraction from clarity.

As for the traditional 'repulsion of Samsara' (this world we love) so often talked about in the classic dharma texts, I'm still working on that. I tend to think about it as a search for authenticity, with authenticity being the unadorned and unelaborated truth of reality, the actual nature of the mind.

I do know the occasional sense of repulsion as to my own elaboration when I catch a whiff of what is called reification, or more traditionally my 'gilding the lily', being wrapped up in unessential. Better to keep simply to the truth, which is the only thing that is aerodynamically sound enough to withstand the winds of change with any grace, especially those winds that will come in the bardos when we pass on.

Cutting away at the excess of attachment reveals in its wake only that which can't be seen with the naked eye. Time and truth are like a sculptor, carving away our overage, the visible world, leaving behind only the invisible shape of truth, the authentic dharma.

I can't see the truth with my eyes, yet I can feel it in my heart. Like the old saying, 'If you see the Buddha on the road, slay him.' In a similar way, if you can see your own hyperbole (and there is little else for most of us to see), cut away at it until there is nothing left to see. Truth has no husk or hull. Sooner or later, Impermanence will out. Samsara is all husk. Cut the husk away and Nirvana (the nature of the mind) remains.

It pains me to point out that, for the most part, life as we know it, and pretty much by definition, is all attachment, distraction, and entertainment. That's what Samsara is, everything but the truth, all that we know plus the kitchen sink. How can that be? Each of us must (sooner



or later) detach, attachment by attachment, and see clearly beyond distraction the nature of the mind itself. Samsara must be deconstructed revealing the true nature of the mind.

I ask you, what do you think samsara is? Please let me know. Otherwise, I will continue to assume, and this from personal experience, that virtually everything we are involved in is one kind of attachment or another, pure entertainment..

Samsara is like Swiss cheese, and we live in the holes in the cheese, like Uncle Scrooge in his money bin, diving and swimming in it. Not only have we never known anything else, but we have no intention of doing so. Only in those rare moments, when some shock to the system overtakes the endless reification of our attachments are we brought up short and (perhaps for a brief time at that) are awake enough to look beyond our Self and attachments at the actual nature of the mind. That is liberation.



## A MURMURATION OF BEINGS

August 4, 2022

We can't see it, but the whole mass of us must do something like murmurate. And Samsara is this visible world of obscuration we find ourselves cycling in and through.

The problem is that Samsara is so much of an obscuration, and we are so deeply embedded in it, that by definition it's our main sense of viscosity, our clinging attempt to sense and verify our own existence, to actually feel that we have 'being', when at best all that we have is a being that is in the process of becoming. Our being is still becoming, hovering on the edge of existence. It has never been. This can be troubling for us.

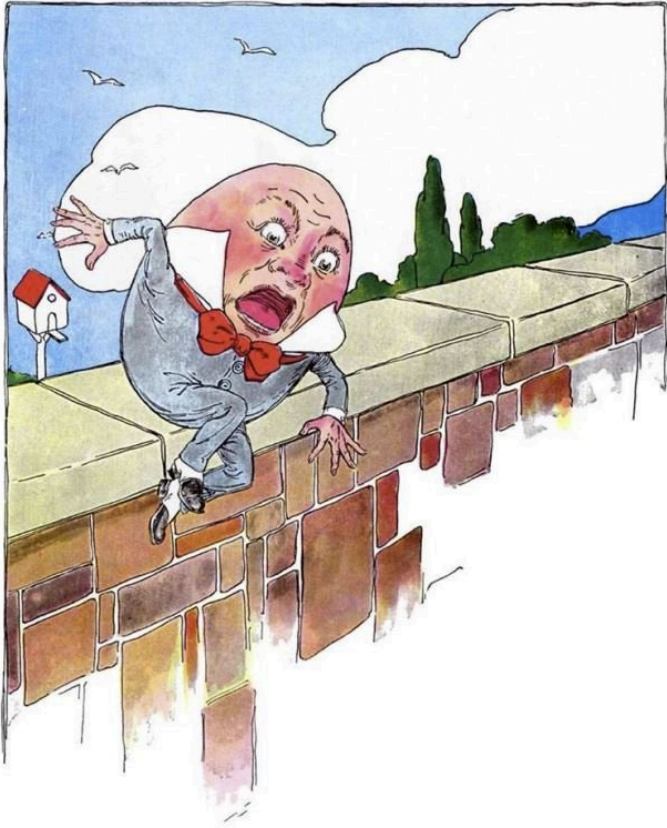
It's like walking on a high wire.

Since we are here right now, no matter how you spell it, why is this fact of having no permanent being in itself not reassuring, that we are right here now and persist at least for a time regardless of what we want to call it?

With dharma, our gradual deconstruction and conversion of Samsara, like Pick-Up-Sticks or peeling an onion, is empty of a center. What we think of as our Self is nothing but veneer, the sum total of our attachments (likes and dislikes), and beneath all that accumulated reification, as mentioned, we personally are nothing but dreams. And yet, here we are, a hollow hologram calling out in the night of time. What's new? Nothing except perhaps for the developing of an awareness of the same.

The only thing holding us fixed in Samsara is our variation from the true nature of the mind, the fact of Samsara. Were there no variation, there would be no Samsara. So, 'Mind the Difference.' And so, if we begin to remove this 'difference', we gradually execute a vanishing act, much like in the movie "The Invisible Man." When he removed all his clothing, there was nothing to be seen. And this because like an onion, when you remove all the layers of our attachment nothing remains. If this happens, 'we' might remain but we would no longer be in Samsara.





## CLARIFYING THE LOSS OF SELF

August 5, 2022

Let's take a timeout to clarify what we mean by the shattering and loss of Self. It seems that some readers of this blog are having trouble understanding what is lost when I say that with the arrival of sudden 'untoward' events in our life, our sense of Self can be shattered, vacated, voided, and otherwise not there or functional. Let's see if we can clarify this concept a bit.

First, let's remember that everything being equal, we tend to lose ourselves in entertainment of one kind or another. That's just living life, and sometimes we even are busy just for busyness sake. Perhaps the most true thing I have ever posted to these blogs is that we have NO IDEA how much a creature of Samsara we are, with attachment and being constantly entertained as we are.

If anyone reading this has lost someone they love, had a death in the family, been fired or laid off from a job, and so on, right down the line of personal shocks, then you may have been subject to the kind of shock that is being referred to here, that of finding ourselves suddenly bereft and at a loss to one degree or another.

And what is immediately lost in these shocks is the stability of what we popularly call the 'Self'. In other words, when the shock and upset of an untoward life event sets in, it can simply find us beside ourselves, destabilized, with our sense of Self shattered and in tatters. It's all about having our normal desires and our various regular attachments suddenly go void, like

having the wind knocked out of us. With these kind of sudden personal shocks, it can take some time for the Self, (like Humpty-Dumpty) to recollect and put itself back together again. With my own experience of a major stroke, I found that this can be quite a long time indeed.

It helps to remember that the Self has been with us our entire life. And as the dharma points out, our Self is mostly made up or focused on whatever we become attached to (likes and dislikes). It could be a new bicycle when we are a kid, a girlfriend or boyfriend when in our teens, and a family and kids when we are an adult. And, also about everything else under the sun: a hobby, new car, sport, not to mention endless likes, dislikes, prejudices, and on and on. In short, everything we have become attached to. In fact, our attachments are the glue that holds the Self together. They make up the Self. There's nothing else there. The Self is otherwise empty and is not an entity of consciousness.

Some folks refer to this loss of Self as a life-shattering experience, while others say they lost their self-composure, stability, confidence in their self, and the like. These events can be temporarily devastating (the vacating of the Self) and as mentioned, it can require some time before the Self can reanimate (again, like Humpty-Dumpty) and put itself back together again as normal, or a new normal. Those gaps and times of loss often are difficult for many of us, but spiritually-inclined folks can also find them of great value in seeing the

nature of our own mind and just how it works without an intervening Self dodging and weaving, and trying to control things -- a pesky obscuration.

As sentient beings, we function physically, psychologically, and spiritually. The problem as I see it (and as I understand the dharma presents it) is that after a sudden shock to our system, in the gap while our body or emotions or awareness still function, our sense of a collected self (and cohesion) can be disrupted, even shattered, and most of our normal attachments and fixations lost or vacated, at least temporarily, thus leaving us for a time naked of our attachments, entertainments, or desires. We sober up, so to speak. We can suddenly lose our desires and may just not give-a-damn for a while, at least until our Self reforms and gets back to flagging us down with its distracting business as usual. For the moment, we are floating in a time gap. Make use of it.

This is especially true in those areas where we have exaggerated our self and, so to speak, "gilded the lily," having laid down a patina based on our own erroneous version of the truth, i.e. where in our Self we have enhanced our reality more than truth could justify. I'm talking reification here. And we do this all the time. To remind us of what I am pointing at here: most of us exaggerate and flatter ourselves, etc. That's what I am talking about, embroidering the truth, what is sometimes called 'elaboration'.



In other words, we augment reality with what we would like to believe it is or that we are. The correct word, as mentioned above, is reification. We reify or attempt to make something more real than it in fact is. We puff ourselves up and put on airs. The so-called Self is filled with our endless reifications, our attachments and fixations, likes and dislikes, prejudices, and, etc. And we drag this entourage of our attachments around with us wherever we go like a dead weight. This is the nature of the Self, that it is a home-made construct based only on our attachments and not any kind of equal or separate consciousness. The Self is by nature empty.

An "attachment" as defined here refers to clinging to something beyond what it merits. We become attached to an object or a notion and that attachment (not the object) is the problem. We may not realize it, but others can clearly see where we go beyond the truth and blow-up or puff-up the value or merit of ourselves or something we like or dislike. This is usually common knowledge in that it is plain to see in others yet ignored when it comes to ourselves.

We all know what is meant by a puffed-up Self, so I leave it to readers to know what is being looked at here. It seems we like to buffer or cushion and surround ourselves with what most pleases us, even if it goes beyond reason or truth a bit. However, all of that exaggeration piles up and serves as a drag on reality for

us. It won't accompany us beyond the grave, for sure, so it might be good to get used now to what in fact is real rather than depend on a sense of false security that will eventually evaporate. I found that out from my major stroke! There was no comfort there and I had to bone up and get used to not having my baby-blanket comforts with me, because in a flash they were gone!

Whatever we have done or whatever opinions we hold in excess of their actual reality are lost when our Self (with its desires and sense of attachment) is shattered or vacated. If our desires are vacated and we no longer are magnetized or fixated, things then are no longer so attractive. I say this on the understanding that our attachments themselves (likes and dislikes) are the glue that holds the Self together. When in shock, our desires bottom out, a gap appears, and that sense of Self (and its stability) is often abandoned – or at least temporarily shattered.

It is very clear after any great shock to the system that much of the Self had been vacated at least as being desirable any longer for us. We are often even mostly nauseated or repulsed by what, apparently, we used to wallow in or indulge. We snap out of our imagined or embellished world, at least for the moment. Either way, what WAS our sense of Self is no longer accessible to us. If it is there, we don't desire it anymore or identify and feel attached to it. We no longer fit into it or it to us. We are suddenly (at least for the moment) a free agent,

which is more (than less) scary. That state of gap is out there waiting for us in a direct sense when we die. I, for one, want to get ready for it. I have seen what it can do and did not like the difference between reality and my preferred on it one iota.

The immediate impression after such a life-shock event (and for some time) is of having no sense of Self or what was remembered as ourselves before the shock event. Nothing of our historical and habitual Self, call it a cocoon or baby blanket or whatever, is available any longer. We fall out of like with life and our Self. We wake up.

In fact, our favorite fan club "Me, myself, and I" is temporarily nowhere to be found. Any buffer between us and actual reality has (at least momentarily) been removed. We are stark naked as far as our own perceived sense of support. In my own case, I suddenly felt like a sore thumb. From a spiritual point of view, this is a good thing, but the suddenness of it through a life-shock can make it VERY difficult to accept and make use of. It is stunning.

In the gap of shock, we have been thrust beyond the comfort of our habitual Self (and its entertainments) into the stark light of the reality of a greater truth. At the same time, like outgrowing a pair of shoes, we can no longer see ourselves fitting back into the Self we just were or used to be. In my case, it was no longer me and

I increasingly found it false; I could not see myself in that old Self and was even somewhat repulsed by it and the BS I had embraced. That's not me! What then am I? This was particularly true of my stroke.

In fact, I spent many days struggling between the stark reality of the stroke and the previous Self I had identified with up to then but could not quite find my way back into. I characterized that period as a form of temporary schizophrenia during which I was unclear which of these two "Selves" I identified with. After many days, that struggle was settled in favor of my new 'changed-sense-of-Self' and the old Self was then seen as just history, mostly an embarrassment. From that point onward I identified with my new situation and the previous Self faded into oblivion. Yet, as mentioned, it was a struggle.

I can remark that something similar is said to happen in the bardo shortly after death, as our previous life is gradually abandoned, and our future rebirth begins to take form. The outcome is always resolved in our identifying with our coming rebirth. Look to the change you experience to be the reality.

And I will comment (again) that I did OK with all of this until I realized that my former attachment to the dharma, my practice of it, and fifty years of habit was also abandoned just as my non-dharma Self had been shattered. The truth is no lover of attachments, be they good, bad, or indifferent. The fact that I was attached to

the dharma was no exception. The built-up patina of my attachment to the dharma was voided completely in the same moment of the stroke. Like a tornado came through, I didn't recognize the Self that remained, such as it was.

It was like I was a stranger to the dharma and at that time I had no attachment to the dharma other than on the merits of my realizations (such as they were), meaning none of the accumulated comfort of my practice remained. It was like I had to start all over again to generate any attachment for the dharma, and attachment of any kind is never good.

I found this a bit terrifying, that my previous attachments to the dharma were not somehow grandfathered into my post-stroke self, but instead were treated as any other attachment and just voided without my knowledge or consent. That to me was some tough love. I suffered over that one. When I first realized this fact, I just sat there and cried.

Fortunately, that situation was relatively short-term and I began to recapitulate my dharma-evolution fairly quickly, probably based on some good work I had done in the past (sincere intent) and instead of repeating stock prayers verbatim, I began to recreate the essence of the prayers from scratch earnestly. You know I 'got religion' through all of that.

I was (before too long) soon comfortable again with my practice even though it was based on the requirement that I did everything from the beginning, from the heart. That means, instead of reading a prayer, I had to find the meaning of that prayer within myself (as if for the first time) and go from there. I was VERY grateful to find that earnest, heartfelt prayers coming from my heart not only put me back into the dharma but was a better kind of practice than I had before. I am learning as I go.

What you can take away from all this is up to you, but there is information in this account that should help to make at least a few things clear.



## THE PATH OF DHARMA

August 6, 2022

I am often asked where can we begin with learning dharma. Of course, if you are asking this question you have already begun. Dharma is a wide plain of techniques that embraces everyone and anyone. It's where we all start and, over time, that vast plain gradually narrows until each of us finds exactly what dharma technique will best work for us. There are said to be 84,000 dharma teachings.

For most folks, the simplest (and perhaps most profound) practice is what is called 'The Common

Preliminaries', because they are common to us all, also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma." The Four Thoughts" are just that, four thoughts to reflect that strike home at the heart. These four thoughts is where I began with dharma and I did so because I was already thinking most of these four thoughts myself. So, dharma was not so much something new, but confirmed my own deepest knowledge and questions.

These four thoughts are what first got my attention and where I started. Here are the Four Thoughts (in just the wording as I first read them), and in enough detail for those who are curious.

(1) PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE. "This precious human life, so favorable for the practice of dharma, is hard to obtain and easily lost. At this time, I must make this life meaningful." I didn't want my life to be wasted.

(2) IMPERMANENCE: "This world and all its inhabitants are impermanent. In particular, the life of each being is like a water bubble. It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse. As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time, I must practice now with diligence." As a confirmed naturalist, I was already very used to impermanence from studying Mother Nature.

(3) KARMA: "At death there is no freedom. Karma takes its course. As I create my own karma, I should therefor



abandon all unwholesome action. With this in mind, I must observe my mindstream each day." I was essentially a phenomenologist (monitoring my own mindstream) from an early age.

(4) SAMSARA: "Just as a feast before the execution leads me to my death, the homes, fiends, pleasures, and possessions of Samsara cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings. I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment." This fourth thought, I was not so up on because I still very much thought I could surf Samsara. Yet, as I grew older I realized I would never get my ducks all in a row.

There is more on the "Four Thoughts" here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=266&t=2669&sid=6175826bffdd4202ffd2d6cc8cb77b39>

Often second in line for dharma learners are what is called "Lojong," various mind-training practices, which include training in Tong-Len and other factors as present in:

"The Seven Points of Mind Training"

These seven points contain 59 slogans, each of which is important in their own way to keep us headed in the right direction. See for yourself at this link.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/NEW%20Seven%20Points.pdf>

An example of one of the 59 slogans might be #12:

“Drive All Blames into Oneself’

You get the idea. Each of these slogans is something to contemplate. They are brilliant and just considering them carefully is a great training in itself.

Beyond the above introductions to the dharma, there are several directions that can be taken. For those who realize that our mind is not ‘good to go’ just as we come out of the box, so to speak, but that we have to get in shape when it comes to using our mind, become more pliant, there are what are called the “Extraordinary Preliminaries” or ‘The Ngondro’, which I call ‘Dharma Boot Camp’, and they consist of five practices, usually done in a certain order and each one is very demanding.

It took me years to be able to admit that my mind was not perfect just as it was and that perhaps I needed to train it. And the difficulty of performing the five practices of Ngondro was almost too horrible to imagine my actually doing them. For example, you start out doing over 100,000 full-length prostrations on the ground while taking refuge in the dharma. That’s just a taste. For more details on the Ngondro, here is a link.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=267&sid=fda0449c04c196e4af1eec144b410845>

Yet, over time, when I weighed my actual mind training progress as I had progressed so far against tackling the Ngondro to help make the mind more pliable, I finally gave in and undertook Ngondro, which for me, took some years to complete. And I hurried through it as best I could, if only to get it behind me and out of the way. And when I finally completed the Ngondro and went to my dharma teacher for more advanced instruction, what practices I should do next, he asked me if I would like to know what he would do if he were me.

I of course said I wanted to know. And his response, to my surprise, was that I should do another complete round of Ngondro. Which I did, as did Margaret my wife.

If you have done Ngondro, you know you have done something. After Ngondro, the path each of us can take may vary, usually taking one of two general directions, undertaking one of the many detailed 'Deity Practices' or instead (or in addition) training for Mahamudra Meditation.

And after my second Ngondro (I am a slow and stubborn learner) I was ready to be introduced to the more advanced practices, which in my case happen to be 'Deity Practices'. I did a number of the deity practices, mainly 'Karma Pakshi', 'Vajrapani', 'Amitabha', and

'Chenresik', each in quite some detail. I was given the reading transmission (Lung), practice instructions, and completed all of mantra recitations (at least 100,000 repetitions for each syllable in the mantra). One part of the Ngondro offers a 100-syllable mantra, and we do 100,000 repetitions the entire mantra.

As interesting as this was, for some reason deity practice did not click for me. It was too detailed, and my work as a programmer and archivist was already more detail than most folks could take. I yearned to rest my mind. At some point I began to move toward Mahamudra Meditation training, and in my case by invoking Insight Meditation (Vipassana). I had been practicing (and trying to learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) for decades.

As it turned out, I took to Insight Meditation naturally, like a fish to water. I was beginning to wonder what kind of dharma practice was natural to me, if there was any. Insight Meditation arose naturally, spontaneously, and that is a story all by itself.

So, that's a very brief overview of some of the major dharma practices and directions one can travel to include the dharma in our lives. Feel free to ask questions.





## THE EVAPORATION OF TIME

August 7, 2022

[A snapshot of 'how does my garden grow'.]

It seems I drag the things I love through life, all my interests and hobbies, and as I'm getting older it's even more true. I feel like Charlie Brown pulling Snoopy after him. You would think that now that I am retired, I would have more time, yet it's just the opposite. Not only do I have less overall time, I also have less day-to-day time as well, because it seems I have so much to do each day. There is exercise, weight-training, naps, cooking, medicines, staying clean, bathroom, housework, house maintenance, outdoor work, garden, and on and on, not to mention writing blogs like these.

Of course, I'm getting older on top of all this. What did I used to do? Back then, I also ran a rather large company as well, co-directed a dharma center, put on 36 conferences and events, etc., none of which I still do. I can't remember having these problems when I was younger. Yet now, it seems that I can't get through everything I have to do in a day and find some quiet time for my hobbies. By the time I do, I'm tired and ready for bed.

And I'm aware that with my main interests, my 'hobbies'

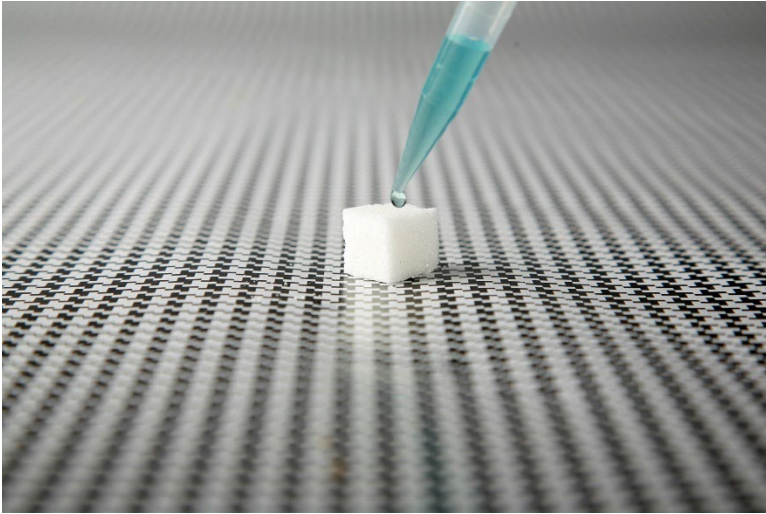
so to speak, as much as I love them, and I do (photography, music, astrology, etc.), not to mention dharma, it's about all that I can do to just stay current with them, with less time to actually do the hobbies. Of course, I want to keep up with them, have the most recent upgrades, models, and the like, yet there they sit, waiting for me to have time for them, which, as mentioned I hardly do.

It's like I want to be surrounded in my old age by not only everyone I love, but also by everything I love (hobbies, etc.) and that's important to me. I must be lonely without them. It's comical at best and sad at the worst. It reminds me of the Buddhist 'hungry-ghost realm,' like trying to drink life through a single straw.

I'm not really complaining, just explaining, and perhaps marveling at the reality of the aging process, in particular the evaporation of time.

[Photo by me.]





## WHAT PSYCHEDELICS POINTED OUT

August 8, 2022

[Here's a thought to flutter the dovecot and make some folks worry, although that is not my intention. And while I know this can be upsetting, as time passes, this concept only becomes more clear and true to me, at least IMO.]

For many, taking LSD back in the early 1960s or the years immediately following was similar in effect (and in a marked way) with what is called in dharma the 'Pointing-Out Instructions', when a lama or qualified dharma teacher points out to a well-prepared student

just how to recognize the actual nature of the mind. And in dharma training, this is quite a big deal. It is called "Recognition" and it is the recognition as to the nature of the mind and how to work it.

By that pointing out of the mind's nature, the dharma teacher introduces the student to the true nature of the mind which has totally escaped them up until that moment. And this can only happen initially for each of us once, one time. These two events, the dharma pointing-out instructions and LSD would seem to be worlds apart. Are they?

As mentioned, this dharma 'pointing-out' only has to be done once, yet it has to actually be done, meaning enough to cause in us a disconnect, one that can distract us from our usual entertainment and distractions so that we clearly recognize (once and for all) the true nature of the mind and how the mind actually works. And perhaps best of all, how we can work it!

Interestingly enough, LSD (Lysergic Acid) can do the same thing (and has) for millions of people, and in its own way acid also serves as pointing-out instructions for the masses. A typical feature of many acid trips is the realization how we have (and have always up to that moment) been unknowingly projecting our own internal fears and wishes onto the outside world and then fixating and staring at them. In effect, on acid (and through dharma) we realize that all of our lives we have

been watching in rapt fascination on the screen of the outside world a movie that we ourselves created and star in, featuring our own hopes and fears. All that time we dualistically assumed that the world was out there, and we were separate and 'in here'. How wrong we were can be pointed out.

And with this recognition (a dawning realization), having the nature of the mind (how it works) pointed out to us by LSD or through dharma, once this penetrates and is taken in by us, our lifelong rigid dualistic separation between subject and object (us in here against the world out there), once our dualistic habit and heritage is shattered, that same inherent dualism begins to atrophy and meld together. Once recognized (by dharma training or by psychedelic drugs), there is no going back and Samsara is mortally wounded, although it may (and usually does) take a long time to work itself out.

When we first realize that much of what we see (and have been seeing all our lives) in the outer world, the world around us, is very much due to our own inner projections... once we are introduced to non-duality (that these two are one, inner and outer), and that we have been in essence pinching ourselves all our lives, the damage (so to speak) is done to our lifelong habit of this deer-in-the-headlights fixation on duality, and by that we are for the first time free to react and our reaction is that we began what usually is a long journey of incrementally deconstructing our dualistic fixation.

We see that we have the choice to change this.

LSD (acid) happened on the scene mostly in the early 1960s, often in the Bay Area of California, and it quickly spread across the country. There was little to no framework or course for those who experienced this kind of reaction to LSD, as to how to proceed, and most people did the best they could to work through the process of deconstructing their rigid dualism.

In my own case, what took a night to invoke, took decades to sort out. However, once started, once I saw that I was watching my own projections, at that same moment I also realized that I could do something about it. I could change this and get over my fears. From that point onward I never (even for an instant) forgot, and immediately (and forever after) begin to deconstruct the dualism (subject and object) that I witnessed that night as self-generated. I realized in one evening that my own fears and thoughts were being projected by me on the screen of the outer world and I was frozen in rapt attention watching a movie I had single-handedly created from my own fears and desires.

Now, I'm a little shy to directly compare the consequences (for many) from acid back in the 1960s to something as sacred and lofty as an authentic dharma teacher pointing out the true nature of the mind to a student, Yet I must do this because (as remarkable as it is) I find it true.

However, as time passes and I understand the dharma in more detail, it is clear to me the similarities to the effects of LSD are the process of the pointing-out instructions in dharma. It's essentially the same thing. The result is the same. Recognition.

And thanks to LSD, millions of young folks had the key to the nature of the mind pointed out to them, not by an authentic dharma teacher, by rather by a drug and they responded to that as best they knew how. Many are still responding even today.

I have thought long and hard about this topic for many decades, almost 60 years, so I am not just remarking off the cuff. On May 6, 1964, in Berkeley California starting at about 10:30 PM my lifelong thread of me in here being terrified of the outside world out there snapped and was broken forever, and I IMMEDIATELY began putting two and two together, and started gradually recovering from my dualistic past, gradually connecting the dots and by that fell down the rabbit hole of unifying subject and object from then on. As the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it, on that night in 1964, for me the "Dewdrop slipped into the shining sea." I was free to change my life.

No, my recovery was not complete from that acid insight. I had no one to help me but myself and it was all up to me to do something about what I realized that

night, yet that single night was fuel enough to drive me toward psychological healing from that moment onward. I was born again, so to speak, from that very evening in the warm Berkeley night.

And while I have worked through the same practice via the dharma, with a much more careful and balanced approach, and with guidance from an authentic teacher, I now see that the key ingredient was already present in 1964, enough to break my umbilical cord to Samsara and plunge me into an Odyssey journey that is still going on. Of course, dharma training sorted this all out and filled in the blanks, but for me the 'Recognition' as to the nature of the mind, meaning just how the mind works, happened on May 6, 1964.

[P.S. I am NOT suggesting that any of you run out and take LSD. Acid appeared and worked in a specific time (1960s) and under specific circumstances (a younger generation emerging from the mental confinement of the 1950s). It did its thing, liberated a generation, which then passed on to other conditions. In today's world, I would suggest that training with an authentic dharma teacher is a much easier and safer way to achieve this breakthrough.]

[Photo by me.]



## PSYCHEDELIC BREADCRUMBS

August 9, 2022

[Garden: The garden is starting to provide. Something I like to do is take whatever the garden provides and throw it together and cook it down and brown it a little. Here with some olive oil are some zucchini, yellow squash, onions, and green peppers steamed and browned a bit. Just add a pile of brown rice or some protein and lunch is there.]

Those of you who are still recovering psychedelic users, clinging to shreds of what perhaps was at one time a

useful hologram, need not abandon ship and throw your LSD experience away. For one, we can't because something of equal imprint has probably never occurred to us since then.

I'm sure that by now we have glued together whatever pieces we have secured much like we would broken shards of an ancient urn. Like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle, what would be useful is to fill in the missing pieces. And there is encouragement here for psychedelic users hanging on to their past insights..

Knowing that we are already on the right track to solving what only great meditators solve should be some encouragement. The glass for us is at least half full, probably more. What remains to be done is to relax and allow the missing pieces of our puzzle to arise and fill in where they belong.

As for me, I did this by learning and practicing Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, yet I am sure many other spiritually organized curriculums could also suffice. We do, however, have to pick one road and walk it to the end, if the end is where we want to arrive.

And alas, we may not (in our current condition) be worthy of the complete empowerment. Yet, let's not forget that you already are an initiate; it's only a matter of to what degree. I know I wasn't worthy. To remedy that I had to entertain and complete disciplines that



would turn your hair gray. Yet, I was filling in the missing pieces and completing my acid trip each step of the way.

Anyway, how could I let go or abandon such insights as LSD can bring? We have treasured them all these years because they are unforgettable. I can offer one point that perhaps we can be perfectly clear about.

When we do reach 'Recognition' as to the true nature of the mind, we will know it. There is no way to miss it. However, and here is a big 'however'. Recognition as to the true nature of the mind is not the end of anything except the end of beginning. After Recognition, we are now ready, willing, and able to finally and wholeheartedly practice our individual dharma path. All the missing pieces will be there because at last we are there.

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## ORDINARY MIND: 'THA MAL GYI SHE PA'

August 10, 22

By "Ordinary Mind" (Tibetan: Tha Mal Gyi She Pa) it is not meant what we call our mundane mind, but rather the mind as it has always been for eternity, beyond elaboration or description of any kind. It's what keeps the lights on.

The key distinction between mundane mind and "Tha Mal Gyi She Pa" or "Ordinary Mind" is that our mundane mind is dualistic (Samsaric), with subject and object, while "Ordinary Mind" is non-dualistic and requires full immersion on our part with no knower and nothing known. In other words, we are all in.

And "Ordinary Mind" is not something 'out there' for us to someday somehow 'get', but rather "Ordinary Mind" is

something 'in here' which we already always have had with us. So, if you are going after the Pointing-Out Instructions for Mahamudra Meditation, don't expect anything new to be revealed from outside, but rather look for something totally familiar, often described in the dharma teachings as when we recognize the face of a dear friend in a crowd. Our Ordinary Mind has always already been right here with us. It's the heartbeat of the mind.

[Graphic by me.]



## ART BY THE REST OF US

August 13, 2022

I glimpsed a part of the future over the weekend when my son Michael introduced me to what is called Midjourney (a multiuniverse), a new Artificial Intelligence graphic-creating software (now in private Beta) that generates art on command via a string of words, a simple description. There is no doubt that this is the

future for any of us who can't quite draw or create graphics as we might like to.

My son Michael is deep into it, and I saw at a glance that this an incredible gift to all of us just shy of being a competent artist, yet with the vision to imagine art.

I instinctively knew that this is something I need and have been waiting for, so I went through the process of signing up to work with it.

All you do is put together a string of words describing a graphic scene as you imagine it and let it go to work. Sixty seconds later, you are gifted with four possible views based on your description, each of which can be used to create alternative views.

I have not had much time to work with this because I have had family here this weekend, but I did submit one description which was:

"Imagine a man turning to left, with arm up, shielding himself from with a single bright sun in the sky, on a vast desert plain."

This is an image based on what I experienced from my major stroke. And in a few seconds, I had this result. I will then work on that result to create further refinements. But for now, I will post it here to give you an idea.

Years ago I introduced my mom a skilled artist, painter in oils and acrylic, to batik. I just thought it might be interesting to her, so I brought her a complete starter kit for batik. She loved it and turned out to be an incredible batik artist, making her work available to thousands.

My son Michael, introducing me to Midjourney (from the Discord server) sparked me in a similar way. I believe I can use Midjourney to create images to go along with many of my blogs. So that is what I am now sitting down to test out.

[My first graphic from Midjourney by me.]





## AND SO, GOES SUMMER

August 15, 2022

Here we are in the middle of August, which used to be (quite often) the hottest month of the year, but it feels like the approach of autumn this year. We are already closing windows, at least at night.

My daughter Lotis and her husband Dana visited on

Friday and Saturday. We had a great time. Dana is my weight trainer, and I got a brief refresher course and got moved up to using 7-pound barbells for my training. We had a kind of Mexican feast with guacamole, and I made Pico de Gallo, plus we had short-grain brown rice and other things. Mostly we sat around and talked. Margaret and I sorted through box after box of childhood drawings from our kids. It is time they each get a box of their own artwork. Dana and I took naps on the couch next to the artwork sorting.

I continue to work with and make progress with the Midjourney AI image software. Here is a flower image I put together but not one of my photographs. I'm not saying it's better. It's different but has an appeal all its own, IMO. Anyway, I'm pushing on to learn how to use this software, bit by bit.

As for what's going inside, it is difficult to say. I'd be happy to say if I knew, yet I'm always the last to know. I'm monitoring my own inner changes but also changing as I do that. For me it's too early to find the right words. It feels like a whole lot of nothing, yet what exactly is nothing?

Lately my mind has been punctuated by the activity in which I am immersed. Action soaks up thought, IMO. So, these excursions into focused activity are at least different, if not obvious with their results. Nothing is lost and we are always moving somewhere. It can just take

time for whatever we are realizing to become clear, yet it is always something that is emerging.

If it seems to be offtrack or going off the rails, who is to say that's not somewhere we need to experience if only because we find ourselves there. After all, a linear run to the end is just that. Who's to say we can't wander off the beaten path and out into the flowers?

Or who is to say that what is found was never lost.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



MIDJOURNEY POINTS OUT THIS WORLD OF ILLUSION

August 16, 2022

As for my take on this Midjourney AI, it's a graphic tool

that is not just a window into the future, but rather a portal into the future through which we all will pass. What it does, IMO, aside from make interesting graphics, is loosen the bonds that bind us to this fixation we have on the physical body and much like in politics with 'Fake News' and actual news that muddies the water between reality and fantasy, Midjourney marks our drift toward the holographic and this 'empty, but quite real world as itself an illusion, a dream we can't seem to wake up from.

I have sampled this program enough to know something about what Midjourney is, how it may affect us, and where it could take us. And Midjourney may well plunge us toward this greater 'illusion', the one where we cling to the idea that the phenomenal universe as we know it is somehow real. It's not real, but we don't believe or see that and never have.

And so, I see Midjourney as a steppingstone, a next step in a path to finally discovering that this world we think we know is not real like we assume it is, but rather is an elaborate illusion (and ingrained habit) that like a straight-jacket, entertains and encapsulates us completely.

The function of portals like Midjourney, aside from their visual treats, is to gradually loosen our mental moorings and make it easier for us to cast off from the dock of what we now call 'reality' (as we have known it) and

learn to surf the sea of illusion as a new kind of reality.

If you notice, Midjourney does not reproduce purely realistic images, but rather images that 'sound like' or seem like the real thing. The comfort of familiarity is there and that tells me what Midjourney actually is, a blurring of what we now call reality in favor of feeling familiar and accepting illusion for what it is, an illusion called Samsara.

This is early Multiverse encapsulating us before we know it.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## A SWIM IN THE SEA OF LIFE

August 17, 2022

[A rather complex time for me, almost inexplicable, and

so my fallback is musing on this illusion we call life. And I am still exploring Midjourney AI, not to mention a lot of busy work. Bear with me if you can.]

I find myself, much like a stuck record, hiccupping back, again and again on this idea, which is a key part of dharma training, that this cyclic world we all live in, called Samsara, is (for us) a practically indecipherable illusion. We have never figured it out. And this because, apparently, from time immemorial we have been entirely lost in this illusion of duality, aside perhaps from momentary gaps or twinges into the actual nature of the mind and how it works.

This is troubling because apparently, we are worlds away from waking up to this fact, this illusion we are encapsulated in. And I can see that, try as I might, I cannot seem to convey to readers how deep we are into this. It's all we know, our everything, beyond our reflection.

And it's not as simple as that we are attached or 'like' this illusory condition we are lost in. Samsara itself is the illusion, lock, stock, and barrel. If it was decoded, deconstructed, or otherwise eliminated, so would life as we know it be eliminated.

I'm not saying life would end, but rather that life as we know it and have known it would end. We would wake up to the reality that our life is in fact a vast illusion, a



simple distraction, our taking refuge in a mistake, and mistaking that mistake for actual life.

The end result, as I understand it, would be that instead of being permanently isolated from life by our own duality, we would be fully immersed, an interdependent swim in the sea of life.

[Midjourney graphic created by me.]



## MIDJOURNEY: WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

August 18, 2022

I see that quite a few folks find the Midjourney graphics unnatural. To them these images don't feel right. As for me, I am just the opposite. I work to find in photographs the feeling in the Midjourney images, even though at this point the Midjourney graphics, now in Beta, are still rudimentary.

I'm the guy that said to himself back in the early 1970s, that I could be a computer. That would be alright with me because there is nothing in the universe that is not of the same stuff. There is nothing not real about anything that is permitted in this world of Samsara, considering that Samsara is said to be by the great meditators an illusion anyway. "Who" is it in us that separates the good from the bad, from the ugly? Who made you Pope?

Yet perhaps we want to separate what we 'think' is real or natural from what we think is not real. What's not real or natural and to whom? How can we tell and what does that telling tell about us? To me, it speaks loudly.

So, I have been at this threshold before, back when the home computer first became available to people like us. For me that was 1977 and it changed my life, and through the computer I changed the lives of many hundreds of thousands of people by being perhaps the first person to program astronomical calculations on the home computer and make these programs available to others. I certainly was the first to do this for astrologers,

to free them from their centuries-old tradition of using log tables and look-up ephemerides, again this in 1977.

Perhaps Midjourney is just a first breeze blowing in from the winds of change, an echo of the impending Multiverse. As they say, "Coming Events Cast Their Shadow." I feel that Midjourney (MJ) is a harbinger of that.

And I understand how it's easy it is to get picky about what we like. After all, I am a music and film critic by trade, founding the [AllMusic.com](http://AllMusic.com), still the largest collection of music data on the planet, and [AllMovie.com](http://AllMovie.com), one of the two largest film databases.

The existence of Midjourney does not make anything in this expanding universe of dharma foreign, except perhaps to us personally. I suggest that when we feel the foreignness or 'otherness' of something, we first look to ourselves for the reason and work that out and not look outside ourselves. IMO, there is no outside.

I had email in 1979 and helped the flood of the Internet to first form and then to overwhelm us. My gut is that things like Midjourney are similar, a bellwether of things to come and not something inherently unnatural or lacking reality. After all, this whole construct of life is one grand illusion, or so teaches the dharma.

For those who would like some support from the great

dharma teachers of the past, here is one of the main slogans from what is called "The Seven Points of Mind Training." These 59 points and slogans were composed by Chekawa Yeshe Dorje (1102-1176) and have been celebrated ever since. Here is the second point in as many different translations as I could find.

## #2 REGARD ALL DHARMAS AS DREAMS

All dharmas should be regarded as dreams.

Think that all phenomena are like dreams.

Regard all phenomenon as dreams.

Consider all dharmas to be like a dream.

Consider all phenomena as a dream.

For those who want to look over all 59 dharma slogans, here is a list.

[http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/NEW%20Seven%20Points.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3to3-8q3dB1AwV6HuK1zq-JZJmVUmqvj0QIDTL-FNPX84U0rVQyE\\_tuQw](http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/NEW%20Seven%20Points.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3to3-8q3dB1AwV6HuK1zq-JZJmVUmqvj0QIDTL-FNPX84U0rVQyE_tuQw)

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## “ME AND MY ECHO”

August 18, 2022

[First, a note on Midjourney, the AI image software: I have looked at Midjourney carefully for a number of days. And while I believe this approach is the future, this Beta is, IMO, not ready for prime time. It can do a number of things quite well, but on other hand (and most important things like the human or animal form) it is woefully not useful. For myself, I believe in seeing for myself, testing for myself, exploring either lenses or software. Midjourney has limited usefulness and should be kept on our radar against future improvements. Right now, while it can express many feelings very well, it falls short on the technical side of things. I don't have much use for it right now and will probably cancel my subscription. Below is one of my own photographs and not Midjourney.]

Some words on duality, this Samsaric world we all reside in. As for “Me and My Echo,” I know, it’s bad grammar, but shaking off duality is not so easy to do. This spit decision of subject and object that we are habituated to, instead of uniting or getting them together, is easier said than done. Between ‘me, myself, and I’ and its dualistic reflection in the world around us amounts to a doppelganger and carrying on two lives is burdensome, that is, me in here and its echo out there in the world (from my own projections) mirroring me.

Sooner or later, probably later, after death, we won't have that duality, that echo. We will be reunited into the one that we are and have always been. Who then can we blame?

If we through non-duality are a co-conspirator in creation, we are damned if we do and damned if we don't, mostly damned if we don't unite in non-duality. That's exactly what Samsara is, struggling with our own reflection in the outside world, which takes up all the oxygen in our room. That's why the great mystic saints all agree that taking the plunge into non-duality is literally the solution. Yet, how to do that?

It can be done, but of course we have to do it ourselves, and coming to the point of doing that is what we are talking about here. We have to get beyond the verge and just do it.

It helps to understand that if we do get beyond duality, subject in here and object out there, and rest in non-duality, there is no undoing non-duality. We don't fall back into duality because there is no place to fall to once we are all one.

The double universe of duality, 'me and my' reflection in the outside world, is enervating and a wasteland of distraction. Like the old saying from the Disney film 'Bambi,' I want to say "Wake up friend owl."



Deconstructing the endless distractions of duality is what dharma practice is all about, IMO. Dharma is in fact this non-distraction, the non-duality we hunger for.

And then there is the poem by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins "Carrion Comfort" and the line in it:

"That night, that year  
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my  
God!) my God."

This duality we currently live with is, at best, a useful fiction. To use that duality properly requires we work from the non-dual state of mind, so that we can always keep the big picture in mind. What remains is to learn to let go of our duality in favor of full immersion in life, which can require considerable training. This is why I have practiced dharma for many years.

[Not a Midjourney image, but my photography for a change.]



## VIVID AWARENESS

August 19, 2022

Instantaneous awareness, moment and then by moment, a realization of being present, aware, and with clarity. It's nothing special other than its a special awareness in and

of this moment. Where do we go from here? To the next moment.

[A Midjourney graphic I created of a young monk that we have not discovered yet.]



## FINDING THE FAMILIAR

August 20, 2022

[I'm trying to put a cap on my own discussion of Midjourney, the Beta for this AI graphics software, one of several similar software popping up recently.]

Everything exists, if only in our mind, unicorns and all.  
Do we want to be reminded of it; whatever 'it' is we

wonder about? Is it familiar and why is familiar, familiar? I believe we know the answer to that off the top of our heads.

It has to be because we are comfortable in what is familiar to us. It is our refuge from, well, the 'unfamiliar', the weird, and the strange. What I find interesting, even attractive, about the AI software Midjourney is their encapsulation of the sense of the familiar, familiarity.

Even though many of their images are perhaps not drawn perfectly, what they have managed is to capture quite well is the familiar in all this. And while I see that many run screaming from the idea Midjourney, an AI graphic generator, I am not of that view.

It's like mining for gold in that it takes a lot of time, yet Midjourney can produce some lovely images that, as mentioned (and at least for me), capture the familiar. Certainly, Midjourney is nothing to be afraid of. It's only a tool to make it easier to create images, perhaps not of interest to most graphic artists (except as competition), but certainly of interest to the rest of us, or at least those who use images in our work.

And the same kind of hue and cry rose up with the advent of the automobile, the television, the Internet, and on and on, the fear of the strange and unfamiliar, until it becomes familiar. I can remember such outcry myself.

When computerized astrology arose, thanks in part to my own work, not all astrologers welcomed it. Way worse was when computerized astrological reports appeared. I can remember one ACT (Astrological Conference on Techniques) that was held at an AFA convention (American Federation of Astrologers, put on by my dear friend Charles A. Jayne, Jr., and myself. Here was panel discussion rather than lectures, and it consisted of 12 or so well-known experts discussing some facet of astrology all lined up at the head of a table attended by interested astrologers. The audience could even participate with the speakers, subject to moderation. And we always had a moderator.

Anyway, one of those panel discussions was on computerized astrological personal printed reports. And we were talking away, while standing at the door (as each session had) was a monitor from the federation to see that all things went well (I guess). So while we were talking about the advances in printed astrology reports, this poor woman was crying her eyes out because she felt such reports would be the end of many astrologers like herself.

Of course, that was not true. Printed astrological reports that an astrologer could sell to their clients (for \$10 or so) when the client could not afford the price of a full sit-down reading only made astrologers wealthier. And to top it off, famous astrologers were buying this

software from us behind the scenes (on the quiet so to speak) to bolster their own sales. That's how breakthrough technologies that bring change go. Some love changes and some don't. But such major change as graphic AI are here to stay, the tip of the iceberg.

[Midjourney graphic by me, remembering the ACT panel discussions.]



## THE LOW-HANGING FRUIT

August 21, 2022

Well, I'm tired of that, tired of the low-hanging fruit in my life. I used to like it because it was easy and available, yet I have come to avoid it. Why is that?

Perhaps it is the resemblance to the knee-jerk reaction, my simply being vulnerable to opportunity and not



liking that quality in myself. It's not that I want life harder than it has to be or that I don't want to be 'moved' by anything at all, be it opportunity, greed, or whatever jerks me around. And what about interest itself? Does that just lead me on?

And then there are all the things I have set out to do and prepared to do that I don't do, preferring to just let them sit there and vegetate. 'Hurry Up and Wait' seems to be my modus operandi, what motivates me of late, that is: no motivation or activity, but preferring instead to just be still and give it all a rest. And yet I am a very active person, so what am I talking about?

Perhaps it's just my growing older and wanting to be surrounded by the things I love, the things I would like to do or used to do, but instead now I don't seem do them, but just let them sit there, staring me in the face, while I feel delinquent. I don't want to not have them, and I do love them, but I also find myself not following up on them as I once did, as I always did, other than I want them there, and I'm making sure they are current and up to date, ready to use yet perhaps not by me today, not just now. And 'now' is all I have.

I'm quite aware of this, yet not sure what to do about it. I could just get rid of all my interests, strip down the things I value yet won't actually use or do, sell them off. Are they just trophies of things past? Yet, where would that get me? It's not like I want to go sit in a cave, either.

I'm moving away from being interested in interest for interest's sake, or is that just a test, being interested in this or that part of my history, yet, as mentioned, I keep up with it and have all the latest updates. Yet there they sit, like a teddy bear, keeping me company as time rumbles on.

Or is it just pure lack of energy. I find that hard to believe, because I have been doing a lot of things of late, just not those things. Perhaps I don't like that part of me any longer, the part that feeds on interest and prefer to just wait that interest out until it dissipates or even dies out, just to see what happens. As mentioned, am I testing interest in general, doing this on purpose?

Or is this my plan, to look boredom in the eye and seek out the least frequented parts of my life and live in them, populate them. Meanwhile, I'm 'delinquentering' my hobbies, my interests, and making a point of doing nothing at all except to wait things out. How strange is that?

And/or is this finally my response to the vision that came with my major stroke, that of being a complete victim of my own constant entertainments, the 'repulsion of Samsara' that the dharma textbooks point out and that I once pooh-poohed. Am I finally tired of it, my own interests? Is it beginning to reveal itself for what it is, a refuge in Samsara first and foremost. Is that the 'sine qua non', what is essential?

In other words, is that what life wraps up to be, a hologram, an empty drum that I beat or a bell that I continually ring and, to use that old chestnut, a bell that tolls for me? Am I at least clear about that?

And last but not least, are we cheering each other on? These are what pass for thoughts these days.

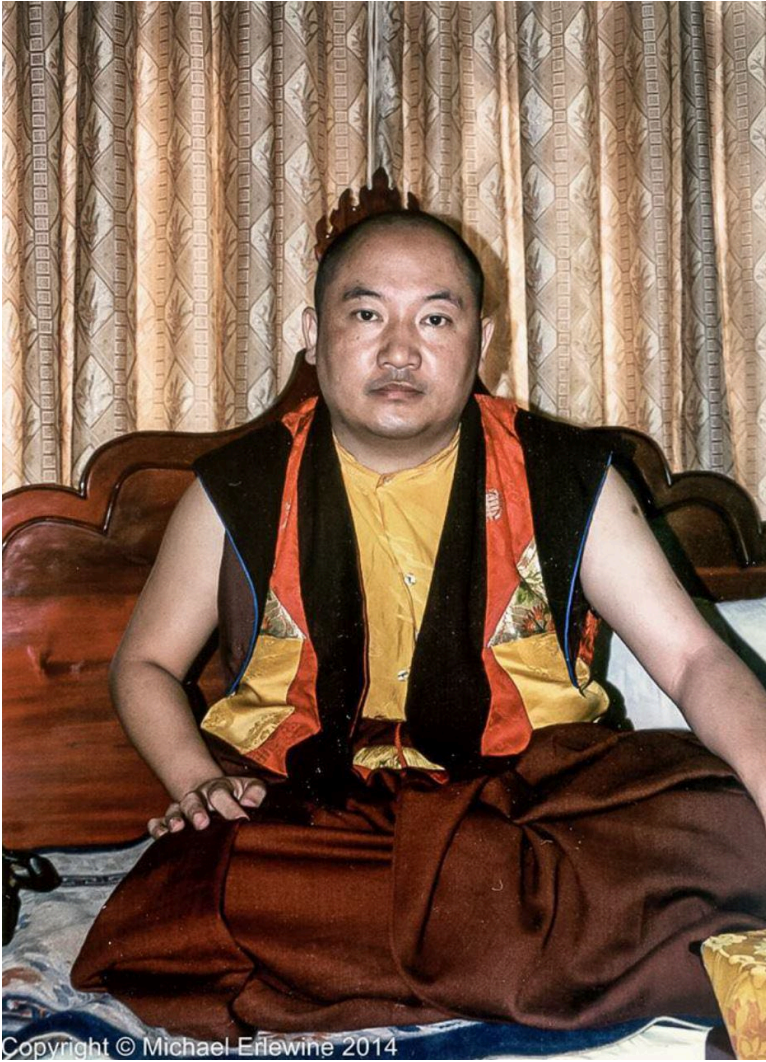
[Midjourney graphic by me.]



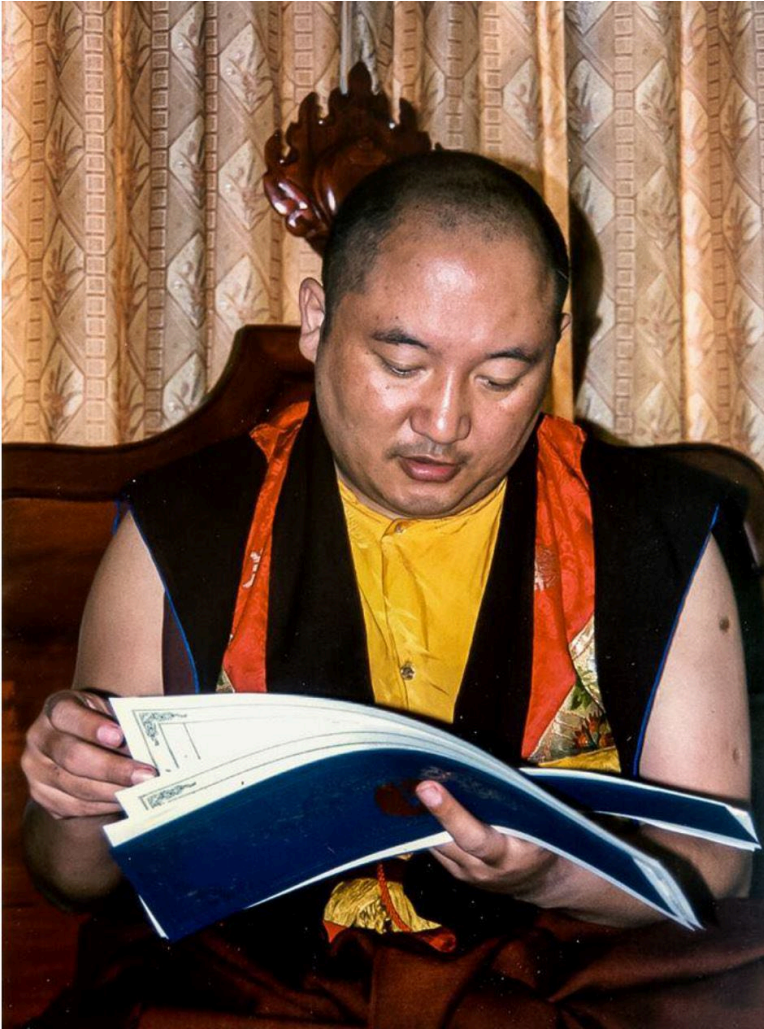
Vajrapani sadhana of "Dorje Tumpo," a wrathful form of Vajrapani, created by our dharma center. Foil-stamped cover. The thumbprint is that of thw 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinly Dorje, when we visited him in Tibet at his ancestral Tsurphu Monastery.



Statue of wrathful Vajrapani, actual a rupa, meaning a filled statue.



His Eminence Goshir Gyaltzab Rinpoche, the emanation of Vajrapanin in our lineage.



His Eminence Goshir Gyaltzab Rinpoche, examining the sadhana of Varapani that we created and brought him a copy.

## YIDAM: FINDING OUR WAY HOME

August 29, 2022

I spent quite some time recently talking with my friend and brilliant dharma translator Elizabeth Callahan, who translated the actual texts I use on an almost daily basis, if not actually, then in my mind, which is where they now are, things like "Mahamudra: The Ocean of Definitive Meaning" (Ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje), "Moonbeams of Mahamudra" (Dakpo Tashi Namgyal) and "The Profound Inner Meaning" (Rangjung Dorje, Third Karmapa) These are my mainstays.

Mostly Elizabeth Callahan and I talked about the concepts of the "Yidam," which is so important in dharma training. I quote another Tibetan translator, Sarah Harding, who says this: "To define the concept of the yidam is to approach the essence of Tibetan Buddhism. The yidam is a special deity one works with in meditation as a means toward recognizing one's own awakened nature. The word is said to be a contraction of 'YID KYI DAM TSHI', which essentially means to bind one's mind (yid) by oath to a deity [or way] that embodies enlightened mind."

Of course, I have no quarrel with that definition, unless (IMO) it mistakenly suggests that the yidam is something other than ourselves (within us) and is not out there in the world of the mind, somehow separate from us. I believe I understand what Harding says or



intends, however, as mentioned, I feel it is a misdirection to give the impression that the yidam is something external to us that we somehow get, choose, or take on. I don't find that to be a useful way to define the concept of yidam, and here is why.

Harding also says, with which I totally agree, "The context for practice with a yidam in meditation is called a 'means of accomplishment' (Sanskrit. Sadhana)." The accent here is that the yidam is 'the means of accomplishment,'" that by and through which we recognize our own awakened nature, which nature is sitting there waiting to be recognized by us, like it always has been.

Yidam is a contraction of the Tibetan phrase 'YID-KYI-DAM-TSHIG" which means 'samaya of mind', the state of being indestructibly bonded with the true nature of the mind, the glue that can do that.

Elizabeth Callahan went over several Tibetan translations of the word Yidam, and then mentioned the Sanskrit term for yidam upon which the Tibetan translations were obviously based, which is ISHTADEVATA, which translated by Callahan means something like 'Chosen Deity'. This can also be defined in my experience as WHATEVER is required in order to awaken, whatever it takes. And this (what it takes) almost by necessity varies from individual to individual, and that point is key. We each are unique.

In my own practice, I have come up with something similar, but rather based my own actual experience, which in hindsight I can't help but attempt to match up with the dharma textbook definition of 'Yidam.'

This whole idea of choosing a yidam, which is commonly presented in dharma texts, of course I tried, but in my case, that and a ticket could get me a ride on the bus. Here is my story.

I chose the deity Vajrapani as my Yidam, and a particular version of Vajrapani (Dorje Tumpo), a wrathful version of Vajrapani. In fact, I came up with this on my own and asked my dharma teacher (my Root Guru) why this empowerment and teaching was not given in our sangha.

Rinpoche's response was to offer that empowerment. In fact, he travelled to our center 'Heart Center KTC' and offered that empowerment for the first time (that I know of). He presented the empowerment of "Dorje Tumpo" from a cycle of empowerments as created by the Ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje. Of course, I was thrilled and all about it. And I did the practice, well, religiously for years. I completed all the mantras (twelve-hundred thousand). I was even asked by Rinpoche to present the sadhana (which we had translated and published) to our sangha in the main shrine room at KTD, which I did.

I also wanted to take the Vajrayapani empowerment from the heart-son in our lineage who is considered the emanation of Vajrapani, Ven. Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, and so Margaret and I travelled all the way to India, to Sikkim, and took the empowerment, just the two of us (plus my young son Michael) and our dear friend Ngodup Burhar who was taking us there. It was wonderful, of course. However, here is the kicker and why I bring this up.

Over time, as my dharma practiced deepened, I realized that although I had chosen Vajrapani as my elected Yidam, that apparently, I was in no position to choose or my choice was perhaps based on my fascination and admiration of the wrathful deities in general, plus all of the reification and ginning-up I had allowed myself in extolling the virtues of Vajrapani. Good intention, but overall a non-starter.

Of course, I meant well, yet I was not yet dharmic-wise fit enough to make such a choice. Perhaps this was an outside choice on my part for a Yidam, when I should have known that all things dharmic are an inside reality we have to become aware of and not something we choose from the outside and import into us, bring home. Anyway, it was something like that.

And of course, I shared all of this with Rinpoche and we had a couple of good laughs about this. But the upshot of all that is that I did not pass 'Go' and I did not collect

\$200, using the Monopoly game rules. Eventually, I realized this and found myself going to the back of the line and starting over with a Yidam for me. Nothing was wasted in my practice of the Vajrapani sadhana, but there is something more organic and natural about the Yidam than I could have imagined, and I had yet to find that out.

Of course, I continued to sit on my meditation cushion each day and was on the lookout for a more natural yidam to somehow appear. Well, to make a somewhat long story short, that is not how it happened at all (sitting on the cushion), and so much for whatever expectations we have, as this poem I eventually wrote indicates.

#### BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

"Looking at the mind,  
It's not what I'd expect.

Expectations can't define,  
And you can't expect to find.

That's the nature of the mind."

It's the nature of the mind that YOU cannot find any 'thing'. A Yidam did eventually come along for me, but it never came from outside, from out there in the world, from a text or book, or even my own idea (as with

Vajrapani) of what I thought would be best. As if I knew what is best about something I didn't even know what it was, like a Yidam. LOL.

Instead, much like a birth, it came during a very, very difficult time for me in life, a time when I was thrown far off course from where I imagined I should be going and found myself suddenly out-of-the-box and totally on my own. 'Painful' is the word.

Anyway, in the midst of that inner turmoil, when I found myself jettisoning and letting go of more and more of my imagined life direction, it was then, and only then, that my Yidam appeared. And it never came from out there in my imagined world or from the lexicon of standard yidams, but, as mentioned, like the process of birthing itself, it came from deep within me, something that was already and always right there for me which, in my case, was Mother Nature.

This is why I believe that a yidam comes from the deepest part of us, way beyond anything we 'think' it should be, but just as a child is born (which I have witnessed some six times or so), through the labor of all of that, we find our Yidam. Again, to repeat, our Yidam is not something outside us we import, adopt, or that we even choose, but rather something that arises that connects us to the true nature of the mind. In this sense, a Yidam chooses us and not vice-versa. A Yidam is the only way we ever will recognize the true nature of the

mind, and in that sense is unique to us. A Yidam is that very connection (and connecting) all in one. It is the way we finally connect with what is called 'Recognition,' the recognition of the true nature of the mind.

In my case, my earliest deep and meaningful training, before I ever knew the word dharma or heard the name Buddha came from my study and interaction with Mother nature, this natural world. I was in awe of it, and it was all I could think about from childhood on up. And when all kinds of stuff hit the fan for me, during that troubled time, I without-thinking leapfrogged my dharma training and quite naturally and familiarly settled on this natural world, which apparently, I knew better than anything else. I trust nature to be true, often perhaps painful to accept, but true nevertheless.

And it was there and then, on the spot, that I found my Yidam, that I actually connected to the point of Recognition. And this is why I believe that we all do some form of the 'Common Preliminaries', the 'Extraordinary Preliminaries', and the 'Special Preliminaries' of dharma training. However, beyond that, how we get from there to the point of Recognition as to the true nature of the mind is unique to us and to us alone. It is always a custom fit and not a template. The way I used to explain about the Yidam, is this:

In all of the above dharma 'Preliminaries', it is like we are all riding together in a city bus, which takes us to all of

the major stops. Even if you and I get off at the same bus stop, the path from there to the door of our own home is individual and unique. That last leg of this part of our dharma journey, from the bus stop to the sidewalk to our home, is unique to us. That is what I found to be my Yidam. Of course, your Yidam will vary, but be unique to you.

[Photos by me.]



## "MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING"

August 30, 2022

I find that I've pretty much got nothing to say these days, if only because I'm deep into investigating nothing at all, if that makes sense.

For this, it means my going into areas of non-interest,



what I used to consider as boredom, and which is typified by inactivity with no particular awareness. That's lifeless enough for me. Yet now I bring with me awareness of this nothing. Yes, we can also be aware of nothing at all!

However, in a way, busy being lost in activity, or just resting in doing nothing are similar and a relief from the threads of interest I have been following since childhood. At the very least I'm experimenting with all this.

There are so many things to do or things that could be done, particular areas where I used to spend a lot of time (my interests and hobbies) and that I now feel delinquent about because I don't 'feel' like doing them just now. At least I'm not doing them now.

Of course, I could change my mind in an instant, and it all could come flooding back, the interest, the keenness, the continuing thread of activity in this or that area. And I'm sure it will at some time. It's not like I'm not aware. I am aware of this, let's call it 'nothing' or 'nothing doing' because it is the process in fact of doing nothing. My toe is now in these waters of nothing, and I'm considering all this actively, so to speak. I'm actively doing nothing, and I am aware of it. That's the point and difference.

Part of this feels like I'm 'on strike', tired of following the trail or the scent of my various interests, not because

they are not interesting (everything potentially is), but rather because I'm considering and examining interest itself and my lifelong following of it. It's not like anything else has arisen in my life other than interest all this time, anyway.

So, why this stalling about now? I guess it's just time, teleologically, for questioning anything, even interest itself. Or better put, I'm now interested in interest itself and you can't salt the salt, so I have come to this apparent halt, where I am looking into the fact of my lifelong interests and studying them by not entertaining them for the moment.

Or is it just that time of life, my getting older, when I don't want to be driven on just by interests, but am in my own way signaling I want to get off the merry-go-round even if those interests are valid and good interests. And perhaps I may not want or be able to wring any more interest out of my universe or don't want to be subject to doing so.

If I turn away from my interests, where does that leave me, like where am I without a trail of interests to follow? Well, I seem to just be here and now, and perhaps I'm being interested in not being interested. How's that sound? Is that recursive enough, this tightening of the gyre?

And, at the same time, I have to remind myself that I am

getting all kinds of things done around here. I've been very busy, although that does not seem to matter, or interfere with my doing of nothing. In fact, as far as I can tell, 'activity' and busyness both absorb thought, suck up thinking, big time.

And so, perhaps I'm like some kind of dynamo, a 'black hole' or gravitational drain the sucks everything in on itself and then closes the door, revealing this nothing I'm talking about here. Beyond everything is nothing at all. Is that the edge of my universe that I have steadfastly ignored all my life up to now, that boredom? What exactly is boredom, aside from the place we don't like to go into? Your thoughts please?

As mentioned, the difference between then and now, past and present, is that I am now aware of doing nothing, while before I was just doing nothing, and to me that's something. Not only that, but that awareness of doing nothing is the same as the awareness of doing something.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## INTO THE BOREDOM

August 31, 2022

For some time, a few years now, I have been exploring not just taking the course of my 'interests', what I consider the path of least resistance. Instead (or in addition) I have tried to check out what to me are the most boring parts of my life, in order to see what may be hidden there. 'Why do we ignore what most bores us?', was my question. What was I missing here? After all

this time, here is what came of that.

With or without interest, whether I'm with boredom or not, it seems it does not matter. What I find that does matter is that, either way, the important point or missing ingredient is just one thing, 'awareness', something I should have known all along and probably did, yet I needed to experience this for myself. I now have.

This experiment is just another way of telling me that the dharma is all about 'awareness' and little else. With awareness we can be anywhere, so to speak, here or there, bored or interested, up or down -- anything.

Or course, I should know this from the word "Buddha," which translates as "to awaken" and "to become aware," thus the 'awakened one', the one who is aware. That's the long and the short of it, whether in the shadows of boredom or in full light.

However, it has taken me (relatively speaking) a long time to actually experience this on my own, and the resulting focus on awareness is true if I do nothing at all, with interest or not, or if I do something, interesting or not.

I come away from this experience with being more aware of 'Awareness' itself, being more aware in the here and the now. If we are aware, it's kind of like the old saying: "wherever we go, there we are." If we are not

aware of where we are, it seems that we are neither here nor there.

Boredom seems to be when we are not aware in the moment (or withhold or ignore) our awareness. Otherwise, there is no such thing as boredom. And I find this is especially true if we are denied (unable to reach) our habitual refuge in familiar desires or entertainments and, instead, have to face reality head on. Then we are stymied or what we call 'bored'.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## THE THREE TIMES: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

September 1, 2022

So much is lost in the past. It can't help but fade, and like a loose sieve, too much falls through our attempts to retain it. Memories (and the past in general) continue to morph and rearrange themselves in the mind, like a

kaleidoscope. I can't count the memory changes, count on them, or even monitor what continues to change. Trying to hold something in mind that is now my past is just wishful thinking. It changes before our eyes as we change, as the winds of change blow.

And the future is just as bad, undependable. Expectations can't define and you can't count on them anymore than we can predict the stock market.

And, as the dharma teachings so brilliantly say, even this present moment cannot be altered without serious repercussions. It's like trying to put our finger on the scale or the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. "Don't Alter the Present," is one of the main pieces of advice given to us by the great Mahasiddha Tilopa. This advice is of crucial importance.

So, if we cross off the past, present, and the future, what does that leave us? It leaves us with things just as they are being perfect. What then are we to do? That's the point, do nothing at all. Rest in the present moment just as it is. Work with the present, assist, but as the Tao says "Do Not Do a Thing."

The patina of our past is built up over time. It can be of any depth and, most important, we actually dwell in it. We live embedded in the Swiss-Cheese holes of Samsara, much like Dr. Seuss's 'Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose', who couldn't say no to critters taking up

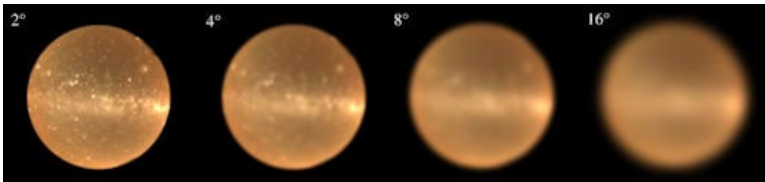


residence on him. We just can't say no to Samsara and we lack any true intention to give up our refuge in it. Samsara is the only home we have ever known. We have no knowledge of what enlightenment or whatever is beyond Samsara is.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



A nocturnal dung beetle at work. Photo credit: Chris Collingridge © 2017



Dung beetle vision blurs the Milky Way, but no one is certain how much. These are four models used in the experiments of James Foster.



Researcher Claudia Tocco observes the behavior of a dung beetle surrounded by urban lights. Photo credit Marcus Byrne.

## DUNG BEETLES NAVIGATE USING THE MILKY WAY

September 2, 2022

[This is an article not by me, but just posted on [SpaceWeather.com](https://www.spaceweather.com), which is always interesting. I could try to paraphrase it, but it is a bit complicated, so here it is in its entirety.]

When you hear the words "dung beetle" you probably think of poop. After you read this article, a different

picture may come to mind: The Milky Way.

In 2009, entomologists made an astonishing discovery. Nocturnal dung beetles (*Scarabaeus satyrus*) can navigate using the Milky Way. Although the compound eyes of beetles cannot resolve individual stars, this species can see the Milky Way as a stripe across the sky and perhaps even sense features within it such as the galactic center and lanes of stardust.

"Currently, dung beetles are the only animals we know of that use the Milky Way for reliable orientation," says James Foster of the University of Konstanz in Germany. "They are excellent little astronomers."

A quick review of dung beetles: They are nature's sanitation crew. Whenever a pile of brown material is dumped in the forest, dung beetles converge to clean up the mess. Each beetle sculpts a dung ball, which they roll away in a straight line. Far from the pile, the ball will be buried and eaten, and sometimes used as bedding for dung beetle eggs.

It sounds simple, but there's a problem. Dung beetles are combative. If two beetles leaving the pile bump into one other, they can get into a brutal wrestling match often ending with overhead judo-style 'full body throws'. Wandering around in circles (like lost humans do) boosts the odds of a fight even more. Dung beetles have therefore evolved the ability to navigate to safety

in quick straight lines.

During the day they steer by the sun. Dung beetles can see 'polarization patterns' in the daytime sky, and use these patterns to hold course. A single patch of blue sky is sufficient. The trick works at night, too. Dung beetles are the only known creatures who can see the polarization of moonlight, which is 100 million times weaker than daylight polarization. 'Studies show' that dung beetles walk straight as accurately at night as during the day, even when the Moon is a faint crescent.

But what happens when there's no sun or Moon? In the early 2000s, this question troubled two pioneers of dung beetle research, Eric Warrant and Marie Dacke of Lund University in Sweden. To find the answer, they took some beetles to the planetarium at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, and projected the Milky Way onto the domed ceiling. The beetles saw it, and navigated.

Their discovery prompted a veritable explosion in dung beetle research. James Foster is a leader in the field, publishing new results every few years.

Foster and colleagues have built a rudimentary planetarium just for dung beetles. It uses LED lights to mimic the Milky Way as beetles see it through their compound eyes. In 2017 'they found' that dung beetles were able to distinguish between north and south arms

of the Milky Way, sensing intensity contrasts as low as 13%. This threshold puts features such as the galactic center in Sagittarius and the Great Rift in Cygnus theoretically within range of beetle senses.

Next they added city lights to their experiment--and the results were not good. "Light pollution may be forcing beetles to abandon the Milky Way as their compass," worries Foster.

In 'a paper' published July 2021, Foster's team described how urban lights wipe out the Milky Way, reduce the polarization of moonlight by 60% to 70%, and "create anthropogenic celestial cues." The last item is worst of all. Spotlights and brightly lit buildings mesmerize beetles who suddenly ignore the sky and make a beeline for manmade bulbs.

"These beacons draw beetles towards the most hostile regions of their environments," says Foster. "After rolling their balls some distance, beetles need to find a patch of soft sand where they can dig in. They are unlikely to find that in the immediate vicinity of bright artificial lights, whether in cities or the countryside, since these are usually associated with concrete and tarmac."

Dung beetles aren't the only ones. Researchers believe they are only scratching the surface of this field with potentially thousands of species watching the stars. Everything from simple light bulbs to sophisticated

satellite megaconstellations may be affecting these members of our ecosystem.

"Dung beetle!" What are you thinking of now?

END OF ARTICLE







## DECONSTRUCTING SAMSARA

September 3, 2022

How does our time fill up or how do we fill up time?  
Another way to put this is in terms of entertainment.  
How do we entertain ourselves throughout each day.

I'm not so concerned with 'what' we do, be that good,  
bad, or indifferent, but rather how packed-in is our

entertainment, how busy we are. Are idle fingers the devil's workshop, as the old saying goes? Do we not want to be doing nothing? Is space that is empty of the press of time abhorrent to us?

Is the deconstruction of our habitual entertainments like playing Pick-Up-Sticks, thus ending with nothing, no entertainment at all?

I often see this whole life I am living as one big effort at entertainment, for me to remain entertained, and when the action dwindles it makes me nervous. I even like to stir up a little chaos from time to time if things get too dull. I'm not dissing our entertainments, but I am looking into them, examining them a bit.

Most of us are not minimalists when it comes to keeping busy, always packing our agenda with entertainment. We lather it up real good, so to speak. And while it's easy to talk about this in a broad manner, when it comes down to emptying out and deconstructing our own entertainments, we get clingy. After all, our many entertainments are our favorite place to hide and be.

However, when tragedy strikes our life, much of our entertainment goes null and void. It vaporizes on the spot. It just dries up and is gone. What exactly is that? And does that tell us something? It does.

And by 'entertainment' I don't mean watching movies,

reading a book, or playing games, although that is what most of us may mean by the word. It goes far deeper than that, right down to the core of our being, or lack thereof. We draw around us by our continued attachments all the things we like and then we basically live in that. There are all kinds of bodies aside from the physical.

Deconstructing entertainments essentially is a spiritual discipline, like meditating and the like. Weaning ourselves from our incessant busyness, from ever involving ourselves in more activity, if only just to keep at bay or keep out the "cold," and ignore the obvious, so that inside all of this activity, we can't have to hear the sound of silence. It seems that conventionally speaking, we don't like that, the ever-blooming blast of nature living that we call silence, and the nothingness, and its peacefulness.

We need to discuss the deconstruction of Samsara and its entertainments.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## THE DEFECTS OF SAMSARA

September 4, 2022

My first real introduction to the dharma, aside from late-night stay-ups talking about what was then an almost mythical Zen Buddhism, while smoking cigarettes and drinking really bad instant coffee and powdered creamer came when I encountered dharma as it is presented in what is called the 'Common Preliminaries,' also called

"The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma," which briefly put are, and I will post this in the format I first encountered these thoughts:

(1) PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE: "First, this precious human birth, so favorable for the practice of the dharma, is hard to obtain and easily lost. At this time, I must make this meaningful."

(2) IMPERMANENCE AND DEATH: "Second, the world and all its inhabitants are impermanent. In particular, the life of each being is like a water bubble. It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse. As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time, I must practice now with diligence."

(3) KARMA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: "Third, at death there is no freedom, and karma takes its course. As I create my own karma, I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action, and always devote my time to wholesome action. With this in mind, I must observe my mind-stream each day. "

(4) THE SHORTCOMINGS OF SAMSAARA: "Fourth, just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death, the homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings. I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment."

Those first three thoughts, this precious human life, impermanence, and karma I instinctively understood the moment I thought about them because I had (roughly) come up with the same general ideas myself, so I recognized these thoughts and bonded with the dharma. The dharma was such a relief compared to the Original Sin Catholic upbringing I grew up in, which was mostly fires & brimstone.

However, it was that fourth thought, the defects of Samsara, that I had much to learn of. Samsara, in my understanding, was this life I was living, and I very much loved my life, warts and all, and found it hard to recognize its defects, much less find it repulsive, as in the classic dharma phrase "The Repulsion of Samsara," the idea that my home, friends, pleasures, and possessions caused me continual torment. However, my respect for those first three thoughts saw me noting that fourth thought and trying not to judge it. It was put on hold in my mind.

For many years, decades, I did my best to unravel that fourth thought and make what sense out of it that I could stomach, something beyond just mouthing the words. I kept a watchful eye out for any understanding that struck home. Of course, time passed, yet for me that puzzle remained.

Looking back, I have to admit I didn't know much about Samsara. I understood from the dharma teachings that I

was in it, and had lived in it from time immemorial, but since I was so in its midst, I failed to grasp what it actually was, much less get my arms around it. I had never known anything else to compare it to. "Compared to What" is one of my favorite jazz tunes, written by Gene McDaniels, and most famously recorded by Les McCann and Eddie Harris. If you have never heard this tune, it is something to hear. Hear it out. It takes a while until the words start.

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

Anyway, this went on for many decades, my ignorance of the nature of Samsara. After all, I was busy trying to recognize the nature of the mind, not of the nature of Samsara. I had no idea that Samsara and the mind's nature were connate, two sides of the same coin and that without recognizing the nature of Samsara, I would not get very far. In fact, recognizing the nature of Samsara is simultaneous with recognizing the nature of the mind itself. Never occurred to me.

It's like we can't go anywhere else without knowing where we are now. It's that kind of thing. I had no idea that realizing Samsara invoked the transformation to what is called Nirvana, the other side of Samsara, so to speak. I was a victim of the old saying, "We too soon grow old and too late grow smart."

And most of all, I had no idea that everything I had

known up to then was pure Samsara, including all that I called dharma. Yes, the dharma teachings pointed me onward, yet I was a long, long way from even getting to the outskirts of Samsara, much less to any part of enlightenment. I believe we all are in that same boat and don't know it. That's how tight we are with Samsara, that even what we call 'Dharma' is allowed us by the permission of Samsara, so that we never even have to leave the reservation, so to speak.

Meanwhile, the accumulation of Samsaric debris continues to add up until we can't see beyond it. In fact, we never have. And so, just what can we do?

We can perhaps begin to grasp the enormity of the situation we are in, embedded as we are in Samsara up to our eyeballs. That alone is no small task. In fact, it is literally enlightening, beginning to disentangle ourselves from our samsaric habits, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, removing them one by one. And that is a long process in itself, yet one that can't be avoided to my knowledge.

It's like trying to grab the edge of one of those little stickers on a piece of fruit that we find in the groceries these days. My first dharma teacher used to explain to me that there are two kinds of peaches, the 'Cling' peach and the 'Freestone'. With the Cling peach, the flesh of the peach literally has to be torn away from the pit, while with the Freestone peach, the pit just naturally



pops out. Mostly on the market today we find Cling peaches; very few Freestones.

When it comes to Samsara, most all of us are like the Cling, not the Freestone. We have to tear ourselves away from our Samsara until we are ripe enough to just pop out. Although there are many roads to Rome, the only way I know to ripen that has worked for me is through the practice of dharma.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## THE NARROWING GYRE

September 5, 2022

Time settles things, IMO. My food choices get narrower and narrower as I age, in part because of medical necessity (the doctor won't allow it) and also I have a habit of finding my favorite foods and sticking to them. I have always been that way. It was the same with ice cream as a kid. I liked chocolate ice cream and with sometimes a scoop of vanilla on top. Of course, I like all kinds of ice cream, but that was my favorite and I always ordered it, although I don't eat any ice cream now. Well,

perhaps a tiny bit every now and then.

It was the same with beer, back when I drank some beer. I never became addicted to alcohol, yet I did have a favorite type of beer. I never liked the dark or sweet beers. Even Heineken's lager was a little off or funky for me. Given a choice, I drank pilsners, which are pale and dry, and a little bitter, beers like St. Pauli Girl and Becks. I liked the bitter pilsners because they had a bite to them. With them I knew I was drinking something. Those days are multi-decades gone.

As to food, of late it is nut-butters. I have kind of settled on Tahini, which is roasted, and ground sesame seeds, as my favorite kind of nut butter. Perhaps because Tahini is also a little bitter. For that matter, life is a little bitter.

I like the organic brand of organic Tahini by "East Wind" and I don't wolf it down, but just spread a little bit, a thin layer of Tahini, on a piece of toast (or bread), with perhaps a hint of jam, and I'm good to go.

In fact, I eat things I like to eat with little variety these years, that is of those things that I am allowed to eat. Tahini is more than just my favorite nut-butter. For me it is almost a sacred food that seems to contain exactly what my body most needs, whatever that is. I instinctively am drawn to foods that are, for me, like medicine. Tahini is one of those foods.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



Molotov, "Molly."



Michael (me) and Timmy, my first dog.

## A DOG STORY

September 6, 2022

As I get older, looking back, one thing I perhaps miss

the most is having dogs. I have had them all my life, since I was about six months old I am told. And for the longest time, many years, we had two dogs. We used to breed English Bull Terriers, not by design but rather because they would get together no matter how we tried to prevent it. We had two Bull Terriers, a Male (Manley) and a female (Mother Dog). In this story I want to tell you of my most recent dog, one that died only a few years ago. At my age, I hesitate to get another dog because I don't want my dog to become someone else's obligation. You understand. So, we are dogless these years.

Anyway, I want to tell you a little something about a good friend of mine, one of the best. To look at him, you might see just a little black dog. If you did, you would be far away from the truth, for this dog has probably seen more of the world than most of us reading this now. He has traveled the length and breadth of the country. He has hitchhiked, walked, hiked, driven in cars, and hopped freight trains going who-knows-where. He has busked cities from the east to the west coast and played music at coffee shops, bars, colleges, and (of course) most often just out on the street.

His full name is Molotov, which should tell you something right off, but most of us just call him Molly. He was born the smallest of a litter of half-breed pups, I believe in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His mother was killed by a passing car when he was still too young to even walk,

leaving him helpless. My daughter May, who was brought up raising baby animals and returning them to the wild, took compassion on these tiny puppies, and she knew just what to do. Molly and siblings were raised in the bottom of an old sleeping bag, hand fed, hand pooped, and carefully kept alive. And until his dying day, Molly loved to get inside and under anything soft and warm, the original 'underdog'. If there is a blanket or coat laying around with a tail sticking out from under it, that probably is Molly. How I came to have Molly is a short story in itself.

Today my daughter May is a professional singer/songwriter, known all over the Midwest, heard on the radio, appearing at concerts, festivals, etc., but back then she was just a struggling musician out on the road. Her hair was usually in dreadlocks, and it could be pink, blue, or both. She had all kinds of rings, chains, and what-not hanging on her person and about the only gift she might cherish would be a really cool Swiss army knife. And we did not see as much of her as we would have liked, not that has changed much now.

May was on the road all the time, traveling from city to city, busking for money, and playing anywhere people gathered and would listen. As an old hippie myself, I took this in stride, but Margaret and I worried about her just about all the time. Her protector was Molotov, who was always by her side, and she even trained him to bark fiercely to ward off whatever. And, although not a big



dog, he can sound just like a big, nasty dog, one that you would not want to tangle with.

And as mentioned, Molly and May did everything together, hitchhiking from town to town, hopping freight trains, camping out, sleeping wherever they could, and eating whatever was around. This went on for some years. We saw them both perhaps a few times a year, if we were lucky. They would roll into our home, usually with a bunch of friends, all dressed down and punked out, and funky as could be. They would stay for a few days, and then just take off for somewhere else. To them, we must have appeared to be the great 'washed'.

When May's music began to be noticed, things changed. For one she and Molly were around more. She often lived out back of our house in a tiny cottage, either by herself or with a boyfriend. They did all kinds of things, like make stringed puppets, puppet theaters, build small livable-sized tree houses, and all kinds of stuff like that. We just watched and took it all in, happy to have our daughter around us. And then people began to REALLY love her music.

As a professional music critic (founded: All-Music Guide [allmusic.com](http://allmusic.com)) and publisher of many music books, I did not know at first what to think of my own daughter playing music. Of course, I loved it. I was her dad! But I soon also knew that her great songwriting abilities had nothing to do with my being her father. She was a

natural, just that good. Who would have thought?

Around the same time, May began to be gone on gigs more and more of the time, and it became increasingly difficult for her to take Molotov with her, especially in winter because there were no dogs allowed in most places she was now playing. She was no longer busking on the streets where dogs can be tolerated. So, Molly stayed home with us more and more of the time. This was not a problem, because if there is one thing I like, it is dogs, and soon Molly and I became closer and closer friends. May really loved Molly, but she also could see that I did too, and it made it easier for her to leave him with us much of the time. And Molly and I just hung out a lot.

Molly would spend most of his time in my office sleeping on the couch there (the only couch in the house he was allowed on), and when I took a nap, Molly was right there crawling under the blanket with me, pushing me to one side. You remember that he loves to be under cloth of any kind. And so it began, a real friendship.

And some years later, Molly officially became my dog when I downloaded some legal adoption papers from the Internet, filled them out, and had May sign them. I even checked the box that said he was part Native American, which added some clout to his pedigree. We all liked that. And sign them she did. After that, Molly

did not travel any more. Many years have passed and Molly, like myself, got progressively older. You would never know it because he was as bright and sharp as ever, but he developed a distinguished white muzzle, like many of us do.

I have to tell you that Molly was all about food. He really did live to eat or at least he looked forward to his meals even more than I do. Years ago, I discovered how to tell a puppy from an adult dog. You hold a treat up between the dog and yourself and then move the treat sideways to the right or left. If the dog continues to look at you, it is still a puppy, but if it follows the food, it is officially now a dog. And Molly will eat anything, even any old grape that has fallen (which are bad for dogs), and once in a while even a piece of lettuce. That is how much he appreciated food.

I tend to get up very early in the morning, often around 2-3 AM. When I come downstairs to my office, there is Molly curled up on the office couch, but he does not acknowledge my arrival. No way. He seldom looks up when I come in. Why? Because he wants everyone to know that he is definitely sleeping now. There he is curled up, head tucked out of sight, and there are no friendly "Good Mornings!" or wagging of tails.

However, around 7 AM, however, he was up, standing at my feet, wagging his tail, and just as bright and happy as he can be. This is not so much a hello as his message to

me that it is time to feed him. He happily escorts me to the kitchen, leaping and prancing the whole way. His meals meant a lot to him.

Recently, during that time, our other dog, Kota (Husky-Retriever), who was quite old (and much bigger), passed on, leaving the whole house then to Molly. Previously Kota insisted on being the Alpha dog, often preventing the much smaller Molly from gaining access to things like... the water dish, for example, or just the freedom to roam around. Both dogs were male and un-neutered, so this was just the pecking order. After Kota passed, Molly found all kinds of new places to hang out aside from my office, although the office was his main 'den' for sure. An easy way to find him is to look for even the least patch of sunlight that enters the house. There is where you will find Molly, for he was a sun dog for sure.

Aside from food, the other thing Molly really loved is walking in the meadows and woods with or without us. He could suddenly take off and disappear on a walk, just when we are distracted for even a moment. He just loved to imagine that something is up and needed his attention, the tiniest movement or sound. He would take any excuse to dash into the underbrush and be gone for way longer than we wanted him to. But sooner or later, he reappeared, often way behind us on the trail, but running as fast as he can to catch up.

Molly was as close to me as close can get. We were best

friends, but Molly always deferred to the ladies of the house, and kept his distance ever so slightly from me, another male. At the same time he wanted to be under that covers with me when I would take a nap, right there beside me on the couch. Molly's grave is in our back yard and flowers come up each year on it.



## A CLARION CALL

September 7, 2022

The sacred dharma texts tell us there is a possible liberation through hearing in the bardo after we die, as demonstrated by the Bardo Thodol (“Tibetan Book of the Dead”), yet we are not dead yet. As for intimations of impermanence, if we don’t have enough already, I suggest certain particularly-deep definite sounds and music.

We can all hear the rumbling of distant thunder, deep

and resonant. It can shake the whole house when it gets close. We all know this. Yet, there are other sounds I feel everyone should hear at least once or twice, especially the deep bass sounds that shake us to the ground, so to speak.

For many decades, I have been exposed to and have heard the great Tibetan long-horns (Dun Chen) both here and in my trips to Tibet, which do much the same thing. Here is how they sound; see what it does to you:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntf75csds6k>

Another sound: If you have ever had an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) at the hospital, where they insert you bodily into a tube and bombard you with very loud sounds for some 20 minutes in order to create a detailed ultra-clear computer image of different parts of the body. Of course, they do their best to protect your ears by having you wearing special sound-cancelling headphones or listen to music, but I always ask for no music, because I love the sound of the machine. Here is a sample, if you have never been in an MRI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvXoHU9Cexk>

And last but not least, be sure to hear the sound of a large ocean-going vessels or lighthouses, which remind me of the deep foghorn-like sound of nature living that we call silence, a vast resonance that shakes us down by

blowing our mind loose. Here is a sample of the foghorn on some of the 'Great Lake' ships:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDTdXdI5CTU>

Don't ask me why or how this works, but these types of deep bass sounds help me to loosen the mind up.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]





## FREE-FALLING

September 8, 2022

I have trouble with the phony spiritual stuff like reification (making the spiritual more real than it is), especially with myself, when I do it. If I catch myself identifying with anything like that, I consider it already a problem. Freedom is non-attachment, non-attachment to good, bad, and indifferent. This or that's not me, never was, and never can be. It's all about free-falling.

Free-falling is just that. It's like the old quote from the great Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, which reads:

"The bad news is that you are falling through the air, and you have no parachute. The good news is there is no ground."

That's free falling'. And we are in free-fall right now, all free-falling whether we know it or not. We just don't know it. Thinking otherwise is just that, wishful thinking.

As to how we got to think the way we do, as I read the dharma, it has always been just like that. It's not that we once were aware and lost it, just became ignorant and unaware. We have never been aware, which is why the dharma is all about 'Awareness'. Other than that, I can't say, just vain attempts to grab at the wind, IMO.

We are all in 'freefall' now and always have been. It's called the present moment and sooner or later we have to allow ourselves rest in it and stop creating dams in an attempt to hold back what we think we have. We never had it.

[Midjourney graphic and then Photoshopped by me.]



## 'SEE' CHANGE

September 9, 2022

Change does not just 'happen' to us as we casually observe it from our imagined 'perch'. It's not like that. In the midst of undergoing personal change, change that directly affects us, much like the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, we ourselves change in the process. We may know that we are in change, but we can't be in two places at once, so we can't exactly see ourselves change.

Worse, when the change stops, neither can we accurately remember how we were before the change.

In other words, we are a moving target when it comes to the kind of change that affects us on the personal level. We can't see ourselves change if what we are looking at, which is we as the 'Looker' itself, is what is changing. Which side are we on? Well, the answer to that is we are on the side of right here and now and not on the side of what once was, there and then.

We can try to remember what we think we were before change struck, but by the very fact that we are 'trying', we are already well behind the 8-ball. We've lost the battle even before we won. About all we can do is roll with the change, hang onto our hats, and observe the change in progress as best we can.

The point here is: how can we be the product of the change and watch it at the same time because it is the "We" (the watcher) that is changing. We can't. We don't even remember what we were before the change, or if we do, it's only rather dimly and already going out of date. That's a losing battle.

About the only thing we can do is give up trying to watch ourselves changing, accept the impending plunge, and start swimming. That's the funny thing about any change that is all-pervasive. What we always wanted may actually appear, but 'we' are no longer there to see

it because we have already changed beyond that. It's too often the case of "A Day Late and a Dollar Short."

In other words, perhaps we now are what we once were looking for (or trying to), and that's circular, also probably recursive.

In other words, we can hardly keep track of ourselves except through a very dim sort of hindsight. Because of this, at some point we, as they say, just "Let go and let God."

Is it OK for a Buddhist to say that?

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## WEIGHT FOR IT

September 10, 2022

As summer stalls and autumn comes on, I offer a sigh, because we are headed into what for me is the 'heavy' season, the long winter and how I tend to eat more and put on unneeded weight. I can't help but think about food more when it is 14-below out, the summer light has gone, and the fierce winds blow. Yes, winter is

beautiful around Michigan in an awesome sort of way, for maybe a couple of months. Beyond that, it's more like waiting for spring, and spring itself vanishes so fast I can't believe it. When the Summer Solstice ticks by, I know we are going into a decline. And I try not to dread winter's coming, which is difficult because of my age. Winter is a physical ordeal to get through each year.

And winter is for sure coming. I can already feel it. More nights now we close the windows, turn off the fans, and dig around for a vest of a sweater. Don't get me wrong; I'm resigned to and love the beauty of winter and always make the best use of it I can. It's either that or we go down south for a spell and rent a cabin, which we have never in all these decades done. Might as well do that because we seldom see our kids these years because of Covid, which IMO is the only reason to stick around for the whole winter, and talk is cheap and doing something about it not so likely. I have never done anything about it.

Each year that I grow older I do enjoy winter more, or perhaps 'enjoyment' is not the word. Each succeeding year I got farther into fall and on into the heart of winter without feeling so claustrophobic, with all the windows and doors sealed. And so, although I am gaining on winter, it seems that I run out of steam around February or March, and "April is the cruelest month..." as the poet T.S. Eliot's poem "The Wasteland" puts it.

As mentioned, when it gets like February out, much less March or April, I could do without any more winter, so that's the idea. As I get older, I talk more about doing things than I actually do them, or so it seems. And, as mentioned, toward late winter and early spring I seem to eat too much, put on weight, and feel the results of that weight. And it's not healthy, although I do exercise, yet it's never quite enough. I believe that is now changing for me, but I always believe and hope.

On the good-news front, I have finally found some winter exercise that I believe will work and that's our new rowing-machine. I also have a wonderful elliptical machine, with a very long stride, but it never gets to the point of pushing me beyond what I can stand. With rowing, no problem. It's fierce in effect, yet gentle on the joints. And the rowing-machine gets at the core problem, which with me is my abdominal muscles, and simply getting that extra weight off.

I also have been doing weight-training (bench) three times a week for quite some time and that has been great, but at best it allows me to kind of tread water. I don't go backward, yet I also don't' break any weight barriers. I am now up to using two 7 lb. barbells for each weight exercise, which may not be much, but at 81 years, you can feel it.

And it's that new machine that's on the block, the 'rower' that's changing things around here for me. They



say the rowing-machine exercises 86% of your muscles if you do it properly. Whatever the percentage is, it gets right at the problem in my case. And it's almost fun to do. I find myself going back for more.

And the machine is actually working, because as of now it has brought me down to my lowest weight in probably 30 years or so, and most amazingly, I actually like doing it. I don't find myself doing it for long sessions. I tend to do something like 50 repetitions at a time, but I find myself doing it more than once, sometimes two or three times a day. And the proof of the pudding is that my weight has dropped dramatically.

I can actually feel (and see) my muscles strengthening and, as I mentioned, my little weight-scale tells me that I am losing weight, more than I have been able to do in decades. That's a good sign. And best of all, I find the rowing-machine is benign for me, but yet also has real teeth for strengthening my core. If I can keep this regime up, I will have rounded a corner health-wise that I have been trying to do for years and many winters.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]





## VIRTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY

September 11, 2022

I seem to have reached a turning point with my photography practice of many years. This summer I took very few actual nature pictures, although I was very aware of what I was doing, which was not doing that. I didn't feel like it.

For one, increasing age makes it difficult and 'heavier' to

carry a full kit (camera, tripod, lenses, and stuff) all that far. I seem to stay close to my car and seldom trek more than perhaps a quarter mile or so. Then there is the fact that I didn't even use the flowers in my own yard for photo subjects this summer. Now, what's that all about?

Who knows, but I chalk it up to change at a root level, in particular my changing in relation to several things, one of them being of course photography. And that's still going on. Let's see if I can at least comment on what's happening.

These last years I have been very busy going through all my various archives and placing them in universities and places here and there around the country. There is that. And also, I have been restructuring the contents of two basements, which was a mammoth task after some 40 years of accumulation, not only by myself, but accumulating the sum total of tools from several commercial buildings as we sold them. All that stuff came here. I have to sort it out.

Aside from that, roiling under all this is at least a couple other reasons. I mentioned that I am not straying far from my car on nature-trips, so there is less to photograph, yet that's not it. And then there is the fact that I have made very few nature-trips this summer. That says more. LOL.

In addition, how I feel about photo equipment has

morphed in recent years. I graduated from DSLR cameras to the new mirrorless cameras some time ago. Originally, since I have a great many lenses, I told myself I would buy no more lenses for these new mirrorless cameras, but just use the ones I already have with an adapter for the mirrorless. That made good sense. Why not use what I already have?

Well, that advice and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus. It shows how little I knew about what the future has in store for me. As it turns out, the new mirrorless cameras have greater possibilities for each lens type. And although I promised myself that I was not going to buy into a whole new group of lenses, I fell in love with the mirrorless camera lenses, especially the Nikon "S" series of lenses. They are just knockouts, or most of them are. I had no idea they would be as good as they are.

To my surprise, I found myself buying them and using them a lot, and then almost all of the time. And they are not so expensive. And there my older Nikon F-mount lenses sit on the shelf, as lovely as they in fact are, but not being used much if at all these days.

So, along with several other sea-changes in my life, now photography (a mainstay) is also changing. And with that I have decided to sell my collection of about 100 lenses collected over many years, most of them the best available for the older DSLR Nikon cameras. That's a

shocker for me because I like just having those lenses around and being able to use them. The problem is that I am not choosing to use them much at all. As life winds down, the reasons for doing things can change with it. For example, I have no reason to keep all these lenses I am not using just so someone has to deal with them when I pass on.

A lens-museum curator I am not, so I have decided to sell most of them off. I don't use them and therefore don't need them except to admire them. Of course, I will keep a few of the older lenses, which I may use, and I will keep almost all of my Large Format Camera lenses (like for View Cameras) because I will use them. And so, I am going through 100 or more lenses, one by one, checking them out, numbering them, and boxing up each lens. All these years I have kept all the original boxes which boxes would fill a large closet or two.

I have not decided whether I will just sell them as a lot to one of the big camera resellers (like B&H Photo), who say they want them all, but I can only get between 50% to 60% of their used value by doing this. Or should I sell each one on Ebay, which is a colossal pain because of all the back and forth it requires for each lens, and Ebay takes a 10% commission right off the top.

I also have tons of peripherals, camera equipment which I should also sell. That's the next project. I will be happy with my new Nikon lenses and, as mentioned, some of

the old I will also keep. And so, that's what's happening with photography and me. I find it just short of earthshaking, certainly for me a sea-change.

And behind all of this is a vague sense of shock that I would do such a thing as get rid of my lenses. What kind of photographer am I then? Who cares! In a way, all this is quite liberating.

And I going to stop nature photography? I doubt it. I am just in transitioning, culling out the old and nurturing the new. This is a process of mind and not a state..

Nature photography was a major inroad to my own dharma training, that being how I originally achieved Insight Meditation, not sitting on the meditation cushion as I had always assumed, but out in nature photographing, so there is some of my spiritual history connected with photography. If I don't feel like photographing, I don't want to stain that history, which has been very pure. Who is to say or what's to say about what we are permitted or attached to? We can liberate ourselves; in fact, we have no choice.

There is no doubt in my mind that through all this I have been discovering that this world is more illusory than I had imagined, very much my own elaboration, something than I have made up. We live surrounded by and also in the midst of our own dreams, a conceptual fantasy we have been supporting since time

immemorial.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]





## THE SOCIAL ISOLATE

September 12, 2022

A problem I have is small talk. I find it hard to reach through the social small talk I am often surrounded by in my life to anything beyond that. And there is something beyond that. I know, we don't want to have serious discussions all the time (at least you may not) and I know that much is also relayed through the everyday small talk. I know all that. I'm just not comfortable with it. I'd

rather skip it.

For example, I love to talk with my kids and friends on the phone, especially when there is news or something to say. However, when the conversation falls away from news to just chit-chat, after a while I have to excuse myself and get just off the phone. And I do.

Perhaps I just don't have much chit-chat in me. I am reminded of one of my first spiritual teachers, a 'Unity' minister from Detroit. She once said to me "Michael, if you need me, call me. If you don't need me, don't call me." I hate to say it, but I guess I am also like that, better in emergencies than not, better when I am needed rather than when I'm not.

And I'm probably not much good to go out to dinner with either, 'have drinks,' and fun the night away. I'd rather stay home and work on whatever I'm working on. If I'm at a party or social event, I prefer going off in the corner and talking with one or two people rather than hobnobbing with the group. That's just me.

Often, even with a family situation, I am trapped in the small talk and don't want to disturb folks by leaving just because I would like to. I can be conspicuous by my absence even though I'm not contributing anything but another warm body.

Of course, this is not a serious problem, and I don't have

a good solution other than to take myself away and that is literally, well, unsocial.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## THE HOURGLASS OF TIME

September 13, 2022

We can dream or imagine a bridge to hold back (hang on to) what we think we have, yet what we have secured by that is just wishful thinking because it, like sand running through our fingers in the hourglass of time, is obviously nothing lasting or permanent at all. Our sense of attachment and possession is just a wrinkle in time, a slipknot that we imagined would hold.

Yet here we are, seemingly stuck in the present moment, unable to free ourselves and dissolve, although that is the only possible (and next) thing to do. How can we be poised on the edge of infinity and not, as the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it, like a dewdrop, slip into the shining sea. What's holding us back?

It has to be our attachments, our grasping for straws, snatching at gnats, and hanging on to just about anything we can. This is why all the sages say to, as the great Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche put it: "Relax, as it is." Let go. Or, to rephrase that, "let it go on" because, despite our resistance, it already is going on. As if we could stop it!

And while I conceptually understand this, it does not mean I can do much of anything about it. We are each stuck in our own mind, IMO. Our mind is filled with all these attachments that like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we have to remove one by one, until we reveal nothing. In that sense, nothing is everything.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## A DEAR FRIEND PASSES

September 14, 2022

A friend and sangha member, Maureen McNicholas, very dear to Margaret and myself, passed away yesterday. Maureen lived and worked at our KTD Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY for many years and was much loved by all the staff and sangha at the monastery. I don't know much yet about the details of her passing. I am told it was unexpected and sudden. I heard she died in her sleep. I am told she was working in the kitchen that very day and then was just gone. IMO, Maureen was a quintessential person at the monastery.

I have searched the web and many of my hard drives to find a good photo of Maureen, but while she took lots of photos of others, she did not like her photo taken, so I only found this photo, which I took during a visit to KTD of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje in 2011. In fact, in this photo Maureen (on the right) is standing in the doorway at the bottom of the stairs that led up to where my teacher and the abbot of KTD stayed, the Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, also gone now (in 2019).

Maureen is standing with one of the only other long-time ever-present persons at KTD I can think of, Tenzin Chonyi, the former president of KTD. These two have

been around KTD virtually forever and between the two of them, they represent much of what made that institution function.

I first met Maureen in the early 1980s (I believe), when she was cooking for Rinpoche in the old retreat house. This was before the monastery was completed, and she also cooked for all of us visiting KTD as well. She was a great cook.

However, Maureen was more than a cook and also did about everything else around the place. She was a mainstay at KTD and went on to be in charge of editing and publishing many books of Khenpo Rinpoche's teachings, eventually heading up KTD Publications, which is what she currently was doing. The idea here is that Maureen was very much more than any one thing.

She knew the history of the place and the people who lived there, every little nuance and problem -- what was happening. No, she was not a lama, but it was Maureen that you sought out to get oriented as to what was going on there. And it was Maureen that cooked for the Karmapa when he visited, or cooked for almost any visiting rinpoche, teacher, or lama. She saw that the food was shopped, chopped, and cooked as only she could. She was a 'fixer' in the best sense of that term. If someone ended up caring for the feeding and caring for visiting lamas and rinpoches, it was Maureen.



Sometimes she had my wife Margaret help her in the lama kitchen. However, publicly she was always in the background, while at the same time she was also everywhere. As mentioned, I could always trust Maureen to fill me in on what was happening when I visited the monastery. She was always direct and honest, knew the ropes, and understood the idiosyncrasies of the place, but did not feed the gossip.

What I'm trying to say here is that Maureen was always at the center of what was most needed, but otherwise she stayed at the edge of things, standing in the back of the room or in doorways, and she was always on the move, walking around KTD. In a way she was ever present. She certainly was very much in demand and busy all the time.

Maureen treated me with kindness and was always friendly, and she was known and cared for by those of my kids who have stayed or worked at KTD over the years.

As mentioned, now that Khenpo Rinpoche is gone, when I think of the monastery and who was the heartbeat of KTD, it was Maureen. She was there that long and always involved at the key level. I realize this now that she is gone. I will very much miss her.

Many folks knew Maureen better than I did, and perhaps spent more time with her. I look forward to their

reminisces as they come out. I know that if Khenpo Rinpoche were still with us, he would be telling how precious Maureen was to KTD and to us all. We can't replace what there is only one of. IMO, at KTD, Maureen Nicholas was that one.

[Photo by me.]



## THE PRESENT MOMENT: A WISHING WELL

September 16. 2022

As for me, I'm at the point of don't push it. Just let it ride. That's what I tell myself when it comes time to write a blog. I used to hunt for topics of interest. Now, I don't do that. I am open to topics, but it's best to let them just arise, if they do. And if they don't, so what. I'll have to do without.

This is a learning curve for me and I'm learning. I'm making headway into going beyond just being fed by interest that I culture, although that has been my history to date. The idea is that rather than prime the pump and encourage anything, is it better to relax and wait for something to come up naturally and work with that? In other words, this is a bit of a refinement on my historical tendency to deep dive for interest.

Instead of grasping at the future or fishing in the past, what about working only with AND IN the present moment? That's where we are anyway. It takes effort to try to reach into the future and effort to look into the past, both of which are not present. Instead, what about waiting in the present moment for things to come up and then work with them? Much less effort, and by that fact (the less effort), makes for a clearer view.

I'm looking for balance here, as mentioned, a balance between the future and the past, which is, of course, the well of this present moment. And so, I am trying, as they say, to 'Curb My Enthusiasm' for the future and become more content to be right here and now, in this present moment.

It could be the other way around, that I prefer fishing in the past for ideas, but that's apparently not in my genes. I am always forward looking, perhaps leaning too far into the wind.

Anyway, I'm just experimenting, using whatever degree of freedom I have, wriggling around in all this, so to speak. What if, by not straining into the future and not trying to dig in the past, that 'effortlessness' on my part is crucial, resting in the present, and by that seeing through both the future and the past.

Becoming still.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## EVEN IF WE GET THERE, WE ARE STILL HERE

September 17, 2022

Working with the flow of the present moment means to not be too forward looking, like raising our eyes to search the future. That's not going to do it. All that we need is here right now. That's the idea. No effort is required. In fact, effort is obscuring.

Just relax and let the present impress with its presence. Allow ourselves to feel that. It's something that we can all work with, in the here right now. It's at hand and fully present.

Also, there is no guarantee of anything. That's the way it is. Work with the present, with what's present, even if right now that is nothing at all. Also work with nothing at all if that's the case. Just as something can be nothing, nothing can also be something.

We edge beyond where we are into somewhere where we are not and have never been. Our world turns. Even there, we are still here. That's the message.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

September 19, 2022

Oh yes! Devoutly to be wished, thinking outside of the box. It's not like I can just at will do it. For me, thinking outside the box, really changing things, is the product of an enthusiasm for change that comes over me from time to time, usually not often or often enough.

When that happens, suddenly I can see things



differently, such as the way to rearrange things so that the flow of life is more organic or natural. It amazes me every time it happens, yet thank goodness it still happens, as I mentioned, from time to time.

It's like one of those old Chinese puzzle boxes I had as a kid. Suddenly, all the pieces slide and move just right, and the box opens. As mentioned, I don't know a recipe to make this happen. It just happens. Then time stretches open, and I walk through. A New Day.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## LIVING DHARMA

September 21, 2022

What's dharma? That's a viable question. Is what we are doing dharmic and how can we tell? How does dharma come alive for each of us as more than mere words?

As I understand, it all comes down to 'Awareness'; are we aware? Or to be more accurate, are we aware of our own awareness, i.e., that we are aware? If so, how much

of the time? Is it every now and again or are we aware from moment to moment?

And so, dharma is about our awareness of our awareness. We are generally aware because we manage to live through the day being aware enough to function. However, dharma is about the awareness of our natural awareness and that all of the time. That is key.

Here we are, each sitting here, being aware enough to read this. If we are also aware that we are aware, that's dharmic, IMO. Dharma is not just the saying of mantras, counting beads, and the reciting of liturgy, etc. We do those things to contact or be in touch, that is, to be 'aware' of the natural awareness we have; that recursion is what is dharmic or spiritual.

Dharma can't be constantly reminding ourselves that we are dharmic or that we 'doing dharma'. That's not dharmic. Dharma is the awareness itself being aware of itself. And yes, we are an integral part of that.

And so, no matter how we state it, dharma comes down to awareness being aware of itself, and awareness with no pause, hesitation, or separation, much like a constant incandescent light. Our natural inherent awareness itself is constant, whether we are aware of that or not. It's the awareness of that awareness we are pointing out here.

For me it was the philosopher Hegel who first

successfully pointed out to me that while we cannot objectify awareness itself, make it an object, we can be FULLY aware of awareness, in that we are all out or fully extended in it. Of course, we have let go. To my knowledge, this is what is called Insight Meditation or Vipassana, of the kind used in Mahamudra Meditation training.

In other words, our failure to 'objectify' (duality) is not a failure, but rather a sign of a more full extension on our part, of our full participation. In fact, what has been described as 'failure to objectify' (and the merging of our dualisms) is itself a sign of the actual nature of the mind, what all meditators are trying to achieve. In other words, the mind cannot objectify itself (permanently become an object) and this by definition, and the discomfort of seemingly forever being on the verge of that, of objectification (permanency), and of our NOT being able to do that (objectify) since time immemorial, for all time. It can't be done. We best stop trying and just let go.

The best we can do is to fully immerse ourselves in nonduality in an attempt to know our own nature and, while we can know it fully, we are not able to grasp or describe it objectively. We can know it, yet just cannot put it into words. We can't objectify -- objectification (duality). In that regard, we are speechless.

In other words, it's not here or there, now or then, or

somewhere else. It's not anywhere or anything. And above all it's not our getting or attaining anything. It's not something to 'get' or that even can be gotten. And it's not the uncomfortableness we feel itself that is the problem. The 'uncomfortableness' is a good sign much like pain is a sign the body needs attention. We first have to become comfortable with our uncomfortableness because that is exactly the problem.

We have that 'uncomfortableness' to let go of and become comfortable with, rather than uncomfortable, to become comfortable with our uncomfortableness. That's the point. We have to own, make ourselves at home with, or as the dharma texts put it: we have to become familiar with the nature of the mind, which itself is all about this uncomfortableness. We have to be comfortable with that.

This uncomfortableness we feel is a good sign that we are getting warm and are on the right track. We have to become familiar with our own uncomfortableness, get to know it, comfortable with being uncomfortable, as in: used to it. Then we will be comfortable. It's not like we have a real choice.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## TRACKING AT THE EDGE

September 22, 2022

The edge of what? The edge of the future, which is the present, where stuff arises and comes in. Or we could track at the edge of the past, as things pass. We all know that it gets foggy if we look beyond the present, either way, past or future.

They say that the present is eternal, yet philosophers tell

us that the duration of the present is infinitesimally small in length. Yet, everything gets done here.

It appears up to us to corral ourselves in the present, midway between the future and the past. As for 'midway, as my first dharma teacher often used to often say to me, using a circus analogy, "Michael, If you spend all our time at the sideshow, the main tent will be gone." Very true.

Our noodling in imagination as to the future or remembering things past takes away from our present time to act and do anything. Perhaps that's why they say that the present is infinitesimal; that's all the time we spend there, a joke, sort of.

Scheduling time for the present is what I'm talking about here, making sure we have a present and are not lost in contemplation of the future and the past. If we stop and think about it, as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa put it in his key 'Words of Advice':

Don't Prolong the Past  
Don't Invite the Future  
Don't Alter the Present  
Relax, As It Is.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

September 23, 2022

Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, as the old saying goes. Noodling in the past or champing at the future are great time wasters.

Refusing both, future and past, takes effort and undue



effort itself is an obscuration, yet sometimes useful in training, as long as we treat it like scaffolding and remove it when it is useless.

The big thing seems to be the doing of nothing in the present moment. That seems to be up to us, yet it is natural to think that doing nothing is uncomfortable. It is easily confused with boredom, whatever that is. We don't go there.

One of the big instructions in dharma training is for us to become familiar with the mind. What does that mean? It means negotiating the awkwardness of being bored or of getting anxious just because we have nothing to do, or if nothing seems to be happening. Negotiating that is very much part of becoming familiar with the mind.

We have to get used to whatever 'is', whatever that is. While we may feed on interest, what interests us, when it comes to being bored, not so much. We avoid boredom and try to skirt around the edges of it. It's not unlike trying to put two magnets together with reversed polarities. They repel one another. We seem to be repelled by boredom., which is fascinating IMO.

Yet, all that is just part of the process of becoming familiar with our own mind. We best get on with it rather than avoid it, and get used to the way it is, how things are.

It's the same with always wanting to eat something, even when we are not actually hungry, a nervous habit with unwelcome consequences. Much like we avoid boredom, in the reverse way, we are compelled to eat something to settle the mind. Just a little something to put the mind at rest so we can sleep or whatever.

And it's even worse when it comes to delinquencies, NOT wanting to do what we have to do. What's that all about? We know we have to do it, yet for some reason we don't feel like it. We rebel. I do this a lot, put off the inevitable until I can find a pathway or way to feel like doing it. Then I do it.

Yet, with some things I just block them and don't do them, even though I should or know I have to. This kind of 'locked' situation can sustain itself almost indefinitely, or so it seems. It's right there, waiting to be done and for me to do it, but I don't. I don't do it.

I steadfastly remain in opposition to doing this or that, rather than do it and by that let it pass. It remains suspended there, in opposition to being done. Too many of these frozen 'to do' things and we are compromised, tied up by the things that we, for some reason, 'won't' do.

In recent years I have been overcoming my delinquencies and just doing what has to be done as

they come up. That works.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## FAMILIARITY

September 24, 2022

If we study the dharma teachings, IMO, the key word to take to heart for most of us is 'familiarity' and by that they mean familiarity with the actual nature of the mind, which itself the texts say is unchanging. Because it's not about to ever change, it is we who have to become familiar with it and get to know it. And as they say, there is no time like the present.

That's not going to happen if we just sit here with our eyes closed and fingers in our ears. Familiarity with the mind's nature is something we develop by actually experiencing the mind for ourselves, getting involved with the giving and taking, the back and forth, and mixing in.

Unfortunately, no one can do this for us because we have to do it for ourselves. A dharma teacher can encourage us, books can be read, and practicing dharma (going through the motions) for years can be undertaken. Yet, sooner or later all that is just prologue and has to be given up, put aside, as we take the plunge and actually immerse ourselves in the mind. How is that done?

Well, for starters, familiarity means looking into the dark corners of the mind, and here we mean 'OUR' personal take on the mind, especially what we avoid, push away, don't like, and/or fear.

This is why some of us, like me for example, were not ready for that familiarity just as I was since I was born. It took me some years of working through what in the dharma are called 'The Preliminaries', which are just that, a series of preliminary exercises or trainings that loosen us up enough to be flexible and pliant. Another word for this, of course, is familiarity. And worse, it took me more years to even get around to admitting I better do the

preliminaries, so that's a lot of time wasted, IMO.

And even then, at least in my case, I had to do something about 'boredom', which I did not like or actually know much of anything about except I did not like it and would avoid it at every opportunity.

All of those more anxious or boring parts of ourselves we have to, you guessed it, we have (we have them) to become familiar with, familiar enough until we can function in those states too, and not just when everything is hunky dory. That takes work, learning to be still, my learning that I did not have to be busy, busy, busy just all of the time or...what?

What happens when I am not involved, busy, and occupied? What about my doing nothing at all? Scary thought, but eventually I had to work through all that. It took time, patience, and endurance on my part to become familiar with those parts of my mind that my conscious habit is to avoid.

Familiarity essentially means becoming pliant, flexible in whatever situation we find ourselves, whether that is active, bored, tired, happy, afraid, and all of that. We can start with the hard spots in the mind, the ones we don't like and don't really know, like boredom, fear, and so on. That has to be preliminary before we can even rest or relax, "as it is," so to speak.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## THE MIRROR OF ME

September 25, 2022

Yesterday, I posted some contour drawings I did of myself back in the 1960s. They are examples of mirroring, trying to find a reflection of ourselves that can be used as a guide as to where we are. Was this all I needed?

Probably not, but my drawings, poems, writings did



capture the moment and served as a mirror for me. It does not have to be drawings, and it could be poetry, prose, or anything that reflects us so that we can better see ourselves. For some, this reflection may be all we have. The perfect mirror, of course, is an authentic dharma master.

For many of us, we can't expect to have ourselves reflected in those around us. We are kind of on our own and perhaps cannot find a witness. Yet, we need some reflection, some way of knowing we exist and are present, something coming back.

Does such behavior feed the Ego? Probably, yet at the same time, reflections also mirror us to ourselves. If nothing else, they are like a rear-view mirror through by watching we can back ourselves into the future. Just as the Moon is reflected in any old puddle in the mud, so are we reflected in a myriad of ways.

And while perhaps it is a bit of a backward way of guiding ourselves, just as our reflection in a mirror is the other way round (reversed image), however, we at least have something coming back, some feedback, something reflected that we can help navigate life by.

A hall of mirrors we don't need, or some sort of amusing funhouse of ourselves, yet without some reflection on our part, it's hard to see, make decisions, and find our way; at least I can't.

And we also don't need a sequined world where we are blinded by a sea of reflections. And having some reflection allows us to form successive approximations to truth, and by that process move like a spider across the web of life, handhold by handhold.

For me, this has been an iterative process, reflecting and redirecting myself by what I see, getting blood from a stone if I have to. At the same time, I understand that reading from the outside, so to speak, is probably not all good, and that instead we should read from inside-out, rather than from the outside-in. Yet, as mentioned, reflection is very much a part of how we figure stuff out, at least in the beginning.

Indeed, too much reflection can be like a hall of mirrors. We have to plunge ahead and experience life, and not just live by reflections. Reflections are a relative truth, something to get us from here to there, yet not a real solution. With reflections, we are still in Samsara.

Ultimately, we each have to remove the mirror and not depend on reflections alone to make our way through life. Or like the old occult image, learn to see through the back of the mirror – nonduality.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## CAN I GET A WITNESS?

September 27, 2022

Perhaps, but this is very hard to do IMO. What is it that we want to be witnessed would be my first question? And the answer to that is very simple. We want our very existence to be witnessed and seen for what it is, but what is it? We don't know that, which is why we want feedback. And so, this is a bit of a "Catch 22."

Who or what are we and equally important what powers do we have and how far do they extend? And since by the definition of what Samsara is, which is dualistic (we as subject and the world and others as objects), we don't

know how to look for feedback except out there in the outside world and in those around us.

The whole concept of the Dharma is to become aware of the natural intrinsic awareness inside us and Samsara, being dualistic by definition, has not taught us how to do that. And so, in brief we are and have been going in the wrong direction all this time. How do we do an 'About, Face', and begin to look inside?

The answer to that for most of us is that we do that slowly, one step at a time. And those steps make up the path of dharma which sooner or later all of us will tread unless Samsara is where we want to remain.

Are we supposed to read the tea leaves of our friend's faces and the outside world as a way to deduce what we are ourselves? Is this simple call and response? Are our alone cries in the wilderness of Samsara waiting for the echo of response so that we can deduce who we are and what we are about?

It certainly is a process of trial and error, trying to figure out our place in the world based on the reflection we get from the outside world. There is not a lot of future in that, IMO. Ultimately, even that reflection tells us to turn around and look within ourselves for the truth we search outside us for.

[Photo taken by me in the last couple of days.]



## READING FROM THE INSIDE OUT, NOT THE OUTSIDE IN

September 28, 2022

I'd like to dwell a little bit more on the concept of 'reflection', the idea that we all need feedback as to who we are and what is possible for us in this world. What and where are our limits? How can we get that feedback or perhaps better asked, how can we go without it?

For me the big question is how do we know that, if we follow our natural interests, we are not simply leading ourselves down a path of self-indulgence, going to 'hell in a handcart' as the old saying goes?

As I understand it, it is axiomatic that being in Samsara (as the dharma texts describe it) we are unable to draw from inside us and that pretty much by definition; we are habitually addicted to drawing from the outside-in, rather than from the inside-out. This is pretty much what the dualistic mind does, draw conclusions from what is reflected back to us from its object, which is the entire world surrounding us. Talk about seeing the Moon in a myriad of rain puddles. For us, the outside world is covered with sequins, each offering a reflection. That, I am told, is Samsara.

And how is this possible without our own self-interests and attachments indicating and influencing the trail of breadcrumbs we are following, thus paving the way? Much like the mixture of air and fuel in a carburetor, our own interests are an important factor in the mix. The short answer is that we can't avoid our own attachments if only because we are attached to them. That alone is a handicap.

In my own experience (and the understanding gained from that experience), it is that the purity of our interests become a key factor in the process of recognizing the

true nature of the mind, and by virtue of that purity alone we separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. It's like the old saying "The truth will set you free." I believe that, so stay close to the truth.

It may seem to be the long way around to enlightenment, but isn't that what Samsara already is, what stands between us and enlightenment? What I find important is that although Samsara is an obscuration by definition, it is one whose only eventual exit is realization. And this through deconstruction.

I'm not saying 'take your time' in becoming enlightened, but rather that there is only time, however long, before we recognize and become familiar with the mind's actual true nature, our true nature. Even a blind squirrel finds a nut every once in a while. And to go along with that saying, "The mills of the gods grind slowly, yet they grind exceedingly fine." That also seems true.

The upshot or point of what I am writing here is meant to be encouragement, ultimately, encouragement that we cannot fail to become enlightened. I know that thought may not appear to be of much help as we struggle to find our way through the thickets of Samsara, yet it is the single light at the end of the tunnel.

And it is perhaps much like the movie "Groundhog Day," where we endlessly repeat a formula for success until we

succeed in enlightening ourselves. The end result is not in doubt, only the time it takes us to get there. How long is that?

The kicker or point here is that we need not fear the stones in our pathway, whatever is meant by the Christian phrase from the 23rd psalm: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear not evil." In other words, if we use our mind and take care, we can sort this all out, if only because that is the only eventual conclusion to be had. To do this, we have to, as the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa put it, "Relax, as it is."

And although we are addicted now to reading the reflections from the world around us, those same reflections will eventually boomerang or themselves cause us to turn inward and draw from within ourselves, taking from the inside-out, which apparently is what is needed.

When I was a teenager and a young man, as a herpetologist I learned to handle poisonous snakes, such as six-foot rattlesnakes in Texas, whose girth was as thick as a big-man's arm. I am reminded of the lawyer's doctrine of "The fruit from the poisonous tree" that indicates that evidence taken unconstitutionally cannot be used in court. And here I am suggesting that much like learning to handle poisonous snakes with care, whatever we fear or find dangerous in life can ultimately



(and will) be handled and sorted by us.

And no, this is not a 'carte blanche' to eat poison (what we fear) and expect not to be harmed, but rather to carefully handle what life offers us that must be handled, because it can and has to be handled. And not to mention the fact that there is no choice. There is that.

For this reason, we should not fear what is before us, what stands in our way or befalls us, because (like the geometrical form, the torus) it is the nature of life that everything both goes around and comes around, showing us its other side, in this case the inside, which is what we need to know. We have it coming.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## AUTHENTIC TEACHER

September 29, 2022

The more authentic the teacher, the more perfect the reflection, but a reflection of what? Well, it's not a reflection of our teacher, but always through them a reflection of ourselves, and what might that be? We see ourselves as reflected in the mirror of the teacher. That's what a teacher is, a mirror into which we can safely gaze and see ourselves reflected.

Certainly, our flaws are reflected clearly; most any teacher can do that. Yet if that were the only truth, there would be some hard looks on our part. A perfect dharma teacher, so to speak, reflects more than just our inadequacies, where we come up short. A perfect reflection sees beyond the surface faults to our true nature, which is also the actual nature of the mind itself. We are that too. It is our innate nature, yet to date we have never realized that.

To have our true nature reflected or to even come close is totally encouraging and serves to confirm our most devout wish to find certainty. Not certainty of an eternal soul and its existence or permanence, but certainty of existing just as we have for eternity up to now, a natural awareness that we too can be aware, of one that is "self-aware," an awareness which has no limits either in time or space. It's an awareness of awareness itself. I find that encouraging.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



## NOTHIN' DOIN'

September 30, 2022

No, I'm not antipathetic. Instead, I'm talking about my just doing nothing, a newfound pleasure. After all, for my entire life I always have been doing something and am pretty good at it. I'm almost always busy and I get things done.

How did that ever change?

My guess is that this change came from an insight that I was avoiding doing nothing, not liking boredom, and going out of my way to avoid it. What was this boredom anyway? I began to look around and found that scientists, behavioral scientists, have been studying boredom for some time. Now, me too.

What is it about boredom, and perhaps by association the doing of nothing, that is intolerable, so worth our avoiding. What is hidden there that we don't know about? "Inquiring minds want to know."

And a lot of this came from the realization that I had packed my life chockfull of entertainment. I was never alone with myself and not doing something. Doing something was like my chaperone. I liked my cup to be spilling over with things to do. "Heaven Forbid," that my activity should fall fallow leaving me alone with myself for even a minute. That might be scary. What would I do? Nothing?

Then, my eyes were opened when I had a major stroke, one of the results of which was that I (and for quite some time) was denied access to any means to entertain myself, as all of my old haunts and their attachments were blown out, leaving me high and dry, so to speak, with nothing at all to do or anything going on to be busy about.

And this was, for me, devastating, being stuck out there in the desert of time with the hot sun of the mind beating down on me and there was nothing I could do about it, try as I might. And I tried, desperately, day and night for weeks. Nothing doing.

Yet, one thing I learned through that, as mentioned, is that I could not be alone with myself without surrounding myself with the usual entertainments I was used to. And a correlate of that was the awareness of what in dharma lingo is called 'Samsara' (this cyclic world we live in) was my beloved home, something I had no intention of leaving, especially when I could not (for a time) access it!

To be shut out in the cold with no way to take shelter from the bright light of 'nothing' was painful beyond words. It was like a newborn baby being left exposed in the Sahara Desert. I just could not stand it, and suffered in a way I had never imagined.

Now, let's fast forward out of that time and examine what are the residual effects of that experience today. Obviously, they made an indelible impression. I remain in shock even today about how little I knew about Samsara, for instance that I was so totally attached to it. Of course, Samsara can be described as the sum total of our attachments, the glue that holds the concept of the Self together, the sum total of how we deviate from the true nature of the mind. Samsara is our deviance.

What I did not realize at all is that we have never, not even ever, known anything else but the cloying embrace of Samsara. We are and have been stuck in it all this time, in fact for all the time there is and has been in history, if we believe in rebirth.

I will never forget asking my dharma teacher, a high rinpoche, about how dharma differs from something like Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," a concept of having once known the truth, but fallen away from that 'heaven' and now trying to get back. Or the Christian concept of "Original Sin," where we once lived in the Garden of Eden, but due to our sins now are trying to get back to that pure state of mind. That concept of sin is what I grew up with. The dharma does not support this view.

And Rinpoche carefully explained to me that the dharma does not see it that way. He pointed out that from a dharma perspective we never knew the true nature of the mind through all our rebirths. We have always been only in Samsara and are still trying to wake up and realize the actual nature of the mind.

As he put it, "We are the stragglers...", the ones that in all recorded time, birth after birth, have never awakened, but are still trying to do just that. Well, this came as a bit of a shock to me, yet at the same time it was a huge relief not to have to see myself as a sinner that had fallen and needed to be saved from my sins. Whew!

What this knowledge (along with my stroke) did was to help me realize how air-tight the grasp of Samsara on us is. We don't have much of a chance because our very language and everything it can describe is Samsaric, a relative truth, a dualism. We can't be having intimations of a paradise lost, because we have never yet been to paradise, heaven, or enlightened.

We are locked into Samsara, hook, line, and sinker. I don't believe that even dharma students have much of an idea of the situation we are in via Samsara. As I joke to myself, even the dharma as we know it is brought to us courtesy of Samsara, and its version of dharma and reality.

There is little use my going on and on about this because it falls on deaf ears since folks have no knowledge beyond Samsara, not even a hairline crack, IMO. I know I didn't. And so, what you and I know as dharma, as mentioned, is a convenient fiction, and is but a shadow of the actual reality that encapsulates us, a reality designed and maintained by Samsara, even including what we know as 'dharma'. How could we assume that dharma was not also tainted by Samsara, like everything else?

And so, if how I describe it is accurate, what are we to do? That is a question I struggle with each day. What's a useful approach to deconstructing Samsara? Obviously,



it's not easy because here we are, (according to the rinpoches) since time immemorial unable to awaken from Samsara. We are deep in its grasp and have always been.

Or am I just talking here about deconstructing reality itself, dharma and all? What exactly then is dharma? And what was a great Tibetan saint like Jetsun Milarepa doing all those years meditating in a cave? Obviously, it was not for a shallow realization. If some of these Mahasiddhas can walk through walls, what does that tell us? As the Dylan song put it:

"And something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?"

Exactly! That's my feeling too. Not that I do know what is happening, but only that I found out how inextricably I was bound to Samsara thanks to my health problems. I couldn't live without Samsara, so to speak, and looked for it like a baby for its bottle. I had no shame, either. I did everything in my power to get out of the strictures of Light I found myself exposed to when I yearned for the comfort and darkness of Samsara. You bet, I was out there crying like a lonely wolf in the desert of time. No one heard me, especially myself.

And so, I suggest you have to discount me and my history, because not to would be, IMO, too difficult to confront.

[Midjourney graphic of the Garden of Eden by me.]