

STORIES OF TIBET AND ASTROLOGY

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Tibetan astrology, like so many of the more ancient astrologies did not have the benefit of computers. Everything was done by hand, and there is much counting forward, counting backward, around, and again. It would be easy for me to fill this talk with all of the many countings you would have to know, and to grasp it you would be taking notes the entire time. And the chances of the notes actually being accurate later, when you get home, are slim to none. You could never be sure where your notes missed a beat.

I have an entire 827-page book, fully illustrated, called "Tibetan Astrology" that is available in paperback on Amazon.com, but it is not inexpensive. I also have a free PDF version of this book that each of you can download and keep. It can be found here:

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books>

I suggest that you write down this link and get the book at your convenience, so that you can study this.

A much better use of our time here is to communicate the context of Tibetan astrology, how it is different from western astrology, and how we might go about learning it. More important yet is to know what you need to know to understand it. It took me years to get this right, so hopefully I can save you that time.

I should say a few words about how I got into it.

Although I was studying Buddhism in the late 1950s, it was mostly an intellectual topic, a subject that along with concepts like existentialism we would stay up late nights smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee to talk about. Buddhism back then was all conceptual, at least as I learned it from the Beatniks, the Beat Generation. So I don't consider all the intellectual talk we did back then of much value.

As the 1960s came along, I continued to read books on Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism, and I made some attempt to actually get into it, like sitting Zazen all day with Roshi Phillip Kapleau, and things like that. No doubt, I was shopping around.

But it was not until February of 1974 that I actually got what I consider a real taste of it. That was when I met the great Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. That indeed changed my life. The story is fun, and I will try to be brief.

I had been reading Trungpa's works, books like "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism," and so on, and they hit home. When I found that Trungpa himself was actually coming to Ann Arbor to speak, I got in touch with the university group that was putting on the talk to find out more. To my surprise, they were not all that organized and I ended up being Trungpa's chauffeur and designing the poster for the talk. I include it here.

Of course, I had little to no idea of what I was getting into, but I sure was psyched to find out. I can clearly remember meeting him at the airport. There I stood at the jet way entrance as the

various travelers filed off the plane. For a while it looked to me like Trungpa might have missed the plane. Then finally this short Tibetan man about my age came through the gate and found me waving my arms at him. And then he was standing right in front of me.

We were standing there facing each other, actually closer than I am comfortably used to, literally eyeball to eyeball. As I looked into his eyes, I could see that he was very tired, as the whites of his eyes were all yellow, with red veins, etc. And then something very remarkable happened: Trungpa rolled his eyes upward toward the top of his head until all I could see were the whites of his eyes and held them there for an uncomfortable (to me) length of time. And then he lowered them.

When his eyes came back, there was no more yellow, no red streaks, and I was suddenly staring into the eyes of the most incredible being I had ever met. I am sure I must of jumped back, but he was so kind and friendly.

I will spare you all of the minor exchanges that took place, but I should say this. After I took Trungpa back to the professor's house where he was staying, unloaded his bags, I was kind of hanging around at the back of the small group that was surrounding him, hoping to get another glimpse or too at this remarkable being. My job was done and I suppose I should have left, and I was certainly too shy to just push into the group. Then a second remarkable thing happened.

Everyone decided to take a tour of the University of Michigan and they began to leave. But Trungpa announced that he was staying behind and would take a nap and that they should go. I stood to the side as people began to file out, waiting for my turn to leave.

But as that turn came, Trungpa look at me and said, "Michael, you stay with me." Well sure I did. It was like a dream come true and it gets better.

Trungpa Rinpoche took me into a small room, like a study, sat me down and proceeded for the next hour and a half to teach me meditation. Of course, he did not call it that, and I had no idea what he was doing as he began to put me through a series of requests.

And to make this story brief, the heart of it all had to do with the breath, particular the out breath, as you breathe out. Of course he told me to breathe out and to follow the breath with my mind. I did that. I breathed out, but as I came to the end of the out breath, he was not satisfied and directed... "No, breathe all the way out. Just let it go and don't worry. It will come back."

Well that seems simple enough, right? What was amazing is that as he did this, as he asked me to let go, all of my fears about death and dying came rushing up into my mind and, as I let go and breathed out more deeply yet, my fears just left. I am not saying that today I have no fear of death, but something happened way back then on that day with Trungpa that ended a lot of my fear of death and of life.

So there you have the idea. And the main takeaway from Trungpa's visit, not just for me, but for all those present in Ann Arbor to hear him (that I knew) was that Buddhism is not a philosophy, not something to talk about, but a path, a method to accomplish something – a way. And that mysterious word "Dharma" just means the path each of us needs to take to greater awareness, and there are said to be 84,000 dharmas or paths..

Back in 1974, that was news to me and everyone I knew. I really didn't know what 'dharma' was. I thought it was a magic word that I probably picked up from a book by Jack Kerouac. And

after Trungpa I began to actually practice meditation. Later in 1974, around August, I also met the 16th Karmapa, Trungpa's own teacher, the lama that he looked up to and learned from. That is another whole story, but you get the idea. Anyway, I was soon immersed in the actual practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

As it happened, I did not end up joining Trungpa's group because for me they were too wild, drank too much, and wore suits. I had been a performing musician for many years, so I had already had enough alcohol, and people were literally dying to see me in a suit. I didn't wear one often.

And I already had my little touch of hanging with the in-crowd. By that time I had hitchhiked with Bob Dylan, Iggy Pop was my drummer (we named him Iggy), opened for Cream at the Fillmore Auditorium in 1967, and things like that. When it comes to a brush with fame, I was like Forest Gump, always there but on the sidelines.

Instead a few years later I met another Tibetan rinpoche, the venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and have been with him ever since. Rinpoche is the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. So there you have a taste of where I began, where I am coming from. I should say a little more to give you the full context of me back then and there.

From when I met Khenpo Rinpoche onward, Buddhism was about practice, not just talk. And practice was difficult, so a few words about that, and maybe I will tell a story or two. Of course I learned to meditate. But perhaps the first thing I learned about meditation upon trying it was how messed up my mind was. I could not concentrate for two seconds, much less a half hour or more, without it wandering. It soon became clear that some form of preliminary work was needed before I could relax enough to even learn to concentrate.

Well, thankfully the Tibetans figured this out centuries ago. They have a practice called 'ngondro,' that is like meditation boot camp, but ngondro is not for the faint of heart. It 'IS' like boot camp.

Among other things, doing ngondro involves physical, emotional, psychological, and mental training. For most it takes years. For example, as part of ngondro you have to do 111,111 full-length prostrations on the ground, and also take the Buddhist refuge vow 111,111 times. And that is just for starters. After that, there are 111,111 hundred-syllable mantras to be chanted, and then 111,111 complete mandalas, which are like sand mandalas, but smaller and done with rice, carefully pouring rice in the ten directions, and so on. And this takes time! And lastly, one does a form of yoga that involves 111,111 elaborate invocations of your guru or teacher.

This whole ngondro thing seemed particularly insane when I first encountered it, but my confidence in Rinpoche was so strong that I actually persevered and completed the whole thing, and now here is one of the stories.

Every year I would get a 15-minute personal interview with Khenpo Rinpoche. We would drive to the mountains above Woodstock New York to do this. I once calculated that my wife Margaret and I have driven to the monastery enough miles to go around the circumference of Earth one and one/half times. That is some driving.

Anyway, in that short interview each year, I would always ask Rinpoche if there was anything special he wanted me to do. Since I thought I was special, there must be something special

rinpoche wanted me to do, etc. And each year he would tell me, “No, no... Just keep on practicing.

So this particular year, I asked Rinpoche was there anything he wanted me to do. And his response this year was, “If you really want to know, if I were you, I would do another ngondro.”

Well, his response cured me from asking that question again, but I did do another entire ngondro at his request, which was not easy my friends. And I will tell you one more Rinpoche story that also has some humor in it.

Another year, during a similar 15-minute interview, I had presented to Rinpoche some problems I was having with my business and the like. His reaction was to pull back, give us a great smile, and look at Margaret and me, saying: “I want you to go to Tibet and see the 17th Karmapa.”

The Karmapas are like the line of the Dalai Lamas, the leaders of an entire Tibetan lineage. And while the current Dalai Lama is the 14th reincarnation in his lineage, the current Karmapa is the 17th in another lineage, which means that Karmapas are older. In fact the Karmapas were the first reincarnate lamas in Tibet. I had met the previous 16th Karmapa in 1974, but few westerners had met the young 17th Karmapa, because he lived in a small monastery high in the mountains of Tibet at some 15,000 feet above sea level.

Of course to have Rinpoche tell me this was a shock to my system, especially because I never travel... or seldom. It takes me two or three days to decide to go to the grocery store, and here was Rinpoche telling me to go to Tibet and with my family. Of course, I thanked Rinpoche for the suggestion (all this through a translator. He speaks no English), and told him that I certainly aspired to go to Tibet one day. It was on my list of things to do.... I guess.

No, said Rinpoche. Go now, this summer, within one month... and see the Karmapa. What? I was in shock. Well, the long and the short of it is we did go to Tibet, and within one month. And a wild adventure it was. If you like stories of culture shock, on that same site where my Tibetan Astrology book is, there is a book “Our Pilgrimage to Tibet” for those interested. It also is a free download.

Of course, I have enough stories to fill up not only the rest of this talk, but the rest of the day, and then some. Let me sum up where I am at:

I have been to Tibet now twice, also to China, Nepal, India, and Sikkim, and so on. I learned to read Tibetan script, but I cannot speak the language, and even my written Tibetan is getting rusty these days.

Aside from the two ngondos both my wife and I did, we have also done a number of advanced sadhana practices which I won't detail here. But the main thing we have been occupied with is learning and practicing these last 23 years or so is Mahamudra meditation, the main form of mediation practiced by the Kagyu lineage. We have also been going to annual 10-day Mahamudra intensives since 1989, and so on.

My point in all of this, aside from wanting to tell you some stories, is to point out that my introduction to Tibetan Buddhism and astrology is not just intellectual, but has been backed up by meditation practice under some of the best Tibetan dharma teachers in the world. So I do know something about all this. In the next blog let's talk about Tibetan Astrology.

STORIES OF TIBET AND ASTROLOGY: PART 2 of 2

Tibetan Astrology

March 31, 2012

Tibetan astrology. You might think it would be as easy as picking up a couple of books on subject, only there were none back then. And even when finally there was one (translated from French into English), it had so many errors that it was nearly useless.

But I was surrounded by real live Tibetans. Because of the Tibetan diaspora, many high Tibetan lamas were visiting North America and believe it or not they had time on their hands. Tibetan Buddhism was not so popular then as now and these great lamas were not invited that many places. And I was in the habit of holding astrology and dharma events of all kinds, so I invited them and they came. This was in the 1980s and onward.

As far as I know Matrix Software put on the first Hindu Astrology conference in the U.S. (August 10, 1986), and the second on August 8-9, 1987). The name "Vedic Astrology" was not even in popular use back then. I managed to find one Tibetan astrological calendar by a westerner by the name of John Myrdhyn Reynolds who translated Tibetan and also knew some astrology. I invited Reynolds to give a conference in June of 1985

And I put on two Tibetan astrology conferences that I imagine also were the first of their kind, one of them on June of 1988 by Sange Wangchuk a Buddhist from Bhutan who was fluent in seven languages, including Tibetan and Sanskrit. Wangchuk lived at our center for two and one-half years. Together Sange and I translated astrology from the Tibetan using the classic text by the great third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje.

Margaret and I have operated the Heart Center since 1972 and many hundreds of distinguished scholars and astrologers have visited here. In addition we have run a dharma meditation center for over 25 years, the Heart Center KTC in Big Rapids, Michigan.

See photos of the Heart Center

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.442936712657.230615.587252657&type=3>

See photos of the Heart Center Library complex

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.447679727657.234455.587252657&type=3>

I had access to the many great Tibetan lamas who visited our center, but oddly enough it was very hard to get any astrological knowledge from them. Either they didn't know it or it was something that they did not feel comfortable in sharing. God knows I asked enough questions.

And there was one statement that the Tibetan translator John Reynolds said that stuck in my mind, which was "When I began to study Tibetan astrology, I found the dharma much more interesting than the astrology." What I found was that Tibetan astrology is part of their actual dharma teachings, and to understand the astrology you have to at least know something about the dharma. It is important to know what that is, and it is simple.

It is one thing to calculate the phases of the Moon (and the Tibetans divide the lunar cycle into 30 lunar days), but quite another to know how to use and be sensitive to those phases. This

required actually being aware of the moments these lunar events took place.

No problem thought I. Here I am, ready, willing, and aware. There was a problem, however, and it was that my idea of being aware and that of the Tibetans were not the same. I had always assumed that my mind, just as it came out of the box, was good to go, you know: clear, insightful, calm, etc.

As it turns out being aware of the more subtle inner channels in our bodies at particular Moon phases required just a little more awareness than I had, like a lot more. I am sure the Tibetans could see exactly where I was in my practice and knew that I was not way ready for these advanced (more subtle) teachings. And let me explain something.

The so-called secret teachings of the Tibetans are what are called “self-secret” in that they hide themselves. And the place to find them is not in some cave or under rock, but in plain sight. In other words, the inner secret teachings of Tibet are hidden in plain sight for all to see, but most of us lack the awareness to see them. It is like air. It is everywhere, yet invisible, and simply taken for granted until we run out of it. Something like that.

And here I was, a bull in the china shop, thrashing around learning beginning meditation. My mind was filled with a million hornet-like thoughts, and obscured by who knows how many cloudy emotions. Of course, I had no idea I was like that. Well, no idea until I actually begin to learn to meditate and found how totally and constantly distracted I was. But that is another story.

Here I just want to describe how one might go about to learn the inner or subtle meaning of Tibetan astrology. Let’s start with some basics, and once again Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche had pointed this out way back at the beginning (see Part 1 of this blow). I had just not picked up on it at the time. Here is another short story of my meeting with Trungpa.

this happened after he had taught me to meditate. He was going to take a nap and was walking with me toward the door. As we passed down a hallway we came across the poster I had made for him. It has a woodcut of an oriental dragon flying in the sky and holding in each of his four paws, a pearl or gem. I include it here.

Trungpa Rinpoche stopped in front of the poster and looked it over. Then he turned to me and said “Do you know what this dragon is all about?” I told him I had no idea, but that I loved the image. Then he explained that the dragon can fly only as long as he holds the four gems, one in each paw. If he lets go of any one of them, he plunges to the ground.

Later I came to understand what he was showing me, and it is called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” or often just “The Four Thoughts” or the “Common Preliminaries.” These four thoughts are said to be capable of turning the mind away from the day-to-day distractions we get caught up in.

These common preliminaries are concepts that one has to have in mind to enter the dharma seriously. And these four thoughts are not like “Do this” and “Don’t do that.” They are common-sense ideas that I already had to one degree or another.

And as Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out, although it is beneficial to take to heart one or more of these thoughts, it is really necessary to hold all in mind to really progress. Over the years I did all kinds of preliminary dharma practices and then some more advanced ones, but when I finally began to practice the most advanced meditation in our lineage, that of Mahamudra, the first

thing I was told to study and acquaint myself were these four thoughts, so they are really key. And when you see what they are, you will understand why, and perhaps even see why I naturally got into Tibetan Buddhism, only because it all made perfect sense. It is practical.

The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind

When I first heard the Four Thoughts, I could not believe this was coming from something folks consider a religion. To me it was just common sense and I was by that time well beyond the idea that going to church once a week was going to save me. I was way worse than that. I needed something I could do every day, all day. That just might 'save' me.... save me for what I knew not... another day? ... another lifetime?

The First Thought: Human Life is Precious

A no-brainer. I always considered life precious, especially my own. Moreover, in my own internal form of prayer I had always wanted to be used up in life for some good purpose, and not to just be wasted. So the Buddhist suggestion that ALL life is precious, including animals, slugs, worms, and anything living was what I already thought. I was never one of those people who stepped on ants, and so on. To steal a line from the movie "Jerry McGuire," "You had me at the First Thought."

The Second Thought: Impermanence

Well, of course. Impermanence, especially my own, has to be near the top of the list of what I worried about. Death, dying, Heaven, Hell, etc. As a lapsed Catholic I knew all about that stuff. And as a naturalist from the time I was six-years old, I cared about every life that was living: bugs, toads, birds, and the lot. Moreover, I was raised from an early age to revere nature's laws above man's. You can break man's laws and still live, but you can't break nature's law (like the law of gravity) and survive. Nature breaks us. So the Second Thought was also already a deep part of me.

The Third Thought: Karma

Now the third thought took a little learning, but I instinctively had the rudiments of it. You will reap just what you sow. That idea. Every action we make has consequences: physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. I knew that if I did something wrong, there would be consequences. What I did not understand as well as I should have is that every tiny action sends a message and brings forth a response. So, karma took me a while, but I am getting the concept pretty good by now.

The Fourth Thought: This World is Inherently Undependable

Now this fourth thought was for me the hardest. It is also translated as "Repulsion of Samsara," with samsara being this world. It sounded too biblical and maybe suggested that I should not have any fun in life.

What it really means is that we will never get all our ducks in a row, try as we might. Or that we will never get really comfortable in our world, no matter how carefully we set it up. In other words, we will have times of happiness and times of sadness, but never times of all happiness, and so on. Of course awareness and enlightenment are the solution to the fourth thought, but that seemed a long way away.

So there you have it, the four thoughts that Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out to me so many years ago. They all made good sense, not some religious admonitions or requirements, but kind of what I already had figured out for myself. I finally understood that it was not that the Tibetans were keeping astrology secrets from me, but that I was keeping them from myself but not being aware enough to see them.

You see, Tibetan astrology is not so much about charting this and counting that, but about getting what they call the winds and channels, our inner landscape, into some kind of shape to receive the teachings ourselves. An analogy I like is that of setting the sails on a boat to catch the wind. Tibetan mind training is more like helping us to set our mental sails so we actually can use the winds of life to sail in a direction that will bring happiness and enlightenment.

And while their astrology does have calendars and lists, like all astrology, their lists and calendars point to the times when we can get in tune with our own intuition and learn for ourselves to interpret life. My point?

It is simple. Tibetan Buddhism and astrology is a path, not a philosophy, a method or way for us to prepare our minds to appreciate our own inner nature and become more aware of the nature of our own mind. I hope this will be of use to those interested.