

Blogs for 2020

Part Three



by Michael Erlewine

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By
Michael Erlewine

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Readable, but not finely edited (no time)

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ROOTS OF THE SIXTIES: THE BEATS

[Since yesterday I pointed out a possible cause via the sunspot cycle for why the 1960s were what they were, it reminded me of how I entered the Sixties, through my interest in the Beat Generation. I thought some of you might like to hear about that.]

I am editing various early areas of my life story, one of which is when I wanted to be a beatnik, back in the late 1950s. Some of this was blogged before, but that was a while ago and these are updates of that material

What is called "The Sixties" actually didn't start until the summer of 1965, which is like halfway through the decade, so what of those little-spoken of years from 1960 through the mid-1965? I don't know what they are officially called, but I call them the Post-Beat years, as least they were to me, and they run from the late 1950s to, as mentioned, the summer of 1965, and they were crucial in helping to make the "1960s" what they were. For one, they represented the end of the Beat Movement, the remains of that day

I was never a hippie, per se, but I was greatly influenced by the Beat Movement of the late 1950s, although I was a little too young for the full experience. That train had already left the station, but I still learned all that I could. And what was it that I learned from the Beats? What was that lifestyle actually like?

For one, I can start out by saying that the beats as I came to know them were very, very serious folk. Or was that just me? They had none of the wild dancing that came along with the Avalon Ballroom and Fillmore

Auditorium in the mid-Sixties. They were in no way hippies. Slow dancing, sure. Light shows and strobes? No. And it was a different kind of drug scene as well

Let's be clear; the Beats drank wine, not beer. Hard stuff, some, but it was not promoted. No, what we drank as Beats was wine, and wine with cigarettes or whatever else we might be smoking. And coffee was big, but not with all the bells and whistles that we have in today's coffee. We had about two coffee houses in Ann Arbor, one early and one later. And there really was no espresso, but just coffee. Viennese Coffee was the thing. And short of that, any coffee would do, even the horrible instant coffee and powdered creamer in our rooms and flats. For lack of funds, we drank a lot of that

And it was dark out too. The Beats did not celebrate the sunshine or the daytime as did the hippies when they finally arrived. The Beats were creatures of the night that only really came to life when it got dark out. Sure, we shuffled along the streets in the daytime wearing our old olive-drab army jackets and surplus clothing. I never wore a beret, but some of my friends actually did. I would have felt self-conscious in one. I did wear a heavy surplus US Navy peacoat and a black watch wool hat. That, and some work boots or even a pair of old motorcycle engineer boots

And remember, I was not quite a 'Beat', but only wanted to be one. Alas, I was too young by just a few years. I searched for the Beats everywhere, but they (and the whole shtick) already were getting old. Even my naïve youth and enthusiasm for their existence could not revive them. It was like sand running through my fingers

As mentioned, it was nighttime that was bohemian, and I mean all night or at least until the wee hours of the morning. I can remember when the album "My Favorite

Things” by John Coltrane was released in March of 1961. I stayed up all night listening to it at Harvey Armstrong’s spacious second-floor apartment down on Packard Street in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Armstrong not only had a grand place to live, but he had a beautiful girlfriend. I only had a single small room at the time and no girlfriend. I could only dream

I seem to remember I did have some Dexedrine (speed) that night with Coltrane, so sleep was not an option. It was instant coffee, cigarettes, and Coltrane, and the heartbeat was too fast from the speed. What an album that was (and is). Next to the Miles Davis album “Kind of Blue,” “My Favorite Things” was probably my most listened-to jazz album back then. And I particularly love the piano of McCoy Tyner on the title tune. It is just the best. If you have not heard it, really listened to it, by all means do yourself a favor!

Coltrane: “My Favorite Things”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWG2dsXV5HI>

I had no idea at the time that in only a few short months I would be out on the road hitchhiking along the East Coast with Bob Dylan. Imagine that

And so, what does the apprentice beatnik do? Well, I quickly established for myself that he or she is well read in literature and poetry. Ginsberg and Kerouac showed me that. I never met Jack Kerouac face-to-face, but I met Ginsberg a number of times. The last I saw Allen Ginsberg was in the Arboretum in Ann Arbor on April 15, 1973 for what was called the “Festival of Life.” Ginsberg was sitting on the ground along the Huron River back where today they have a field of tall prairie grass. Back then it was like a soccer field. Ginsberg was stark naked

Anyway, back to books. Familiarity with the Existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Camus, and their kin is also suggested, and probably required. Kierkegaard? Yes, and Hegel too. Classical music (at least some of it) was mandatory, and the more the better, and jazz? The Beats were all about jazz. Blues was not big back then, at least in Beat circles, but folk music was fine. It was mostly about jazz

My first home away from home was a tiny single room at 335 Packard Street in Ann Arbor, just across the street from Crazy Jim's, home of the Blimpy Burger, an Ann Arbor landmark that I am told recently has been torn down

This was around 1962 or so, before I moved out to Berkeley, California for a year early in 1964. In that room was a bed, a wooden chair, a side table that held a hotplate (which was not allowed, next to which was my jar of instant coffee) and a cheap record player, one of those kinds that had a hinged top that closed so you could carry the whole thing as a suitcase. That was me

For records I had Mozart and Bach. Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" was one of the few records I owned and the "Brandenburg Concertos" of Bach. I had "borrowed" a few of my parent's records too, which ones I can't remember, perhaps Art Tatum and Joe "Fingers" Carr. I might have had a few jazz records, because that was where I was headed. Needless to say, I did not spend a lot of time at "home." I was almost always out and usually in the M.U.G (Michigan Student Union Grill), in the second room, where no staff bothered you and you didn't have to order anything, filled with gray Formica-topped tables and simple chairs. All the beats in Ann Arbor, and that was but a few, hung out there

I used to bus dishes at the MUG when I was in high school and bowl at the tiny bowling alley, all part of the University of Michigan's Student Union. Yet at this time. I even had some friends

And the 'good' beatnik was familiar with art, at least the French Impressionists. So, there you have the general idea. I believe I mentioned that Beats only come out at night and stay up until (or near) dawn. Did I also mention how serious life was back then? I did. So, no sunshine, not too much laughing or day tripping, and a strict diet of Ingmar Bergman films and the darker European shtick, which was infinitely preferable back then to any of the more entertaining Hollywood flicks. Those American films were just uncool. It was all about the darkness, loneliness, and depression of Europe. American music and films came back with the hippies

We would see these foreign films at the university-sponsored "Cinema Guild" in the old Art and Architecture building or at the "Campus Theater" down on South University Street, the only other theater that showed these films early on. In later years you could find them at the "Fifth Forum" downtown on 5th Avenue. As I look back on that time, I can't believe I bought into that dark, depressed, alcoholic and nicotine-stained world view. And I really tried to enjoy it. Back then I would not allow myself to be entertained. Humor was not a highlight in my life. We would take in a dark European film and then spend the rest of the night smoking cigarettes, drinking instant coffee, and talking about it. Today those films seem more like horror films to me or just funny. I know... I have no taste. And those dark European films went out of style as the hippies came dancing in and daytime and sunshine was cool again

And jazz. Forget about rock n' roll; I didn't listen to it much when I was a "beatnik." Pop music was on the back burner. As mentioned earlier, it was mostly jazz that we listened to, in particular Miles, Coltrane, bop, and most of all "Cool Jazz." The Beats were, above all, cool. And it was kind of hard for me to be cool. I was excitable, too much of an enthusiast, and as I found out, simply 'not cool'. I was just about nineteen years old! And then, there was the "just sitting around."

We did a lot of sitting around with serious talking, and often I would find myself watching a friend shoot up heroin. I never went that route myself, but I was familiar with all the dope paraphernalia, the little bent spoons, the tourniquet, the flame, the 'works', etc. I most remember my friend Frank Trun who was really steeped in the Beats and a kind of model beatnik for me. He had a little upstairs apartment way out on South State Street near Stadium Boulevard. I would hike down there very late at night hoping his light would still be on so I could dare go up and knock. It usually was and he was friendly to me. How wonderful that any older person could even see me! To myself, there was still nothing to see

I am sure we talked (probably he talked) about all kinds of philosophy and deep-life matters, but mostly what I remember is Frank shooting up and me watching. Just watching him shoot up was an inoculation against my ever doing it. It was not pretty, but pretty scary. Sometimes I would have to just leave him there and go home. He was out. Later, I heard that Trun was killed when his car ran off the road on the Pennsylvania Turnpike while driving back from New York City. I can only imagine his state of mind Just like that, he was gone from my life - impermanence

And the Beats lived 'down'. As a rule, my Beat friends had no interest in working a straight job and tended to do just barely (or less) than enough to get by. And they were likely to live in the poorest parts of town where rents were cheap and no one cared how they looked or lived. Theirs was a life of the mind. For the most part, the Beats I knew were dedicated intellectuals and aesthetes

In reality, much of the Beat movement for me amounted to my just trying to get in the door, to be accepted, and to be like them. Just to find real Beats was tough. Reality is seldom what we hope for or expect. My own dreams and imagination of the Beat movement were perhaps more interesting than the final reality. I never really became an insider because by 1960 that movement had already mostly dried up and grown old

There was no "inside" to become, but only the diminishing remains of what Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote of. Even though Ginsberg lived on and I would see him once in a while here or there, he was by then a celebrity and no longer just a beat. What I wanted was to have those inspired visions that the beat authors had, not the withered remains of where they had been. I was just a little too late

Perhaps that was why all the Beats looked so old to me, because I was young. Finding the beat movement was like when the hourglass sand runs out. I tried to grasp it, but it was already gone, slipping through the fingers of time. There was only a taste left. I so wanted to become them, and all I got was a taste

With the Beats gone or going, soon there remained only a bunch of latecomers like me going through the motions, but that 'Beat' train had already left the station or was trying to turn commercial. But I did have some

Kerouac-like times of my own. After being expelled a couple of times from high school, I quit and I actually left Ann Arbor and hitchhiked to places like Greenwich Village (late 1950s), Venice Beach (in Santa Monica), and North Beach in San Francisco. If you have the patience, I will tell some of those stories. In 1960 I hitchhiked across the country on Route 66 to Venice Beach in Santa Monica. I will try for tomorrow

[Photo of me in my tweed jacket, probably with a dark blue cotton crewneck sweater underneath. I am sitting at Carl Oglesby's house, a writer and political activist. Carl is standing in the back and I am sitting by his wife Beth.]

Dec 6, 2020, 6:19 PM

SOLAR ACTIVITY PINPOINTS THE SIXTIES GENERATION

I can't help but notice that the current sunspot activity is unusual in that there are a lot of sunspots just now, in particular in the lower part of the solar disc, what is called the "South Region." The article says that 82% of the sunspots of this new sunspot cycle are in the south region. Historically, this happens, where the south region dominates and then, at some point, the dominance switches to the north region, and so on

This is interesting, but another fact I find even more interesting and that is to take a look at the peaks of the sunspot cycle over the previous decades. Since I came up in the 1950s, reaching young adulthood in the

1960s, I am always interested in what the sun was doing back then

In particular, I would like to know what happened to me back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, because my life changed so radically. Was it just growing up that I was doing then or are there any scientific facts that single out the late 1950s and early 1960s as “special” in any way, and there are, and very pronounced at that

I was always fascinated to learn, not sure whether this is true or not, that it has been said that the rate of activity of live ants on a hot plate being turned up and down is more accurate than any thermometer. Scary thought, yet I have always been convinced, since I watch my mindstream somewhat carefully (and constantly), that I react to solar activity (solar influx, like solar flares, CMEs, etc.) in a 1:1 fashion, in other words, in real time

And if we look at a graph (included here) of the sunspot cycle and its peaks and valleys, that by far the greatest peak in centuries occurred in the very late 1950s and on into the 1960s. And I am also aware that our inner reaction to high solar influx, which acts in a seminal fashion like a seed, is to react over time to what solar activity is inset or imprinted in us

Like a seed, solar activity is planted within us and develops over time as we react to it. Certainly, the influx of the late 1950s and early 1960s was pronounced, in that it seeded an entire younger generation, which separated from their parent’s generation to create what we call the Sixties generation, the whole hippie phenomenon of alternate culture, and the changes that it wrought, which are still reverberating

Of course, this includes the Internet, natural food, return of home birth (and for some, home schooling), and on down the line of the alternative culture that arose in the 1960s

So much changed from that seminal influx-time. I know that I began to come alive in the late 1950s, which resulted in my spending a year (1964) in Berkeley, California, which resulted in the explosion of the alternative generation in the mid-1960s

So much changed or was seeded back then and I find the absolute strongest peak of solar activity (in the late 1950s) to be as good a “reason” or cause as I can find. I feel and believe that we are tied like a knot to changes within the sun and its solar disc. And since, the new solar cycle is now just taking hold as we can see from the profusion of sunspots recently on the southern part of the solar disc, we might want to take notice and begin to monitor this solar activity

Included:

Graph of sunspot peaks

Graph of the dominance of the south and north solar regions

Photo of current group of sunspots in the south region of the solar disc

Dec 6, 2020, 5:56 AM

1967: THE SUMMER OF LOVE

[Some folks asked for me to tell something about 1967 and the Summer of Love out in San Francisco. We were there and here is a bit of that story.]

I was interviewed a while ago for an article on “The Summer of Love” (1967) in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Why? Because I was there for that summer. So, while it is still on my mind, I might as well share with my Facebook friends my memories from that time

Back in the summer of 1967 my band, “The Prime Movers Blues Band” (all five of us), piled into our 1966 Dodge van, with our suitcases, plus all our amplifiers and equipment and headed for San Francisco, not quite a walk-in-the-park drive. I remember waking up as we crossed over the Continental Divide to find our van surrounded by sheep and shepherds. That was in the Rockies

It’s not like we had any money or even a place to stay. We just had to go; that’s all. The 1960s were like that. Luckily, our friend Michael Bloomfield, the former lead guitarist for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, and at that time the leader of the Electric Flag band, found us a place we could stay for free. And that was the heliport in Sausalito, California, where many Bay Area bands practiced

We could sleep on the cement floor there and, since we had no money, we ended up playing at Mr. Lees Rib House just a couple of blocks away for meals. After all, we had to eat

Other than that, we played and auditioned at clubs all over San Francisco, including The Matrix, The Straight Theater, Avalon Ballroom, and the Haight A, not to mention the New Orleans House (a folk club) in Berkeley. But the most memorable gig we played was at the Fillmore Auditorium on Geary

, when Michael Bloomfield asked us to fill in for the Electric Flag when they could not make the gig. This was in August of 1967 and we opened for “Cream,” and one of their first few gigs on the west coast

In fact, I watched Eric Clapton, Ginger Baker (drums), and Jack Bruce (bass) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. Also, on that bill was Gary Burton. And so it went. The interviewer asked me a number of interesting questions, so I will list a few of my answers, while I have them in mind

Michael Katz, One of my best friends from Ann Arbor, Michigan lived in San Francisco at the time. Amazingly enough, he was also in a band called “Anonymous Artists of America,” and they (the whole band) took LSD each time they played. They were on the scene and in fact played at the event called the “Acid Tests,” the poster from that is worth thousands of dollars today

Also playing in the “Anonymous Artists of America” was Sarah Ruppenthal, who had been Jerry Garcia’s first wife, and later married my friend Michael Katz. We hung out with Michael and the whole band lived in the same house, the walls of which were papered with Family Dog and Fillmore West posters that today are worth a fortune

When we were not in Sausalito, hanging out at the heliport or cruising around the Sausalito houseboat scene, or playing for meals at Mr. Lees rib joint, we were in San Francisco auditioning or performing at various dance venues. We played here and there, but also at the New Orleans House in Berkeley

And we made the rounds to places Golden Gate Park and the Palace of Fine Arts in the Marina District, a originally temporary structure built for the 1915 Panama-

Pacific Exhibition. This was a huge structure, originally made with wood and plaster, and it had been falling down but was restored over the years

As mentioned, Michael Bloomfield, originally the lead guitar player for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, had befriended us and is one of the few “famous” that I have met musicians that lived up to being a friendly and caring person at close examination

We opened for Cream on August 29, 1967. It was the largest gig our band had ever played. Here we were, a small group, suddenly opening for “Cream” at the Fillmore West. Before I knew it, I, as leader of the band was in a shouting match with Bill Graham, the owner of the Fillmore over what speakers to use. They had towers of speakers, and we, just our little amps, but the sound we wanted were from those little amps, thus the argument. I ended up winning the argument, but probably that was not the format for our sound

I think we were a bit terrified and over our heads in this new situation. But play we did and people danced and the night is a bit of a blur in my mind. I had spent the year of 1964 living and working in Berkeley, California, so this was just a continuation of my seeing how amazing the California scene was back in the day

I have few memories of our ride back across America to our home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where we went back to playing at a small Black bar called Clint’s Club on Anne Street, usually from Thursday through Sunday for something like \$35 a night for the whole band. Often we would finish our gig at Clint’s Club around 2 AM, pack up our gear, drive a few blocks, reset up our gig and play after-hours until dawn at the 5th Dimension, a rock teen club that featured artists like Jimi Hendrix and so on

As for what that scene was, for one, I would point out that the Hippie Movement or whatever we want to call the 1960s, while perhaps peaking in popularity in 1967 (to the masses) was already starting to fade. The bloom was off the rose, so to speak, but there we were nevertheless, celebrating that era

When asked what was the most important thing to come out of the 1960s (aside from ourselves alive), I pointed to the Internet. It was we, the 1960s folks, that more-or-less put the Internet together, IMO. And the funny thing was that the academics and businessmen of that time (those in power) never saw it coming. In fact, the residue of the hippies just walked right in the back door and took over, with nary a blink from those in charge. That has to be funny, in retrospect. We just took over and built the Internet

And the Internet has changed the world more than any single thing I can think of, and people like me helped that to happen. I had email in 1979 for example and was fielding major web sites (music) before the World-Wide Web even existed. We had what are called Gopher Sites way back then. I ran major forums (Music and Film) on CompuServe, not to mention 110 New Age forums for the Microsoft Network. And so on

Another question I got was what was for me the driving force of the 1960s and I have to, in all honesty, at least for me, say it was LSD and the changes it wrought. I took acid in May of 1964, when it was legal and the only acid around was the original Sandoz, imported from Switzerland

Back then, LSD was virtually unknown, but a mystique already surrounded it, nevertheless. It was said that LSD could alter your mind permanently. That, my friends, was a scary thought, but we took it anyway, if

only because trying to emerge from the straight-laced 1950s mentality was just way too slow. Anything but that looked good

And acid did alter the mind permanently, but not as we feared. What LSD did was to cause us to see into the nature of how the mind worked to a greater degree than we had ever imagined, and THAT altered not our physical brain “mind,” but our perception of reality... forever. I am grateful for that!

What I realized on acid, and never before, was that what up to that night I first dropped acid I thought of as reality and the “real” world was, to a great degree, very much just my own biases and prejudices magnified and projected onto the outside world. And I, like the deer in the headlights, was transfixed watching my own projected movie, mesmerized. From that moment, that acid night, I begin to change my own mind, a thought at a time. That was a revelation!

I also pointed out to the interviewer, something my friend the poet John Sinclair pointed out to me, that those my (and his) age were not “hippies,” but rather pre-hippies or post-Beats. We had wanted to be Beats and had learned all of the liberal arts from them, poetry, music, literature, etc., something the emerging hippies knew nothing of

And we ended up introducing the hippies to all of the arts that we had learned, even though the Beat Movement was dying out and almost gone. We had missed that boat

And so, there you have a little stroll down memory lane, back in The Summer of Love. Hope you liked it

As they song says “Those were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end.”

[Image of a poster for one of the gigs we did in San Francisco during the Summer of Love.]

Dec 5, 2020, 2:32 PM

THE SEXAGENARY CYCLE: ANIMAL & ELEMENT

The sexagenary or sixty-year animal-element cycle is a cornerstone of Tibetan astrology and is part of Jung-Tsi, Tibet’s astrological heritage from China

This sixty-year cycle repeating cycle combines two cycles within itself, the 12-year cycle of animals (Mouse, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Bird, Dog, and Pig) and the cycle of the five elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Iron, and Water)

This cycle is also called the Great Cycle of Jupiter In this cycle the 12 animal signs follow one another in strict sequence, with each animal sign taking one year, and these are paired with the five elements, but the elements are repeated twice, so that one element is the same for two successive years. It may be easier to just look at the list as shown below

Includes traditional Tibetan interpretations for each of the 60 combination, plus a tarot-like card to make it easy to remember

Note: At the end of this e-Book is an extensive list of modern years and the Animal-Element combinations for

the sexagenary cycle of sixty years. Look up your year.
The link is here

“SEXAGENARY CYCLE: ANIMAL-ELEMENT YEARS”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Sexagenary%20Animal-Element%20Cycle.pdf>

Dec 4, 2020, 9:34 PM

TIBETAN LUNAR DAY CYCLE

INTERPRETED WESTERN AND EASTERN

[The link to this free book is at the bottom of this article. Samples of one lunar day enclosed, with the traditional Tibetan interpretations and then in wester-style by Michael Erlewine.]

The idea: The basic structure of any cycle, and thus all cycles, is similar, the movement from an inner point of contraction or encapsulation (seed) to an outer expansion or fullness (flower), and back again to the seed point. All cycles follow this pattern, whether it be the cycle of the breath, heartbeat, the seasons, the solunar cycle, or any planetary pair cycle. You can also examine the circle of the astrological houses, the zodiac in the same way. Use the cycle of the breath as an example:

There are two halves or hemispheres to any cycle, the outgoing or expanding half, and the ingoing or contracting half. The two key points of any cycle are the

seed point, like the New Moon, and the expanded phase, like the Full Moon

The next two most important points in a cycle are the two quarters, like the quarter moon, halfway between in and out (expanding half), and halfway between out and in (contracting half)

These two quarter points mark clear shifts in energy and direction, the First Quarter from within to out, and the Fourth Quarter, from out to in. In the First Quarter, we cross from the inner side of the cycle to the outer half, and in the Fourth Quarter, we cross from the outer side of the cycle to the inner half. These mark the change from being within to outward being, and from outward being to inward being

Next, there are several other points that are important. Tradition seems to favor the 45-degree points on the cycle as the next most important events, and because these 45-degree points are one half a square or 90-degree aspect, these 45-degree marks are said to indicate shifts in activity or physicality. These 45-degree marks are crucial, IMO

For my own part, I tend to find the four points, sextile/trine (60, 120, 240, 300) to be equally important, and perhaps even more so, because they introduce another kind of aspect to the analysis, one which I find particularly useful, "realization."

So, these 16 aspects are what I look to as the major phase events in any cycle: 0, 30, 45, 60, 90, 120, 135, 150, 180, and 180, 225, 240, 270, 300, 315, and 330 degrees of angular separation. You can also use the division of any circle into 30 sections of 12-degrees each, which is what the Lunar Days are in the solunar cycle

Of equal importance, at all times, is to keep in mind where these phase aspects fit into the overall cycle. Let me give one clear example, and it will be a corny one, but hopefully helpful:

If I have a circular route that passes through a large swamp, and at the center of the swamp is a rest area, where you can get some food, while you are traveling. Let's say the rest area is one of our main phase aspects. And, you are traveling through the swamp, but not quite near the rest area. As far as major phase events go, you are not on the radar screen, but you are still in the swamp

In other words, it is ALWAYS important to know roughly where you are in the cycle phases, even if you are not at one of the main phase points

As astrologer Dane Rudhyar pointed out very clearly in a conversation at my home years ago, many (if not most) astrologers pay NO attention to phase cycles. A square, is a square, is a square... as far as popular astrology is concerned. If you have transiting Saturn square to its natal position, it makes a huge difference whether that square is a waxing or a waning square, the difference between a fairly young person and a quite older person. Most astrologers do pay attention in the above example, however, most astrologers also don't pay this same attention otherwise

It makes absolute sense to measure aspects by their phase angle (in context) and not just by their geometrical angle

And one last thought, referring to our walk through the swamp analogy: While it makes great sense to try and pinpoint the aspect phases, it also makes equal sense to note the general phase area, the angular separation,

between the two bodies, whether or not it is near one of the main phase points

And, if I may, this is true for all astrology. If you choose to not declare a square aspect as present if the angular separation is 11 degrees, and you are using a 10 degree orb, at least be clear that what you have here is more like a square, than it is like ANY other major aspect. It is squar-ish, and has just been a square or is about to be a square, and this is essential to note. I find orbs not useful because they tend to make us lazy, especially if a computer program does not list the aspect because it failed to be the aspect by one degree more than the orb we set. Orbs are not helpful. Instead, always see what part of the swamp you are in

Keep your thinking in the ballpark. For one, you always have some landmarks this way. You are not dependent on a few events to give you information

Every planetary combination is on a continuous curve, circle, and cycle, and there are no rest stops in cycle space. Yes, there are aspects that seem to resonate, at least with astrologers, but there is no space empty of activity between these special phase aspects.

Everything depends on its context, and it is very useful to note the context of any two planets, not just whether they are near a major aspect. With that in mind, let's walk through the 360-degree cycle with a little more granularization

THE CIRCLE, CYCLE, AND ITS CIRCULATION

And all this is true when we look at the solunar cycle of 30 lunar days as used in Tibet, India, China, and other Asian countries. I have spent years (decades) exploring the 30-day lunar cycle as used in Tibet. I even learned enough Tibetan that with the help of a Bhutanese

scholar who knew Tibetan, we translated a variety of Tibetan teachings, most notably from the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. And I have examined many documents from India and their interpretations

Sadly, since I don't read Tibetan well enough, not to mention Sanskrit, Hindi, and Chinese, I have no definitive results to report. In fact, what I came up with is a bit of a mess. For example, one source says not to travel on a given lunar day, while another says do travel. Multiply that by scores of statements and you can get an idea of what I mean by "mess."

And so, what I have done is a little different. For each lunar day (1 to 30) I first provide you with a typical traditional Tibetan interpretation for that lunar day and then, second, a western interpretation (done by me) for the same general part of the lunar cycle. I also have a little tarot-like card for each version, just for fun. I didn't have quality art available, so I just used whatever clip-art that I had on hand so that you could have some feeling or flavor

The result is that you can first read a traditional Tibetan version and then read a western version as I would interpret it. Hopefully this is helpful, and perhaps this can be a start for other western astrologers to begin interpreting these classic lunar days. And, after the text, as an addendum, the whole-phase aspects are again interpreted as a complete cycle by Erlewine

If you don't know your birth lunar day, you can look up your birth Lunar Day or any other lunar day from 1900 to 2054, please download this free ephemeris, located at this URL

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The%20Cycle%20of%20Lunar%20Days%20Interpreted%20V4.pdf>

[Graphics by me. I include one of the lunar days interpreted traditional, followed by the same lunar day done with a western whole-cycle approach.]

Dec 4, 2020, 3:02 AM

BOOKS AND NOTES ON THE TIBETAN LUNAR CYCLE AND DAYS

I have been working on consolidating some notes and various work I have done on the Moon, the solunar cycle, and in particular the Tibetan/India approach to the lunation cycle, the 30 lunar days or tithis

Here are some (most of them) new books, booklets, and notes on this material. Meanwhile I am working on sharing with you what amounts to a walkthrough of the 30-day solunar cycles, a day (tithi) at a time with interpretations. Not sure when I can finish that but I am knee deep in it at the moment

Meanwhile, here are a whole bunch of free e-Books on the Moon and/or the Lunar Days

154-Year Lunar Day Ephemeris

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/LunarCalendar%20Ephemeris.pdf>

Lunar Day Cycles

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/CYCLE%20of%20LUNAR%20DAYS%20WALKTHROUGH.pdf>

Lunar Articles & Notes

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Lunar%20Articles.pdf>

Lunar Day Events

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Lunar%20Day%20Celebrations.pdf>

Lunar Day Electional

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Lunar%20Days%20Elect.pdf>

Lunar Gaps

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Lunar%20Gaps%20Full%202.pdf>

Lunations East & West

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Lunation%20Cycle%20East%20and%20West%20Final.pdf>

Lunar Phenomena

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20My%20FIN%20TIBNOTESFIN.pdf>

Lunar Days Electional

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20TITHI%20ELECTIONAL.pdf>

Tables of Tithies

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20TITHIES%20TABLES%202020.pdf>

Mother Moon: Astrology of the Lights

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

Vision of the Eclipse

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/vision_eclipse.pdf

Tithies and Karanas

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Tithiout%20FORMAT.pdf>

THE 30 LUNAR DAY CYCLE EXPLAINED

Those of us here in the West are familiar with the monthly lunar cycle with the four quarters of the moon, the New Moon, the start of the First quarter, followed by the Second Quarter leading to the Full Moon, which is the start of the Third Quarter, and the Fourth Quarter leading up to the next New Moon. That's about all know

Some folks, mostly Western astrologers, divide up the monthly lunar cycle into eight parts by dividing each of the four quarters in two, giving the following

New .Moon (0°)

Waxing Crescent (45°)

First Quarter (90°)

Waxing Gibbous (135°)

Full Moon (180°)

Waning Gibbous (225°)

Third Quarter (270°)

Waning Crescent (315°)

The Tibetans, Indians, and many Asians divide the solunar cycle into 30 days (two 15-day halves). Some of you have asked me to explain something about how to use these lunar days, so I made this diagram and an accompanying diagram as a legend of sorts

The diagram contains most of what you need to know to better understand the thirty Lunar Days (Tithis). Please refer to it. Plus, I have included a number of interesting charts and notes for once you understand how to use the lunar days

You need to download the 154-Year Lunar Day Ephemeris so that you can look up today's date (or your birthdate) and see which Lunar Day it is

The large solunar diagram should give you an idea of how it all work. The Moon goes around the Sun in about a month, a lunar month. This is the familiar cycle from New Moon to Full Moon and back to the next New Moon

The Tibetan divide that month into 30 days on 12-degree increments of the angular separation of the Moon from the Sun. The Tibetans and the Indians traditionally have associated each of these 30 lunar days with certain qualities if you are born under that lunar day or events if that lunar day is taking place today. I have included some of those interpretations in the various charts and tables for your information

Plus, here are a whole bunch of free e-Books on the Moon and/or the Lunar Days

Tithies and Karanas

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Tithiout%20FORMAT.pdf>

154-Year Lunar Day Ephemeris

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Lunar Day Electional

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Lunar%20Days%20Elect.pdf>

Lunar Gaps

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20Lunar%20Gaps%20Full%202.pdf>

Lunations East & West

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Lunar Days Electional

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20TITHI%20ELECTIONAL.pdf>

Tables of Tithies

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/GO%20TITHIES%20TABLES%202020.pdf>

Mother Moon: Astrology of the Lights

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

Vision of the Eclipse

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/vision_eclipse.pdf

[Graphics by Me.]

Dec 2, 2020, 11:23 AM

154-YEAR LUNAR DHARMA-PRACTICE EPHEMERIS

FREE- Years from 1900 to 2054

All of the Tibetan monks that I have met, and the lamas and rinpoches, use an astrological calendar for their daily practice, especially for scheduling group events. I spent years quizzing them about astrology and the dharma. What I found out is that they all use these astrological calendars, but very few, including the rinpoches, knew how to calculate them

And, with the language barriers, I grew old trying to explain to them that most of these calendars that they were using were calculated for India (or some other time zone), yet they were using them here in America. They are not accurate here, but many clung to them anyway

I even brought two expert astrologers (Tsipas) who were from India and Bhutan to live at our center (for years) in an attempt to learn what I could. Together we translated material from the 3rd Karmapa (Rangjung Dorje), who was an astrologer and put it into English. Although I learned to read Tibetan and translate with a dictionary, I never got good enough to do this on my own. And I spent many months working with a Tibetan astrologer expert from Rumtek, Sikkim to extend calculations that apparently had been lost or had run out

I later took those calculations to Tibet and presented them to the 17th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje) at his ancestral home in Tsurphu Monastery, who gave me the name Tenzin Nyima, which translates to something like "Holder of the Sun," which amazed me, because I am well-known here in the U.S. as a heliocentric (sun-centered) astrologer and the Karmapa could not have known that, but he did

Anyway, here is an accurate 154-year DAILY lunar ephemeris for dharma practitioners that for EST (Eastern Standard Time) from 1900-01-01 to 2054-01-01, showing:

Lunar Day (Tithies 1-30)

Weekday,

Date,

EST (Eastern Standard Time)

KM (Tsurphu Calendar),

DM (Gelugpa Calendar),

Eclipse,

K (Losar Tsurphu Kagyu),

D (Losar Gelugpa, Dalai Lama),

TF (combined Tidal Force)

This is a PDF, but very large file, yet it is everything you need for following the thirty lunar days of the Tibetan practice calendar. I suggest you download it while you can, because it may be hard to find anything like it for that length again

The dates and times are accurate for EST (Eastern Standard Time). However, you will have to adjust them to your particular time zone AND adjust for DST (Daylight Saving Time) when that is in effect. That should be a one-time calculation that you remember or write down when you use this calendar. The list also indicates when there is an eclipse

Beyond on, this list also ATTEMPTS to give Losar (Tibetan New Year) for both the Tsurphu (Karmapa) and the Gelugpa (Dalai Lama) Tibetan New Year, and an attempt to list the Tibetan months involved, but whether those are accurate I can't be sure because there are so many variants in the traditions that I may or may not have resolved. So, treat that as extra information that may be correct, but I can't be sure

Here is the link to the Lunar Day Ephemeris:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/LunarCalendar%20Ephemeris.pdf>

Dec 1, 2020, 9:05 PM

FIRE & BRIMSTONE IN THE DHARMA

Urgency in Dharma Practice

In my experience, every religion or spiritual practice has a little (or a lot) of what I call “fire and brimstone,” imperatives, words for action that also can put fear in us. They are not always right out front on the surface, but if you poke around or dig down, they are there

The way I have come to appreciate the fire and brimstone is the following. If we are new to the teachings, too much fire and brimstone will tend to snuff out our flame of interest in that approach and we move on. However, if we stick around, at some point, the imperative or commanding tone is welcomed, because

we have faith in the process and want to get right down to it and do what needs to be done

That absolutely happens in the dharma, at least in my experience. There are times that we, each of us, have to be spoken to directly lest we go off the rails. And if going off the rails is what we have to do, then this or that spiritual technique is not going to work for us

Just as when my dogs used to come home with some dead and rotting critter in their mouth and I had to tell them: DROP IT! And they usually did, although I can tell you a funny story, which I might as well tell here or forever hold my peace

We used to have a dog name Kota, half husky and half perhaps golden-lab. He liked to police our yard, in case any other dog or neighborhood cat had gone in and peed or left something. He was on it. I thought of a joke to play on him, which ended up as a joke on me

A traveling circus had come to town and we took the kids to see it. And laying on the ground was one big elephant turd, about as big as a small football. I grabbed a couple of abandoned paper plates, scooped up the turd and without drawing attention to myself brought it back home and placed it out in Kota's yard. Since he freaked out on any foreign trespass, I wanted to see what he did when he found the huge turd in his yard. Could he imagine what huge creature had laid it there?

Anyway, we put the turd in the yard and let Kota out in it and he started sniffing around his yard as he liked to do. Sure, enough after a while he came across this elephant turd and instantly froze. However, instead of freaking out and jumping back as I imagined he might, he immediately grabbed the whole turd in his mouth

and took off running. He started to eat the damn thing. I had to get it out of his mouth with my hands. It was funny

A Dharma “Catch 22”

The idea is simple. I am not yet enlightened, but am older now, with probably not that many years left, am easily distracted, and not much into forced routines. You tell me if this is unusual

What are my chances of becoming enlightened before I die and why should I even worry about it?

The very great majority of dharma practitioners (not to mention everyone else in the world) are pretty much in this same boat or WILL BE before they realize it. One thing we do know (if we are honest with ourselves) is that we are not enlightened yet no matter how we may rationalize it. If we have to even ask ourselves the question, the answer is “No, I am not yet enlightened.”

And we are told by the Tibetan Buddhist teachings that in the bardo passage, soon after death, we either will or will not get another human birth depending on how we have used our current life, this one we are living now. Sounds biblical, and this is some of that fire and brimstone I was talking about. And while another human rebirth or life is not guaranteed, we can however easily get a lower birth, one in which the dharma practice we have put off doing in this life is impossible, such as being reborn as a bewildered animal, and so on. What a thought! To westgers, this is a foreign though

On top of whatever our current will for dharma practice is (and our hopes for enlightenment), we also have the growing pressure of this inevitable showdown in the

bardo, where (bodiless and without all the things from this life) we will have to somehow pilot our mind through (so we are told) what is said to be (for the majority) a most terrifying experience. And just how stable are we when terrified?

And we won't even have the steering wheel of this heavy body to tie us down. In the bardo, we are anything but grounded. If we get frightened, and think of a bad place, we will (so the teachings say) instantly be there. It's much like in a dream or nightmare

At the time of death, we will each be alone, as we are today when we dream (or even when we are not dreaming) and even a few moments of reflection should tell us how disciplined that is. Just consider your dharma or spiritual practice and ask yourself: have you achieved the results you expected, were looking for, or that you feel you need? Is it enough? If you are on shaky ground here and now, then just imagine what you will be like in the midst of the bardo passage

It will be like trying to control the outcome of a dream, for we will be one big mind with no body. Or, it could be like trying to drive a car without a steering wheel. You probably won't be able to point yourself anywhere and just have it go there or the reverse: whatever comes to your mind, you WILL go there, including into your worst fears. This is not me making this up; this is what the dharma texts and teachings actually say

Keep in mind that the outcome of the bardo experience will determine whether you or I have another human body, another chance to learn and practice the dharma, or whether we will instead fall into lower realms where it will be very difficult to do much of anything at all, certainly nothing like the opportunity we have now in this human life

Forget about the pain of intrauterine life, the trauma of birth, and all the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that Shakespeare points out. It gets a little Old-Testament like. Those of us who have not managed to enlighten ourselves in this life will have no choice but to try and qualify for yet another chance at a human life in the bardo, hoping to somehow keep what we now have, and to at least come out even, but with no guarantee. I am imagining that 99.99% of us are in roughly the same boat

We will be angling for and hoping for another human rebirth, another chance on a human life, rather than fall into what are called the “lower realms.” If it has been hard for us to get serious in this life, it may be almost impossible to practice dharma in the next. Ninety-nine percent is a good percentage, basically like: all of us

If you have ever wondered why many of the Asian Buddhists are into the Buddha Amitabha and his “Pure Land” Buddha realm called Sukhavati (Tibetan: Dewa-Chen), it is because, of all the buddhas, the Buddha Amitabha has promised each of us an easier access to his pure-land realm, an access that for most would take place in the bardo instead of rebirth – at what otherwise is the changing of the bodies and perhaps also changing realms

Sukhavati is said to not only allow us to avoid falling into lower rebirths, but also to avoid our even taking another human rebirth whatsoever. According to the teachings, if we merit it, we go directly to Sukhavati at death and we become enlightened, period, end of births from karma. This is due (as the teaching say) to the compassion of the Buddha Amitabha for sentient beings, in this case we humans

Obviously, as an unenlightened human, I know nothing about this Sukhavati realm personally, but am only sharing with you what the teachings tell us. This option (Sukhavati) is very appealing compared to the alternatives

Aside from trying to qualify for Sukhavati, the majority of us are practicing not only to become enlightened using the methods Buddha taught, but also to get our minds in good enough shape before we die so as not to lose our balance in the bardo and fail to obtain at least another human birth, complete with all its joys and sorrows. So, there is some extra pressure on many of us, and that pressure increases with age, as we actually get closer to that deciding moment. Imagine!

My only point for even writing this is to take a look at how this urgency to qualify for yet another chance at human life might affect our ongoing ability to become enlightened, our will and ability to practice. Getting another human rebirth after this life amounts to getting our foot in the door to do our life all over again, like the movie "Groundhog Day." In itself, a rebirth in the human realm I understand. I don't consider myself a dharma teacher, but rather a sharer of what I know or have experienced with the dharma in an attempt to get this all out in the open and being discussed. This "dharma is secret" thing is not true in Tibet, where they talk and debate and argue about the dharma, all of it, all of the time. I don't know exactly how we Americans came up with our attitude that we should not talk about the dharma. It's true of our yidam practice, not to talk about it, but not because it is secret, but because a yidam is an individual thing that works for us but probably will not work for anyone else, so there is no point in sharing it, except generically

A human rebirth provides us with nothing more than another chance at life, another opportunity to practice the dharma and to work toward our enlightenment, that is 'if' we can be born in a time and place where dharma is available to us, which is itself not certain or guaranteed

Whatever skills or imprint we start out with in our next life will come from our dharma practice in this current life. It is entirely up to us. We set the pace. It all comes down to our actually having to DO something toward awakening ourselves, toward becoming enlightened. No one will or can (not even a Buddha) do it for us, and we can take all the time in the world to get the job done, lifetime after lifetime if needed, and so we have up till now

Nothing will ever change for the better, except as we change it. We are not going to stumble on or luck into enlightenment. If that were true, we would have done it a long time ago. We are, as one high rinpoche puts it, the "stragglers," the ones who have not managed to get enlightened in all of the time in the world of eternity up to now - eons

Fear of the bardo (and attempts to get ready for it) remind me a little of being distracted and worn out by a low-paying job while all of our hopes or dreams go unattended. Our fear and worries about our future may make that future all the more urgent, but they also can detract from our concentration on our dharma practice. And I don't mean to be disrespectful

We are told that the most important thing is to study and practice the dharma and move toward enlightenment, step by step. However, at the same time we have to somehow get ready to pass through the eventual bardo experience at the end of this life, if we don't reach

enlightenment before we die. This is not something we can just ignore or endlessly put off, as there is an end to our current life and then there we will be: in the bardo

The two should be the same thing, meaning: if we work hard at our dharma practice in becoming more aware, that alone will stand us in good stead when we enter the bardo at death. And if the two are not the same, that is, if our fear of not being ready for the bardo overpowers our actual ability to do our daily dharma practice, then the amount of actual dharma practice we get done should take priority over the fear of what will happen in the bardo and not vice versa. In other words, our fear of the bardo can inhibit our actual dharma practice

At the time we die, nothing we have done (with the exception of dharma practice) will be of any use to us at all. Our money, friends, all our experiences, and any and everything we have accomplished in this mundane life will be totally useless in the bardo realms. We won't even have our familiar body, but will be the 'horseless headman', just out there (or in there) alone with our mind, driven about willy-nilly only by whatever discipline we actually have mastered, not by our intellectual understanding of the dharma. Thinking won't help

All the dharma talk, hopes, fears, dreams, and what-not part of our dharma practice will also be lost to us, leaving only whatever imprints and dharma skills in directing the mind we have actually acquired up to that point. All of our clever rationalizations will add up to nothing and make no sense. There will be no sense to make

Many have told me that when they are in the bardo, they are counting on their dharma teacher or some

dharma saint to appear and guide them. I can't say that's not true; I only ask: how will that work?

My impression is that we will only have whatever essentials we have learned from our teachers, meaning the realization we have recognized and internalized through our own practice. And even their essence won't just rub off on us. We have to acquire or master even that for ourselves. Teachers can only point the way; they can't do our practice for us. They can't live our lives for us. In the bardo, we will have to make up our mind on the spot based on how our mind is made up, as in: how we made it up in this life. We won't suddenly be different than we are now as far as mind training. We will be what we have done and how we have lived:
karma

In summary, we seriously have to figure out how to work on becoming enlightened in this life, while at the same time live under the pressure and the age-ticking clock to prepare for the inevitable bardo passage. The growing pressure to meet the demands of the bardo can actually inhibit us from doing the practice needed to be confident in the bardo, a "Catch-22" if there ever was one

That's the idea. If you want to read more, here is a small free e-Book to download. It has more about what we can do about this:

"Urgency in Dharma Practice"

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/URGENCY%20IN%20DHARMA%20PRACTICE.pdf>

Nov 30, 2020, 7:01 PM

ASTRONOMICAL FACTS AND THE DHARMA

[The following is technical. It's not intended to confuse or confound you, but rather to give you a taste of how complex all of these forces we feel inside us are. I suggest that it won't hurt you to read through it and get a feeling for this complexity

I love it. Years ago when I first programmed astrology on calculators and later on home computers and shared my programs with my fellow astrologers, they loved to think of me (and said so!) as technical, the Geek programmer, but at the same time they would “wink, wink” assume that they were more intuitive than a Geek and had a margin on interpretation

I seldom said anything, but little did they know that I am an interpreter just as much as they are, just one more in touch with the actual astronomical facts on which astrology depends. I did not start out as the “technical guy” they liked to imagine me as (and limit me to), but rather I'm also a full-blown dreamer just like them. LOL

I learned about astronomy because I wanted more and clearer facts to help me interpret, not because I was a nerd. When I was young, the word “nerd” did not yet exist. A lot is made about astrology being cultural astronomy. It sounds right, doesn't it, that astrology is the interpretation of astronomical events? I think so

But what does that mean to astrologers? Do we actually pay much attention to the astronomy upon which our astrology is based? And what would that mean? It

would mean, as it should, that we astrologers take our cue from the astronomers

In other words, we interpret the facts of astronomy and nothing more. Adding psychism or using astrology as an oracle is fine, but that's not technically astrology. In other words, astrology can be an oracle, but so can anything else in the world – whatever floats your boat

“To each his own, said the lady as she kissed the pig!”
If we want to learn more about astrology, we are limited to the astronomical facts and they are always available to us, if we will just dig a little. After all, astrologers intend to tell us what all the astronomical facts mean

I guess my point is that in order to do that, we would have to know something about the facts, because, when all is said and done, the facts have it. They are what we, as astrologers, interpret. Anything else is beside the point. I have made a habit of looking into the facts on which astrology is based, and in many ways

I won't try to reference all of them here, but let's take one example, our mother Moon. We could write books about the moon; I have even done that. But here, for this brief article, let's explore some lunar facts and see if any of them set off some synapses in your brain. It's a safe and sure way to develop astrology

Here, we will talk about the radial and tractive force of the moon. Most of us are familiar with the radial force (Moon-Up and Moon-Down), if only from fishing blogs, but I would bet few astrologers know about the moon's horizontal or tractive force. That is one point

Another is to example the relationship of the sun, earth, and moon in the monthly cycle. For that, I drew some

little diagrams that I find thought provoking. Perhaps you will too. Here are some facts to feed on:

THE PULL OF THE MOON

The Moon's pull on us is strongest when it is nearest us and that happens when it is straight up or overhead (Moon Up). This point is called the zenith

A second strong point occurs when the Moon is at the opposite point or beneath us at a point called the nadir (Moon Down). The Moon is weakest in radial upward force when it is on either horizon, rising or setting. At these times the radial force is directed downwards toward the center of the Earth

When the Moon is at the zenith (overhead), gravitational force is at its strongest and it pulls us up, ever so slightly. When the Moon is at the nadir (on the other side of the Earth from us), a special form of centrifugal force, stronger than gravity, pushes us out or away from the surface of the Earth

In other words, the effect of the Moon at zenith or nadir is to lift us up or away from the surface of the Earth, but for different reasons. The two points during the day when the Moon is up or down are when the radial lunar force is at a maximum

However, sometimes the pull of Moon Up is greater than that for Moon Down, and vice versa. This variation depends upon what is called the diurnal inequality, which varies during the course of a month

This diurnal inequality is responsible for the difference in the height of successive high tides and depends upon which part of the ecliptic the Moon is located. Using the Tropical Zodiac, when the Moon is in the

equinoctial signs (Aries and Libra), the pull of Moon Up is the same as that of Moon Down for a given day

However, when the Moon is in the solstitial signs (Cancer and Capricorn), the pull is unequal. When the Moon is above the equator and in the sign Cancer, the pull at Moon Up is always stronger than the pull at Moon Down. When the Moon is below the equator and in the sign Capricorn, the pull at Moon Down is always stronger than the pull at Moon Up

Your geographic latitude will affect how unequal the Moon Up and down can be. For example, if I am here in Big Rapids at almost 44 degrees of latitude North and the Moon has a declination of minus 28 degrees (which it can reach), then at Moon up, the angle between my zenith (Moon up) and the Moon is some 72 degrees

However, some 12 hours later, when the Moon is at my nadir (Moon down), the angle between my nadir's latitude (40 degrees South) and the declination of the Moon at -28 degrees is only some 16 degrees. At this time, the Moon Down pull will be much stronger than the Moon Up pull

The Moon is weakest, as mentioned, when it is on the horizon, either rising or setting, each day. However, this too varies during the month depending on the declination of the Moon. The closer the Moon comes to your own geographic latitude, the stronger the effect

Therefore, if you are residing in northern latitudes, the Moon will be closer to you in the ecliptic sign Cancer and this will cause the Moon to be somewhat stronger at moonrise and set. Both the Sun and Moon exert a gravitational pull on the Earth. Although the Sun is much more massive, its greater distance results in the

gravitational pull of the Moon being almost twice that of the Sun

In any case, we experience their combined effect rather than each singly. This effect varies with the monthly lunar cycle. At New and Full Moons, the combined pull of the Sun and the Moon is greatest. This pull is weakest at the lunar quarters. Therefore, this pull waxes and wanes with the month. It is strongest at New Moon, grows weaker at First Quarter, is strong again at the Full Moon and then weak at Fourth Quarter, and on around

At New and Full Moon, the Moon's tidal effect is, in effect, added to the solar effect and the resultant tractive force is increased in the ratio 3:2, the tide-generating force of the Sun being one half that of the Moon. During the First and Last Quarters, when the Moon and Sun are some 90 degrees apart, the resultant tractive force is roughly one half of the lunar force alone

This combined solar/lunar force is subject to some variation (other than that already pointed out) due to the fact that the Moon can have latitude above or below the ecliptic. The Moon's orbit can reach some 5 degrees above or below the plane of the Earth's orbit, the ecliptic. Where the Moon crosses the ecliptic are what are called the ascending and descending nodes of the Moon

At these points (twice a month), the combined force of the Sun and Moon is greatest. Eclipses emphasize this even more

TIDAL VECTOR

So far, we have discussed something of the effects of the Moon as it transits overhead or beneath our feet each day. Yet it is the combined vector force of the Sun and Moon that produces the strongest pull that we feel during any 24-hour period. Keeping track of this vector force is a little complicated and that is where the "Time Cycles" program I wrote (no longer available) can be a real lifesaver. It does it for us

In fact, that program will keep track of the Sun and Moon singly or their combined vector. In any case, here are the various components that the program calculated and graphed:

RADIAL COMPONENT

This is the tidal component that lifts us away from the face of the Earth at zenith and nadir passage. You will note that there are two periods each day (zenith & nadir) when this component reaches a maximum value and that, depending on your geographic latitude, these are often unequal in magnitude

At the rising and setting points of the moon in the daily cycle, the effect is to push us down towards the center of the Earth. At ALL other points, aside from the above mentioned four, the effect is transverse or horizontal. And these horizontal (tractive) forces are seldom mentioned, but just as important:

HORIZONTAL COMPONENT

In addition to the vertical or radial tidal components, there are horizontal or transverse forces that push and pull us across the surface of the Earth in various directions. The earth's rotation produces semidiurnal changes in the tide-generating forces both in direction and magnitude

EAST/WEST HORIZONTAL COMPONENT

These forces reach zero values at zenith, nadir, rising, and setting times and become strongest at the intermediate times (45 degree points) between the above four events. These horizontal components vary depending upon the geographic latitude. In a 24-hour period, the effect of the horizontal component is as follows:

Starting from Moon Up, the transverse pull grows stronger to the West, reaches maximum magnitude some 45 degrees (3 hours) after Moon Up, and fades until we reach the point at which the Moon is setting at which time the horizontal force has again dropped to zero. After this we are pulled to the East, dropping off again at Moon Down. At this point, a Westerly pull is again felt, diminishing to zero at Moonrise

After Moonrise, we experience an Easterly pull, reaching a peak some three hours (45 degrees) before the Moon is at our zenith, and dropping to zero at the zenith point

NORTH/SOUTH HORIZONTAL COMPONENT

These force also have a North South component that varies on a 24 hour basis. It is much like the East/West component, and functions as follows. There is no North/South component for places located along the equator. In other latitudes, the force vector describes an ellipse. At Moon up and Moon down, it is directed toward the South, while at Moonrise and Moonset it is directed toward the North. The North/South component is of the same order of magnitude as the East/West component

DECLINATION CYCLE

The monthly cycle (tropical month of 27.32 days) of lunar declination contributes to the overall tidal effects. The closer the Moon comes to being overhead, the more powerful are its effects. If we live in the northern hemisphere, then when the Moon rides high above the celestial equator, when it is in the sign Cancer, it will come closest to our own geographic latitude, and to being overhead

This effect can further be enhanced when the latitude of the Moon reaches its maximum value of some 5 degrees. Thus, the total declination of the Moon can reach some 28-1/2 degrees above and below the ecliptic. This happens (North or South) once in about 18.6 years

PERIGEE/APOGEE

These are the points when the Moon, due to its non-circular orbit, is closest and furthest (respectively) to the Earth. The Moon moves at its greatest speed when it is at perigee and at its slowest when furthest from the Earth at apogee. The gravitational pull of the Moon is much stronger at perigee than at apogee. The apogee/perigee points (the line of apsides that connects them) are not fixed along the ecliptic, but move slowly forward along the ecliptic over a nine year period

LUNAR SPEED

In addition, this line of apsides also fluctuates backward and forward in the ecliptic slightly with a period of 31.81 days. This is due to the eccentricity of the Moon's orbit, and this fluctuation is called evection. The resulting effect is that the Moon speeds up and slows down at different rates in the four weeks from one perigee to the next

The Moon's speed is also affected by the lunar phases, since the Sun's pull on the Moon is different in the various lunar quadrants. The Moon moves faster from the Last Quarter to the New Moon, and slower from the New Moon to the First Quarter. It also speeds up from the First Quarter to the Full Moon, and slows down from the Full Moon to the Last Quarter

NODALCYCLE

The greatest possible astronomical tide-generating force occurs when, at the same time, the Sun is at perigee, the Sun and Moon are at Full or New Moon, and both the Sun and Moon have zero declination

This happens about once in 1600 years, 250 B.C., 1400 A.D, and it will happen around 3300 A.D

MAJOR TIDE-RELATED PHENOMENA SEM-DIURNAL (12 hr., 25 min.)

Time between Moon up and Moon down caused by the rotation of the Earth

DIURNAL (24 hr., 50 min.)

The time between succeeding upper and lower transits of the Moon caused by rotation of the Earth and declination of Sun and Moon

INTERVAL BETWEEN SPRING TIDES (14.76 days average)

The time from New Moon to Full Moon or vice versa caused by the phase relation between the Sun and Moon

LUNAR FORTNIGHTLY (13.66 days)

The time for moon to change declination from zero to maximum and back to zero caused by the varying declination of the Moon

ANOMALISTIC MONTH (17.55 days)

The time for moon to go from perigee to perigee caused by the ellipticity of the Moon's orbit

SOLAR SEMI-ANNUAL (182.6 days)

The time for Sun to change declination from zero to maximum and back to zero caused by the varying declination of the Sun

ANOMALISTIC YEAR (365.26 days)

The, time for the Earth to go from perigee to perigee caused by the ellipticity of the Earth's orbit

PART TWO

That was just part one. Now let's see if you can make any sense out of some other astronomical facts. This can be a test if you want it to be, but I hope it will spark your insight into how facts can be unpacked into what they mean

Here are diagrams I drew of the four quarters of the moon, showing the positions of the sun, moon, and the earth. Things I find interesting are whether the moon is within the orbit of the earth or outside of it, whether the moon is behind (in the zodiac) or ahead of the earth, whether it is going in the direction that the earth is traveling or going in the opposite direction that the earth is going OR at right angles to the direction the earth is traveling, either heading inward or outward. I find this kind of analysis fascinating. Do you?

LUNAR VARIATIONS

A study of the lunar position in relation to the Kp-Geomagnetic Index, PCA (Principal Component Analysis), and Forbush Decreases shows that PCA and Forbush Decreases (which prevents cosmic rays from entering Earth) reach a minimum during the middle of the 4th lunar quarter when the moon is near the 45° axis (315 degrees, 27th Lunar Day) and thus between the earth and the spot where the charged particles arrive from the sun

A maximum for these values is reached when the moon is in the Second Quarter (135 degrees, 12th Lunar Day), unable to block the particle advance. It has been shown that the moon has an electrical charge of at least 100 V/m, which means that the moon has a positive electrical charge that can deflect solar protons

There is also a minimum in the Kp-geomagnetic index during Second Quarters when PCA and Forbush Decreases are at a maximum (135-degrees, 12th Lunar Day). It has been suggested that at Second Quarter the moon may least disturb the geomagnetic field, which is, at that time, most active

There is a sharp rise in the Kp index just prior to full moon and continuing into third quarter. It has been suggested that this might be due to the magnetohydrodynamic wake of the moon interacting with the tail of the magnetosphere or modulating the flow of solar particles to the tail

FATHER-LINE DEITIES

It is interesting to note that around that the Second Quarter, 10th/11th Lunar Day are the maximum for PCP activity. This is when the Father-Line deities are

observed in Eastern astrology. The 25th/26th days are when the Moon somehow blocks or inhibits the solar magnetic field. This is when the Mother-Line deities are celebrated in that tradition. Thus, the time of greatest activity (male) has some scientific backup, and the same for least activity and greatest calm (female)

The western portion of the sun is strongly magnetically linked to the earth, while the eastern portion of the sun is not. This is due to the fact that solar corpuscular radiation approaches the earth from the west, guided by the solar magnetic field. As pointed out, these particles come in from the Western side of the sun at about a 45° angle to the morning side of earth. Statistical studies show that solar flares occurring on the eastern portion of the sun are much less frequently associated with geomagnetic storms than those occurring near the central or western portion

Nov 30, 2020, 4:23 AM

LARGEST SOLAR FLARE IN THREE YEARS

[This is a quote from [SpaceWeather.com](https://spaceweather.com).]

MAJOR SOLAR FLARE: Earlier today (Nov. 29th at 1311UT), Earth-orbiting satellites detected the biggest solar flare in more than 3 years. NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory recorded this extreme-ultraviolet movie of the M4.4 category blast:

X-rays and UV radiation from the flare ionized the top of Earth's atmosphere, producing a shortwave radio blackout over the South Atlantic: map. Ham radio operators and mariners may have noticed strange

propagation effects at frequencies below 20 MHz, with some transmissions below 10 MHz completely extinguished

Remarkably, this flare was even bigger than it seems. The blast site is located just behind the sun's southeastern limb. As a result, the explosion was partially eclipsed by the body of the sun. It might have been an X-class event

The flare also hurled a significant coronal mass ejection (CME) into space, shown here in a coronagraph image from the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO):

This CME will not hit Earth. It is outside the strikezone for geoeffective solar storms. If, however, it were coming our way, we would be anticipating a strong geomagnetic storm. Maybe next time!

"Next time" could be just days away. The hidden sunspot that produced this major event will rotate onto the Earthside of the sun during the next day or two. Then its ability to spark geomagnetic storms will be greatly increased

Nov 29, 2020, 7:29 PM

LUNAR OBSERVATIONS

[With the Full Moon coming up on Monday (the "Full Beaver Moon," also called the "Full Frost Moon"), this is a good time to share a teaching on Tibetan astrology by the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Years ago, probably in the late 1980s, my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karhtar Rinpoche came to our dharma center "Heart

Center KTC” and spoke on Tibetan astrology and some of the festivals that Tibetan monks celebrate. Of course, he knew that I was an astrologer or “Tsipa,” as they called in Tibet. The Tibetan monks all use astrology. Here is some of that teaching and it should be very interesting to any of you interested in astrology.]

LUNAR OBSERVATIONS

by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

Then, there are specific events that pertain to specific sects which are of course observed by these particular lineages. One thing is different. In Tibet, there never was the system that we have in the West of having so many days of each week as holidays -- Saturday and Sundays off. There was not anything like that. There is no weekday that is a holiday, in that context. But, the full moon, which is the 15 day of the lunar month and the new moon which is the 30th day (usually) of the month, these full moon and new moon days are observed

In the teachings of the Buddha, specifically in the vinaya as regards to precepts and disciplines, Buddha had emphasized that, in the absence of the Buddha, during these full and new moon days, practitioners should reaffirm their vows and precepts. Any aspect, or element of their vows or precepts that may have been violated, contaminated must be renewed and restored to completeness -- full and pure

In the different monasteries (in all four schools), every 15 days or half month (the day of the full and new moon), all the sangha get together to reaffirm and renew precepts or vows. This is known as sojung practice. Sojung basically means whatever has been violated is restored to completeness (purified), and

whatever has been maintained is further reaffirm. Lay practitioners who are informed of these occasions (meaning everyone who in name is a practitioner) also participate. They do not necessarily have the knowledge of the different practices and important events in the Buddhist calendar, but they, in their own way, observe these occasions by doing mainly nungne practice or by dedicating themselves to different other practices of purification

These days are not only important within the vinaya context, but from the vajrayana view, they are even more important. From the vajrayana (tantric) teachings point of view, the change of the sun and the moon produce a change of the elements, and thus a shift or change in the elements/planets. While there is a shift in the more physical sort of gross level (the physical elements of the body), there is also a shift on a more subtle level -- a shift in the wisdom mind -- potential enlightened mind

This is sometimes referred to as the wind energy. There is a shift. According to the vajrayana practice, as one will gradually and eventually learn as one progresses on the path, when all the different wind energies are channelled into what is known as the central and the life channel, this subtle system (not material, physical) which is related to the mind... when all of these are channeled into the central or the life channel, these various wind energies, then there is experience of enlightened mind. You see or you experience enlightened mind, and that is how practitioners enter into state of indestructible sammadhi and other meditative state

Related to that, on the occasion of the full moon, the 15th day, the right peripheral wind energy, also know as

white element moves closest to the central channel. And, if one is a practitioner of the dharma, and if one is able to, on that occasion, engage in more serious or intensive practice, this would be a most right time for the practice to bring strong and highest benefit. It is very much possible that one can be aware of that kind of motion happening. There is a push that is in some sense taking place

This is aside from one's own efforts to put the Dharma into practice. Being able to engage in the practice of the Dharma is very very important on such occasions. There is a shift. There is a change. What happens is that conflicting emotions in general have sort of increased activity at these times -- in particular the pattern of desire and lust have a stronger activity, stronger upheaval. If one were to know that this is full moon, that today is full moon, or today is new moon, then one would be able to notice that change or activity (in some sense) in one's life

Generally, we know that on some days that conflicting emotions are more strong than other days, but we have no idea what caused it or what didn't cause it. We just sort of go along with them as a part of the activities and circumstances encountered in our lives. On the day of the new moon, the left peripheral channel, the wind energy of that (referred to also as red element) comes closest to the central channel

Again, for a practitioner who uses this time for practice, this kind of intense time for practice can be of the highest benefit, of greatest benefit. During these times, access to potent qualities are at your disposal more than on regular occasions. If you put them to wholesome use, then greater benefit. If you put it to unwholesome use, then greater harm than normal will

result, because the cause of your activity, the source of your participation would be stronger, enhanced and so understanding such and bearing in mind such situations, then a practitioner would try to take these days into account

The lunar calendar is based on the system of the Sun, Moon and planets, how these bodies work as well as how your internal system works. As regards practice at the times of the full and new moons, one begins on the day before the full moon, on the 14th day of the month. However, the main practice, or the more intensive practice happens on the actual day of the full moon (15th day) and ends on the morning of the 16th lunar day. And this same pattern is true with the new moon too. Beginning on the 29th day, intensifying on the 30th (which is the new moon) and then ending on the 1st day of the month

In addition, the times of eclipses are very potent times. The full moon and new moon are themselves important and then the eclipse is even more so. According to the Kalachakra teaching (wheel of time), the seed syllable of Kalachakra, the symbol of the mantra is also recognized as a very special protection and this seed syllable is a combination of ten letters put together. They are in essence the five outer elements and the five skandhas, making ten. Ten different parts of the seed syllable represent these ten -- five elements and five skandhas

According to the Kalachakra, outer changes take place because of inner changes and so the outer change (we talk about these different outer changes) are based on inner changes and when the moon or the sun is eclipsed, that is most potent in the sense that, then, both the two channels (the left and the right of the

central channel) and the wind energies (the white and red elements) both come closest to the central channel. It is doubly intense, stronger with regard to practice as well as with unwholesome activities. It is a time to pay even greater attention

As far as multiple benefit is concerned, it's because it's the change of shift in the skandhas as well as outer elements. Whether you are aware or not aware that there is a new or a full moon does not matter. It will equally harm or benefit you depending upon the action. The multiples apply whether you know or not. The only thing that would be to the advantage of the practitioner who knows, would be that one would be more joyous in doing the wholesome actions. One may rejoice and that, because of the occasion, one will make the extra effort to do good action

[Graphic by me of the Tithies, the Asian lunar cycle of 30 lunar days of increasing 12-degree angular separation of the Moon and the Sun.]

Nov 29, 2020, 7:12 AM

GIVE IT A REST

“Resting in freshness is described as being without hesitation, like a pigeon entering her nest.”

This quote is taken from a classic Tibetan text, but I can't remember which one, but if you ever have seen pigeons or hens settle in on their eggs, it is so apt

The beginning dharma practices, almost all of them, are about purification. They have to be, because our obscurations are so thick that we can't see beyond them. These are called the Preliminary Practices,

practices like the “Common Preliminaries” (The Four Thoughts), “Lojong” (Seven Points of Mind Training, etc.), “The Extraordinary Preliminaries” (Ngondro), and the “Special Preliminaries.” So much effort is required

Beyond that however, in what are called the “Advanced Practices” (Vipassana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, etc.), it is all about relaxing and allowing the mind to just rest, as it is

For me, it was a major turning point in my dharma practice when I understood that when, in the pith dharma teachings, they said “rest,” it was the same kind of rest as when we sit down in an easy chair at the end of a hard day’s work and relax. Not a special kind of dharma rest, but just the rest that we already know how to do, allow ourselves to rest, as they say it is.”

One final analogy. In Tibet, in the high plateaus, you don’t see large agricultural farms. Instead, you find almost innumerable tiny plots of grain owned by a family, almost always barley, which is a lovely grain

In the early autumn, when the barley is harvested, it is mostly done by hand. The barley is cut at the base of the stalk, gathered into a bunch, and bound together with a string or cord. Then the bound bunch is placed standing throughout the field. If you take one of these bunches of barley stalks, which are tightly bound, and gently cut the cord, the stalks don’t just suddenly fly all over. Instead, when the cord is cut, the whole group of stalks ever so gently just slumps, almost imperceptively. It is something to see, and also is used in the dharma texts to express how we are to come to rest

Nov 28, 2020, 1:59 AM

WHAT I'M GOOD FOR

[I'm supposed to wait for the new year to have any new resolutions, however I seem to be going through something like this about now, so here are my Thanksgiving resolutions or at least explanations to myself as to what I am doing in this world.]

How can I follow my own interests and offer something of interest my FB friends here on this blog? Over the years, I have shared whatever I can here on FB and have scores of free books and hundreds of free videos on almost all of the areas I know about on my web sites. I am happy to share notes on astrology, photography, archiving, music, film, and the other things I have become somewhat skilled in

However, what interests me most, what gets me up in the morning, is the dharma, but within that world of dharma, my particular thread of interest, which is more like a fuse, is very dedicated and somewhat narrow in scope. And you have all heard from me about this in triplicate, I am sure

What you get from me, or what I intend, is mostly my actual experience and what little realization that I can pull from that, such as it is. Sure, I try to present some historical material and general dharma-related info, but that is not my main interest or forte. Sorry, I'm just not a scholar or interested enough to become one. And I hate school and lectures. Nor am I interested in Tibetology, although I love Tibet, the place, and its people, but mostly I like Tibet's dharma

And while I love the dharma, I have never been all that interested in organized religion of any kind. And the same goes for other kinds of Buddhism or any kind of “ism.” As mentioned, what does interest me 100% is “The Dharma” or “the dharma,” however you want to phrase that. This same dharma is true for all types of Buddhism, and so I go with that

In truth, to repeat myself, all I have to offer is what I have actually experienced and what little realization I have resolved from that, which I am still very much immersed in, warts and all. And I don’t think of myself as a teacher of dharma, but rather as someone who has tasted enough of the dharma that I want more than anything else to be of use, if I can, pointing out to others what I have found about the dharma that has been so lifechanging for me. That’s about it for me, the whole ball of wax

And while I could (and can) probably teach much of the beginning dharma (the various preliminary practices), that too is not first on my list, although I hope I am always encouraging of others in those practices. Anyway, I have scores of articles and free e-books on most of the preliminaries at DharmaGrooves.com. However, my top priority, as I said earlier, what gets me out of bed in the morning, is to work with those dharma students who are close but not quite yet able to attain what is called Recognition of the true nature of the mind. I believe that we each need to have that recognition and anything I can do to encourage that, I will

Just because I write about it all the time does not mean that I am attempting to be a teacher of the pointing-out instructions. I’m not, but rather I’m a brother and fellow traveler who might be able to encourage and support

those of you who need someone to talk with or ask questions of. That much I feel I can do

And this because, in my own journey, I never got much or enough encouragement from those dharma practitioners around me, other than from, of course, my Root Lama. Apparently, that is all I needed, because that's what I got

I have reached out to other experienced dharma students out there who I believe are roughly where I am at in practice (or more advanced) but have gotten very little back. I can understand; they apparently don't need what I have or I what they have, but I had hoped that more friendly dharma companionship along the way might be possible, but it's not my luck. Most of these practitioners are just too busy and have even told me so when I asked for their friendship. It almost seems like being a friend and "friendly" is uncool or beneath being a good dharma student. However that works, I don't get it

Don't get me wrong. there are dharma practitioners out there who are my friends (I can feel it) and most of them show up here once in a while, on this blog, and I treasure their companionship. That's how I always imagined it could be, that we talk with one another and share our practices as we travel along There is nothing that I have found that is secret about the dharma that means we have to keep our distance as far as friendship goes. We don't measure practice by how distant we are, but rather how there we are for and with one another

And so, that leaves me on my own (which it seems that I have always been) to pursue what most fires my enthusiasm for the dharma, which is, as mentioned, that I feel honest compassion and even devotion to all

dharma students who are attempting to cross over that delicate bridge from the preliminary practices to Recognition of the mind's true nature. IMO, this is so crucial

Other than that, I don't know a lot about the history of the dharma, the culture of Tibet, or anything else related. However, I am dedicated and have genuine compassion for those attempting what I described above. I'm walking that path myself and if we have to be alone in doing all this, let's be alone together. Let's walk together

Thanks for listening

26, 2020, 9:10 AM

FREE DHARMA PRACTICE LUNAR CALENDAR

One of the last things I did before I sold my company Matrix Software to my friends David and Fei Cochran was to (along with the help of my brother and fellow astrologer Stephen Erlewine) create this web page that would provide folks interested with free and very valuable astrological information

And this also include a complete Dharma Lunar Calendar so that practitioners can plan their practice using the 30 tithies (lunar days) as used by the Tibetans and Hindu practitioners. You just have to go to this URL which is for "AstrologyLand.com, a page I designed with the help of my team at the time

<http://astrologyland.com/index.aspx>

Once on that page, there are two areas that I will describe here that offer free astrology with interpretations written by me, one for a Lunar Calendar and another for a complete astrological chart wheel

Let's start with the Lunar Calendar:

On this main page in the lower right-hand side of the page is an option called "Moon Time," a little rectangular box. In that box is a lot of information about the lunar cycle, including daily interpretations by me

INCLUDED INFO:

MOON SIGN: The position of the Moon in the Zodiac for the current time in degrees, Zodiac Sign, and Minutes

TAROT-LIKE CARD: A card with the current general aspect, whether the Sun and Moon are separating (s) or applying (a), a keyword at the bottom, and a title for this combination at the top

INTERPRETATION: Next is an interpretation by me for the particular solunar combination, which should be pretty accurate

Date of the next New Moon

Date of the next Full Moon

Lunar Day – Which of the 30 lunar days (tithies) as used in Tibet and India is in effect

TIDAL FORCES: A percentage that shows the combined tidal force of the Sun, Moon, and Earth for that given day. This is not often made available, but is very useful to determine how much tidal stress is being

exerted for that day. This is a scientific calculation that is quite complex

NOTE: The times are all within an hour, but can be exact if you do the following. I have asked these to be fixed, but it has yet to happen. If you are in STANDARD time, then the program will list DAYLIGHT TIME, which is wrong. Just subtract one hour

If you are in DAYLIGHT time, the program will list STANDARD time, so add one hour to the correct time. Pain in the butt, but you know how fix it

DHARMA PRACTICE CALENDER

In the lower left corner of the box is a little red button (image of a dharmachakra) for a lunar Practice Calendar as used by the Tibetans and Hindus. This is very valuable to those of us practicing dharma by the lunar calendar. However, you will have to pay attention to the different columns

There are two boxes, one dark red and the other multi-colored

RED BOX

LUNAR DAY – the far-left column is the lunar day (1 to 30) for the calendar DATE in the third column, and the day of the week is in the second column. You can note what lunar day it is for today's date (3rd column) and then look it up on the Multi-Colored Box (1st column) to see what kinds of dharma practices are done on that lunar day. Remember, lunar days (tithies) are NOT calendar dates but are lunar days (from 1 to 30). You can see both the 15 waxing days (from New Moon to Full Moon) and the 15 waning days (From Full Moon to the next New Moon)

In the 4th (right-hand) column of the RED BOX is the tidal force for the day as described above

MULTI-COLORED BOX

Here is a list of the Tibetan lunar days (all 30 of them) from the top (New Moon), moving down through the Full Moon and reaching the next New Moon at the bottom. ▸ This gives you an overview of the 30-day lunar calendar as used in Tibetan astrology

CHART WHEEL DHARMA CHART

On the top-left of the main Astrologyland page, is a chart wheel. You can press the "Click Here" button to get to a larger view of that page. There are a lot of things you can do here, but for this blog, let's start with your heliocentric chart, which I call the Dharma Chart

Enter your name, month, day, and year. Mark whether you are male or female and then select and press the button (far right, lower row) that says "Helio." You should get a page that looks like the enclosed chart for me, with an open chart wheel, with three interpretations, all written by me for your chart. These interpretations start with your Dharma Chart (StarType), followed by one for your Sun/Moon Angle, and finally with something about your closest main aspect Nov 25, 2020, 9:06 PM

"FINER THAN FROG'S HAIR"

One of Michigan's great living songwriters, Robin Lee Berry, has a song called "Bloom," with the line "Everyone's looking for a safe place to bloom." This

song is not for the faint of heart but is one of my favorites. Here it is for those who want to listen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaTxU7mccnw>

From a dharma point of view, we all are just waiting for a safe place to bloom, I would modify this a bit to say that everyone is creating through the purification practices the space in which to realize the actual nature of the mind. This takes space and apparently, at least for me, lots of time

And the standard Preliminary Practices, include what are called the Common Preliminaries (The Four Thoughts), the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), and the Special Preliminaries. However, these purification practices only help to smooth out the rougher stuff, the crude obscurations

Beyond that, even after we have attained what is called "Recognition," the recognition of the true nature of the mind and how it works, we have to further stabilize that recognition and this is what takes the time.

Unfortunately, few if any of us, at least in these modern times, are enlightened instantaneously, emerging full-blown like the proverbial Athena from the head of Zeus

Instead, we gain some glimpse of authentic realization at Recognition, which does not fade away, but remains. However, that realization has to be systematically extended and expanded until it becomes the full realization of Enlightenment that a Buddha has. And that takes time, real time, very probably lifetimes

What I am getting at here is that this thinning out and eventual evaporation of our obscurations, as the dharma textbooks say, is through this process of "expanding and extending" our realization

systematically until everything is of “One Taste.” And this is not just about smoothing out the lumps in the gravy, so to speak, but further refining the quality of our awareness until it is lucid and crystal clear to us. And that is more like the old quote “The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.”

I’m talking about the granularity of our personal filter here, which has to be, as they say, “finer than frog’s hair.” Frogs have no hair, so we are talking about exceedingly fine indeed. And it is this finishing or polishing that I believe is what, when yogis sit in their solitude, takes time

As mentioned, this process of refinement is what is taking place while yogis sit on the cushion for years or when they seek a place of solitude. It is the solitude and not the place that is important. Who knows what we need to do, recite mantra, say prayers, sing songs, whatever floats our boat, as they say. That’s not important

What is important is that we have enough time and space to refine our view of the mind until we are completely one with it, until the granularity of our obscurations is imperceptible or just gone. Anyway, that’s how I understand it

Of course, instead of my always fighting for more time, clearing everything out to the way so that I have some solitude, I might be more successful slowing down and taking my time, as the Zen Buddhists do, to more carefully do each thing I have to do, including brush my teeth, make meals, and so on. That way I could spread my need for time out among what I do each day, all day long, and insert the solitude in between the seconds

I am working on that, but until that's working for me, I am still of the mind, so to speak, to clear my schedule so that I have large stretches of time in which to do nothing more than just rest in this awareness that we all have. I have done that all my life in various ways. Yet, right now I'm still caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, as the saying goes. Like this poem I wrote, I need that time

TIME FOR NOTHING

Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,
I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky

Nov 25, 2020, 9:53 AM

WHAT WOULD MILAREPA DO?

All of the Mahasiddhas, the great dharma teachers, and even Buddha himself had no realization until they did. They each were once ordinary human beings as are we. "Unrealized" is just that, unrealized. It's not that these great meditators, any more than we do now, knew what realization was and could use that as a target or pole star to give them faith, confidence, or whatever. If we don't yet realize, then we don't realize, plain and simple. Even Milarepa at one time did not realize and was unrealized. I find that encouraging

And so, what are we doing all that time when we are learning to meditate or meditating? And what I have long wondered is just what exactly was Milarepa doing sitting in a cave for all those years, while he was eating nettles and wearing next to nothing? I used to imagine that Milarepa was doing all the dharma practices you

and I know or have read about, yet do you really think he was doing those? I don't think so. So, what WAS Milarepa doing?

I do have some ideas and I can't say they are right or wrong, but they came to mind uninvited or at least unexpected, so they might be worth a discussion

Are we any different from Milarepa, other than being at an earlier stage in the process? If the Buddha was unenlightened, just as we are now, how did he make the transition to enlightenment? I had one thought, an emerging thread that tied some things together that I had missed all these years

As far back as I can remember, at least as far back as the beginning of grade school, it seems all I did was ignore what my teachers and the world wanted to teach me, and fight for free time, time when I could be alone to think about or do whatever I want. Certainly, I did that all through grade and high school. I seriously did this, including flunking an entire year and generally not doing well in school. I was too busy trying to observe my own consciousness. That was enough for me and I became what is known as a phenomenologist, someone who monitors their own mind

And then, when I left school (never finished) I tried to hone whatever menial job I had to do down to the least possible time spent each day, in order to, you guessed it, do nothing whatsoever other than what the heck I felt like doing, observing my own changes. I still am

And this continues on, where each day I get up and do my best to do whatever I have to do as quickly as I can, including brushing my teeth, taking a shower, dharma practice, housework, and all the perfunctory tasks that

stand between me and what? I am gathering whatever time and space I can to just be there

And I am doing nothing whatsoever but buying myself some time to ponder my navel, so to speak. And so, it occurred to me, meaning a realization recently arose, that how is this different than a yogi trying to find a place of solitude where they can “practice” whatever gets done in those caves or mountain hangouts. It's not all just the Preliminary Practices

Perhaps, wide-open spaces or vast amounts of time on our hands is what we need for realization to come about naturally. My point is that perhaps lamas like, Milarepa, we are not doing anything at all other than “nothing,” waiting for everything obscuring us to die down so that realization can arise, realization of the nature of our own mind

And all these years, what I have been fighting for or holding out and trying to find is enough time and space to just experience and eventually realize this present moment. I fought for it in grade school and beyond, I tried to arrange my whole life so that I could do just what I was interested in. And now, as I am older, I'm abandoning my busyness in favor of not being busy, of arranging my life so that as much time and space as I can gather up in a day, is just what I want to do – nothing at all

Yet, it's not that “nothing” gets done, but that this nothing in itself is actually something. And so, my point here is that regardless of what particular activity a practitioner may have to do to get there, no matter which particular path to Rome we take, we will come upon this same vast plain of awareness in which, no matter how long it takes, we must allow ourselves to

come to rest in. That is what I believe happens in those caves, call it meditation or non-meditation

And that empty plain or “emptiness” must be empty of distraction, thus all the purification practices. And that, in my understanding, means floating in the present moment, and so to speak, allowing the waters or turbulence in our mindstream to quiet and clear

Is my lifelong struggle to find time to myself, enough time and space, that this resting in the present moment can be accomplished? IMO, it is just that which must be going on in a cave, on a cushion, or wherever we find time and space enough for this to take place. And it is just that which takes an indefinite amount of time, time for nothing whatsoever other than to rest in the present moment and allow the nature of our mind to arise and be realized

This brings to mind the image of the full lotus blooming on the surface of the water, while the roots extend to the mud below, which signifies the earth-touching gesture of Shakyamuni Buddha. This poem I wrote touches on this

WATER AND THE WELL

The rare times,
When nothing moves me,
And I don't feel,
Like doing anything

Perhaps this is some kind of,
Natural meditation,
An effortless detachment,
From my day-to-day world

All that is missing,
From just being lazy,
Is this awareness,
Of my own condition

I don't waste time,
Pretending to be busy,
But just sit there,
And for a long time

Nothing is missing
Watch a movie,

Read a book,
Sit, or not,
It makes no difference

I am right here

The mind is at rest,
The water back in the well

Nov 24, 2020, 9:16 PM

SOLAR FLARE ACTIVITY

[For those that are sensitive to solar flux and activity, and can feel them churning inside us, here is a brief update of recent solar activity.]

Just a friendly reminder that the young Solar Cycle #25 is coming in and is quite active. Sunspot AR2785 flared up on Monday Nov. 23rd producing a C4-Class solar flare, which hurled a plasma plume more than 155,343 miles across the sun. See enclosed animated GIF

Three of the largest sunspots of this cycle so far (AR2783, AR2785, AR2786) are facing Earth or soon will be doing so. They promise C-Class flares (like the one shown here) and there is a possibility of a stronger M-Class flare in a day or so.

Sunspot AR 2786 could swallow the Earth, it is so large. Even so, a pulse of ultraviolet radiation from the recent flare briefly ionized the top of our atmosphere and caused a shortwave radio blackout over the South Pacific, including eastern Australia and all of New Zealand. There are more solar flares in the works, so stand by

Nov 24, 2020, 9:56 AM

WORKING THE MIND

To most of us “Know your own mind” means something intellectual and conceptual; we don’t have to get up from our chair and do anything, so to speak

Yet, in the pointing-out instructions that lead to what in the dharma is called “Recognition,” where what is recognized is the true nature of the mind by the student, something more than thinking is required

It’s not misleading to say that what is required is “physical,” although in a strict sense it’s not physical, but if we could say that there is a muscular element to the mind, this would be it

And this is because when we are asked by our guru to search the mind, they don’t mean just intellectually or conceptually. Instead, they mean to search the mind exhaustively, intensively, deeply, thoroughly, totally, and whatever other similar words you want to use

The guru here is not trying to tweak our intellectual understanding but rather to jump-start our familiarity with our own mind by our actually spending some serious time viscerally examining it, walking around in there, so to speak

Not understanding this was the single greatest obstacle to my attaining any “Recognition” as to the mind’s nature. The mind is not a muscle, but that is the closest analogy that I can come up with to what is required, that we exercise our mind as we would a muscle

In my own experience, it had never occurred to me to look at the mind that way. And it was only thanks to my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, that he managed to jog or prod my mind enough that it occurred to me to stop intellectualizing just because I could, and instead start using something like brute force to actually go into my mind in a physical-like sense and EXERCISE it, so to speak – explore around in there and get to know it

Without knowing our mind “muscularly” and flexing it, it is much like when a baby is being born, their lungs have to start moving in order to breath; otherwise, the doctor has to spank their little bottom to get them breathing. If, instead of breathing, we just sail on over it all conceptually and never descend to the point of knowing our mind from the inside, then our guru must do whatever it takes to pop us out of that. That’s part of what the pointing-out instructions are about

Our veneer, the patina of our intellectuality, obfuscates and overlays the actual reality (and always has), so that we don’t ever feel and know the mind in any other way than superficially -- intellectually. It’s like kneading dough or clay; the mind must become flexible enough so that it is workable

Even so, it took a lot for Rinpoche to, so to speak, get me breathing so that my mind moved (or was flexible enough) enough to snap out of intellectually solving everything without my feet ever touching the ground

It is right there in any statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha of our time, where his right hand is touching the ground in what is called, appropriately enough, the “earth-touching gesture.” Our mind has to be grounded and workable

[Photo of Buddha Shakyamuni with his earth-touching gesture.]

Nov 23, 2020, 9:01 PM

LOOKING IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

The point of this post is best said in the incredible words of the Ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje, in his classic teaching “Dispelling the Darkness of Ignorance.” Here is the quote:

“Therefore, be rigorous in your practice, like pulverizing bones with a rock. It is not something “out there” to be patched together by conceptuality. It must be genuine experience and realizations arising within you,” right here,” through the force of meditation. “ Translation by Elizabeth Callahan

What needs to be communicated, at least in my opinion, about learning dharma, something I feel very few understand, is that in order to learn the dharma, we have to be comfortable in our own skin. And the reason for this, as I understand it, is that the only way the dharma is going to reach us and sink in, is through our particular personal filters, call it our self or personality, or whatever

The long and the short of it is that to fully engage the dharma, we have to, you guessed it, fully engage, and that means “me, myself, and I,” not just sitting at a desk at school abstracting. The western esoteric literature, and psychics in particular, have a term “on your contacts.” All points of contact, using all of our senses, have to be going full-out for us to be able to absorb dharma enough to turn the tide of our ingrained taste for distraction

We have to be all points on, plugged in, and not somewhere over our head in concepts and abstraction, in other words totally relaxed, our local funky self, and open to receiving as only we can when we are on our

contacts and able to actually absorb the nutrients of the dharma. Otherwise the dharma passes in one ear and out the other, like taking too many vitamins, without our ability to absorb and retain them. To retain requires that we are open and have the ability and flexibility to naturally respond – responsibility

In a similar vein is that we have to refrain from looking outside ourselves for dharma to speak to us, like from a teacher or teaching. Yes, those are words of wisdom we hear and read, but the common mistake is to assume or look for that wisdom to come into us through various forms from the outside. It never does and can't even come that way, and this is why. All dharma realization comes from inside us and arises into view, not from the outside penetrating in, but from the inside out through realization

It is “We” who have to realize and we can only do that through our own particular filters, be it our self, personality, or whatever habits we have. We are limited in our reception of dharma by our particular filters and obscurations. Everything comes up from within through them. If we are looking outside for something to come to us, think again. The wisdom of the dharma will always come to us from within us. That is what realization is all about. We realize what is already there. It is familiar because it has always been there. It's called Buddha Nature

Nov 23, 2020, 4:48 AM

THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES

The Four Kinds of Lamas

Traditionally, the Tibetan term “Lama” refers to our spiritual guide in the dharma. The Sanskrit word for “Lama” is “Guru,” again, our guide in entering the dharma, especially when we get into the more advanced practices. In our tradition (Karma Kagyu), a Root Guru (Tsawi Lama) is the lama who introduces us to the true nature of our mind, what is called “Recognition.”

And so, I was surprised to learn, many years ago now, that there is more than one lama or dharma-guide out there. In fact, there are four main kinds or types of “Lama, which I will relate here

Let’s start with the one mentioned above that we all know well and think of when we say the word “Lama,” the “Lama of Lineage.” This was taught to me by my good friend Lama Karma Drodhul, who has completed two three-year retreats and is currently the president of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. If I have space, I will say something about the circumstances through which I happened to learn of this

(1) The Lama of Lineage

This is the Lama of our particular Lineage, the particular school or approach to Buddhism to which we naturally belong, including our particular Root Lama, if we have one. Today in Tibetan Buddhism, there are four popular lineages, the Gelugpa, the Nyingma, the Sakya, and the Kagyu. Although all four lineages share much in common, each of the four lineages has its particular

approach or path. For example, I find (and have found) that I naturally am most in tune with the Karma Kagyu lineage

(2) The Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugatas

There is another kind of lama that most of us are familiar with and that is the “Lama of the Scriptures.” The extant teachings and texts themselves are considered a lama on their own. This “Lama of the Scriptures” refers to the dharma teachings themselves as guides, the actual texts and instructions left by the Buddha and his enlightened followers

(3) The Lama of Dharmadhatu

And third, there is the “Lama of the Dharmadhatu,” less known than the first two types of lama. The word “Dhātu” in Sanskrit means “space,” and traditionally Dharmadhātu represents the expanse of all-encompassing space from which all phenomena, both samsara and nirvana, arise and dissolve back into

This refers to the realization that comes with Recognition, recognizing the true nature of the mind, and the realization that comes with that recognition. And this also is our lama or teacher

(4) The Lama of Appearances

And last, and perhaps least known, is what is called “The Lama of Appearances,” the lama of the natural world surrounding us. In other words, the world of appearances in which we find ourselves embedded in is also a perfect reflection of the dharma and can serve as a lama and guide to us in pointing out the dharma path, if we will just take notice and observe carefully

Although all appearances reflect the reality of the dharma, I am mainly talking here about the world of Mother Nature that is as close as the nearest parks, fields, woods, and streams

Nature is also a perfect reflection of the mind itself. All the truth as taught by the living lama or written down in the ancient dharma texts is also perfectly readable in nature herself. It is all the same text with the same message and pointing to the identical path or dharma

In other words, there are different lamas or guides to the dharma, but only one teaching that they all point out or toward. In fact, while some of you may be searching for an authentic living lama to work with, the world of nature is always present and is as clear and unflinching as any teacher could be. And, this lama of appearances is as near as going outside in nature and reflecting

The message and teachings of the natural world and the message of the root lama are in truth the same. And, of course, we can use as many of the above four types of lama as we can manage

I was going to share my own story about how I was introduced to the “Lama of Appearances,” but, as I thought about it, this would take way more space than we have here. If you want me to recount it, which I have before, let me know and I will try to do that

What I will relate, and in a nutshell, is that during a time of great personal pressure and insight, I found myself going through a deep dharma opening, but not on the cushion as I always had imagined it would be, but out in nature with no cushion at all. It was confusing and my dear friend Lama Karma came and explained to me that what I was discovering at the time (as related here) was

the “Lama of Appearances,” and that it was perfectly natural

[Photo NOT by me. I just like it and have permission to use it.]

Nov 22, 2020, 10:12 AM

WHEN ENDING IS BEGINNING

I'd like to talk here about the two main forms of meditation that most people learn, at least in our lineage, Shamata and Vipassana, also known as Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation. If we study these techniques, it is not too long before we come across references to the effect that the two of them are really one or work together as one, even that they are coemergent or connate, two sides of one coin

As for learning Shamata, my guess is that any so-called “detail work” that requires concentration can easily be part of Shamata training, not just following the breath or focusing on a twig or stone. We start out in beginning meditation clearly distinguishing Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) from Vipassana (Insight Meditation) as being very different from one another. And then, along our way to the more advanced “Realization Practices,” the two somehow morph into being coemergent (connate)

And now that I am learning the more advanced practices, I have to agree that these two forms of meditation (Shamata and Vipassana) are indeed connate, not just in conceptual understanding, but in reality and fact. And they are not at first seen as

connate just because usually students are first taught Shamata as a base or platform upon which Vipassana can be mounted. This is not always true. Sometimes Vipassana can occur before Shamata is fully accomplished, thus helping to bring Shamata into focus, so to speak. The two are incomplete without one another, at least in Mahamudra training

In my case, this was true. I was learning Shamata, but having a really hard time, which would be another story. And while that was going on, out of the blue, Vipassana just happened first, and my intense interest in that practice (Vipassana) sort of pulled Shamata together almost immediately into a finished state, “finished” meaning that Shamata was complete enough for Vipassana to occur clearly and naturally

When I say “I learned Vipassana,” I mean that, for me, Vipassana just suddenly arose naturally, so I was not studying a textbook, step-by-step, or anything like that. It just happened and my interest in Vipassana itself was immediately so strong that, somehow, the Vipassana just pulled my Shamata training together, instantly, and automatically. And this was because of “interest;” My keen interest in Vipassana concentrated my Shamata, just like that. Wham! There is more to it, but that would be too long a sidebar for this article

And of course, it was soon obvious to me that Shamata and Vipassana were two ends of the same process, call it connate, coemergent, or whatever. They worked together and, without either of them present, Mahamudra was not possible. That is the coemergent or connate quality that, as mentioned above, these two share

And so, when some folks say they like my flower photographs, well, that makes perfect sense because it

was through photographing nature, to my total surprise, that Vipassana first appeared to me, and those kind of photographs were for me the first external fruit of Vipassana. It's no wonder that some of my photographs carry that seal

I have learned that in dharma training we, each of us, are so individual, so potentially different as to what it will take for us to wake up to "Recognition" and thus Insight Meditation, that we can't expect to behave like or follow the path of another practitioner. Sure, more or less, we all must find our way to what is called "Recognition," realizing for ourselves the true nature of the mind

However, while the end result is the same, "Recognition," the path to that recognition can vary so totally. This variation is what is called our "Yidam," and our particular yidam is the path that connects and transitions us from the Preliminary Practices (purification) to what are called the "Realization Practices," like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and others

Our yidam is the thread, path, and practice that like a bridge connects these two types of dharma practice, purification and realization. And just as we may learn Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation) separately, first one and then the other (or vice-versa), once we have them both, we see for ourselves that they are connate, part of the one practice called Mahamudra -- inseparable

Getting established AFTER Recognition, is like a kid learning to ride a bicycle, a little wobbly at first, which the textbooks call "Expanding and extending realization," balancing just the right amount of Shamata with Vipassana, yet eventually it all evens out into the smooth flow of Mahamudra. My takeaway is that just

when we think we arrive somewhere, “Recognition,” we find ourself at the actual beginning of actual dharma practice

[[Photo by me, with the Nikon Z7 and the Nikkor APO Noct 58mm f/0.95 lens.]

Nov 21, 2020, 8:59 AM

HITCHHIKING WITH BOB DYLAN

[I keep being asked to share the time I spent travelling with Bob Dylan, so here it is again, with some additions.]

In the late 1950s and early 1960s I would hitchhike to New York City often. Back then unless you had some old junker of a car to borrow, you hitchhiked. Heading out of Ann Arbor, the bad places to get stuck hitchhiking were down by the prison in Dundee, Michigan or trying to get around Toledo, Ohio, that sharp left turn, heading East. Once you got past those areas, it went pretty smoothly, usually. And we would hang in the Village in New York City

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

Lederman played Travis-style, which we used to term ‘3-finger picking’ and his playing was unmatched. Lederman was not a vocalist and when he did sing it

was not special, but he could play instrumentally like no one I have ever heard. When Lederman took out a guitar, people would listen and marvel. Each song was like hearing a mini-symphony, with an overture, the main them, variations, and an ending

I traveled with Lederman a number of times and later in 1964 spent time with him during the year I spent in Berkeley, California where both of us were living at the time. After that, I don't believe I ever saw Lederman again. He died some years ago now and, although there was a CD issued after his death, it was not of his early playing, but something later and not representative, a kind of shadow of himself, at least compared to what I heard back in the early 1960s

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

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

I don't know how many days we were in the city on this trip, which was in June of 1961, but it was probably a while. We were hitchhiking and tended to spend at least a day or so at each main stop before moving on. Plus, Lederman's mom lived in Brooklyn. I remember visiting her one time and she served us matzo ball soup at a small kitchen table by a window. I quietly ate my soup and gazed out that window while Perry and his mom got caught up. I don't remember how we got out to Brooklyn or back to the city. It could have been by bus

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

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

I can't remember whether Dylan played a few songs later that night himself or perhaps he or Lederman played some tunes elsewhere. I can't recall. But I do recall his being irritated by Kalb, and dissing Kalb was

not hard to do. He was just a little too full of himself at the time. After all, Gerdes was 'the' place to be New York City as far as the folk scene went

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

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

This was Monday April 23, 1962 and Dylan had played at set the night before in the Michigan Union Ballroom as part of the U-M Folk Festival that had featured the incredible Jesse Fuller (from San Francisco). They even spelled Dylan's name wrong, that's how new he was to publicity, calling him "Bob Dillon." I have been told by others that I helped work on setting up that gig, but I don't remember that

I remember that Dylan was very concerned about how his gig went over. That is most of what we talked about. He wanted to know how he was received. This was before he had the world at his feet. He still put his pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us back then. When the local Michigan Daily paper finally came out and we

got a copy, sure enough Dylan got a good review. With that he was soon at the edge of Ann Arbor and hitchhiking to Chicago and the folk scene there

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

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

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

Cambridge was where we left Dylan that time. He was heading out west hitching along the interstate toward I believe it was Saratoga Springs or perhaps

Schenectady, New York for a gig. Perry Lederman and I were hitchhiking over to New Hampshire and the city of Laconia to attend the annual motorcycle races there, which is another story. I don't know where we slept at the races. I remember it being just on the ground, but it was still kind of cold out at night

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

This all took place in mid-June of 1961. The Laconia, New Hampshire races were held from June 15 through the 18th that year. This would put us in New York and Gerdes Folk city some days before that

As to what kind of "person" Bob Dylan was, in all sincerity he was a person like any of us back then, a player or (in my case) a would-be player. Dylan and I are the same age, born a month or two apart. All of us were properly intense back in those days. I was 20 years old in 1961. Imagine!

I vaguely remember Dylan telling me he was going to record an album or just had recorded one; it could have been the Harry Belafonte album where he played harmonica as a sideman on "Midnight Special," I don't know. I believe it was later that year that Dylan

recorded his first album on Columbia. I don't remember seeing him much after that, except in Ann Arbor

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

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

Grant Green: THE Groove Master

All that I can say about Grant Green is that he is the groove master. Numero uno. He is so deep in the groove that most people have no idea what's up with him. Players like Stanley Turrentine, Jimmy Smith, Kenny Burrell, and many other really great soul jazz artists are also groove masters. But the main man is Grant Green. He is so far in the groove that it will take decades for us to bring him out in full. He is just starting to be discovered

To get your attention and make clear that I am saying something here, consider the singing voice of Bob Dylan. A lot of people say the guy can't sing. But it's not that simple. He is singing. The problem is that he is singing so far in the future that we can't yet hear the music. Other artists can sing his tunes and we can hear that all right. Given enough time... enough years... that gravel-like voice will sound as sweet to our ears as any velvety-toned singer. Dylan's voice is all about

microtones and inflection. For now that voice is hidden from our ears in time so tight that there is no room (no time) yet to hear it. Some folks can hear it now. I, for one, can hear the music in his voice. I know many of you can too. Someday everyone will be able to hear it, because the mind will unfold itself until even Dylan's voice is exposed for just what it is -- a pure music. But by then our idea of music will also have changed. Rap is changing it even now

Billie Holiday is another voice that is filled with microtones that emerge through time like an ever-blooming flower. You (or I) can't hear the end or root of her singing, not yet anyway. As we try to listen to Holiday (as we try to grasp that voice), we are knocked out by the deep information there. We try to absorb it, and before we can get a handle on her voice (if we dare listen!) she entrances us in a delightful dream-like groove and we are lost to criticism. Instead we groove on and reflect about this other dream that we have called life. All great musicians do this to us. Shakespeare was the master at this. You can't read him and remain conscious. He knocks you out with his depth

Grant Green's playing at its best is like this too. It is so recursive that instead of taking the obvious 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, the opposite of ego. He knows that the groove is the thing and that time will see him

out and his music will live long. That is what grooves are about and why Grant Green is the groove master

[So, there you have it. Sometime, I will tell you when I opened for Eric Clapton and Cream at the Fillmore West in San Francisco.]

Nov 20, 2020, 9:13 PM

A CASE OF THE DAILY BLAHS

[I have just about had it with allowing myself to be manipulated by the media and news cycles, not that they don't have reason to communicate. I know that my family feels the same, so this is not a rant, mind you, but perhaps a little bit of overflow.]

I can't help but mention something about what I call the daily "blahs." Lately, just about everyone I know feels the same way too in one degree or another. Confronting all of the aggressive and threatening media kind of pushes me into some sort of Limbo state, where I don't want to hear any more or see any more news. We all have off-times, but these times are a little bit ugly, IMO. These current blahs have become phoenix-like. I have to confront them and somehow burn off the dross

So if, like me, you are looking for new ground to take cover in or for a different kind of challenge to meet for a change, look no farther than your nearest daily "blah" feeling or perhaps for some it is "I don't wanna" or "I don't feel like doing that today," and on down the line. Choose your poison

It's especially easy these days, with winter coming on, windows and fresh air being shut out, the politics heading south, going from bad to worse, not to mention covid-19 which is really scary. Where do we turn? Well, I have to turn somewhere or else, as I am mentioning here, find comfort in the blahs themselves until they burn off like mist in the morning. Perhaps wishful thinking. It's not morning yet! Never thought I would say that! I have always avoided the blahs, sidestepped them as best I could. I am a perennial optimist, but at what cost?

Perhaps I am looking for some escape, some place to hide or find shelter from this impending ennui, meaning all the mediocre that threatens to overpower the "I feel good" or even the "I feel OK." I give up trying to find some fresh air in what's obviously stale or even something of interest, as in a diversion. It's too much like I'm running away or giving up ground that I no longer even have. I must look directly at what's happening in these times

No, I'm not talking about major threats or even the minor ones, like the housework or chores that have to be done, if not now, well, soon. I'm talking about the feeling I get of just trying to buy a little time to get ready for this present moment (and all that's happening in it), which moment obviously is already here, so who am I kidding?

The last place I would think to look for something fresh and possibly liberating is among this looming ennui, the blahs themselves. Certainly, that is the one place I don't willing go and I have probably never been beyond the edge of whatever these "blahs" now are, at least in a long time, if ever. As mentioned, that's somewhere I

normally just don't go, but these are not normal times, are they?

However, I'm thinking that maybe now is a good time to go there, if only to get down to it and find a little peace. One thing I can say is that when these blahs come over me (or the hanging veil from these disappointing times), it kind of brings me to a standstill. I don't feel like doing anything at all and I am often just looking to find a little quiet space to consider my options, not that I have that many just now. I know; I'm overpainting this, but I just want to communicate the idea. I am not really complaining, but if I were, I would have reasons

It's almost funny that in these turbulent times I am driven to find what I usually consider boring or just blah as perhaps a refuge from the impending storm and constant onslaught of events

When we run out of options or clever ways to busy ourselves in order to avoid the obvious emptiness or to ignore our growing awareness of the ennui itself, instead of seizing our reaction and scuttling off into the "under mind," I'm trying to just hold on to that moment, wait it out, and look at the blahs positively or failing that, at least try to burn them off. There has to be an end of this, hopefully by January 20th

We know what busyness for busyness's sake will get us. Why not take some time to explore the "blah" that we are trying to wiggle out of and see what that emptiness feeling is all about? At least, this is what I tell myself. It may be just the bit of respite I've have been waiting for. I also tell myself to stop avoiding the obvious. "Go to meet your maker" or at least go halfway. Explore. I am working on that and also still trying to shake off this cloying ennui that seems to be smothering all of us just now. It is phoenix like

Here is a poem I wrote years ago about our personality,
the mask or veil we wear that like the phoenix, we will
have to burn off

PHOENIX

Personality,
Bright beauty of the night,
That terrible crystal,
Burning in the darkness,
At the very edge of time

Watching,
In rapt fascination,
Fires,
Impossible to ignore,
Forever frozen,
On the face of age

It is a dark light,
Indeed,

Funeral pyres,
Signifying nothing,
But impermanence

This is a fire,
That does not warm

Nov 20, 2020, 10:09 AM

THE MIND AS A MUSCLE: A STORY

I will share something here that I consider very special and that is learning to exercise the mind as we would exercise a muscle. And I will explain how that can be done

Exercising the mind like a muscle perhaps sounds like an oxymoron, but in all truth, when it came to the pointing-out instructions that are preparatory to “Recognition” (recognizing the true nature of the mind), the single concept “Exercise the mind as you would a muscle,” triggered an avalanche of direct insight that showed me how to unpack the pointing-out instructions into a program of practice that led me to having at least a glimpse of the mind’s true nature

Here is my story:

The mind has always been with us. If we lose our mind, well, we all know that’s all she wrote. Yet the mind is not something most of us have ever studied, much less looked into training it in its own right. Sure, we have trained the mind to do things externally, like operate computers and a host of external things that we use the mind for, yet training the mind, such as in meditation, is still, at least in America, a fairly new interest. We know how to USE the mind (like a tool) to do things, but we have never known the mind itself, much less its nature. How do I know this?

I know at least some of it because I grew up right here in America, so I know that learning to know the mind for its own sake, as to its own nature, is not something offered in any school I ever went to. Of course, I lived through the 1970s, when everything New Age was rampant, when swamis, gurus, roshis, rinpoches, and

on and on were first appearing in major cities, especially college towns like Ann Arbor, Michigan with the University of Michigan. That's where I grew up

It was during one of the thirty-one continuing 10-day teachings that Margaret and I traveled 800 miles (one way) to Woodstock, New York each year. And this particular year, our teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, was giving a special dharma teaching (with commentary) by the great Karma Chagme Rinpoche called "The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen," which went on for eight years for this one teaching, each year consisting of a ten-day teaching intensive

This particular year, Rinpoche was sharing Karma Chagme's classic pointing-out instructions that lead to "Recognition," recognizing the true nature of the mind. And in that teaching, something that Rinpoche said clicked and stuck in my mind. It changed my life

In other words, at the pointing-out instructions by my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche that year, I did not immediately recognize the true nature of the mind... at least not on the spot, so to speak

Instead, as I listened to those special instructions over the 10-day intensive, I finally understood what I had been doing wrong all those years when previously I was given the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind. It dawned on me what I was missing. And so, what was that little piece of advice from Rinpoche that was so precious that everything turned on it? It was very simple, and I will give an example

Khenpo Rinpoche asked each of us a question and told us to go off for 24 hours and examine our mind to see if we could answer it. And one of the questions was "Is the mind the color red?" And Rinpoche explained that in

Tibet, the monks taking this training, were no fools. They would take the question and spend three days and nights asking themselves if the mind is the color red

Then they would come back to the Rinpoche and give their answer, after which the Rinpoche would ask them “Is the mind the color blue?” and do it all over again, three days, day and night, and bring back the answer. And the Rinpoche would go through many colors and move on to other similar kinds of questions. In Tibet, this kind of questioning went on for three months, so said Khenpo Rinpoche

When Rinpoche asked us, in this case, as mentioned, “Is the mind the color red,” when we came back, of course the answer was usually that no, the mind is not the color red, and so on

And when I was asked this question, I went off and thought about it, but not all day and night, because it was obvious to me that mind itself has no color, not red, blue, green, or any other. And my answer was, like the others, that “No, the mind is not red.” I didn’t need to spend 24 hours on it, much less the traditional three days and nights. The mind is not red

And here comes the problem. Rinpoche was NOT asking us if the mind was, conceptually-speaking, the color red. What he was asking us is to go and SEARCH the mind, thoroughly, completely, exhaustively to see if the mind was the color red

In other words, it was not the color that was operative, but rather the searching that was operative. And by conceptually, instantly answering (to my satisfaction) that, of course not, the mind is not the color red, I could (and did) just skip all that effort and searching. I felt that

I didn't have to do that. I even wondered why such an obvious question was asked

And so, clever me, skipped all that 24 hours of exhausting myself in searching because I already knew the answer. Yet, the whole point of it was to go into our own mind and search and search and search to see if the mind was the color red. I didn't do that

It was the "searching" that I skipped over and the searching was the one important thing that had to happen and I didn't bother (or know enough) to do just that

When I finally realized (at these particular pointing-out instructions) what Rinpoche was actually asking us to do, everything changed. No, everything did not change just overnight, but in a flash I finally understood what we were being asked to do. And I did that as soon as I could.

I turned my mind in on itself and went into my mind and actually searched and felt my way around in there. I had never done that before, except perhaps by accident. And about the only analogy that came to me, which is an awkward one, is that it was like going into my mind and setting up a huge tent, like a circus tent, with pushing up poles and stretching the inside of my mind like inflating or erecting a tent in there

When I was a boy my dad would take me (and my brothers) down to the fairgrounds to see the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. And we would first go down to the circus train and watch the elephants, some 40 of them, get off the train, parade to the fairgrounds, and proceed to, with their great mass and strength, pull the ropes to raise the huge wooden

poles that would expand the circus tent. I'm just sharing with you where this analogy came from in my history

The point is that searching the mind was for me like pushing up those tentpoles, thus stretching and expanding the tent of the mind open enough for me to walk around in there. It was hard work, a new kind of mental exercise that was very much like physical exercise. I was used to using the mind like a tool, but I was not used to exercising the "muscles" of the mind. I hope you get the idea

And... it was by exercising the mind, getting in there, looking around, searching it, becoming familiar with it that, somehow, I loosened up my mind for it to become more flexible. I was getting to know it internally as it was in itself and not just as I used it in the outer world as a tool to get things done. And that was key

And that kind of muscular mental exercise made a huge difference. I came back from that teaching and spent about three years exercising the mind in very special ways, after which, during a very difficult time in my life, I had a little breakthrough and first discovered Vipassana – Insight Meditation

I believe this came about because I was becoming familiar with my own mind instead of just using it as a tool as most folks do. My two cents

Nov 19, 2020, 10:27 PM

NO MEDITATION

Our native or natural awareness is what we are using right now to read the sentence on this page. Everyone has it. Now, with that same awareness, instead of using it like a flashlight to read this sentence, use your awareness to look at itself. Try it

This would then be awareness looking at itself, i.e. awareness being aware of the same awareness, something like an infinite mirror reflection. Not that we are objectively aware that we are aware (dualistically); that's not the object here, but recursive awareness (non-dualistically), to be at one with (and immersed in) awareness to the exclusion of duality. We are momentarily just out of time

It's like the two "Scottie Dog" magnets (with reversed polarities) trying to cling together that I had as a kid. They don't go together, but the two separate magnets "short-circuit" and immediately flip to line up as one direction -- instantly

In the more advanced meditation, what are called the realization practices (Mahamudra, Vipassana, Dzogchen, etc.), when awareness is aware and at one with itself, in that merged awareness we rest. That is to say, we allow our mind to come to rest and relax, totally immersed within that non-dual awareness

In the line from the Mahasiddha Saraha, as quoted yesterday, this may give some context

"The undistracted mind looks at itself."

Our awareness (that we have right now) is turned on itself, so that our personal awareness is aware of the awareness itself. It's not actually aware "of" as in

subject and object, but the two are a single recursive awareness, mutually reflecting, until as the Tibetans like to say “the waves and the ocean are indistinguishable.” it is the same awareness, and in that total awareness we rest without objectification or in any way altering the mind’s awareness of awareness. “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

For this kind of practice, we don’t have to think, consider, contemplate, speak, elaborate, or even make any effort whatsoever to meditate. Meditation is achieved, not by consciously “meditating,” but by allowing the mind to rest and by not consciously meditating, thus no effortful meditation

This is something, in my understanding, that requires an authentic dharma teacher to point out to us just how to prepare for this. However, it is good practice to go ahead and look at our own awareness and begin to break down the resistance to doing so

[Photo by me of a rupa of the wrathful dharma protector Vajrayogini from one of the shrines in our dharma center, “Heart Center KTC/KKSG.” Taken with the Nikon Z7 and the Nikkor APO 58mm Noct f/0.95 lens.]

Nov 19, 2020, 9:19 AM

AN EASY FALL

If I stop to consider what is perhaps the most common dharma mistake I have made, and I am not alone in this, it has to be the following:

We want to share dharma before we are ready to do so

I fall into imagining that what I see out there in this very imperfect world that we live in has to be healed and transformed and that since I am learning the dharma, why not jump right in and help to do that. Who doesn't feel this way?

I imagine that what I see out there that is broken is what needs to be transformed, and I am just the person to do that. However, the dharma lineage I am in and the way I was trained is that we don't teach dharma without permission from our lama to do so

Of course, we can talk with others about dharma until we are blue in the face, and do so, but we don't claim to have any realization until our lama or dharma teacher tells us we have some. If followed, that pretty much takes care of the problem

So, rather than transforming the world (and others) around us, instead we first work on transforming ourselves so that everything we see "out there" is actually what it is and just not seen through a filter of our own attachments that we are projecting onto the world

The dharma tradition I have trained in is in favor of first transforming our own view so that we see the outside reality clearly and only then trying to help others and the outside world. Otherwise, we risk messing with the world and damaging it, while we are still doing our own

homework. First do our own homework and then, when given permission from our dharma guide, take it to town

I first learned of this approach back in the 1960s from reading the journals of Franz Kafka. I like to read journals of people I admire if such journals exist

And while browsing Kafka's journals, I came upon a single sentence that kind of burnt into my brain. Kafka said:

"Each sentence I write, it already has perfection."

My takeaway from that was that instead of continually trying to perfect his writing as an author, Kafka worked on perfecting himself and mind (like we do in the dharma) so that, as he wrote, "each sentence he wrote already had perfection." That, to me, made sense and especially as it relates to the dharma

Instead of being gung-ho and trying to change the world, we might better first work on improving ourselves, so that we see the world clearly and know just how and where to help

Nov 18, 2020, 7:07 AM

MEDITATION IS NOTHING

The books say:
Seek a place of solitude,
And meditate,

But it's just the other way round
When meditation,
Naturally occurs,
There is no place in the world,
That you feel comfortable,

Try as you might
Not here or there,
Not doing this or doing that

Only nothing feels right

You just want to hold real still,
Let the mind rest,
And then park yourself,
Somewhere out of the way,

Like on a cushion,
Or
In a place of solitude,
Because:

Nothing is going on
[Photo and poem by me.]

Nov 17, 2020, 9:28 PM

ATTACHMENT IS THE CLINGING ITSELF

Attachment is not as simple as this and that thing we are attached to. That's what we might like to think, but the reality is more sobering than that, IMO. Attachment is not only the glue that holds Samsara (and our Self) together; attachment is what we have chosen and continue to choose, our first choice, our own desires, in fact, our continued desire for desire

As if we could get relief by just removing this or that thing we are attached to. It's not WHAT we are attached to that is the problem, but the attachment and the desire for attachment itself and that is not something we can just remove like a "thing," easily set aside, and move on

Seriously, what do you think Samsara is? As mentioned, it's not what we are attached to, this world and everything in it, but rather it is the attachment, the clinging itself that is the glue that holds Samsara together. Without that attachment, the dharma texts say that Samsara IS Nirvana. As mentioned, it is not what we are attached to, but the attachment itself, the clinging, that is the problem

And it's not that when we are enlightened, we go somewhere else, like to a heaven or to another world or place. The dharma texts clearly say that Nirvana (Enlightenment) is the realization of Samsara, Samsara without the attachment. As pointed out, Samsara is the attachment, the clinging itself, not what we cling to. There, I've said it four times

And we are afraid of boredom, which has been described, as mentioned earlier, as "the desire for desires." We like those desires and are clothed, layer upon layer, in desire, which attaches us to all kinds of

things, and we have done just that for, so the dharma texts say, innumerable lifetimes; by now we must be as comfortable as we can get in attachment, like a boll weevil in a cotton bud

According to the dharma teachings, we've never yet experienced or realized enlightenment, not ever. Is it any wonder that we are comfortable (as best we can) and totally attached to Samsara? It is not that we are yearning for a paradise lost. Or are that we are so deep in the clutches of our own attachments that we can only dream of liberation? We have never known liberation. We have only an imagined concept of Nirvana or Enlightenment to go by, and that is just a fabrication, "sounds like."

However, just as in our sleep at night when we dream of getting up and going to the bathroom or getting a drink of water, but cannot quite raise ourselves to action, so in our lifelong Samsaric nest, can we realize that we are stuck clinging and what we are stuck in, and thus wake up?

In my experience, this is much harder than I had imagined. Not trying to be negative here; just trying to get grounded enough to wake up

Nov 16, 2020, 1:59 AM

THE SHAPE OF AWARENESS

I'm not sure dharma realization grows exponentially, but it does increase globally, meaning in all directions at once, although it may start out locally. And "locally" simply means realization starts somewhere, in our

limited experience, with something very well known to us and that we are interested in

In that, while realization at the onset may be like a fuse, seeming to run linearly, as “extending and expanding” increases, like a plane lifting off, realization proceeds to expand globally in all directions at once to enclose or envelop the whole of Samsara within its embrace

Gradually everything becomes of one taste and eventually merges into what is call “non-meditation,” meaning resting in Awareness itself, with no emphasis on a meditator or a meditator

With no linear end or point to meditation, a lot of directionality falls away. It no longer has a leg to stand on, so to speak. My understanding of this, such as it exists, is that we learn to rest in and identify with the very Awareness that you and I are using to read this sentence on the page

And by that, and this may be a little crude, we no longer identify with our focus on the subject we now call, “me, myself, and I.” This amounts to a transmigration or pivotal shift away from dualistic fixation and a slipping into nonduality’s pure awareness

Gradually everything begins to make sense, from the outside in and the inside out. The dharma tradition is filled with different threads, but as my dharma teacher made clear to me, in all of these writings and teachings, there is only one thing being pointed out, although there are a millions of ways to point it out. And it is pointed out over and over and over again, until we get it, until we can pick up any old thread of dharma and see that it is illuminating the same truth, saying the same thing. In other words, the dharma becomes clear or transparent to us

THE VORTEX: ESOTERIC MEANING OF THE OUTER PLANETS

[Dare I mix some dharma with astrology? I do it all the time in my own mind. IMO, this is a key pointing out of what the outer planets are all about.]

If, like Sisyphus; we are rolling the boulder uphill, what happens when we push it over the top and it begins to roll downhill? One of the trickier parts of life, IMO, is to know when to stop pushing and instead start pulling. There are many places in life where this changeover is required and failing to switch modes is a perilous mistake. In the western esoteric tradition this is called "failing to round the nadir."

In other words, there is no steady or permanent state where we are "done" and at which time there is no more process. Process, another word for change, is universal and the only kind of permanence available to us

As I have emphasized for years, many decades in fact, is the concept of the "Point of No Return," which does not mean just that we can't turn back, but rather we have reached a point where there is no return for us, nothing coming back. And THAT is the point where we do turn around, return, and trace ourselves back along the route we came

My first dharma teacher imprinted this concept in my mind, over and over, using the idea of the "Palindrome," a word or sentence that reads the same forward as backward, like "racecar," "civic," "deified," "level," "madam," or perhaps the most famous one about Napoleon, "Able was I, ere I saw Elba."

This reading forward and backward is about life and bears a message that we would do well to pay heed to, that we will be going back the same way we came in. How is that?

I made a point for many years, when I taught astrology, and introduced students to the concept of the outer planets, the planets beyond Saturn, which are Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, to explain to them that these planets were not (increasingly in turn) pointing beyond themselves to outer space, but just the reverse, the outer planets were increasingly (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) telling us to stop, turn around, and retrace our steps back home, to where we came from

The topic of the Saturn Return (returning back to where we came from) is echoed throughout the poetry and literature of the world. In a way, it's the only story to be told, and we never tire of hearing it. As I used to joke to myself, "It goes without saying, or you can say it again." In my case, I prefer to say it again

I spent years teaching astrology, not that all that much was learned. In the 1970s, much was made of the outer planets, those planets beyond Saturn: Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. They were, among other things, called the Transcendental Planets. My first dharma and spiritual teacher used to click his teeth together and say "Transcendental," beyond the dental," meaning beyond physical reality. Another nickname for the outer planets was the "Metaphysical Planets," again: outside the physical, meaning beyond the prime of life. We all remember the cliché "Far out!" It seems that back in the 1960s everyone wanted to be far out

Back then, many books were written about the outer planets, but almost no one seemed to know what these

transcendental planets were all about or could tell their story to my satisfaction. I will say a few words here

Having lived through my first Saturn Return (29.4 years) consciously, I knew the true story about these planets from experience because I witnessed it, with my eyes open, at least as best I could. My esoteric teacher taught me (before I turned 30 years of age) to witness and go through this climatic event with my eyes wide open

These planets beyond Saturn are not romantic, and if you will study them carefully, they are, as their names suggest, not even physical. They are “metaphysical,” “transcendental,” beyond the physical as we know it, and that is mostly all that we know. The outer planets are a rendition of what I have spoken of in my writings, the “Point of No Return,” and the turning around (changing one’s mind and direction) necessarily involved in that. Yes, these three planets (Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto) tell a coherent story, but in Western society that story is mostly whispered, if even spoken of at all

It is the story of impermanence, of reaching the prime of life, after which (physically speaking) there is nothing further. After the age of thirty years, our physical trajectory sustains for a while and then goes into a slow, but steady, decline. Physically, we literally wear ourselves out of existence over time. Like a chrysalis that breaks open, the physical breaks down and from that we emerge spiritually and, like a butterfly, gradually take flight. We rise from the grave of the physical and are, as the Christians like to say, quite literally born again, but not physically. It is a spiritual or psychological birth

To be clear:

Beyond Saturn's return at 30-years of age, there is nothing else out there. The point of no return is when we realize this and stop looking outward toward the outer planets (stop wanting to grow older) and, instead, turn and start to look inward. We do a 180 and begin to embrace that from which we ourselves emerged, much like a mother cradles a child. In the esoteric world, the inside is the outside, and the outside is what is formed from the inside, just as a baby forms (or crystallizes) within a womb of fluid. We grow from the inside out, rather than vice versa. We crystallize

The main point here is that there is a change of vantage point, a transmigration of view that happens sometime after the age of thirty, whether or not we are aware of it. We go from being on the inside looking out to being on the outside looking in. The beauty of it (or the terror) is that over our lifetime we play both parts and each with a straight face. "Now you see me, now you don't."

When we reach beyond the physical (age beyond 30 years), the only thing we see (like the astronaut up in space) is Earth itself. From space, Earth is most obvious. The mysteries of the outer planets are as simple as breaking out of (going beyond) the physical (Uranus), embracing that from which we emerged (Neptune), and finally realizing that we are going to do it all over again, and again (Pluto): rebirth, again and again

So, the outer planets (from the standpoint of the physical) are nowhere. They are meta-physical and are nothing other than the stages of turning around and walking it back once we have reached the point of no return. This is why no matter how many new trans-Neptunian planets are discovered, their story will not change

This is my daughter Anne's birthday, and I wrote this poem for her many years ago. It is called The Point of No Return

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

A Poem for My Daughter Michael Anne

The point of the "point of no return" is that:

When you have reached the point of no return,
From which there is no return,
The point is to turn and return

That is the turning point

Every life has a turning point,
Whether it's in the echo of age,
Or in the very midst of life's prime

As we reach our point of no return,
We pause,
Then we turn
And, in turning,
We begin to reflect
In our reflection,
And rising into view,
Perhaps for the very first time,

The Sun

Where before it was we who were seen,
And others seeing,
Now we are the mirror in which they see themselves,
And we can see our self in them,

What we once saw shining before us, as youths,
That which we gladly embraced in our prime,
And what we now see etched in the mirror of reflection,
Is our eternal Self,

The Sun,

Ever burning in the darkness of our life

That's it

I understand this

What I find harder to understand,
Yet still believe is:

We didn't know it then;
We don't know it now
We never knew it

In truth,
It never was

IT NEVER WAS;

It never will be
It is not now,
And still, it is
It still is:

This most brilliant illusion,
Shining in the mirror of the mind

Feb 14, 2006 2-4 PM
Grand Sextile Helio

Nov 14, 2020, 9:30 AM

INSIGHT, SAMSARA, AND THE YIDAM

[Our dharma center's stupa gets a new coat of paint and is now surrounded at the base by scores of Petoskey stones.]

Samsara, as we know, is dualistic (subject and object), while Insight Meditation is non dualistic. Like oil and water, how do these two mix and where?

They can't mix until both exist, meaning that until the dharma student manages to invoke Insight Meditation, we each only have the dualism of Samsara

And Insight Meditation, unlike perhaps Shamata, which is dualistic (subject and the object), is not something that we develop through muscle memory, but is said to be a byproduct of Recognition, the recognition of the true nature of the mind

In other words, Insight Meditation is something that, as the Greeks used to say, springs full-blown from the head of Zeus. Insight Meditation is non-dualistic from the get-go, otherwise it is not Insight Meditation

Thus, there has to be a pivot or turning point where the dualistic thought typical of Samsara gives way to the non-dualism of Insight Meditation. In the history of the

Kagyü Lineage, which is the only lineage I have steadfastly practiced in, only the Guru, your dharma teacher, can guide you or push you over the difference and into the non-duality of Insight Meditation. And this is done, appropriately enough, by what are called the pointing-out instructions, which point out to us whatever is needed by us to collapse our dualistic view so that, as the poet puts it, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

This is not something that can be accomplished through accumulating mantras, counting prostrations, or any mechanical means alone. There is no test we can take or course material to finish that will grant us a diploma certifying that we have recognized the true nature of the mind

Recognition is highly individual and is the product of a careful interaction between an authentic master and a prepared student. It has got to be like mental brain surgery and one size does not fit all. The path to Recognition depends on what is called our “Yidam,” which in a word is the particular pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind that will work for us, and probably for us alone. A yidam is highly individual

There is, IMO, a mistaken view that our yidam and the interchange between a guru and a student is secret. A yidam is not a secret, or if it is, it is self-secret, in that our yidam path will only work for us alone, for one-user only, and not something that will work for anyone else

That does not make it secret, but only very personal, but not something to hide or keep secret, other than the fact that our yidam is practically useless for anyone else but us. Many of you will have heard this analogy used by me before, but I repeat it because I feel that it communicates what I am trying to convey

The beginning dharma practices, the Common Preliminaries, the Extraordinary Preliminaries, and even the Special Preliminaries (all purification practices) are something we all share and they even can be practiced in a group. In this analogy, these preliminaries are like taking a ride home on the bus

We all get on the bus and travel along the city route. And we get off at the stop nearest to our home. However, the path from the bus stop where we get off to our home is unique only to us and our family. This unique path home is equivalent to our yidam. It only works for us because no one else lives where we do. It is no secret; a yidam is just useless for others to walk that route. I hope you see the difference. More in the next blog

DHARMA PRAYERS (PRINTING AND LAPTOP)

Although simply sitting and learning to do Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation is always a good thing, some of you have asked what written dharma prayers you might want to recite

I recites a bunch of them every day, aside from the various other dharma meditation practices I do. Some time ago, I made some of these available at no cost for anyone who wants to have them. And, for those who want to print them out, I have made printing versions that will print on any standard printer, using 8.5x11-inch paper. In most cases, I have also made non-printing versions that can be used on a laptop

Here is what are available:

MAHAMUDRA LINEAGE PRAYER

[This is the classic Mahamudra Lineage Prayer, an incredible teaching in itself.]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Lineage%20Prayer%20PRINT%20V2.pdf>

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

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

[This is what is called the Common Preliminaries, the understanding of which is how I got interested in the dharma.]

[itgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The%20Four%20Thoughts%20PRINT.pdf](http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The%20Four%20Thoughts%20PRINT.pdf)

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

THE TASHI PRAYER

[This is the Verses of the Eight Auspicious Ones, a prayer many Tibetan recite before doing just about anything, like a trip or a project.]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Eight%20Auspicious%20Ones%20PRINTER.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Eight%20Auspicious%20Ones%20LAPTOP.pdf>

REFUGE AND BODHICITTA

[This is the traditional prayer, the first to recite each day, invoking Refuge and Bodhicitta.]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Refuge%20and%20Bodhicitta%20PRINT.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Refuge%20and%20Bodhicitta%20LAPTOP.pdf>

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES

[These are the Four Immeasurable, something I recite every day.]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Four%20Immeasurables%20PRINTV3.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Four%20Immeasurables%20LAPTOP%20V2.pdf>

DEDICATION OF MERIT

[This is the Dedication of Merit, to be recited at the end of every on-the-cushion practice or day.]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Dedication%20of%20Merit%20PRINT%20V2.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Dedication%20of%20Merit%20LAPTOP%20V2.pdf>

THE KARMA KAGYU LINEAGE

[Here are the names and images of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, something to recite the names, look at the image, and invoke the blessings of each great being.]

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

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Lineage%20Corrected%20%20Copier%20V3.pdf>

84 MAHASIDDHAS PECHA FOR GURU YOGA

[Here are the names and images of all 84 of the great Mahasiddhas, recite the names, look at the image, and invoke the blessings of each great being.]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Mahasiddhas%20Practice.pdf>

KAGYU LINEAGE: GOLDEN GARLAND

[Here are the names and images of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, what is called the Golden Garland, all of the Karmapas and the Heart Sons, recite the names, look at the image, and invoke the blessings of each great being.]

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

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

[Pecha designs (colored) designed by me, as well as the B&W by me and Sange Wangchuk.]

Nov 13, 2020, 2:35 PM

ORGANIC SHAMATA MEDITATION

And now for some of my personal experience with Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation, and I will start (forgive me) with something I've had trouble with, how Shamata is best learned

I was taught Shamata personally by no less than the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1974. I had been trying to practice meditation before that, mostly in the late 1960s, Zen style, like sitting sesshin with Roshi Philip Kapleau, and other attempts. Trungpa Rinpoche taught me Shamata in Ann Arbor, Michigan, using the breath as the object, but I eventually preferred using a visible object like a stone or stick

Since I have probably said more than you want to hear about this subject in the previous blog, let me start out with an analogy. Let's say you are interested in learning to play the guitar. I offer you two approaches, the first is by giving you a fingering chart for the chords and things like that. I then tell you to go and practice

An alternate approach is that you tell me you really love the music of Bob Dylan and, in particular, the song "I Shall Be Released." And so, I give you a song sheet for that tune with the melody, words, and the pictures of the chords on it. I tell you to go and practice

As to the first, while your interest in learning the guitar is strong, is it strong enough to learn all the parts, chords, fingerings, and eventually get around to learning the Dylan song? Or, as in the second approach, your interest is in hyperdrive because you have your original interest in the dharma, plus the interest in Bob Dylan, plus your love of the song "I Shall Be Released, which happens to be one of my favorite Dylan tunes too. Now let us look at Shamata

Learning Shamata has your original interest in dharma (I assume) going for it, but the rote practice required to acquire the muscle-memory needed to master Shamata (concentrating on an object) lacks much of the second or third levels of interest as mentioned in the above Dylan-song example

As mentioned, I can only-too-well remember when (back in the early 1970s) I was first exposed to Trungpa Rinpoche's follower's approach (as it was presented to me at the time) of encouraging long (and very long) stints of sitting meditation. They were not just hour-long, or even day long, but what they called weekthün (week long) and dathün (month long) sitting meditation sessions. Not only did I not have the time for such stints, but I lacked the patience

And, of course, no one made us do this, but the sub-text was that if you were really into the dharma, this is what you had to do. And, if you couple this with the horrid hard rectangular-cushions called Gomdons from Samadhi Cushions, about the only cushion maker available back then, long cushion sessions became particularly painful as I can well remember

And, most surprising to me, was when I finally went on pilgrimage to Tibet a couple of times, I never saw any Gomdons like that. I did see some very low hard cushions, but nothing that cut into my legs like those Gomdons. In fact, it also came to my attention that all of the rinpoches sat on soft cushions that were loose and form-fitted the behind. They were (and are) very comfortable. That is what I use today. This idea that what is painful is good for you never caught on with me

And so, this push early-on to hurt ourselves through long sits in the 1970s has morphed into something more comfortable these days. And, of course, my

eventual dharma teachers all suggested many short sessions rather than long ones. And they made it clear that there was no use in staining our practice by sitting beyond the point where we enjoy the session. In fact, their advice was to always end your session BEFORE you reached the point of not liking it, so to, as I mentioned, not stain the practice. Our practice, once stained (or strained), is hard to walk back. That is a bit of my history, so let's return to Shamata

I was also amazed, when I went to Tibet to find that, for the most part, Shamata was NOT taught to Tibetan monks until AFTER the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro) were completed. Not true in this county. When I asked of the Trungpa folks why Shamata was taught to beginning students in America, the simple answer (if I am to believe it) was because Americans just refused to do the Ngondro practice, referring to it as "Medieval." That may be a practical reason, but IMO, not a good enough reason to introduce it so early. It's not that easy of a practice, IMO, if it is not done properly

I remember when I was first getting to know my own dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and I asked him for permission to do Ngondro, he gently declined to offer that, instead introducing me to the book "The Torch of Certainty" and the practice of Tong-Len (exchanging ourselves for others). Rinpoche had me do Ngondro later down the line. In fact, he had me do it twice! I'm a hard case

This next piece of my story still stings to even tell it, but I feel it is important to get my truth out there. I had a terrible, and I do mean terrible, time learning Shamata. In fact, and here is the sting, I spent 32 years (yes, years!) trying to master Shamata and still was not able

to do it properly, yet I can finally explain why that happened

In a word, it was due to a lack of interest on my part, but I do have a healthy excuse. Ever since I was a young boy, I have been very keen on what interests me. It would even be fair to say that I ignored eleven years of schooling in the process. In fact, the school (and my parents) were so concerned that they had me take a battery of tests when I was young to see if I was retarded. As it turned out, I was just the opposite, bored by what school offered me. Instead, I had a high IQ, not a low one. I don't know why, but I can certainly confirm the boredom. I spent all those years sitting in school, busy in my own head, mostly about what I would do when I got out of school for that day. For some reason, I was unable to learn from teachers for whom I did not have a respect for their, what can I call it, "life savvy." I was the oldest of five boys, never had a grandfather on either side, and had a father I loved, but who never talked with me about anything personal. In that way, I was my own grandpa, as they say

As an astute student of natural history (Mother Nature) since I was quite young, I was aware of what was presented to me in the wilds early on, Nature's laws. As I understood it, nature is very direct and matter of fact. It was from nature that I learned life's laws, and not from man and civil law. Apparently, unless I respected a teacher, unless they were clear like Natura is clear, I would not listen to them or do what they told me to do. Even as a young boy, I had my own take on things. Go figure

Eventually, I didn't even finish high school, but in 1960 I left school, hitchhiked to Venice West in Santa Monica, California where I lived in an abandoned walk-in freezer

in the basement of an art gallery (now legendary) called the Gas House. I wanted to be a painter of oils

I travelled to Venice Beach to be with The Beats, such as they were back then, gradually atrophying. And in my life, and this is generally true, I refused (or was unable successfully) to work for anyone but myself. I followed the thread of my personal interest and, from that, built a number of businesses that were successful

I was early into the Internet and had email in 1979 In fact, an article on me written for Red Herring Magazine, determined that I had the second oldest software company still on the Internet. The only older company was a little firm called Microsoft

How does this relate to Shamata? Well, this is how. As mentioned, I spent 32 years trying to master Shamata and mostly failed. Then, in a group of dharma students, my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, pointed out that “Those of you who have computer skills have a leg up on the rest as far as Shamata goes, because of those computer skills and concentration” or words to that effect

Well, with that remark, a light went on in my head. I was totally skilled on the computer. I was a system programmer and had spent (and at the time was still spending) 14 hours a day (or more), seven days a week, on the computer, busy programming and coding hundreds of programs over the years. And I was dedicated to that, totally interested in the work. And then it dawned on me

It was not that I could not master Shamata, but the way I was taught, this rote kind of sitting meditation, went against the grain of my whole life. I was used to being totally interested in, well, (and this is a tautology),

everything I was interested in. I had religiously followed my interest since I was a child, to the exclusion of school, college, and any other of the usual opportunities. And, while I was very interested in the dharma, I had trouble with rote practices that I did not understand the reason for

It was not that I could not concentrate, but rather that I was used to only concentrating on what interested me, and the rote repetition of learning Shamata meditation seemed puerile to me – uninteresting. It was like trying to “salt the salt,” so to speak. I already knew about concentration through being a programmer all those years, not to mention a dedicated archivist managing millions of pieces of data and huge databases, where even one misplaced letter was enough to crash the computer code

Once I realized that I had what amounted to a degree in concentration, things went easily. With Shamata in place, practicing with something I loved and was interested in (closeup nature photograph), Insight Meditation snapped into place and I moved on. In fact, it was through Insight Meditation that I realized the importance of and how trained my Shamata was, once I became interested in something. And I experience live and in depth just how crucial the interplay between Shamata and Insight Meditation was and their absolute unity

So, kind of a long story, but I am not angling for readers here except those very few who might get an “Aha!” out of this piece

I hope the takeaway here is that if you are skilled in any detailed hobby or practice in which you actually are interested in... and are having trouble getting your Shamata (on the cushion) practice working smoothly

enough to invoke Insight Meditation, you could do worse than use your hobby or interest as a way of confirming your skills in Shamata

It is much easier to confirm and then transfer your Shamata technique from your hobby to the cushion, than it is to keep trying to spark your Shamata practice on the cushion, when there is no real interest in rote practice. As they say, "I'm just saying."

Well, this is too long. Sorry. There is more, but perhaps for another day. If you have questions, please ask them here

Nov 13, 2020, 10:11 AM

ROUNDING THE CORNERS OF SHAMATA

Shamata in Sanskrit (Shiné in Tibetan) or perhaps more popularly called Tranquility Meditation in this country is, without a doubt, the most commonly practiced form of meditation in the world. And Shamata is not limited to Buddhism or any one country, but occurs in one form or another in almost all countries, sects, religions, and kinds of mind training

It must be the easiest kind of meditation to learn, although I question it is all that easy. At any rate, Shamata is worthy of our attention. Shamata comes from the Sanskrit roots "Shama" meaning "peace or calm" and "tha" means "to dwell in" or "to have stability." Shamata is most often done "with an object" (like the breath, a stick, or a stone), but also "without a conceptual object."

Typically, the tools needed to practice Shamata are Mindfulness, Vigilance, and Carefulness, yet “Mindfulness” and “Vigilance” are the ones most commonly cited

Exploring Shamata yourself requires assuming a comfortable, but appropriate, physical posture. It also requires a quiet place, and silence, at least at the beginning

And given the above, we then bring our eyes and mental focus to rest on the object (the breath, a stone, etc.) and allow it to remain there. If we find that we are distracted and no longer focusing on the object, we very gently (without punishing ourselves for having drifted) bring the mind back to the focus and continue. All of this develops muscle memory, as many practices require

This is not the blog to lay out all of the physical postures, mental things to avoid or add and so on, useful for Shamata training. Here my interest is to have a discussion about Shamata and its importance in dharma practice, what it is and isn't

First, Shamata is not only a practice in itself, but provides the stable foundation for practices like Vipassana (Insight Meditation) and the realization practices in general. Without the stable platform or foundation of mindfulness, Insight Meditation and Mahamudra are not easy to practice

If you read the literature on Shamata, something that comes up frequently is that Shamata is preliminary, but not by itself a complete practice. There are many variations on this, and it is important to separate the truth as to the value of Shamata from the misleading statements, even if well-intentioned

Shamata, frequently, does precede what are said to be the more “advanced” practices like Insight Meditation, yet there is nothing not advanced about Shamata. It simply goes before. As mentioned, it provides the foundation

What is said about Shamata, perhaps where this “Shamata-bashing” comes from, is that mindfulness alone, Shamata without Vipassana (clear seeing or Insight Meditation) is incomplete. I don’t know why that makes Shamata any less. It is one side of a two-sided equation. The two, Shamata and Insight Meditation are meant to belong together

In fact, as you get to know the realization practices, like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra in particular, we find that Mahamudra (for example) has two principle parts, Shamata and Vipassana, and the two are equal partners. Moreover, not only are they equal partners, they are mixed so they are not even all that distinguishable, or to put it another way, there is no reason to distinguish them. They are inseparable in actual practice –together they are just one complete practice

My point is that, IMO, it is best to take any disparaging comments about Shamata with a grain of salt and ignore them. It is something that beginners talk about, but I don’t hear the great teachers saying this, other than that Shamata without Vipassana is not enough, not a complete practice, which is true. And this is because, as mentioned, the two are and have always been inseparable as we move on to the more advanced practices. In the next blog, I will share more of my personal experiences and remarks on Shamata

VIPASSANA: LIBERATION FROM ATTACHMENT

[The following is pretty much a paean or song to Vipassana or Insight Meditation. And by Insight Meditation, here I mean the special form of Insight Meditation that, along with Shamata, makes up Mahamudra as taught by the Karma Kagyu lineage.]

It's not WHAT is realized though Insight Meditation (which by definition has to be Samsara and which could be and is anything at all), but it is the immersion of our dualistic-Self in the waters of realization itself and the relief that total immersion brings that is the power of Insight Meditation. I would call this "Insight Meditation with an Object," even though that is an oxymoron, because Insight Meditation has no object. That's the whole point: Insight Meditation is nondual. However, that is where duality goes to die, to Insight Meditation, so they do meet

Perhaps it would be clearer to say Vipassana has no objectivity. It defies objectivity, thus immersing us in the waters of nonduality, ending at least for a time the reactivity that otherwise continues to torture us

It is the relief that Insight Meditation brings from our own reactivity, our own constant objectification and elaboration, that soothes us. It is the liberation from duality, which is liberation from the loneliness of being a subject alone in a world of objectivity. Insight Meditation is a hiatus or reprieve from that obscuring and divisive duality

In my own experience, Insight Meditation is literally a time-out, somewhere beyond time, thus timeless. That

“timelessness” and its lack of objectivity means that karma is not recorded and thereby not accrued

Everywhere the torch of Insight Meditation shines, duality collapses and withers away until this process is established permanently and welcomes in what is called “One Taste.”

Sometimes I think (and this is conceptual on my part) that Insight Meditation embroiders realization at the very edge of objectivity and is always busy realizing the nature of Samsara as, in fact, Nirvana. And in that pool of lucid clarity that Insight Meditation inspires, our too-tired objectivity is liberated, put out like you would put out a cigarette. That’s just an image that comes to mind, yet to me it heralds the liberation from attachment. And attachment is the glue that holds Samsara together

Nov 12, 2020, 5:45 AM

TAKING OUR DHARMA TEMPERATURE

It’s a legitimate (and very common) question dharma students have: where am in my dharma progress?

If we are just learning to sit on the cushion, learning Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), practicing concentration on some object like a stick or a stone, it is clear to us when we stray off from that object. Even so, there are things we can learn from those who are more expert in it than we are, very important things

If we are counting mantra recitations, prostrations, or any of the many dharma practices that “count,” then we

know exactly where we are in the count, although the accumulation of numbered iterations is no guarantee of dharma progress, as I well know

However, as we advance beyond simply counting iterations and such, it becomes a lot more difficult to gauge where in the world of dharma we are presently at

Years ago, when I finished the quite lengthy (for me) dharma practice called Ngondro, what I consider amounts to a dharma boot camp, I was at last ready to move on to the more “advanced” deity practices. Of course, I went to my teacher and asked him what I should do next

Rinpoche considered for a moment and then asked me, “Do you want to know what I would do if I were you?” Well, how do I answer that? Of course, I told him I would like to know what he thinks I should be doing. And Rinpoche’s response was “I would do another Ngondro.”

Well, that was not the answer I was looking for, because Ngondro takes most of us (who have also to work a job) years to complete. Yet, in our lineage, such a suggestion is to be interpreted as a command. I did another Ngondro, and that was a good thing

In general, it is hard for us, as beginners, to know where we are at in our practice, especially when it comes to realization. Have we realized anything yet? What is realization like?

And the most mysterious and seemingly ephemeral realization of all is what is called in the Kagyu lineage I belong to, “Recognition,” meaning the recognition by the student of the true nature of the mind. In the case of “Recognition,” there is less-to-little room for our

imagination. Like a switch, we either have Recognition or we are still waiting to have it

With that in mind, what follows is a little bit more on that crucial event, where our preliminary purification practices transform into what are called the realization practices. As mentioned, this amounts to how to come to terms with what in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism is called “Recognition,” a major event marking (to a significant degree) the advent of the realization practices like Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and Mahamudra

Dharma students frequently are confused as to whether they have or have not recognized the nature of the mind. They imagine it is this or they imagine it is like that. The answer is simple. If you are asking that question, then you have not achieved Recognition. You know if you have. And it’s very hard to fake, even if you are sincere in wanting to believe that you have recognized the mind’s nature. If you have had Recognition, there is no question if you have done that. You know it. It changes everything

In my training, Rinpoche would get us up in front of a whole roomful of dharma practitioners and grill each of us, if we dared to subject ourselves to his questioning. We had to volunteer. Rinpoche would sort out, through a series of direct questions, where we stood as to having recognized the nature of the mind or not. And the more scholarly were the first casualties of the assumption that they had. Dharma students who had read too much or understood (wrongly) too much as to the qualities of recognition, were parsed out of that contention in short order. However, it was thrilling (and a little scary) to be on that spot. You had to ask yourself whether you wanted to go on that ride

What's hard to imitate or pretend about this recognition as to the nature of mind? And this is true because until we have what is called Recognition, we have no idea as to what that is. We tend to imagine and conceptualize only, because we have not had the realization

Because this kind of recognition (and its resulting realization) is ineffable, no amount of written words or in-person teaching can give us the correct realization, other than through what are called the pointing-out instructions as personally given to us by our guru. As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to say: "Your guess is as good as mine."

If we have not recognized the nature of our own mind, we can't know exactly where we are headed in our dharma practice (or what Recognition is) and that is because we don't yet know how to get there and achieve Recognition (otherwise we would already be there), any more than when we focus a pair of binoculars, the image is not focused until it is. You can't fake it, even if you desperately want to believe you have it. And the proof of the pudding is that if you are pretending, you are only fooling yourself, because there you will sit, making no progress. Using the binoculars metaphor, you will be looking through a glass darkly while claiming it is clear

And so, instead of insisting that you HAVE Recognition, even though you have doubts, it is much more helpful (and efficient) to put your protests aside and continue your preliminaries, the purification practices

The realization practices that follow Recognition, like the special Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra, are a process that takes place AFTER Recognition as to the true nature of the mind has occurred, which practices amount to an ongoing

process of extending and expanding our initial realization (from Recognition) until it is complete in that everything in Samsara/Nirvana has one-taste. In other words, we are guided by our increasing realization itself, which becomes our pilot and pole star. We can see it unfolding. Eventually we would become a Buddha, with an accent on the word “eventually.”

And that realization process continues until full enlightenment. In other words, we are done when we are done, when everywhere we look, so to speak, there is but one-taste, and there is nothing to consider or even rest in other than Awareness itself

Enlightenment, as I understand it, is a successively complete realization, like ever opening our arms to more fully embrace. Just as a falling leaf gently floats down to rest, with realization, Samsara telescopes from duality to non-duality. Or it is like uncrossing our eyes. The process of realization is also the transmigration of our identity from a dualistic view (self, et al) to that of nondualism. We eventually identify with Awareness itself and not Samsara. As Sir Edwin Arnold put it “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

“Recognition” is not enlightenment or anything close. Recognition is finally realizing what has to be done to become enlightened AND that we already have everything we need to do just that. And with Recognition, our dharma practice, IMO, actually begins

Nov 11, 2020, 9:39 AM

“THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WAIT”

A line from the poet John Milton, and wait we sometimes have to do

In 1964 while traveling in upper California or perhaps I had crossed into Oregon along the Klamath River or one of its tributaries, I left the car and hiked up the stream where salmon who were migrating upstream to die could go no farther. There the salmon were, suspended in a clear deep pool, unable to get above a small waterfall. It was for me an imprinting moment, as I watched these large beautiful creatures peacefully floating at various levels in the pool

It reminds me of those dharma students who are working on and close to finishing their preliminary practices, purifying their obscurations, but unable yet to achieve Recognition, the recognition of the true nature of the mind. This is a special group

I have been around the dharma scene since the late 1950s, ever more constantly, so aside from authentic teachers, I have seen all the posers, all the talkers, the fakers, and the wannabes. I have been a wannabe myself and for a long time at that, before I had any glimpse of realization and confirmation of that from my guru

These advanced students are not fakes or pretenders. Most are sincerely working on assimilating the pointing-out instructions from their guru and practicing whatever remedial response to those instructions that are required. And the pointing-out instructions are not always successful

I had what are called the pointing-out instructions a number of times that were unsuccessful. Try as I might, I could not attain Recognition and had no realistic idea of what such a recognition entailed

Once, and I will not reveal who this was, one of the four Heart Sons of the Karmapa, His Eminence, took me into a room, sat me down on a chair and, sitting across from me on another chair, face-to-face, only inches away did his best to give me the pointing-out-instruction, at the same time gesturing with his hands around my head

To my extreme disappointment and embarrassment, I had to hang my head and acknowledge to him that I did not get whatever His Eminence was pointing out. I had to walk out of that room with my head down and close the door after me. LOL

My point is that if you at first do not succeed in dharma, try, try again, which I did, a number of times. There did come a time when I received the pointing-out instructions from my own guru. Now, these instructions did not instantly work or bring me realization, but what they did that time is imprint in me what I was doing wrong all these years, so that I finally got that

After those pointing-out instructions, I drove some 800 miles back home and put those remedial instructions to work, and very assiduously at that. It took me three solid years of concentrated effort and practice to bring my obscurations down to what I would call a “fighting weight,” until they were transparent enough to perhaps see through or beyond

I share this because perhaps someone might need to understand that like anything worthwhile in this life, we have to work for it. And, although I have done many

things in my life, and mastered a few, nothing I have done even comes close to how difficult it has been for me to realize dharma. Hopefully, you will find it easier, but if you don't, my advice is to not give up, but to understand that the dharma takes 100% of all that we have to succeed, with no exceptions

I doubt that in today's hectic world any (or many) can realize the nature of the dharma with one hand tied behind their back. We really have to be all-in to move forward. To repeat: the dharma (and realization as to the true nature of the mind) is the hardest thing I have ever attempted in my life, so my advice if you are serious is to find a good teacher that you have confidence in and work with them

Nov 10, 2020, 8:36 PM

THE ROMANCE OF BOREDOM

At last, tedium and boredom, a topic I know only too well. I will list my bona fides for tedium at the conclusion of this article

Although the idea of boredom goes back to the Greek philosophers, it did not enter the English language until 1766, and has been discussed by authors like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, and many others. Boredom has been described as "the desire for desires," what a wonderful definition, which makes perfect sense in terms of Samsara

Many feel that time slows down and passes more slowly in boredom. And it was also found that people who meditated were more successful in accepting boredom. Psychologists found that for many, boredom is an extremely unpleasant and distressing experience

A study by Marion Martin, Gaynor Sadlo, and Graham Stew (2006) found that “Only one person in this study was never bored, and this was an elderly woman living in residential accommodation ever since she had a mild stroke,” who enjoyed just sitting and looking out of a window. And in their conclusion, these authors write:

“It is proposed that mindfulness meditation could help people to refocus their attention to what is happening in the present moment, thereby decreasing their boredom. It is suggested that future quantitative studies should investigate the proposed negative relationship between mindful attention and boredom.”

While this is all very interesting, I find that boredom comes into its own in the various meditation and dharma practices and also perhaps in attention deficit disorders, i.e. in distraction and the inability of many to concentrate. IMO, the whole nation suffers from this

In my own life, I am seldom bored and have been quite proud of my busyness and productivity. However, I began to examine boredom when, through having a stroke, I realized that being constantly busy was not all

it was cracked up to be. Busyness for its own sake came into question

What is boredom? And is it a ring-pass-not beyond which we will not go and why? As mentioned, all my life I have been proud of my busyness and keeping occupied, but occupied by what? It is only recently that I began to see my busyness in a different light, as much an escape as beneficial, in particular busyness for busyness sake. Sure, I get a lot done, and that is useful, but how much is my busyness at times just an escape? An escape from what, I am finding so remarkable

The moment's pause, when we sense that we are bored, and then our turning away from that boredom as we dive back into one busyness or another. It's not unlike Uncle Scrooge diving into his money bin. Just what is the point of no return, when we encounter boredom, reverse our course, and reach back to find some area of interest or entertainment? Everything we encounter in life is fuel for realization

I never thought of myself as a creature of the shadowy world of Samsara, but if I think about it, that's just what I am. I seldom venture out from being busy, yet when I do and reach the no-man's-land of boredom, I don't stay there long, but turn back into busyness as soon as I can find a thread of interest

Somehow, life seems too barren for me once boredom takes hold, so I pause, have second thoughts about how I got here, and turn back. We don't like to be bored, but perhaps have never asked ourselves what boredom is. We certainly are aware of boredom in short order, yet perhaps have not explored that "awareness" of the boredom itself, much less have we seen where that awareness leads to if prolonged. If we lean into the

boredom, what happens next? That is what I am attempting to find out

How will Samsara ever end if we cling to it like a pig in mud and never venture out beyond its borders? Now, as promised, my genuine bona fides when it comes to tedium and boredom:

I know it by heart and have not been intimidated by rote busyness. Having created the All-Music Guide, which when I sold it had 150 full-time people and 500+ free-lance writers, all working to document over a million albums. My CD collection, which was added onto by my company AMG, now is a permanent part of the collection stored at Michigan State University, more than 700,000 CDs. That's just music, the largest collection in the world. I also founded one of the two largest film and movie databases, the All-Movie Guide. And I personally created the largest rock concert-music poster database, with almost no help, including 30,000 poster images that I photographed myself. Not to mention founding what I am told is the largest astrological library in the world, which is now part of the permanent collection of the University of Illinois Library. Also, an archive of Tibetan Buddhist dharma audio tapes, many thousands. And other smaller collections. And archivist of popular culture is what I turned into

My point is that I intimately know tedium like entering countless thousands of albums, with tracks, times, composers, sideman, biographies, photographs, and so on. I have not been intimidated by tedium, but have endured many decades of it. Nevertheless, that being said, I still have a lot to learn about boredom. I am just getting to the good side of boredom

If nothing else, I have learned concentration and focus, which has proved very useful in Shamata Meditation,

which along with its partner, Vipassana, makes up Mahamudra

Nov 9, 2020, 2:48 PM

RESOLVING DUALITY

Insight Meditation, in my experience, is the unveiling to us of the true nature of the mind, not dualistically with ourselves as a spectator, but holistically and nondualistically, where we are wholly immersed as part of the solution

Dualistic evaluation is when we focus on one facet of reality, thus (by definition) excluding everything else. That's what makes it dualistic. There is a subject and an object. Of course, that's what we do all the time when we identify ourselves as a subject and anything else is an object

Insight Meditation (the special form of Vipassana as taught in the Kagyu Mahamudra tradition) is the complete immersion (to the extinction of us as a subject) holistically and nondualistically in a sea of total awareness, including by definition absolutely everything, which results from our identifying with the total awareness rather than objectification. It is a change of identification, a transmigration of identity from the awareness of objectification to the awareness itself

Think of Insight Meditation as being lost in the moment, as we sometimes are in sudden emergencies, to the exclusion of any objectivity or critical second thoughts, but rather just being present and aware of and part of

whatever is taking place. Vipassana is something like that, IMO

In other words, Insight Meditation of the Kagyu Mahamudra tradition is not “realization” in tiny dualistic increments, but rather realization in one broad swath... gradually (but increasingly) illuminating the mind, stripping it naked of our conceptuality and obscurations, thus revealing its true nature non-dualistically

The result of this special form of Insight Meditation is a clarity or certainty, a kind of global illuminating awareness that is not a spotlight (looking at something), but like the sun, a total illumination. And whatever is illuminated by that global awareness is revealed and its duality is resolved to nondual realization in that awareness. “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

And, when we turn awareness on itself, meaning when we are aware of this Awareness itself, then

this process goes on until one is fully realized or enlightened as a Buddha, resulting in everything being of one taste. This apparently takes a very long time

Words in themselves are senseless. Conceptuality by itself does not make sense to most readers but at best are pointers in perhaps the right direction that too often tend go in one ear and out the other. When the texts say that words about the realization practices are ineffable, they are serious. We can't realize what we cannot yet receive with the mind. As I understand it, for most of us the mind is too obscured and has first to be massaged and prepared

Those of us who write about dharma conceptually learn to realize there is often nothing coming back from readers because these practices are said to be self-

secret, and this seems so true. It's like the old saying "If you lack the faculty, you can't see the phenomenon," and vice-versa. That valve is sealed and one-way -- light-tight. We each have to develop our faculty of realization which is why we have what are called the dharma preliminaries. Like a pair of binoculars, it is all about resolving duality into a single image

Nov 9, 2020, 3:17 AM

THE EVER PRESENT

This present moment, so brief that scientists can't even measure it, lasts longer than everything else. The dharma teachings state that immersion in the freshness of the present moment through Insight Meditation or Mahamudra is the only relief from dualistic elaboration. And that is a very telling statement

Those of us who study the dharma are familiar with the three levels of dharma progress: understanding, experience, and realization. And this holds true for this present moment

"Understanding" the present moment is what we are doing here in this article, examining and thinking about the present, what is called in dharma teachings conceptualization or elaboration

However, simple understanding is not enough. We have to ourselves experience in the flesh what we understand. That, in my opinion, is a little more difficult to do. As for me, because of my major stroke, I kind of got grandfathered into experiencing this present moment more directly. For quite a length of time, I was

stuck in the present moment, unable to retrieve my past, examine my future, or be content with my present. And with the stroke, what I knew as my familiar Self was immediately vacated and shattered into a million fragments of memory that I could not quite remember. All I had was the “Now” of the present moment, stripped naked of my usual attachments and embellishments

There I was, naked of all my entertainment and self-fixation, stuck in the present moment, which seemed almost unendurable and everlasting. If I were a yogi, I would probably have relished this state, but sadly I am not a yogi, so I felt confined to the present, imprisoned, and very, very uncomfortable. And this went on for weeks, but slowly morphed into some kind of normal as my Self reanimated itself and came back together into something like coherence

After any experience, there remains the possibility that, as the pith dharma texts state, “In the midst of experience realization can arise.” We can realize what the heck we are experiencing. This is especially true for dharma. So much for a preamble

If you look around, look to the past and the future, we find that the present is the only viable place and even there only if we don’t alter or try to change it. Test it out for yourself. Both the past and the future are fabrications that shift and weave as we try to keep them in mind, returning us each time to the present, if only fleetingly. It would seem that most of us spend very little actual time in the present, preferring the past or angling for the future

Because it is ubiquitous, we tend to ignore the present moment, yet how can we? It’s right there and this moment is the gateway to the future and the past

My point here is that the present moment is the only place to rest that will allow us to actually rest. All else is one form of elaboration (read obscuration) or another. And it's not the present moment you like it," but the present moment as it naturally is. That means boring, not-boring, or whatever. And acceptance of the present moment without alteration is the only option, as anything else is either a reaction or a projection – an elaboration

If I am looking for peace, for a place to rest, I don't have to go farther than the present moment. Rest in that. If you are looking for a true solution, there is none other than the here and the now

The past and future are fabrications. Not sure what the present moment is, but I will never know because to be in it I have to be immersed 100%, with no elaboration. And yes, we can know it, but not be able to express it other than retrospectively and a retrospective or memory is not, by definition, being in the present moment. Immersion in the present is total

I have expressed this conceptually so that hopefully you have some understanding. As for helping you to actually experience the present moment, good luck! It's up to each of us and our training. I fell into it accidentally and would recommend a more gradual immersion if possible. For me, it was an eye-opener – life changing

As for realizing this present moment, that is what I am now involved in, attempting to realize just what I experienced through the stoke. It's been going on almost two years and I am only now just beginning to get a handle on it, which is why I am writing this

I question whether I can find words good enough that they will stick in your mind so that you will catch my

drift, so to speak. I know that you can read the words, so I will summarize:

There is no rest in Samsara; all the dharma texts point that out. The dualistic conceptuality of the past (fabricated memories) or the future (fabricated anticipations) will eventually drive us back to this present moment. We can try to pretty-up or otherwise alter the present moment, but that alteration itself is an obscuration that further clouds the present moment

Attempting to relax and rest in the present moment enough to release whatever we are grasping onto takes, at least in my experience, a lot of training. Spontaneous realization, so the Tibetan's say, is as rare as hen's teeth. Most of us have to remove our obscurations by the various purification practices that the dharma offers, like "The Common Preliminaries," "Lojong," the "Extraordinary Preliminaries: Ngondro," and others

Even then, the present moment is hard to take "neat," so to speak, without embellishment, elaboration, and entertainment. I had the naked experience of the present moment served up to me on a platter, and I could not wait to get away from it as soon as possible. It was way too stark for me to exist there. There was no place to hide! Until then, I never imagined I was such a creature of the shadows! Apparently, I am

However, the takeaway from my stroke experience after almost two years of study, the residual realization from it, is inescapable. It's like an old line I wrote "To fail ignorance by a meter or a foot." I can't in good faith go back into hiding in my busyness and constant entertainment. I have tried. It's like I am half out, an infant where so far only the head is born. I must

negotiate this present moment as I can manage to do so, apparently slowly

In a word, unpacking the sheer starkness and brilliance of the present moment will take time. As of now, about all I can do is sample it and withdraw back into my Samsaric entertainments to make sense of it, and then sample it a little more. I am working on that

What I can see is that this is a one-way trip I am on, one that I can't backtrack from. I am committed to moving forward, yet at the same time progress is very difficult. It is turning out that, for me, I can't just exist in the present moment without training. If I could, I would. I am finding that I have to endure and normalize the brilliance of the present moment a bit at a time. It's like taking the sun gradually without burning to a crisp

However, I do see that the freshness of the present moment is the solution to what I have been looking for

Nov 8, 2020, 1:13 PM

NOT ACCUMULATING KARMA

Here are yet more words of my dharma teacher of 36 years (the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche) for those interested

The next quotation comes from the great Sakya Pandita, who wrote:

“When self-arisen wisdom arises all thoughts as well turn into the nature of wisdom.”

[self-arisen wisdom here refers to the authentic wisdom that is the recognition of mind's nature which itself, as the display of that nature, is self-arisen and is not produced by causes and conditions],

“Turn into the nature of wisdom” does not mean that the nature of thoughts changes. It means that for the first time the nature of thoughts is seen for what it has always been. In other words, at that point you see or recognize that thoughts are nothing other than the display of that same nature as the mind itself. He continues:

“Then there will be no difference between meditating and not meditating.”

This refers to what happens when you achieve such consummate or continuous recognition of your mind's nature that there is no longer any distinction between the even placement practice of meditation and post-meditation. That is the achievement of what among the “Four Yogas of Mahamudra” is called “no-meditation.” Then, because the recognition of thoughts is unceasing, because no thought arises the nature of which is unrecognized, and because recognized thoughts are self-liberated (in other words, they do not accumulate karma), at that point you stop once and for all the accumulation of karma. Therefore, he says:

“Thoughts dissolve into the Dharmadhatu.”

At that point, whatever thoughts arise are self-liberated and dissolve into the dharmadhatu, the nature of which they are the expression

NOT JUST A WALK IN THE WOODS

What better way to celebrate the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris than to take a walk in the woods on this Indian summer day, which Margaret and I did this afternoon. We live only a block from this creek, with woods and meadows, and only a mile or so from 900,000 acres of the Manistee National Forest

My thoughts are that I am happy for the election results and I know that Trump supporters must be sad. I am hoping that Biden can take from what was good about the Trump presidency, repair whatever was not helpful, and come together to shape our country

It was crystal clear from this election that we Americans are very divided. I am hoping that all of us, liberals and conservative alike, could overcome our differences and come to know and work with one another to bring this country back together. We can have a great future together. I grew up, was always a liberal, but my parents voted Republican. We had both Democrat and Republican presidents and it was just fine. We need to learn to work together (and get to know one another) all over again, IMO Nov 7, 2020, 1:41 PM

I am so grateful!
I am so grateful!

Nov 7, 2020, 11:57 AM

VISCOUS SOLAR PLASMA

[While we have been negotiating this election and its aftermath, the Sun and the solar disk has been active with solar flares. At the same time, during this week, a very large sunspot has been slowly turning toward Earth and we have been going along for the ride.]

Our body has been described as a bag of bones, but our emotional and psychological insides are more like a bag of churning feelings

Where did all our life and energy come from? My view is that all of this comes from the Sun and I will try to qualify that. I don't just mean life comes from the light of the sun, but something more. Not only does the sun light up our life, which it does, but when the sun is active with sunspots, flares, and CMEs, we somehow respond to that solar activity directly, even though we live down here on Earth. When the sun moves with change, so do we. We are always in the embrace of the solar energy

We know how solar activity physically effects things here on Earth, but very little is known about how the sun affects us mentally and emotionally, although we each have our own laboratory of emotions that we can observe just by observing it. For some reason, we don't look at the obvious. We don't look directly at the "inner sun" than we do the outer

Don't ask me how, because I don't know, yet if we will chart the solar activity or subscribe to solar alerts, we can notice (at least I have) a one-to-one correlation between intense solar activity and the churning of change within our own consciousness

I sometimes feel that the effect of intense solar activity is that internally we are like a washing machine with no sides, with all of this emerging “change” churning and moving within us, in the process of wearing that change into existence

I have mentioned this in other articles about solar activity, that monitoring solar activity within our own consciousness is not as simple as watching a change taking place within our mindstream. It’s not quite that easy, because not only are we attempting to watch ourselves change, the WE that’s watching is the main thing that’s changing. “We” are changing and that makes being a spectator of no real use

Nothing is quite as difficult to chart than when the subject in us, the one who is looking, is exactly what is changing, and in real time at that. It’s like watching a kaleidoscope while being part of the kaleidoscope. Of course, that’s exactly what most geocentric astrologers do, as we are part of the solar system we are looking at and charting. The geocentric astrological view is also like looking at the kaleidoscope from within the kaleidoscope because it is giving us a skewed view of solar system activity. We can straighten that out by having the map of the solar system as a whole handy, the helio chart

Nov 7, 2020, 3:47 AM

THE FUSE OF INSPIRATION

[Perhaps we can finish the election today.]

We wait for inspiration and unwavering attention until we are inspired all the time is my takeaway from many of the pith dharma teachings

It seems that, at least for me, to properly (actually) practice Insight Meditation, the focus has to be somewhat detailed, like the technique that is in my photography or astrology and the nuances in the dharma writing that I do, something I can focus or concentrate on. I doubt that is true for everyone. We each must have that sweet-spot where something shifts and Insight Meditation kicks in or is otherwise enabled

When I cast about and look around for other parts of my life to become the focus on my daily Insight Meditation, what I see is not so much. However, what I do see is that the degree of inspiration for, to take an example, dharma writing (my essays), where before I would wait (and often) for many a day, looking for an inspiring topic so that I could pick up a thread, while now (and quite frequently) that inspiration is there more and more of the time, so that all I have to do is pick up on that thread, write, and a topic unfolds from the ether, so to speak. To me, that's a sign of something, at the very least some hard work. Actually, it is the invoking of Insight Meditation

I take it as a sign of the gradual progress of increasing realization that in real-time is a bit like watching plants grow or paint dry. Dharma progress is hard to see on any given day, but looking by the month or a few months, is more obvious. I am learning, and whatever realization I have is growing. And, while it can be (and is) frustrating to always be a little bit at loose ends (having to work at expanding and extending realization plus casting about for signs of progress so that what little realization I have does not go fallow), I have to take the long view. No choice. The dots are already connected; I just have to realize that and, most of all, relax!

And it seems to be a dharma truth that each of us must do all the work involved with our own realization ourselves. I sometimes feel like Sisyphus rolling the boulder uphill. There is no one that is going to (or can) help me. Just as no one can die for us, in the same way no one can “dharma” for us, even though we may be surrounded by great dharma teachers and teachings. They all will tell us the same thing, that this is a do-it-yourself process

The reason I write these blogs is to let anyone interested who may be fumbling around or have doubts to know that we are not alone. Yes, we have to do it all by ourselves, but we are not alone in this. With dharma, we are all alone together

I guess the point here, as I read over what I wrote, is that dharma realization (at least for the likes of me) is a very, very slow process, almost impossible to measure on a short-term basis, but quite visible over time. Right now, that slow progress has to be my guide and pole star

Here is a little poem I wrote:

THE END

If you are looking somewhere,
Other than here,
You won't find it

You never will find it there
You will never find it then
Just rest here

Here is the end

FOLLOWING THE BREADCRUMBS

[I know, its election day. I have my ear tuned to the TV from time to time and this is going to be a long haul, I imagine. That said, here is a blog where, once again, I sing the praises of learning to find and follow our natural thread of interest, especially when it comes to the dharma.]

I don't like the phrase, but as they say "There is no point in beating a dead horse." And by that, I mean that while a rote approach to dharma practice is possible, IMO it is the long way round, so to speak. Mere repetition with minimum heartfelt-ness must be an oxymoron, but unfortunately it is the way much dharma practice is taught. There are other approaches

What's the point of endlessly practicing something that we have no natural interest in other than the development of muscle memory or because we have been told to do it? Life comes in pulses and waves, so I feel it is much better to learn to surf our waves of interest than to plod ahead mechanically, not "even if," but "especially if" it is the dharma. Nothing IMO is more important than developing our awareness, and that for me requires intuition and especially interest in what we are doing. At least that is true for me

Finding and following our own natural path of interest should not be a voyage into the unknown, but more like a homecoming. Why? Because "interest" is our only true guide and it always leads us where we want to go. If we think of our voyage of interest as a "stranger in a strange land," then, IMO, that shows just how far we are out of kilter and how much we need to get back on track

And, while following our own path of interest may at times appear to lead us off the beaten path to “who knows where,” in reality it is the shortest path to realization. Is it risky? Yes, very risky, especially in this modern world, where everything turns on a dime and we are expected to follow societal conventions without knowing why. However, we are fortunate that this is a choice that is still available to many of us, to pursue our internal organic sense of direction, our natural path of interest

To do so, to follow what actually interests us, will almost certainly throw us off the rails we have been on, yet that is just the point. For sure, no one (or few) will tell us to break with society’s conventions and do something off-track from the beaten path, and we may not have to. However, my guess or I should say “in my experience,” I had to go way off the conventional track in order to stay with what actually interested me. Not everyone will risk that or have to

This is why I can’t encourage that you break with convention and go out of the way of conventional society just to pursue your inner sense of what you are interested in. As mentioned, it is very risky indeed, getting to know yourself so well that you value doing what you want to do above doing what you have to do to get along. Yet, you might at least check it out; try it out in small ways and see how it sits with you. I find it clears things up

Then, there will be some of you, a few perhaps, who cannot go along with what you are told to do and can only feel satisfied doing what you naturally want and feel like doing, but this kind of risk is relatively rare in this modern world. Think about it and feel it out for yourself

And to bring this back to dharma practice, being interested in the dharma to the degree that it self-interests us so that, like a great novel, we can't put it down, is going to take some adjusting on our part. Yet, without interest, IMO, dharma does not work. At least that has been true for me

Like the sand running out in an hourglass or like protecting a flame from the wind, our thread of interest, must be carefully tended and protected. It is not good to do too much rote dharma practice or try too hard, if the result, as the dharma texts say, "stains our practice" with effort. If we get to the point where we don't like to practice because we have strained ourselves, that all has to be remedied and turned around before we can proceed. And it is difficult to walk back

My point here is to keep your interest in dharma alive by following what interests you, which is kind of a tautology, yet one I find that we must keep in mind. Gently does it. Keep your practice sessions short and always stop them before you get tired of them, which can be a bit of a Catch-22. Following our natural train of interest will keep our dharma practice alive and well, but we may have to become more aware of what interests us and what does not. There is no point in the path to dharma where vigilance on our part is not required

LAMA FACEBOOK

I have been on Facebook for eleven years, since June 17, 2009. I have been here through thick and thin, summer and winter, sickness and health, and I may even be here until death do us part

I can't count the number of people who, when I say I am on Facebook, turn up their nose at me and let me know

they never would be on Facebook, as if Facebook is a sign of unsophistication on my part. I can only laugh

Facebook has been nothing but kind to me, all these years. I allow my Facebook to run on my computer, 24x7, but I am not on Facebook all that much. I do post to Facebook and I read ALL your comments to my blogs. And I also at times press the blue “f” in the upper left-hand of the screen (desktop) and scroll through all your posts. But they are like a waterfall, too many to ever get through, but I see what some of you are doing and it is encouraging

However, mostly Facebook has been my dharma teacher, not my main dharma teacher, but a very important dharma teacher for me. I have learned so much about myself by being on Facebook

I learn by just observing my reactions to your comments and notes, or your personal messages to me. In that way, you tell me where I am at and what I have yet to learn. And that is valuable beyond measure

Plus, many of you have become more than just “Facebook Friends,” but actual friends. I wrote this fun poem many years ago

THE FACEBOOK ORACLE

Facebook,
A waste of time?

Not for me

Like any,
Good oracle ...
A perfect,
Thermometer,
Of my state of mind,

Instantly showing,
Both hopes,
And fears ...

As good,
A reflection,
Of me,
As any,

Much better,
Than most

ATTACHMENT TO DHARMA IS JUST THAT

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

What does it mean that in the aftermath of my stroke, when the smoke cleared and the changes stopped changing, I found that my Self (as I knew it) had been cleaned out like a chimney? I had experienced something like this shattering of the Self before in my life through various untoward life events, including a previous TIA (small stroke). So, I knew what it was to have the Self deconstruct, vacate, and go void on me for a time, but not for anywhere near as long as this stroke demanded

Yet, what was total news to me this time (and most worrying) was that the part of my Self that had done dharma practice for 40 or more years had also been cleaned out too. I did not expect that, nor had it ever crossed my mind yet that the dharma cupboard too was bare or seemed so. And that realization (as it dawned) was more terrifying than the stroke itself

My investments and attachments to this or that in my Self had been voided by the stroke, as mentioned. Yet, I had no idea (and was not remotely ready) to find out how irrevocably and totally attached I was to the dharma. In other words, my personal investment in the

dharma all these years was huge and I had never realized it until it too was shattered, vacated, and just GONE! And the resulting realization was that attachment is attachment. Period

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, because even I could recognize how much BS or how unessential most of it was

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

The proof is always in the pudding, as they say, and as it turned out the truth of it was. I was horrified to find out that the slate of my dharma-attachments, also part of my Self, had been wiped clean and it too was gone. I couldn't believe it. It was unfair! LOL

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

I never even imagined that when it came to dharma practice and the stroke, that I would not somehow be

grandfathered in. 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 anywhere else in my life. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it?" Certainly not me. It seemed I had to go back to square one and I didn't collect \$200

It's like I was stripped of all rank from 40 years of sincere practice and told to start over. All of that built-up attachment to the dharma was just gone and nowhere to be found. And it did not come back. That's about as bad as it got and eventually that was true only for a time, but for quite some time

In the "good news" department, I found I had actually accrued some benefit from all those years of dharma practice and perhaps even some tiny bit of realization. And these qualities stood me in good stead. How could I tell? Because they are still there; I already had whatever realization I had earned and that part of my practice was untouched

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

Yet, it was at first a very bitter realization to find that attachment to dharma was still attachment and had to go. It had to go because it went, just like that! It was permitted. There was no court of appeal. We know that attachment to bad habits have no place, but I had to

experience first-hand that attachment to good things were no different. They too have no place. I had always thought that good attachments were at least harmless. I don't know about that, but I do know they are useless when they are not existent. So, much of my attachment to the dharma had just evaporated

It's a valuable realization that when death comes and the bardo beckons, my attachment to dharma will be no more help to me than any other attachment. I had to think on that and what to do about it. A start would be to stop unreasonably attaching myself to anything, including dharma. Reification is not acceptable because it is not accepted

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

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

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

And what this boiled down to was to stop parroting or blindly reciting prayers, practices, sadhanas, and instead do my practices from scratch and with heart. 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 had seen me through the hurricane of the stroke and I have come out more or less in one piece

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

Nov 2, 2020, 12:41 AM

THE GLARING LIGHT OF BOREDOM

[We have all seen photos of a school of fish suspended in the ocean, all turned or oriented in the same direction so that we can see both the school and the fish. It's like the old chestnut of seeing the forest and the trees. What I am trying to do here is to arrange the fish (words) so that we can also see the school, if that makes sense.]

I keep thinking that I have communicated what there is to say about my stroke experience, but the realization from that time keeps deepening and broadening, and so I keep wanting to share it in full. I wonder if there are a few of you out there that are on the same page?

I experienced (and am still unpacking) the realization that came with my stroke last year, during which I confronted a glaring white light in my mind that I could not avoid or get away from. And this went on for weeks in various degrees. When I presented what I am sharing with you here to my Tibetan dharma teacher of 36 years, he explained that the realization I had will stand me in good stead in the bardo, when I pass on

In other words, I equate this stroke realization with what is said to happen to us in the bardo after death, at least to some degree. In fact, in the bardo, much is made of the series of colored lights that appear to us, some bright or glaring,

It is said in the dharma teachings (such as the Tibetan Book of the Dead) that in the bardo after death, when we are freed of our earthly obscurations and impurities, we are many times more mentally clear and sensitive than we are before death. When my stroke hit, with the aftermath in the hospital and all that, plus for quite some time (at least a week or two), I was stripped to the bone of anything I would call a Self and extremely vulnerable and sensitive. I was isolated (and confined) to the present moment with no access to my past or the future, which is what I understand yogis try for. Only, I had no choice

During the aftermath of the stroke, I experienced this brilliant white light-like thing illuminating the landscape in which I found myself naked in the middle of. Aside from all that was going on around me (Hospital, tests, doctors, etc.), it was like standing in a great salt lake, where the only obvious thing other than the vast plain itself was a huge glaring light high above me that was so blinding that I could not look directly at it. I had to look away

And this went on for weeks until my usual self and habits gradually reanimated and pushed the light (and the vast plain) deeper into the background, where it still remains to this day, and I am thinking about how to re-approach it, but I am doing that from the safety of my usual shadowy habits, which by now have reanimated themselves

Where is that bright light right now? Why can't I just turn and look at it, even if it is so glaringly bright? That's a good question and perhaps the best I can offer as an answer is the following approach. There is no "On" or "Off" switch for that glaring light that I know of, short of having a major stroke, which I do not recommend. And anyway, the light is already and seemingly has always been, on. I just have always ignored it

That this world we live in and ARE is a fabrication is far too abstract a concept to grasp easily. It rolls off the tongue and out the other ear with almost no purchase other than perhaps a flicker of interest. So, where is the light?

For starters, it is in a place where we don't go and perhaps have never more than had a peek at, if that. The operative concept here is that it is hard-to-impossible to even glance in that direction, and long before we could do so, the endless habit of Samsara warns us off. More than just a warning, Samsara is the exact opposite of having that vivid light and awareness. This light is sealed off from us by habit. And here is a thought:

Our closest approach to accessing this light is boredom when we start to get bored. It is then that we are getting warm or at least in the distant proximity to facing the light directly. Boredom warns us to get back to being busy about something or find what interests us and we

don't normally feel like pursuing being "more bored" than we already are. Boredom is one of the warning lights. And it is very difficult to choose boredom over our usual escape to doing everything else. And so, boredom is shunned. We don't like to be bored, yet boredom is here the SYMPTOM and not the cause of what's happening here

However, we might want to ask ourselves, aside from being "boring," just what is boredom in itself? Why do we always turn back from getting more bored or enduring boredom? What happens if we actually entertain boredom instead of avoid it?

With the smorgasbord of Samsara spread out before us, why would we choose boredom as our entertainment of choice, when it is the exact opposite of entertainment? How could we ever wean ourselves from the endlessness of our busyness as entertainment? Well, the simple answer is that we don't. We feel safe, comfortable, and properly entertained in keeping our head down in the attachment of busyness

So, not only do we not go down the road of boredom, but we don't even know where that road leads. It's not like we have been to where boredom goes and that's why we don't want to go there again. We have never been very far down that road. We instinctively don't like to be bored and have never questioned what that avoidance reaction to being bored may hide

In my case, as explained in many blogs on my stroke, I had no choice but to walk that road. My stroke made it impossible for me not to endure the boredom of "The Light" and for weeks at a time at that. I was stuck in the present moment... all of the time. What I discovered, much against my will, was that all of my busyness, and I have been a very busy boy, was (aside from getting

things done), a way to never see the glaring light that revealed to me that Samsara itself, this Samsaric world I am dedicated to, is a fabricated construct whose sole purpose is to shield us from enduring the light of our own consciousness, however we want to phrase that

And the short takeaway here is that Samsara, once seen for what it is as a dodge from reality, lost some of its glamor or glow, and no longer seems so inviting. In fact, the stroke shown light on the whole of Samsara. And what I saw in that harsh light astonished me, brought me to my knees, which brings up the Tibetan idea of “Terma,” hidden insight

I have always been interested in the terma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, in particular what is called “Mind Terma,” where ideas and teachings that are hidden in the mind are gradually revealed or discovered. These “mind terma” are not just said to be found and then distributed to mankind, but rather when they are found, it takes time, often years, for these insights to develop into experience within the tertön (the one who found them) and only when they are properly marinated are they “realized” and then able to be shared with the world

There are some similarities between the terma-process and the time it has taken me to develop more fully what I discovered through my stroke and have been describing here. As time passes, what I took in and witnessed through the stroke has become more of a general realization, which I am now trying to communicate here, because it imprinted me so powerfully. And that realization is:

Samsara is our home, all that we have EVER known, and not something we would ever abandon identifying with willingly

However, the process of the dharma is a transmigration from identifying ourselves as a Samsaric being (as we do now) to identifying with our intrinsic realized awareness (the white light) rather than with Samsara. Most dharma students understand this conceptually

What was disturbing for me, and I understand this may seem like a threat to some folks, is that the conceptual understanding I had from studying dharma texts and teachings all those years did not match the reality of what my stroke experience demonstrated so emphatically. Of course, it could just be me, yet my takeaway from the stroke is that simply understanding the problem conceptually as to what can happen in the bardo after death does not begin to describe what I experienced after the stroke, when I tried to (and had to) deal with what is called the “bright light.”

The white-light experience was much more, obviously, REAL, and what preparation I had up to then through dharma training, was not enough to encourage me to approach the light. On the contrary, I found myself bending over backward to stay away from the light. Not a good sign, IMO, thus the second thoughts about my training

Talking with a friend about this, she pointed that “grace” and the blessings of the guru or perhaps even the appearance of our guru or some bodhisattva in the bardo could alleviate the fear I had. I am hoping so, but I still feel that to a great degree it is up to me to somehow better prepare for that time in the bardo after death more than I have to date

And I am doing that by learning to exist in and endure my boredom, to wait it out, rather than to

Nov 1, 2020, 9:56 AM

THE BRIGHT LIGHT

AND THE ECLIPSE OF THE SELF

[Photo of my (now quite large) *Datura ioxia* plant, which is now going to bloom for a while.]

Just as the Sun is shining, day and night, so there is a sun of the mind that is ever present and always shining within us. It is this awareness that allows us to read this sentence. And it too has a center, yet we have probably never seen it, not because it is not there, but because we won't or don't know how to look at it

This unlooked-at-sun is probably that bright light (or lights) that is said that we see in the bardo after we die; however, my stroke last year ago turned me around and pointed me in a direction other than what I had always imagined

Once again, I am reminded of the classic dharma advice: "Don't Invite the Future," meaning don't anticipate

The key to this "Bright Light" thing, IMO, is that it is not the KIND of light that is bright, but rather our inability to look directly at the light. My very direct stroke experience showed me this and at the same time made it clear to me that the idea of a "bright light" (including in the bardo) is more a metaphor than the reality, although when experienced via the stroke, it was exactly LIKE a bright light, yet not a visible light

In other words, what was so bright that I could not bear to look at it (not even a little), was not "light," per se, but

rather, in my case the LACK of any kind of entertainment, anywhere at all, where I could hide my figurative “eyes” i.e. the failure to find any sort of busyness to distract my raw attention from the glaring “light,” which light was the ONLY thing around... anywhere. It was blinding or, if you wish, “deafening” by its singularity. In the mental desert left by the stroke, that “Light” was the one thing I sought to escape from noticing, but notice it I did

And this experiencing of the light that would not quit managed to flip much of my world-view, and all at once. There I was, more totally alone than ever in my life, and unable to find, reanimate, or otherwise pull my Self together around me as a filter or view because that Self was just gone, stripped to the bone! Although my history and past were dimly felt somewhere back in there, veiled, I could not get back into it or bring it forth to the present mind. My former Self had fractured, was way too incoherent, distant, and proved to be no refuge whatsoever

What WAS present was this present moment itself and the blinding awareness of there being no comfort whatsoever, no hiding place to wrap myself in. My obvious nakedness and vulnerability were all there was. The door to the endless veiling myself in my own busyness was closed to me, denied for the first time in such totality. I could not find anyway to get back into it and hang out. I was stuck in what appeared like a vast wasteland with this omnipresent glaring light

My point here is that if this MOST unforgiving light is the same or similar to what we might experience after death, then I am not ready for it. Up to the stroke I had thought, even assumed, that all of my dharma practice

was getting me ready for the bardo and after-death states. I'm sure it helped, but not enough for this

When I presented my stroke experience to my dharma teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, he told me that my experience was good preparation for when death comes. And he went on to tell me that he had something like eleven small strokes himself and could understand

And so, I feel a bit like a voice crying in the wilderness because I know that I am NOT ready, as Shakespeare said, for that "undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns," and so am casting about for ways to get ready if this is something like what I will encounter in the bardo. Whoah!

Just as in the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol), where after death in the bardo, when the brilliant lights appear, the texts state not to run and hide from the bright light but instead to move toward it. And I realized through all of that stroke experience that our life here in Samsara, and Samsara itself, is nothing but a running from the light. What else do you think Samsara is other than just that?

Samsara is an elaborate and continued shunning of the light of realization. The dharma texts clearly state that the dharma is NOT like original sin as in Christian thought. It is not that we once were enlightened and have somehow fallen away from that, much like Plato's cave analogy. Not at all

The dharma states that we have never known enlightenment and are still working to discover the nature of the mind for the first time. In other words, it is not old-home week, but rather the first time for enlightenment with us. And so, we are not trying to get

back to anything we once had and lost. Enlightenment is still in our future and at this point unknown to us

More on this tomorrow if possible

Oct 31, 2020, 4:38 PM

LIGHT-ERUPTIONS OF THE SUN AND HUMAN VISIONS AND INTUITIONS

This will be the last of the three excerpts from Theodor Landschiedt's seminal book "We Are the Children of the Light." If this is not enough, I may have some more excerpts I could email you. If interested, send me an email (Michael@Erlewine.net) with the subject heading of LANDSCHEIDT. As I have some quotes from this text for review purposes, I will send them out to you. This may take a few weeks

3. Light-Eruptions of the Sun and Human Visions and Intuitions

The "mysterious flames" that the sun emits according to the Taoist experience of meditation quoted above, exist in fact in astrophysical actuality. They are called solar eruptions or flares. These enormous light-flashes of the sun release energies that are equivalent to the potential of several hundred million hydrogen bombs, which would supply the whole population of the earth with electrical energy for a hundred million years. The physical effects of such solar eruptions on the earth are manifold

Among solar-terrestrial phenomena belong the northern lights and magnetic storms, disturbances of radio

communication, and interruptions of both telephone communication and the electrical supply. These have already been known for a long time. According to more recent knowledge, weather changes, heightening of thunderstorm activity, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, interruptions of the electronic control of satellites, and uncontrollable changes in the data storage in large computers are connected with energetic eruptions. [172]

Such events do not have an immediate bearing upon the human psyche. The increase in the frequency of traffic accidents, psychoses, and suicides after solar eruptions[173] observed at the same time already points to psychic reactions. But this could possibly be explained as follows: The electromagnetic radiation of the sun, whose intensity increases dramatically in special frequency ranges after eruptions, unbalances the autonomous nervous system or hormone system of human beings who are pre-disposed toward instability. But this explanation fails to explain the astonishing phenomenon that particularly energetic light-eruptions of the sun are concurrent with light-experiences or phases of prominent creativity

Here are some examples: When Gopi Krishna had his light-experience at Christmas in 1937, severe magnetic storms formed on the earth, preceded by energetic flares on the sun. The same holds for the mystical experience of Arthur Koestler on the third of February, 1937. A further example is that of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, made famous by his book, "The Seven-Storey Mountain," which he wrote as a monk. Men listened to him when he addressed himself to the problems of the renewal of the church and to the fundamental questions of human existence in the fifties and sixties. On December 3, 1968, after a visit by

Buddhist statues in Polonnaruwa, he wrote in his diary: "Now I know and have seen what I sought for in the dark. I don't know what still remains, but now I have seen, I have pierced through the surface and have reached beyond the shadow and the veil." [174] Very energetic solar eruptions occurred at this time. The proton activity of the sun was the strongest of the year 1968. A so-called Forbush effect was observed, accompanied by a decrease of cosmic radiation of about 5%

Moreover, when the German Nobel laureate Klaus von Klitzing discovered the quantized Hall-effect at 2 A.M. on February 5, 1980, a strong magnetic storm occurred, preceded by energetic solar eruptions. At this time sunspot activity in its 11-year cycle reached the second-highest maximum since the beginning of the regular counting of sunspots in the eighteenth century. The discovery was not merely a matter of technical observation, but a cognitive act presupposing spiritual presence, deep vision, and the faculty of integration in addition to comprehensive knowledge. When Wilhelm Conrad Rontgen discovered the radiation named after him, a very severe geomagnetic storm was observed at the same time, such as can be released only through solar eruptions

Up to this point, there has proved to be a consistent temporal correlation in all cases investigated for which the date of the spiritual experience or discovery was known and fell in a period of time for which there existed observations of energetic solar eruptions or strong geomagnetic storms explicable only through such eruptions. In this connection, one must consider the fact that energetic solar eruptions and correspondingly strong geomagnetic storms are relatively rare, and many months often elapse before

such a cosmic event occurs. since the acts of prominent human creativity of interest here are rarer still, and moreover are frequently unknown, the data considered up to this point still does not suffice for a mathematical-statistical judgment. On top of this, the technical prerequisites for the observation of solar eruptions were not satisfied until the beginning of the 1930's. Also, energetic solar eruptions are often observed without their leading to a magnetic storm on the earth

Eruptions presuppose a suitable energy potential, which is to be found in the strong magnetic fields of sunspots. Hence, maxima of sun-spot activity can at least be regarded as an indicator of the fact that the sun has also developed powerful eruptive activity at the same time. It is remarkable that in 1905, at the time of a maximum of sun spots, Albert Einstein submitted four path-breaking works, including one containing the theory of special relativity. Also, when Werner Heisenberg conceived the matrix mechanics of quantum theory on June 8, 1925, the sun-spot activity stood out far above the contiguous observations at that time. The number of sun spots was at its highest in the first half of 1925. Heisenberg reports on this experience in his autobiography, "The Part and the Whole": "I was deeply shocked. I had the feeling of looking through the surface of atomic phenomena at a source of remarkable inner beauty lying deep beneath it ... I was so excited that I could not think of sleep. I left the house in the dawn that was already breaking ... and climbed a rocky tower that jutted into the sea. I waited for sunrise on its top."

After a publication in 1984 [175], which referred to these relationships, it became apparent that the psychologist Suitbert Ertel, holder of a chair at George-August-University at Gottingen, has been working for more than

ten years on a work that proceeds from the idea that there is a connection between sunspot activity and human activity. With subtly conceived statistical procedures that are fortified against all conceivable objections and executed within a complex relational structure, Suitbert Ertel has contrived a proof that cycles of solar activity are stamped onto cycles of human activity in such different areas as art, science, religion, and the development of new social structures

Here the investigation extends not only to the 11-year sunspot cycle but also to a very long-waved cycle, which is characterized by phenomena like the drawn-out, deep Maunder-minimum of the sunspot activity of the seventeenth century, which has played an important role in climate research for some time now. The particular results of this still unpublished work cannot be anticipated. For the connection we are pursuing here, it is especially interesting that the direct correlation of creative phases to the maxima in the 11-year sun-spot cycle emerges particularly clearly in poetry and painting. In both cases the level of significance lies at $P=0.002$. [176] According to international practice, a result is called statistically significant if the value $P=0.01$ is not exceeded. This is plainly the case here

Both painting and poetry deal with the immediate transformation of impressions and moods. If it is correct that light eruptions of the sun have any kind of influence on human creativity at all, then this can take effect immediately in both these art forms. According to the cases cited, this seems to hold even for scientific intuition, for the "flash of inspiration" in the original sense of the word. For the most part, several years elapse until the work arising from this flash gets published

Thus, Suitbert Ertel has found that the publication of appropriate works increases several years after the flare maximum, when the cycle is already tending toward the minimum. However, for the matter under consideration here, it is not the publication of the fully ripened work that is decisive, but the creative impulse, the seed of the work. Such a line of thought might appear senseless to materialists, who would never in their wildest dreams think of looking at the sun as anything other than a machine for the production of energy. However, the creative researcher Hermann Haken, the founder of synergetics, has drawn an analogy between the processes in the sun and life. [177]

In view of the indissoluble interwovenness of mass, energy and information, and in view of the overall result of the previous investigation, it is a reasonable assumption that the flow of solar information, which seems to maintain a special quality throughout light eruptions, influences human creativity. That is, structural impulses from the ultimate source of the creative give an impetus for development wherever the state of ripeness favors the reception of a seed of development. It is striking that the same developmental tendencies emerge again and again at the same time in such different areas as mathematics, physics, painting, music, and literature, and that they lead to the formation of similar forms. [178]

That these outbreaks of light in the cosmic light-core, the sun, also have a correlation to mystical experiences in the core of the Self testifies that the roots of this connection reach down to the mystic ground. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe gave expression to this. In his final conversation with Eckermann, immediately before his death, he said, "If anyone asks me whether it is in

my nature to worship the sun, then I say again: absolutely! For it is a revelation of that which is most high, and surely the most powerful revelation that is vouchsafed to us children of man to perceive. In it I adore the light and the creative power of God, through which alone we and with us all plants and animals live, move and are."

Wise Hassidim have said, "As the hand held before the eye conceals the largest mountain, so the little earthly life conceals from sight the tremendous lights and mysteries of which the world is full. And he who can take it away from in front of his eye, as we can take away our hand, beholds the great illumination of the innermost world." [179]

May this transcendent light become living actuality for the reader, so that he may return the smile of the universe

Oct 31, 2020, 4:28 AM

PHYSICAL RESEARCH AND UNITY OF THE COSMOS

This is a second excerpt from the book by Theodor Landscheidt, "The Children of the Light," as translated by Robert Schmidt. I hope to post one more excerpt tomorrow, if all goes well

2. Physical Research and Unity of the Cosmos

"In this connection, it is significant that it is only in our century, where the masses are dominated by the world-view of mechanistic materialism for the reasons already

discussed, that the research of the scientific avantgarde is confirming the experience of the universe as an indivisible living whole in the manner consistently affirmed by all mystics

Universal systems theory, founded by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, no longer considers the universe to be a machine consisting of a multitude of parts, but an indivisible, living whole whose tissue-cells reciprocally influence one another and determine the condition of the whole. Quantum theory has led to a revolution in the picture of the world held by physicists, since it questions the objectivity of empirical results as well as the concept of causality. When Werner Heisenberg, one of the founders of quantum theory, speaks of the wholeness of the cosmos, he describes it no differently than the mystics millennia before him: "So the world appears to be a complicated web of processes in which very different combinations alternate with one another, intersect one another, and act together. In this way and in this manner they eventually determine the structure of the whole web." [162] Niels Bohr, who decisively influenced the interpretation of quantum theory, expressed a similar point:

"Isolated particles of matter are abstractions. Their properties are definable and perceptible only through combination with other systems." [163]

Max Planck [164], the discoverer of the quantum of action, stated this still more comprehensively:

"Purely local relations suffice just as little for the formulation of the laws of motion in the new mechanics as, say, the microscopic investigation of all its individual parts suffices for the understanding of the meaning of a painting. Rather, we attain a usable representation of

lawfulness only when we consider the physical structure as a whole."

The Nobel laureates Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers[165] said the same thing from another standpoint:

"Darwin's theory means that we are connected with all forms of life. The expansion of the universe means that we are connected with the whole cosmos."

Here the reader may recall the statements about the "cosmic epistemology" that were made above in the discussion of the time-yoga of Padma Sambhava

According to Carl F. von Weizsacker, the physical cosmos displays three aspects: matter, potential for motion, and structure. These are measured through the physical quantities of mass, energy and information. Albert Einstein showed that mass and energy have a common root. But the third aspect too is indissolubly connected with the other two. Matter and potential for motion always exhibit structure, and structure requires energetic or material carriers, however rarefied in potential or fine materially. All three aspects form an existential cosmic unity. [166]

The results of the newly revived discussion over the foundations of quantum theory point in the same direction. A new formulation of the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox proves, in connection with the so-called Bell's inequalities, that all physical processes are indissolubly connected with one another. According to these little-known fundamental results, which have been experimentally verified, the world is indivisible. This result is so basic that a physicist would have to renounce the correctness of quantum theory — which would seem unthinkable to him —before he could

repudiate this newly-won recognition of the universe as an indivisible whole. [167]

But if mass, energy and information are constituent elements of an existential unity, then a concentration of matter like the sun's also represents an enormous structural potential. with regard to such potentials, the biophysicist Fritz Popp[168] distinguishes between information that is bound up in structures and free information. The sun, as a dissipative system that emits high-grade energy, is at the same time a source of free information whose quantity can even be calculated.[169]

Such a function is consistent with the morphology of cosmic nuclei, which are constant regulatory centers of the system-spaces associated with them, whether it is a matter of biological nuclei, galactic nuclei, or a sun as the nucleus of a planetary system. Detailed comparisons[170] show that all these nuclei are carriers of the primordial creative impulse whose individual quality became visible in the first moments of the expansion of the universe, and is today reflected in the "anthropic principle."[171] Accordingly, it is even compatible with the results of physical research to proceed from the supposition that the sun not only supplies mankind with life-sustaining energy, but also influences it through a flow of free information which may possibly be the source of creative impulses

END OF QUOTE

Oct 30, 2020, 7:24 PM

THE SUN AS THE CENTRAL ELEMENT OF MYSTIC EXPERIENCE

IMO, the importance of the work of Theodor Landscheidt to modern astrology cannot be overstated. As astrologers, over the last several hundred years, we have devoted our attention to all of the planets and to the Sun and the Moon. However, I feel there is a tendency to still consider the Sun as a highly efficient furnace rather than a body sharing in the spiritual essence in which we so easily credit in ourselves

It is the ultimate oxymoron and a sign of our continued ignorance, IMO, that as Landscheidt puts it, “We are the children of the light,” yet don’t know our own father

Landscheidt’s seminal book “Children of the Light,” unlike some of his other works has never been translated into English. Even finding a copy in German is very difficult. My concern is that we English-speaking astrologers have missed an important step and a key to our own development as astrologers. Since I knew Landscheidt personally and value his insights, here are a few excerpts from Landscheidt’s “Children of the Light,” so that as astrologers at least you can have some idea what he was pointing out to us. We have Robert Schmidt to thank for this translation. What follows are Landscheidt’s words:

1. The Sun as the Central Element of Mystic Experience

“The image of the sun as the central source of light, performing analogous functions in both worlds even if they differ in their mode of being, emerges with impressive clarity from the quoted accounts of the mystics, as was already stated. It follows from the

overall context of what we have presented that the human Self also performs sun-like central functions. otherwise it would be hard to understand how there could be a union with the "sun of the second world." Just as in the "first world" masses attract one another through gravitation, so light-cores in the "second world" are attracted through cosmic love. In her book "Gravity and Grace" Simone Weil stressed that "all natural motions of the soul are subject to laws that correspond to those of material gravity. "Accordingly, the unio mystica could be understood as a melting-together of two light-cores that obey the "gravitation" of love."

Does this mean that even the light-core of the "first world," our sun, stands in a hitherto unrecognized relation to the light-core of the human self? It could mean that our sun plays an important role as a symbol and even as a real cosmic body in the meditation techniques that lead to the release of mystic experience

A rule of Taoist mediation from ancient China reads: "Standing, wait for sunrise. In the heart of your soul call upon the spirit of the sun, which shines like a pearl and emits mysterious flames. Concentrate your imagination on the fact that the radiant aura of the sun enfolds and touches you as with a breath."[158]

Here a clear distinction is made between the body of the sun and its spirit. The ancient Egyptians also distinguished precisely between Aton, the body of the sun and higher solar functions: "Aton is the body of Re."[159]

In representations that depict Echnathon, Nefretrete and the sun, the radiant arms turned towards the lordly pair seem to express only the beneficent corporeal action of the sun. However, when one looks at them more carefully, one sees that in each case the

outermost radiant hands, pointing to the heads of the pair of Pharaohs, hold the ankh, the symbol of higher life

Such ideas seem based on experience. According to tradition, it was at sunrise that Buddha finally found Enlightenment under a fig-tree, after so many years of trying. Jacob Bohme had his decisive vision when his glance fell on the sun, reflected in a brightly polished pewter plate. [160] The same thing seems to happen even in our time. In the last sentences of the account of Gopi Krishna already cited occurs this passage: "I was pure consciousness ... plunged into a sea of light. When I opened my eyes again, the sun had arisen and shone full in my face."

Many in our time think that only that which can be measured exists. Even under such restrictive conditions there are proofs that the very image of the sun can release unusual psychic effects. In October 1973 in a bio-feedback institute in La Jolla, California, a visitor who was training in relaxation with the aid of electronic instruments by chance observed a picture that was almost entirely filled by a setting sun. Suddenly a powerful outbreak of theta waves arose, which was recorded by instruments. Theta waves are brain waves in the neighborhood of 4-7 Hz. They are observed in hypnagogic conditions, in Kekule inspirations, in dowsing, and in the deep meditation of yogis. [161]

Thus, they indicate creative occurrences. The musical vibrato, like the one that sounds at the beginning of the slow movement of Bach's Fourth Brandenburg Concerto, vibrates at 7 Hz., just like the vibrato of great tenors like Caruso. The earth's atmosphere resonates at this vibratory range, which is all the more interesting, since the sun emits theta waves in energetic eruptions

An unalterable precondition for the development of cosmic consciousness is an adjustment in attitude that wipes all the phenomenal forms of mechanistic materialism out of the mind and soul and replaces uncertainty, discouragement and meaninglessness with the certainty and security of being that shines through the testimony and way of life of the mystics. In this spiritual transformation, it could prove helpful to the rational intellect to consider that the living whole that embraces all that is, also subjects the "sun of the second world," the sun of the earthly firmament, and the sun-like human Self to a uniform law by virtue of their common character as light-cores, in spite of their entirely different forms of being. This law accounts for the correlations which are evident in the enlightenments of Buddha, Jacob Bohme and Gopi Krishna

END OF EXCERPT

Oct 30, 2020, 6:09 AM

Also, a photo of the Heart Center Astrological Library as I had it. It now is part of the permanent collection of the University of Illinois.

Also, a photo of the Heart Center Astrological Library as I had it. It now is part of the permanent collection of the University of Illinois Oct 29, 2020, 9:52 PM

THE FATHER OF 21ST CENTURY ASTROLOGY

Don't panic! This is just who in my opinion is the "Father of 21st Century Astrology." I know, this is a topic on which we astrologers differ and find our differences. I would like to share with you the astrologer that has most influenced me and my direction in astrology, if I may

In my sixty years studying astrology, I have done my best to gather and at least examine as much of the world's astrological literature as possible. My collection, "The Heart Center Astrological Library," I no longer own, but have donated to (and it is now a part of the permanent collection of) the University of Illinois, so that these astrological works will remain available for future generations. I enclose a photo of the library when I was curator of it. I have also donated other large collections to various universities and non-profit organizations

Of all those many thousands of books, magazines, journals, and materials, at least in my opinion, the one astrologer who has most influenced me and served as a pole star for the direction of my own work was Dr. Theodor Landscheidt, who, aside from being an astrologer, was also a climatologist and served as one of the Supreme Court Justices of Germany

Although I had previously tried very hard to change (and charge) my life with the works of Dane Rudhyar, Marc Edmund Jones, L. Edward Johndro, and others, the only one that actually did change me was Dr. Theodor Landscheidt. His book "Cosmic Cybernetics" changed my life. I also learned a great deal from astrologer Grant Lewi and his book "Astrology for the Millions."

This modest-sized 80-page book, "Cosmic Cybernetics," now long out of print, whose subtitle "The Foundations of a Modern Astrology" more than lives up to its words, IMO, clearly establishes the foundation upon which some of my own work is based. If nothing else, I join Landscheidt in forming the beginning of a lineage as regards solar activity and its importance to modern astrology and, for that matter, to all of us here on Earth

I became friends with Theodor Landscheidt in the later 1970s. In fact, I sent Landscheidt his first home computer (a Commodore PET 2000) in 1978; I boxed the computer up and off it went to Germany. Landscheidt did some of his original solar research on the computer as well as programs such his geocentric planetary nodes. Landscheidt also travelled to our center here in Big Rapids and gave teachings. He and I exchanged ideas, in particular, as to planetary nodes and cosmic structure. I had specialized in heliocentric planetary nodes and he in the geocentric planetary nodes, two different ways of looking at the same phenomena

I find that I can study, study, study, coming up with little, and then someone like Landscheidt comes along and I get it at once and all at once. Landscheidt's main astrological books include:

"Cosmic Cybernetics: The Foundations of a Modern Astrology;: Ebertin-Verlag (1973)

"Sun, Earth, Man: A Mesh of Cosmic Oscillations - How Planets Regulate Solar Eruptions, Geomagnetic Storms, Conditions of Life and Economic Cycles;"
Urania Trust (Mar 1989)

“We Are Children of Light: Cosmic Awareness as a Source of Life Affirmation.” (1987)

“Wir sind Kinder des Lichts. Kosmisches Bewußtsein als Quelle der Lebensbejahung.”

And this work, “Children of the Light,” which is not yet available in English, is the one I want to tell you about here:

In the fall of 1989, my dear friend, mathematician, and translator Robert Schmidt (along with his wife Ellen Black) came and lived at our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan for some years, until May of 1992

According to Bob Schmidt, it was while he was living with us here in Big Rapids that he became an “astrologer.” Bob and Ellen lived at our center, right next door, and we took meals together for a long time and had many, many in-depth discussions

At some point I asked Schmidt, who was fluent in German, if he would translate this very important book of Theodor Landscheidt’s “Children of the Light,” and he agreed. Of course, Margaret and I would underwrite it, and so Schmidt translated the book

Unfortunately, Robert Schmidt passed on before he was able to complete the footnotes and final proofing for “We are Children of the Light” and that remains for someone yet to complete. If you are fluent in German and want to help preserve what will be a classic text, message me. Still, the main text is translated and this book is one of the later works authored by Landscheidt and a perfect match or complement for his early classic “Cosmic Cybernetics.”

It is important that Landscheidt's work be available in English. We are looking for volunteers who are skilled in German and who are somewhat technical to clean up the footnotes for the book

In the next few blogs, I plan to post some excerpts from "Children of the Light," so that you can see why this work is important. I hope some of my fellow astrologers will read these passages over the next few days

Oct 29, 2020, 9:09 PM

"STONES IN MY PASSWAY"

Autumn is here and the first frost has ended summer as we know it, thus this little poem

FIRST FROST

Listen to,
Their songs,
Disappearing

The deep silence,
Of a billion lives,
Ending in,

A single night

If I walk the now-faded meadows, where before there were flowers, now there are burrs and what are called stick-tights that cling to my clothes. We no longer have dogs, but when we did, de-burring them after an autumn walk was somewhat of a challenge. Worse are the deer ticks that climb to the top of weeds along the

trails and leap on whatever warm-bodied mammal moves past them. They can carry Lyme disease, something really fierce

What I am pointing out here is not so much the lack of flowers and the coming of winter, but these things in life, that like the stick-tights, wait for us to attach to them. The same things happen in the mind and our psyche with kleshas and various emotional upsets

Few of us can get through even one day without falling prey to our own reactions. There seem to be countless triggers, perfectly set to catch us when we least expect them and set us off onto a tangent. I remember a slogan from one of the pith dharma teachings that reads:

“Don’t Follow after a Lot of Wild Thoughts.”

Once a train of thought leaves the station, who knows where we will get off? We can cling to a distracting thought for days. It’s like everything around us is rigged to distract and lead us away from whatever path we are following. It’s actually worse than I am presenting it here

It seems that we put on different hats, or should I say masks, as the day progresses. We can get lost in a riff like feeling sorry for ourselves or feeling left out, not to mention anger, irritation, and who knows what. So many thoughts become sidebars that can take not only minutes, but hours or even days before, just as suddenly, we pop out of them and feel normal again. They line our pathway like briars to snag us as we go through our day

It’s like we are all schizophrenic to one degree or another, if not multiple personalities, with multiple takes on what we are feeling, often one mood after the other

until, as mentioned, we manage to wake up enough to pull out of the dive

The key here to watch out for that is the proof of the pudding is, as pointed out, how we can snap out of one of these moods or views in a moment, after which we feel totally normal again. Plus, we can watch ourselves switch out of our theater of the absurd and dissolve in the twinkling of an eye, leaving us feeling ourselves again

These are more sophisticated kind of reactions than what I usually write about, which are the standard knee-jerk reactions that we all can see happen to us. These are much more subtle because before we know it, we are distracted, lost on a sidebar, and don't even remember how we got there or what was the trigger

If we drill down on all of what I am describing here, we find what is an almost psychedelic world of tantalizing triggers, a pathway of snapdragons, each waiting to entertain or frighten us. We are lost to being wide awake

Perhaps there is nothing wrong with this other than, IMO, these triggers suck our energy, leaving us with very little for our use elsewhere

[Photo of me and photography, now inside until spring.]

Oct 29, 2020, 3:20 AM

THE EMBRACE OF THE SUN

In 1997, in Tsurphu Monastery, Tibet, at an altitude of some 15,000 feet I met H.H. the Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa for the first time. He gave me a name right there on the spot: "Tenzin Nyima," which means something like "Holder or Keeper of the Sun." How the young Karmapa knew I was a heliocentric astrologer, I have no idea." That's why he is the Karmapa

It has to be ironic and even kind of funny that after a lifetime of my studying esoteric knowledge, the most occult of the occult western spiritual traditions, not to mention the dharma, that the most secret of secrets, what is called self-secret, are all hidden in plain sight

The ubiquitous is often the most precious and publicly secret. Air would be a good example. Air is ubiquitous, but without it, life is not possible. How precious is that? Or water. That would be another one

However, the one I want to focus on in this article is sunlight, the sun's radiation that bathes Earth (and each one of us), 24x7. We like to think of the sun rising and setting, coming and going, but as we know, the sun is always shining, as steady as time itself

The Sun, Earth, and Moon's combined interaction creates what we could call the pulse of life. We all know that. But overarching that pulse is the gift of light from the sun, whose warm embrace makes life on Earth possible. Of course, we take for granted air, water, and sunlight, until we don't have them

As steady as the sun is, it still varies or pulses too. The 11-year cycle of solar sunspots waxes and wanes. At its peak, the sunspot cycle shields and protects Earth with its solar wind, which blows through space night and day

We are just ending a period of several years where the solar cycle (and solar wind) weakens and is no longer able to protect the Earth from cosmic rays, which are high-energy protons and atomic nuclei which travel through space at close to the speed of light. Cosmic rays originate not from the sun, but from beyond our solar system, from deep space and distant galaxies

These cosmic rays are said to be harmful to life here on Earth because they can damage and alter the DNA in our cells. And so, this pulse of cosmic rays alternates (in reaching us here on Earth) with the 11-year sunspot cycle of solar activity. When solar activity is strong, the solar winds protect and block out cosmic rays from reaching Earth, and when the solar activity is weak, the cosmic rays overpower the solar wind and penetrate Earth. They bring information and particles from the far distant reaches of deep space

And so, the Earth alternates in being bathed only in the solar winds and being inundated by cosmic rays. This pulse is like a beating heart and has been going on as long as the sun has shined

Right now in the heavens, we have reached the end of the low spot (no sunspots) in the sunspot cycle, and the first really large sunspot that marks the start of a fresh sunspot cycle has just reached us on October 27, 2010. And it is a whopper

This first sunspot, named AR2778, is a very large area stretching some 62,000 miles across the solar surface. And it is currently filled with C4-Class flares. One pulse of its radiation has ionized the top of Earth's atmosphere, disturbing shortwave radio propagation over the Indian Ocean. This marks the start of the new Solar Cycle 25,

So much for the physical description of the sun's influence on us. Of special interest for me in my life has been appreciating the effects of solar activity on our mindstream. The first book I ever wrote, published in 1975, was a heliocentric ephemeris titled "The Sun is Shining: Heliocentric Ephemeris 1653-2050" I created that book because there was no easy-to-use heliocentric ephemeris and I needed to study the sun in thousands of charts

I have been studying and monitoring solar activity of one kind or another for about fifty years. Although I appreciate solar minimum and the advance of cosmic rays toward Earth, I am (personally) more at home at solar maximum, when we Earthlings are more at home with our father, the Sun. We are just starting to come into such a time now and it will last for the next few years

Just as with dharma, where much of the realization practices are ineffable, can't be put into words, I feel the same way about the mystery of sunlight and its effect on us. It seems to me that we here on Earth have about no idea how much we are creatures of the Sun. Not a clue

Fresh light from the Sun reaches us every 8 minutes and 20 seconds, which is how long it takes for the light from the Sun to reach us. When the Sun starts to be active, to talk with us, as it is now, we listen, whether we know it or not. And this is because solar activity, such as flares and CMEs (Corona Mass Ejection) are, IMO, the main way that change reaches us and arises in our minds

We can think that solar change affects us, yet to me it is not so much that it affects us as that it IS us. We are the

Sun's change and we dance to the changes that the sun conveys to us, whether we know it or not

And when changes like this current massive sunspot appear on the sun's surface, our inner psychology moves in rhythm with the solar changes. As mentioned, it is not that solar change affects us, but rather that solar change IS us. This is an important point to grasp

We are not that far from the Sun and certainly we are not removed from the Sun's life. The Sun's life is our life too. If we will relax, we can learn to identify these solar changes as they appear in us. It is time that astrologers woke up and took notice of this very obvious brilliant light sphere and source and made it part of their practice

I plan to communicate with those who will listen how we can incorporate solar change consciously as part of our daily observation

ASTROLOGY OF THESE POLITICS

LOST IN THE WAKE OF THE SUN

This indeed is a time of our lives, one we won't soon forget. To me, it's like one of those rollercoaster rides where the metal sides and wheels of the cars begin to rattle and shake as they pick up speed. It may be time for me to put on my astrology hat, at least long enough to say something about the oppressive veil that seems to be hanging over life at this time. It's not surprising, given the recent conditions, yet it won't last forever. Perhaps, using some little bit of astrology, we can shed light on what's happening now

Sorry, non-astrologers, but this may get a little technical, so I hope you can either follow along or skip this post

Astrologers need to grasp that what may have us so sluggish just now and feeling kind of mired down, astrological speaking, and I am looking here at the astrology of November 3rd, 2020, Election Day itself, is that, for one, the planets (all eight of them!) are completely lost in the past just now and none of the planets are what we could call future oriented. In truth, we are being forced to look backward for the most part at this time. Let me explain

All of the planets are either now retrograde (looking backward) or have recently just turned direct and are still lost in the wake of the Sun in the zodiac. What this means is the Sun and the true positions of the planets in the solar system (heliocentrically) are (zodiacally speaking) all ahead of their geocentric counterparts, their positions as we see these same planets from Earth. And see them from Earth we all do

In this discussion, what is key is whether the planets as we view or see them from Earth are ahead (in the zodiac) or behind (in the zodiac) from where they actually are in the solar system, as they circle the sun. Are we in the future or in the past? The answer is we are totally, planetary speaking, in the past!

This includes Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, all of which geocentrically (from this earthbound Samsara) are behind where the actual planets are in their journey around the sun

On election day, all the planets are either retrograde (going backward) or, if not retrograde, have recently turned from retrograde to direct (forward motion in the

zodiac) and have yet to make up their displacement behind the Sun from the helio positions, which is where the planet actually is right now as it goes around the Sun – all eight planets. This is very unusual and my thesis is that is why they are unusually veiled with the past and thus so depressing to us when many of us want so much to look forward

The planets that are actually retrograde (and moving backward into the past) are Mercury, Mars, Uranus, and Neptune, while those who, while no longer retrograde, are just recently gone direct and still trailing in the wake of the sun's (solar system) positions, include Venus, Jupiter, Saturn, and Pluto. That's all of the planets

Folks, this is a LOT of craning our necks and looking backward and no real forward motion at all, although, as mentioned, some planets, while direct, are still behind the Sun (their solar counterparts) and trying to catch up

That is the gist of my message. I could go into, and I may another day, many other astrological goings-on that are taking place just now. I will just say a few words on that

The planets on Election Day are in what would be an octagon formation, in five groups separated by approximately 45-degrees each, leaving 156 degrees of zodiac arc empty. And that empty space is focused on 6 degrees of Scorpio, in the midst of what is known as the "Via Combusta," the "Fiery Way," being a stretch of traditionally unfortunate fixed stars

If you consider the five groups of bodies like a satellite dish, and a very stable or evenly-place one at that, then they are pointing at (and receiving), as mentioned, the "Fiery Way," the ancient "Via Combusta" (15-degrees

Libra through 15-degrees Scorpio) at about 6-degrees of Tropical Scorpio, in particular toward stellar bodies like:

The fixed star xi Centarurus at $05^{\circ}\text{Sc}57'52 -38^{\circ}45'28$ and what has been called "The Great Attractor Center" of the Mega-SuperGalaxy" at $06^{\circ}\text{Sc}47'29 -28^{\circ}41'13$. In other words, we have our satellite dish aimed at Tropical Scorpio and the "Fiery Way."

On Election Day, Jupiter is conjunct Saturn (heliocentrically) to the same exact degree and within a few minutes of arc. Jupiter our vocation or life-path is perfectly conjunct Saturn, the great limiter. So, push comes to shove or a more disciplined order of things will be our path

I could go into chapter and verse about each of the planets and how each is oriented toward the past just now, but it probably would just be confusing

You get the idea. And the point of my writing this is that, with all of this emphasis exclusively toward the past, which is indeed quite rare, it can't help but be confusing for us, especially when right now we want change and action. Those elements from the past that are now emerging to view (have been revealed) are not here to stay and endure, but rather are coming up for their last gasp. That is how I see it

As the Christian Bible says "This came to pass... that came to pass," etc. This time we are in has not come to stay; it too has come to pass. Let us help it pass by voting!

Oct 27, 2020, 10:24 AM

STABILITY WITHOUT STRUGGLE

It is the hallmark of experience, especially spiritual experience, that it cycles, going up and down, much like a rollercoaster in an amusement park. In other words, experience is unstable and to the degree we cling to it we are also unstable,

And when I say that we are unstable, that means how we view the world is also unstable. The Sun in the sky offers up an almost endless series of days. It never stops shining. Yet the weather as we see it here from Earth varies from day to day. And the same is true for our inner weather, our psychological and emotional states or moods

For example, I can write a blog, an essay on this or that topic and, as I read it back to myself, it confirms my state of mind. However, when I wake up the next morning and read it over to spellcheck or whatever, it's like someone else wrote it. It no longer reflects how I feel and the whole tone of it, to me, has gone sideways, drifted off from how I felt last night

Yet, the words are the same as when I wrote them, and the only thing that has changed is me, how I view it. And yet, not 12 hours has passed. What does that tell me?

It reminds me that my mind is like the moon and its tides, rolling in and rolling back out. I can cling to my everchanging rollercoaster mind and go along for the ride, or I can let it go and just be aware of it. That

second choice seems to be the dharmic choice. Be aware and take note

The longer I practice dharma, the more it is clear that not grasping or grabbing at reality is not only recommended but required. And we can't fake it, either, meaning suppressing our attachment is just another form of attachment

It amazes me that folks don't realize that learning dharma requires 100% of us and not just lip service or sitting ten minutes a day. Don't get me wrong. All intent and practice is warranted, no matter how small an amount we can manage. I am trying to communicate something else here

What I am saying is that we acknowledge that learning any sport, video game, or whatever takes real practice and learning, but somehow we are more casual about the dharma and its practice, although dharma is, IMO, more important than any other kind of learning

Organized religion in America is well established. And while Buddhism is usually thrown in with the various theistic religions, I don't consider Buddhism a religion. In fact, I tend not to call what interests me "Buddhism," because there are so many different kinds of Buddhism. I call what I practice "Dharma" and leave it go at that

In this country, the dharma is still relatively new. They say that "Dharma" takes something like 300 years to come into a country. Well, in that case we are still just getting started, although it seems that the dharma these days is on an exponential curve, catching on in the west relatively fast

My interest is in enabling others to get into the dharma with as little struggle as possible. I know that I had a

very difficult time sorting out the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, when I started out trying to make sense of the dharma. And, although I have been called a bit of a polymath because I am relatively skilled in a number of areas, nothing has been as difficult for me as realizing the dharma, even to the small degree I have

For me, the dharma is not something that I can dabble in and learn anything. It takes all and everything that I have to reduce dharma concepts to anything that is remotely experienced by me, much less realized. Everything! Yet, IMO, nothing is more worthwhile. Not even close!

Oct 26, 2020, 7:01 PM

GRANT YOUR BLESSING

[Before I share this article, here is an update as to the end of the year gardening. You have all heard of a bed of roses, but I wonder if you have ever heard of a bed of tomatoes? Margaret has brought in the remains of our garden tomatoes and (with a plastic sheet under them) laid them out on an extra bed where the southern sun can ripen them, and so it is. Even green tomatoes ripen and turn red.]

Scattered through many of the dharma books and texts that I have read, particularly in what are called the concise or “pith” texts, is the supplication for all of the great gurus to grant us their blessing. In the traditional Mahamudra Lineage Prayer of the Karma Kagyu lineage, it is repeated many times

When I started out, we had to do all of our practice in the original Tibetan with mantras in Sanskrit, so one transliteration we learned to recognize (over and over again) is “JIN GYI LOP,” which means “Engulf me with your blessing” or “Grant your blessing.”

It even seems to me, because of just where I come across this supplication in the texts, that this phrase is as important or even more important than any other instruction. In its most extreme form, this phrase is stated something like “The only hope is blessing. “

This thought of this blessing being our “only hope,” is as if anything else we do with our dharma practice of secondary importance compared to this often-repeated supplication, “Grant me your blessing.” Of course, I wanted to know more about this phrase. Who are we requesting this from?

Well, we are requesting from all the enlightened and realized gurus or masters that have ever existed to grant us their blessings, but most important we are asking this of our own guru or dharma teacher, if we have one

In particular, we are supplicating our Root Guru, which is that one dharma teacher who first successfully introduces us to the nature of our own mind so that we recognize it. In the teachings, this personal guru is often referred to simply as “the guru above your head,” because we are told to place the image of our awareness of our Root Guru above our head and refer to him or her frequently. The exact words often are “always turn to or toward the guru above you head.”

My understanding of why is that, as mentioned, the Root Guru, the lama who first introduces us to the nature of our own mind, is the most important conduit to

our own Buddha Nature and, as mentioned, to the Buddha. There is nothing more sacred than this connection and that is why we always turn to our root Guru (in Tibetan, the “Tsawi Lama”) in any supplication or any time we inquire

There is also a train of thought or thread that runs through many of the teachings that, even if you can do little else in the way of dharma practice, if you can keep that channel open between yourself and your Root Guru, that is of key importance. Of course, we supplicate all of the great dharma masters for their blessing, but particularly our own root teacher

It is also stated throughout the teachings that, and I am not sure of the correct words for this, if the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, or any great master notices you, looks at you, or receives your supplication, a rain or flood of blessing can wash over and bless us

And some teachings suggest that receiving the blessing of your guru is, as mentioned, our only hope of realization. All else is secondary

I just thought some of you might want to know about this tradition

Oct 25, 2020, 4:32 AM

DOING WHAT WE WANT OR LACK

[This dharma-oriented article is about discovering our innate interest and cultivating it.]

Given the opportunity, people will naturally do what they want, what they are naturally interested in. Our internal thread of interest is something that I feel is very precious to us and should be discovered rather than ignored, covered over, and further obscured

And most of us may be bottled up and stifled when it comes to our interests. We may not get to follow out our own interests as much as we would like. And when we first start doing so, when our interests are finally unplugged a bit, they may prove unruly and hard to manage until they settle down to a gentle flow

However, I don't know any way to learn the dharma that is better than to have genuine and pure interest to guide us, yet, as mentioned, it may take each of us a little time to learn how to let our own natural interests be our guide. If we are patient and take the time to discover and hone our instinctive interests, they are an authentic and natural way to find the appropriate dharma direction and path. As mentioned, it may take a bit of bravery on our part to find this out

And, as mentioned, in today's society this may be because our interests (also as a society) have been bottled up and sublimated. The sudden unbottling of our interests may find that they explode a bit and at first run wild, yet given time they will slow and find their natural and more even flow

I find this especially valuable with any kind of dharma practice. "Practice" of any kind, as we know, can easily turn into rote attempts at discipline, which are often boring and tedious. We can find ourselves just grinding through them to glean whatever muscle-memory they can provide, but when it comes to "practicing" dharma, I feel we need to have heart

Without a true and heartfelt interest, it seems practicing the dharma by rote is going to take forever. Much better is to organize our dharma practice based (as much as possible) on being actually interested in what we are doing, rather than just following instructions without any intuitive interest. And by interest I mean, not just a casual interest but a wake up in the morning and can't wait to do it interest

If we don't know how to unleash our own interest, we may have to first clear out some of the built up mental plaque and obscurations we have accumulated, and there is one quite easy way to do that, which is by "Reactivity Toning," which is based on our own involuntary reactions, thus requiring no particular interest or effort on our part. And we can practice this all day long and it adds up to authentic valid dharma practice

Sitting on a cushion for 20 minutes a day, IMO, is just not enough practice to get the job done. It is like going to church on Sunday, which was never enough to get me to heaven, I would bet. If we are bored or unable to move ourselves to practice (enough and more than enough) the various rote dharma practices like learning Tranquility Meditation, then simply monitoring our moment-to-moment reactions is an easy alternative. We have to do something that will bring down our buildup of obscurations so that we can see through them and feel our own natural interests, i.e. kind of get our obscurations down to a fighting weight

Of course, we are interested in what we are interested in, however, we may have had to curtain and subdue our natural inclinations in favor of not rocking the boat of conventional behavior and so on. I mentioned that earlier. Re-finding and strengthening our natural thread

of interest can put us on a track that we won't easily fall out of or give up, why? Because we are interested in it. Make sense?

And here is the more complicated part: our interest can be expanded both laterally and vertically. What does that mean? By laterally I mean (and I will use my own case as an example), that I first learned to do Insight meditation through close-up photography and for a while that's the only way I could do Insight Meditation. And then I tried (moving laterally or sideways through my other interests) to doing Insight meditation in writing articles such as this one, and so on. That took a long time and great effort, but was successful, moving Insight Meditation from one area of interest to the next. That's what I mean by "lateral."

And I had this idea of continuing to move on from topic to topic until everything I did in my life was included. That seemed like a good, but slow, plan. However, there was one bump in that road, which is that I found out that I was not interested (did not have sufficient interest) in things that I was not that interested in, so that lateral movement (at least in my case) kind of ran out of steam. I didn't have the interest. Period, end-of-story

Well, at first that seemed to me a real setback, but unknown to me, there was the other shoe waiting to fall as far as being able to extend and expand my ability to do Insight Meditation. While I ran out of interest to extend my interest laterally (sideways), I did not lack interest in the areas that I had already had interest in, like writing, photography, astrology, music, and so on. In those areas, my interest was still strong

And so, instead of trying to add on areas that are important, laterally, but that don't interest me all that

much, I went deeper and deeper into those where I did have interest and that turned out to be a way I could continue to expand my realization. Instead of horizontal extensions, I tried vertical extension, and it worked

The end of both lateral and vertical awareness extension is identical, to unify and make all areas of our life so that they are of “one taste,” so to speak. Incremental inclusion of all the parts of the whole (lateral) or a deeper understanding of the nature of a single area (vertical) have the same result because the NATURE of any one area of interest is identical to THE NATURE of any or all of the other areas. We can choose whatever direction works best for us, but it is axiomatic in realization practice that:

Our realization, like breathing, must continue to be expanded and extended

Whether this is understandable or will be useful to anyone reading this, I have no idea. I put it out there for those who can benefit from it

Oct 24, 2020, 9:35 AM

THE DHARMA IN REALIZED ENGLISH

I have been interested in Buddhism and dharma in general since the late 1950s. I have spent time in person with Alan Watts, Baba Ram Das, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Chögyam Trungpa, the Dalai Lama, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (16th Karmapa), Ogyen Trinley Dorje (17th Karmapa) and on and on. I have taken empowerments not only from the 17th Karmapa, but

from all four of his Heart Sons, and many other great Tibetan teachers

I have listened, listened, and listened to dharma teachings, including more than 600 in-person sessions (31 years) on Mahamudra from my Root Lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who did not speak English. Through most of these teachings I have depended on translators to bring me the words of these precious teachers

And translators come in all flavors of English, which can be a problem. The western translators speak English, but they tend to be learning the dharma and are not yet IMO fully steeped in the practice and the tradition. On the other hand, the Asian translators, for the most part, don't know English well enough to translate the more subtle points and many of them are not practitioners. I have listened to endless hours of broken English while trying to, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, "Suck any sense from that who can."

I'm not complaining, but just explaining how it was to learn dharma that was taught in a language I could not speak. I did my very best to hear the gist of what these well-intentioned Asian translators offered, and I am very grateful for their help. That being said, I have dreamed of and wished for a westerner who speaks perfect English and who is also what I would call "realized" to some degree. Realized is as realized does and I believe that I can hear and sense when the translator actually knows the dharma that they translate or teach

And I am sure that we all differ in terms of how attuned we are to one translator or another. I have been listening to dharma for something like 60 years as best I can, and I feel I know when I hear the dharma clearly

expressed. I literally appreciate it beyond words, yet through words

To the best of my knowledge, the Harvard psychologist and Tibetan translator Dr. Daniel P. Brown is, IMO, the most clear and realized westerner I have heard to date. I actually get realization from Dr. Brown just by hearing him speak on the dharma.

This is not to say that you will, but I encourage those of you looking for what I am describing to give Dr. Brown a listen. Perhaps the most comprehensive single video of Daniel P. Brown is this one:

“Sacred Sundays with Dr. Daniel Brown, Ph.D.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0swudgvmBbk&t=5483s>

It is long, but you can listen to as much as you want. I have seen comments from listeners that Daniel Brown, in these later videos, is not as spontaneous as listeners would like. It helps to know that Dr. Brown has contracted Parkinson’s Disease, and so perhaps has to control his bodily movements more than he used to

Here, IMO, is a westerner that to my ears has actual realization and expresses it clearly enough so that even I can, upon hearing Dr. Brown speak, hear it, learn, and have gotten some realization right on the spot

Do you have the same experience?

Oct 23, 2020, 9:57 PM

DIRECT AND INFERENTIAL VALID COGNITION

“The thigh-bone is connected to the knee-bone is connected to the ...” is an example of inferential valid cognition. With conceptual interdependency, everything that is connected must be included and adding every last thing into the mix apparently takes a very, very long time, like eons

This is why yogis or adepts instead use direct valid cognition, which instead of inferring everything, involves bypassing that process and looking directly at the mind itself. The mind is there to be seen if we will look. Learning HOW to look becomes the threshold or bar to be crossed

It does not involve just craning our neck to take a peek inside the mind, although that might be a good gesture. Like any other worthwhile discipline in this world, we have to study and work at it. However, IMO, unlike any other discipline, training our mind pays the greatest possible dividends

As for that “first step,” most books on dharma meditation say to learn Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), yet I have not found that to be so. Yes, Shamata Meditation would be helpful starting out, but for many it is a bridge just a little too far for beginners

As for where I feel most anyone can begin, and I have proved this to myself by doing it, I find the best (and easiest) simple practice is one of increasing our general awareness by removing what obscures it

And the place to start is with our own reactivity, our almost constant reactions (positive or negative) that take place all through the day. And I am not just talking about major reactions like jumping when a firecracker goes off, a door slams, or an alarm clock rings, but the much smaller (and more frequent) reactions

If we will look and take note, we find that we are drawn toward and move closer to those things we like, while at the same time withdrawing our attention by reacting toward what we don't like. It can be as simple as not liking the color of that scarf someone is wearing or reacting to someone's appearance, like thinking they are too short. It goes to both smaller and larger reactions from there. If we take a close look, we find ourselves wrapped in a hotbed of reactivity from morning to night and even in our dreams

Simply taking note of our own reactions is one of the easiest and most useful forms of dharma practice that I know of. We don't even have to note a reaction and then go off and think about it, which takes even more of our precious energy than the reaction itself. Just note the reaction, own it as our own reaction, and drop it – let it go at that. The rest will take place automatically, without our reacting to our reactions. As I used to say to my dog when he showed up at the door with some dead or rotting thing in his mouth: Just drop it

The beauty of this technique is that it takes no extra expenditure of energy on our part. We have already paid with our own energy by the reaction itself. Each time we react, it takes energy and clouds up our consciousness by some, perhaps small, amount. Yet, if we add up the hundreds and thousands of reactions a typical person has each day, the amount of disturbance and energy spent in a single day is enormous

If we can learn to tone back our reactions and replace them with more appropriate responses to whatever caused them, we save all that energy and simultaneously create a peaceful environment where we can live and get things done. This "Reactivity Training" or "Reaction Toning" is so simple to do and

we don't even have to go one millisecond out of our way because reactions by definition are involuntary; they are already happening without our permission

And another beautiful fact about this technique, about toning down our reactions, is that each reaction, no matter what caused it, is 100% our own. We reacted, not someone or something else. Sure, someone may have insulted us (or attempted to) and that is their problem, but our reaction to whatever is thrown at us is all our own. It is our reaction. We can do something about that

Learning to replace our knee-jerk reactions with a more appropriate response is what we are talking about here. The energy we save by toning back our reactions or at least getting them down to a gentle roar may well be just the amount of energy we need to break through to a greater awareness

Noting our reactions is itself an awareness technique. By cleaning up our reactions until they are reasonable responses increases our awareness field by a great amount and is a true dharma practice. I presented this to my dharma teacher of 36 years and he stated publicly that this reactivity training was an authentic and valid dharma technique

If you want to read more about "Reactivity Toning" and other related practices, here is the link to a free book called "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction."

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

Oct 22, 2020, 4:19 AM

THE LAZINESS OF BUSY

Harvard psychologist and Tibetan translator Daniel P. Brown tells this story of the Ven. Denma Lochö Rinpoche, the head of Namgyal Monastery of the Dalai Lama, who tells that a western dharma student once asked Denma Lochö Rinpoche a question “I get lazy in my everyday practice,” and Denma Lochö Rinpoche shot back at him, saying “No, you westerners, that’s not it. Monks in the monastery are lazy, but for you westerners, your laziness is busyness. That’s your laziness.”

In my experience, I would agree that westerners hide behind their daily busyness as an excuse to not practice. Perhaps that is all that Denma Lochö Rinpoche meant, but I would phrase it differently, and expand on that

For myself, I feel that this “laziness” we have in the west is more a symptom than the cause. Sure, we can be delinquent with our dharma practice. Delinquency is something I do know from experience, but I ask why IS that? What’s missing in our daily dharma practice that leads to our giving it short-shrift? Why is it not more precious and pressing than that?

Or, like almost anything we learn, are the beginning dharma exercises and their learning curve (that we need in order to build some muscle memory) just too tedious or boring?

I know from my own introduction to dharma, which happened in the late 1950s, that originally for me

dharma was simply something we would stay up late at night and talk about (fueled by cigarettes and lousy instant coffee and creamer), along with topics like Existentialism or Ingmar Bergman films

Until I met Chögyam Trungpa in person, it never fully sunk in that the dharma was a path that someone (just like me) might walk. However, as mentioned, every real form of practice, dharma or otherwise, has a basic threshold to cross before we are fluent enough to practice it properly

It is the same with any practice, such as learning to play the guitar. It's somewhat of a journey from first stringing up the instrument, fingering all the notes and chords, and putting all that together. And then there is the actual practicing, which is not the same as playing music, as any parent knows whose child is learning an instrument

I feel it is not so much that here in America busyness is our way of being lazy as it is that we can't (don't know how) to stand the heat of being exposed to pure awareness, and so we seek shelter from the difficulty of practice in our busyness as a way of coping with the brilliance of this awareness. We can't hold still and endure the light of pure awareness (which may appear to us as tedium or boringness) but have to seek shelter in the shadows of being busy or otherwise entertaining ourselves

This very obvious awareness, like the sun at Noon in a cloudless sky, is blinding in its persistence, yet we don't or can't see it. You are using it right now, like your personal flashlight, to read this page, but you may have never looked at it directly although it is right there. We each have (so the dharma teachings tell us) lifetimes of ignoring this vivid awareness. Somehow the whole

world of people have Photoshopped out this inner glaring sun of Awareness. How is that possible?

I am sure I don't know the nitty-gritty of it, but perhaps it is just ignorance. We have habitually ignored it until we don't (and apparently can't) see it. Or, more consistent with dharma teachings, we never yet have seen it at all. The advanced dharma teachings are pointing it out because it is right in front of our eyes. And still we don't see it, although it is the elephant in the room and always has been

As mentioned, I can't explain why we can't see this awareness, but can only guess at why this is true. I used to like the metaphor that it is like one of those old pictures that have a picture hidden within the picture, but you can't see the hidden image until someone points it out to you. Then you can see it

I've tired of that metaphor, because what I am describing here is way more obvious than a hidden image. Just as we habitually don't look directly at the sun is more like it, only with awareness, we are in the midst of using this same awareness to look for or at itself. That's like forcing two magnets with opposite polarity together. They short-circuit by resisting

Perhaps, just as the eye can not look at itself, we can't shine our flashlight of awareness around at itself. I don't know, but hopefully you get the idea

All I do know is that, because of my stroke I have myself had a good look at this blinding awareness straight-on, so to speak, "You can't miss it!" Not only can we not miss it, but apparently, we also cannot see it! How does that work?

Not sure, but perhaps over many lifetimes (not to mention this entire life) we have ignored or otherwise avoided looking at it. We have yet to ever see it! It might help in thinking this to remember that the only difference between this world of Samsara and that of Nirvana is the plaque or crud we have accumulated from reifying everything. It builds up like a patina, layer by layer, until our mind is obscured to one degree or another

Somewhere in that process of obscuration, we have programmed out looking directly at the native awareness within us that makes life have any clarity and lucidity. The long and the short of it is that we don't see the total awareness shining on us, even though we USE that light to literally light up our life. Go figure

Until my major stroke, I had never seen it, not ever. And the short-circuiting of the stroke cleaned house of most of my obscurations, if only temporarily, so that the awareness, like a sun, shown through, leaving me with a "What the heck is that?" look on my face. In truth, it was terrifying!

For a while I tried to write it off as medical voodoo or something, but as I begin to find references to it in some of the dharma teachings and my own dharma teacher of 36 years not only confirmed it, but went on to point out to me that this was a good thing and my stroke experience would or could be useful after death in the bardo states. And you know that got my attention

And so, what goes around, comes around and this finds me in the awkward position of trying to get a witness to what I have seen and experienced. I'm OK without telling folks, except, the way it works for me is that if I learn something of inestimable value to me, I instinctively want to share it with everyone else

In its worst form I'm being a pest, and at its best form it is called Bodhicitta

[Illustration depicting the experience of the “empty stage” I had after my major stroke. My normal sense of self and all entertainments were stripped away and for a long time I had no access to them. I just had to endure the brilliant light I suddenly notice shining in my mind.]

Oct 21, 2020, 4:51 AM

GRATEFUL FOR SMALL FAVORS

Actually, not so small, and I'm grateful for any insights. I find dharma practice itself is a long journey, one filled with ups, downs, and turns. As the pith teachings state "In the midst of experience, realization can arise." What that means to me is that in our spiritual experience, which has nothing but ups and downs, in the middle of that routine experience a realization can sometimes arise, changing the order of things

Something like that happened to me today, nothing earthshaking, folks, but something confirming that brings a little more certainty to my journey. I will share it with you, for what it's worth. It's a little subtle and probably not all that interesting to read about. I hope I can convey to you what it means to me

Ever since I was introduced to the nature of my mind by my dharma teacher, years ago now, with that realization came the necessity to receive that realization and continue to expand and extend it, lest it fall fallow

As I have explained many times in blogs here, my introduction to the mind's nature came not while I was sitting on the cushion as I had always imagined it would or should, but rather it came to me out in the forests and meadows crawling around in the grass taking close-up photos of Mother Nature's critters and flowers. It spontaneously just happened

And as I have also communicated here before, if I wanted to do Insight Meditation (Vipassana), which I had just discovered, I had to have a camera in my hand and be out shooting photos. Otherwise, my mind was (when I got back home) perfectly ordinary as it had always been. That made it difficult, especially when

winter came on and it was way too cold for the camera to be outside, not to mention myself

Anyway, and here comes the background as to what happened today. Feeling constrained to camera work in my realization, yet because I loved Insight Meditation, I tried everything that I could, just as the dharma textbooks say, to “extend and expand” my realization from Insight Meditation to something other than just photography

Well, I was able to do that, but it took me about one and a half years of very hard work to do Insight Meditation while writing things like this blog. Ever since then, and I am talking about many years now, I have continued to work patiently at extending (and expanding) my meditation beyond both photography and writing to other parts of my life, whatever they might be. And, while I have made some progress, it’s clearly not enough or moving along fast enough, or so I thought

My idea for progress was simple, follow the pith dharma texts in that, as mentioned, we are told to “expand and extend” our realization, and I interpreted that to mean extend it linearly and laterally, you know, like from the old song, “the knee-bone is connected to the leg-bone is connected to the ankle-bone” and so on. I sought to extend my meditation to include everything in the world, one piece at a time. I worked and worked at it

Well, that dog won’t hunt and perhaps the reason is that while I am interested in photography, writing, and, of course, the dharma itself, I am not all THAT much interested with things beyond those, other than my family, of course. And so, that left me kind sitting high and dry and not progressing all that much. It was kind of disappointing

And then today, out of the blue, this insight came that lateral extension (adding thing to thing to thing...) is not the only kind of extension. There is also vertical extension, an idea that never had occurred to me until today. And, in fact, of late I have been already doing (and being successful) in what I am about to share here

Instead of spreading out Insight Meditation to new areas of my life, I can also extend my realization by going deeper into the few areas that already work for me, i.e. going down farther (vertical) into the areas that I have the most interest in, for instance, like the dharma... or photography

I know. It is a small thing this pivots on, but pivot it does, and, like lateral extension, extension and expansion vertically is also unlimited. And the pivotal thought to all this is that reaching and going deeper into any single area of interest, dharma-wise, is like reaching into all areas. And this is true, that all individual anything share the same true nature. Touch one, touch all

I remembered today, that Rinpoche had told me, some time ago, that being devoted to one yidam or deity was the same as to any other or all of them, because in the last analysis they all are the same. That came home to me today like a punch in the gut

And so, the takeaway here is, instead of trying to conquer new ground in the world, by endlessly adding on, I find myself delving deeper into what I already know and love best, photography, writing, and especially the dharma itself. And this vertical movement is revealing everything I had hoped adding on things laterally, one by one, can do

I don't have to realize Samsara as Nirvana by incrementally adding on everything in the world to my awareness, one topic at a time. I can achieve the same realization by deeply knowing the nature of one thing, whatever most interests me

This is how realization works

Oct 20, 2020, 8:49 PM

“NO POT TO PISS IN”

When we learn to stand up and are still unsteady on our feet, we can hope there are others around that we can lean on. Sometimes there are, but more often perhaps there is no one that we can lean on. Remember the old lyric:

I ran to the rock to hide my face
The rock cried out “No Hiding place.”

The rock cried out “I’m burning too,”

“And want to go to heaven the same as you

My first true dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, who had been a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order, put it more bluntly. He would say:

“Michael, I’ve got no pot to piss in”

There comes a time where, increasingly, there is no place that we can unload, no shoulder to lean on, and as Andrew said, no pot to piss in

It can be unsettling to wake up and realize we are walking point. Even with all our dharma brothers and sisters, we still each must be enlightened on our own recognizance. No one will or can do it for us. Even the Buddha himself could but point out the way to enlightenment; he could not do it for us or touch us on the forehead and we would be enlightened. Enlightenment must be earned in every case

So, if you are wandering in the wilderness of dharma practice, you are not alone and not the first one to feel so. No one ever said that it would be easy, and it’s not

We can't depend on those with no dharma realization because they have no realization. Even if we were to plunk ourselves down in the middle of a thousand Buddhist monks, we would still have to do our own practice and get enlightened. At best, monks, lamas, rinpoches, and even the Buddha himself can but point out to us whatever we are capable of seeing and receiving. This is why the Preliminary Practices, which are almost all purification exercises, are so important. We have to be able to receive the teachings

Dharma practitioners who have been practicing longer than we have will do their best to point out to us the dharma path, yet we may not be able to follow their pointers or their methods don't work for us. First, we have to get our obscurations down to a fighting weight, one that allows us to see through the veil of whatever now obscures us. As for choosing to stabilize our unruly minds, I wrote this poem years ago

MIND PRACTICE

Not an option,

But a refuge Less painful than:

Anywhere else

Oct 20, 2020, 2:15 AM

ALL THE WORLD A STAGE?

[This post is not for the faint of heart. It's not really for the eyes of many and even reading it may compromise readers, so unless you are into and interested in the dharma for the long run, I suggest you just pass on this one. This blog is about Awareness, with a capital "A." What we have is a combination of several posts that comprise my takeaway from an extraordinary experience, one I am still trying to place. Sincere comments are welcome. – Michael Erlewine.]

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

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

The light was so bright that I could not bear to look at it directly, but only out of the corner of my eye. And so, I turned away, sought out the shadows (which were not there for me yet), kept busy, and did my best to ignore the light by endlessly doing things. This was not a dream, but a reality. I had never noticed the light before, although it apparently has been here all my life. And I did not want to be left alone with it, but I was. I had no

choice. My sense of Self, shattered in the stroke, had completely blown out. Yet, there I was, of something like me

The brilliant light, just a symbol or placeholder used here, was actually the true “reality” of my situation, or whatever we can say is going on here in Samsara where we all live, but as mentioned, I could not bear to look directly at it. It was so horribly bright. In my case, the light was (and hear you may to have to think on it) not an actual physical light, but rather it was the LACK of any cover or entertainment shown or got my complete attention. It was that lack of any cover which shone so bright. That was the basic idea early-on, but it became increasingly visible and apparent during the time I was in the hospital

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

Until the stroke took place, apparently, I was constantly entertained all of my life, busily entertaining this or that. Always, I was busy! And this is where the photo of an empty stage comes into play What the theater stage in this photo is “empty of” is all the trappings of a performance or show and what is especially lacking is me as lead actor in my own life, not to mention the other players and the sheer “entertainment” and show of it all, which is what a stage is for, an outer display. This stage was empty

And so, although through dharma study and practice I am familiar with the concept of attachment and fixation, another and overwhelming term that occurred to me after this stroke experience, which I am sharing with you here, is simply the concept of “entertainment.” We are (or at least I am) totally entertained and involved with myself almost all of the time and so very, very used to it. Either that or I immediately suffer from its absence, the lack of it, which the stroke brought on so vividly. At least, this is how it seemed to me once the fog of the stroke began to clear

What I missed after the stroke overtook me was this “Entertainment,” being entertained or otherwise being constantly busy about something or other, anything but face the now obvious bright light high above my empty stage, which glaringly bright was in fact nothing other than the harsh shock of my sudden utter lack of “entertainment.” Suddenly, I had none and no means to find any. I was stuck in this present moment only. My past and sense of self had vacated

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

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

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

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

Without my constant busyness and entertainment, I didn’t know what to do with myself, because my attachments, fixations, and usual entertainment were my required filter for life as I knew it. Of course, I

wouldn't have copped to that before the stroke because I kept any thought of such entertainment as quite separate from the serious business of being "Me." As mentioned, I liked entertainment as I used to consider it, but had not realized I was addicted to it beyond measure and comprehension. Looking at it now, this life we all share is almost total entertainment! It is a fabrication we each create and support to the exclusion of any gap in it whatsoever. The cracks are all sealed

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

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

And for many decades I had handled those dharma concepts fairly well. However, what if you were to wake

up and realize that you are in a play, a theatrical production of your own making, in which you were the star. And what if that play or dream were to be suddenly over and closed out? What is left? That's the \$64,000 question, if anyone remembers back to the old game show

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

Thanks to that stroke, I got stripped of all that entertainment while still alive and before death takes me and not yet at death itself. And no, I can't say whether that is what also happens at death, although when I had a translator explain my stroke to my dharma teacher (who was 96 years old at the time and sharp as a tack), his response was that my stroke event was good preparation for after death. And my response to that was, whoa! I'm NOT ready for that. And I thought I had been getting ready all these years through my dharma practice, but I never imagined what I was now experiencing. If THAT happened after death, in the bardo, I was not anywhere near ready

So, there you have an introduction. If I can, I follow this article by a couple others on the same topic

Oct 19, 2020, 5:56 AM

MEASURING OUR DHARMA PROGRESS

Yes, there is some, but usually not in any time scheme we have in mind. Yes, it does happen in a lifetime, that there are a few dramatic (and obvious) moments when our dharma progress leaps ahead, but never often enough for most of us. Yes, there are a few of what they call “all-at-oncers” out there, but no one I know and certainly not me. I would have to call myself a no-see-any as far as progress go

Of course, we all watch for signs of dharma progress, yet all of the pith instructions tell us not to do so. Even some of the most pith of the pith instructions (and secret too) clearly state not to worry about your dharma progress because it only adds another layer of obscuration or plaque that veils our progress

And by slow, I mean slower than slow, slower than watching-paint-dry-or-plants-grow slow. And, as mentioned, it is recommended not to watch anyway. Yet, we cannot but chance to keep an eye out

In this world of constant change, dharma-progress change seems to defy that law. And it only gets worse as you get into the more advanced practices. At least in the Preliminary Practices (like Lojong or Ngondro), we have iterations to count, 100,000 of this and 100,00 of that. Do sheer numbers show dharma progress? Not really, yet it is a count and has a sense of accomplishment. Of course, in my case, when I finished 500,000 of these iteration, my reward was to be told to do them all over again. LOL

And in what are called the realization practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra, there is no numbered counting of anything. It is all a matter or

measuring awareness, which is in a word unmeasurable. Try doing that for years!

My point here is not to depress you, but rather to inform you that, as mentioned, attempting to monitor your dharma practice progress is a non-starter. And so, what's the solution?

The solution is to get into the here and the now 100%, instead of always keeping one eye out for progress. That's the solution. Without complete involvement on our part, there will be no progress or very little. The realization dharma practices are non-dual; they have NO subject or object, so if you are objectifying your practice by keeping an eye out for progress, then by definition you are still in a dualistic state and that will never work. Not even ever

So, keep your head down and your heart in your dharma practice. Only that will move the progress-slider down the track. And, as long as we are trying to get somewhere, then obviously we are not there yet. We have not arrived. Try that on for a thought

In other words, if you can't expand your awareness to include other ways of realization, then extend or deepen the ones that are working for you. Complete your realization. That is the road to enlightenment

And just to be difficult, if you still can't see any progress in your dharma practice, you are looking in all the wrong places. Here is an easier way:

Just click on the blue FB logo in the upper left-hand side of your Facebook page and you will get the scrolling list of many of your FB friend's posts. Just scroll down and watch your reactions to each post, one by one. We can judge by our reactions (positive or

negative) just where we are in your dharma stability.
LOL

Oct 18, 2020, 3:28 PM

THE SEARCH FOR INTIMACY

The search for intimacy seems to look everywhere in the world other than within ourselves. We look out, rather than in. My first true dharma teacher was a Rosicrucian initiator name Andrew Gunn McIver, who was from Glasgow, Scotland. He was 82 when he passed on and I saw to his burial and designed his tombstone. He used to say “Touch one, touch all,” meaning that first we have to move ourselves and that would move others

What I mean by this is that just as when we read a poem that moves us to the quick, or watch a lone great bird high in the sky heading north or south, we sometimes get popped out of our steady stream of business and brought to our knees for a moment or two of reflection. That’s what I mean by “being moved,” the intimacy that we have with ourselves

My point here is very simple and obvious. Such moments as those described above are not empty of meaning, but just the opposite. They can be deeply satisfying to us and we are thankful when we have them. Moving or being there for others depends on first being there ourselves, not just in the role of benefiting others, in helping others, in walking point, etc., but being with ourselves with others. I don’t find routinely helping others by rote or fabricating compassion and

kindness to be all that helpful, although the intent may be good

I'm not saying by that we should not be helpful to others, but simply that fabricating compassion (or what have you), drumming it up, without being also fully present ourselves is not the same as our being there too. Doing our duty as helpers is one thing, admirable in itself perhaps, but we often forget to include one person also in need, and that is ourselves. We remain dualistic, standing back as the subject

We may be putting on the "happy face" and the tired smile, but I am reminded of the line from the old standard "When the Saints Come Marching In" ... "I want to be in that number when the saints come marching in." We all should be in that number, with no one left or hanging outside, including ourselves. It's kind of like "truth in advertising," yet in this case it is truth in relationships

We all know how plastic formal occasions can be. There is no (or little) intimacy in those. Again: intimacy comes from inside, when we too are included in our own gestures to others. I know. We do the best we can, and we mean well. I am not saying that we don't

It's the old dharma-difference between duality and nonduality. No one wants to be the object of your subject or vice versa. Everything is included in non-duality, including whatever it is we call our "Self," unconditionally, with no questions asked and no questioner

The intended takeaway here is that instead of looking outside for intimacy, out there in the world of people and things, I find it better to start right here where we are and make sure we are included in whatever

approach or gift we have for others. Make sure that we have been moved and are ourselves the dewdrop in the line of the poem “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” In that case, as they say, the word “alone” becomes “All One.” That’s where intimacy comes from, IMO

Oct 17, 2020, 9:56 PM

THE TRUTH OF REACTIVITY

I believe that we all have climactic moments, moments where our life turns like on a pivot, often suddenly and decidedly. My dharma training has had a few of those, as well. I would like to tell you about one of them

Oddly enough it came to me as I was browsing YouTube, looking for information on meditation, in particular the kind of meditation known as Mahamudra

Of course, I found dozens of videos on various approaches to Mahamudra. In particular, I was looking for Tibetan, Chinese, Indian and other southeast Asian experts on practicing meditation. Too often, almost always, what I found was only barely understandable to me, sometimes because of poor English skills by the speaker, or an overly intellectual presentation, and on and on. It was, for the most part, very disappointing. I just couldn’t learn much from what I found. It was probably my fault too, but that was what happened

In my frustration, I found a westerner, in fact a Harvard psychologist names Daniel P. Brown, who professed to

know something about the Tibetan methods of mind training. At least he knew English, so I gave Dr. Brown a listen

To my amazement, what I heard not only caught my attention, but ended up directly connecting with my mind in a most powerful and effective way. This professor Brown was speaking on the Four Noble Truths, a pillar of Buddhism. For those who may have forgotten, here are the Four Noble Truths:

- (1) The Truth of Suffering
- (2) The Truth of the Cause of Suffering
- (3) The Truth of the End of Suffering
- (4) The Truth of the Path to the End of Suffering

Well, I had of course heard of these four noble truths, but somehow my understanding of them was so intellectually abstract that they kind of went in one ear and out the other

However, Daniel P. Brown did not repeat the common way of understanding the Four Noble Truths as taught by the historical Buddha as expressed by translators. Instead, he started right out by challenging the use of the word “suffering” in describing these truths. Brown pointed out that, in his understanding (and he was fluent in Tibetan) a better word than “suffering” would be “reactivity,” thus we would have:

“The Truth of Reactivity, The Cause of Reactivity,” and so on. Brown went on to explain that in our everyday life, we react. When we like something we try to draw it close to us and when we don’t like something, we try to push it way, thus constantly reacting all day long

I can't explain why, but the moment I heard this, something shifted in my mind, just that quick. While all these years I had never deeply understood what "suffering" meant, because there were so many forms of it, but I instinctively, intuitively, and immediately understood about reactivity. I, myself, reacted to this or that all day long and always had. A light went on

In other words, in that moment I understood, really for the first time, what the Four Noble Truths were all about. And when I took that realization into my life, a great deal cleared up in short order. I was immediately aware (and remained so) of my constant reactions throughout the day

I not only reacted to any sudden event, but I reacted to almost everything constantly as my day progressed, and I could trace these reactions down to finer and finer reactions, like: "I don't like the color of the tie he is wearing" or "Or her nose is too big," and on and on. All of these reactions consumed an immense amount of my time and energy and served no purpose whatsoever, other than to accumulate karma of an unfortunate kind

If you want to hear a westerner who with real awareness, here is the first of six short talks (about 8 or 9 minutes each) by Daniel P. Brown, for those interested:

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

[You could do worse than give this short series a listen.]

It was not long before I developed an entire dharma practice using reactivity, which I called "Reactivity Tong-Len" or "Reactivity Toning," which is a form of Tong-Len

that, instead of doing it with others, we can do it with ourselves, with our own reactions. And it is very powerful and returns back to us to us an enormous amount of energy that we otherwise spend

When I presented this technique to my dharma teacher of 36 years, his response (to a shrine room of people) was to acknowledge that this, indeed, was an authentic dharma practice. Of course, I find it invaluable and for those of you who would like to try it out, here is a free e-book to test it

“TONG-LEN: THE ALCHEMY OF REACTION”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

[Photo by me, with the Nikon Z7 and the Nikkor-“O” CRT lens]

Oct 17, 2020, 5:41 AM

KLESHAS: EMOTIONAL UPSETS

While most people today in the west more or less know what “karma” is, fewer are aware of the dharma term “Klesha,” which originally came from a Pali word. A Klesha is an emotional block or upset that once triggered, arises in our mind, and can’t just be removed by shaking our head or looking at it. It usually takes us quite a while and sometimes a long while for a klehsa to subside

Like one of those stick-tights I get when walking in the meadows in Autumn, for the most part, most of us, are

unable to shake off a klesha once it takes hold of our mind. It clings to us; worse, we cling to it

Our mind clouds over, our aura turns dark, and before we can stop it, we are carried away with whatever is upsetting us. We are soon out of control and lost in a sidebar to life, having lost the main track

While we can usually handle an upsetting thought or two with not a lot of problems, a klesha is more like a swarm of hornets that distracts our good senses 'en masse' and sends us running for cover

A klesha can dominate our mind for hours or days and then, often, it can just vanish, dry up and blow away. We are clear-minded again. What happened? It's like a part of us that we don't know and we don't know where it came from other than it overcame us on the path

Kleshas have been described as emotional or psychological knots that twist and tie us up for varying lengths of time. And unlike simple reactions, sudden or otherwise, kleshas are not usually remedied except slowly. In a way, kleshas are the kind of thing people might seek out therapy for, because often we can be unable to deal with them ourselves

It is not difficult to realize we have been taken over by our own upset, but more difficult is to do something about it other than wait it out – a hurricane of the mind

Working with a klesha is like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where we painstakingly have to remove each stick from a pile, one by one, without inflaming (moving) the mess of them. First step is to realize that we are upset, and the second is to relax and calm down, and the third is to let it blow itself out. With a single thought, a dharma practitioner may be able to look directly at the

nature of the thought and have it vanish, but with kleshas, even quite experienced dharma practitioners are advised to wait out the klesha-storm, keep their heads down, and wait for another day to cope with it

Oct 16, 2020, 10:24 AM

REVEAL: REDUX

In a previous blog, we briefly looked at the physical process and technique involved in approaching the practice of Mahamudra. This involved managing to stabilize our mind with Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) to the point where Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is possible

To put a finer point on the above: we don't practice Shamata just for its own sake, but rather to the point where it is stable enough to serve as a base for Vipassana (Insight Meditation), after which we don't stop with Shamata, but just as breathing is the basis of life here on Earth, Shamata is the basis for Insight Meditation. Shamata has to be maintained as we go on to further dharma practices like Vipassana

Shamata is like getting to and establishing a base on the Moon and Insight Meditation is like the base itself and its ability to sustain life on the Moon. These two practices, together, comprise what is called Mahamudra

And the shift or pivot point that I am trying to point out here is the transmigration from identifying, as we do and have always done, with this dualistic world (and our

place in it) to being able to transfer and transform our identity from here (where it is now) to the nondual world of Vipassana/Mahamudra and beginning to identify with that realm. Working from the realization practices is much more useful than only working from what is called Samsara, where we are now, this cyclic world of ups and downs

It's kind of a joke in that by identifying with the world of Vipassana, which is nondual, there is no subject (or object) to identify with, yet the peace and tranquility that allows Insight to occur reveals the nature of the mind itself to us every time we access it. Think about that

In the more concise pith dharma-teachings, it is clearly stated that Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight) are connate, just two sides of the same coin. We can't have one without the other. They are like the two poles of Mahamudra

[Photo by me, with the Nikon Z7 and the Nikkor Z 70-200mm f/2.8 S lens]

Oct 15, 2020, 6:33 PM

INTEREST AND SHAMATA MEDITATION

Although we can practice Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) quite mechanically and make some progress, authentic Shamata is fueled by an intense interest rather than any manner of just mechanics. And, although Shamata traditionally is learned on-the-cushion using various subjects of focus, it can be learned on any subject that we are intensely interested in. Because "interest" is the determining factor and fuel

for progress with Shamata, any part of our life in which we are unconditionally interested or fascinated by can be our practice

And so, in my experience the secret of success with Shamata is not, as I was first instructed, the sheer number of hours spent in this repetitive practice, but rather the degree of interest present. And I learned this the hard way, in fact the hard, hard way. I am ashamed to admit this, but I practiced Shamata for 32 years and never mastered it. Think about that for a moment

And like the deer in the headlights, I only snapped out of this endless rote practice when my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche said to a group of us: “Those of you with computer skills may have a leg up on the rest of folks by the concentration necessary in many computer applications.”

As a system programmer for many years, the moment I heard what Rinpoche said, something snapped. It was not that I could not do Shamata, but rather than I was already totally skilled in Shamata from my years of working with computer code, often 14 hours a day, seven days a week, for a great many years. So, to sit me on a cushion and have me try to look at a pebble or a stick completely lacked interest for me. All that time on the cushion I was trying to fabricate interest, which for me can't be fabricated. I was trying to salt the salt, so to speak. I already knew how to concentrate exactly

And so, for me, mastery of Shamata depended on the degree of my interest in whatever I was focused on. You may differ, but then again, you may be similar. Look into what you are intensely interested in that requires some detailed skill. You may already have your degree in Shamata and not know it. And it may be

easier to transfer that degree to the cushion and Shamata meditation than you think

Ultimately, IMO, it comes down to interest, being interested in what we are doing. It is very hard to do things just by rote in order to build up the muscle-memory needed to do Shamata. Obviously, it can be made to work, yet in my experience it does not hold a candle to training in Shamata meditation with something we actually are keenly interested in. Each of you can check this out for yourself and please let me know how it works out

Unfortunately, dharma practice in meditation is just that, "Practice," which is not the same as meditating. Meditating is what we are practicing to do, but not yet able to do it. When dharma practice is still new, it can be hard to find a thread of interest that is strong enough to fuel our interest in practicing dharma each day long enough to learn much.

This is a chicken and the egg kind of situation. Powerful interest in dharma traditionally arises at the event called "Recognition," and that interest is called "Absolute Bodhicitta," which is to be distinguished from "Relative Bodhicitta" which is more of something we fabricate at first

And so, there is a real problem here, at least for some of us. Starting out in meditation practice, we have the cart but no horse. As mentioned, the horse that needs to be before the cart appears after we attained "Recognition." This amounts to a Catch-22. This is why we might consider learning Shamata using something as an object of focus that we already are keenly interested in and have extensive experience with

Oct 15, 2020, 2:26 AM

THE GREAT REVEAL

Insight Meditation is enabled by a successful practice of Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation, the ability to place the focus of your mind on an object and leave it there, much like when I take my computer mouse and place the cursor on my desktop screen and take my hand away. The cursor remains on the screen where I left it until I decide to move it again. Shamata is something like that

When, in the more advanced teachings, it is said that Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation) work together, in tandem as part of Mahamudra, it is Shamata that fixes our mind at rest, after which point it is possible to perform Vipassana (Insight Meditation). The two are really one thing: Mahamudra

Shamata holds the focus still, in which we then rest our mind (allow our mind to rest), and that motionless-resting reveals or allows our native intuition to kind of bubble-up or arise in a non-dualistic manner that reveals with certainty the actual nature of whatever we are examining or focused on

Shamata, which is dualistic (subject focusing on an object), fixes our inner gaze so that Insight Meditation (which is non-dualistic) reveals the nature of what we are at one with. This resolving of dualism into a non-dualistic state is very clarifying and brings certainty, which is very addictive – that luminous clarity

We practice and do this mixture of Shamata-Vipassana again and again and again, each time resolving our habitual duality and revealing its inner unity -- a non-dual realization. In time, the whole of Samsara is gradually revealed, increment by increment. And, all of the time, by an almost infinite repetition of this sequence (this practice), we reveal the true nature of Samsara and by that means transfer our consciousness from our age-old habit of ingrained dualism to revealed non-duality in its timelessness. How wonderful. E-Ma-Ho!

This transmigration of consciousness is something that is done in the right here and now, while we are living. We gradually learn to depend less and less on our dualistic framework of subject-and-object, Self and others, and begin to transfer our identity, that is, "identify" with the timeless awareness that is stable and unchanging

We begin to work out of and center our identify with nonduality rather than this dualistic Samsaric world we have clung to for who knows how many lifetimes

This transmigration is (for most of us) very gradual, like a spider crawling across a web, handhold by handhold, yet always progressing. The process of Insight Meditation, as I understand it, is like that, a revelation. The Great Reveal

Oct 14, 2020, 10:16 AM

REVEAL AND REVELATION

Where I like to spend my time

Some folks like to hang around the office water cooler and things like that. I never managed that, yet there is a way I like to spend my time

I wish I could say that I love to spend my time on the cushion saying mantra and reciting texts, but I don't. Of course, I do my daily mantra and text recitations like clockwork, but anything that rote I am not always in the good mood for. It varies

It is with off-the-cushion dharma practice where I shine, if I shine at all. As to what on earth is dharma practice off-the-cushion, it is called "post-meditation" and that is where you will find me when at all possible

And post-meditation dharma practice is what we do the rest of the day and night when we are not on the cushion and practicing. In the preliminary dharma practices, it is often said that when we get up from our on-the-cushion practice, we carry with us a sense of our practice, much like a rose has a scent. I am not talking about that here, but we could

What I am referring to here is carrying the clarity and lucidity that we perhaps originally engender on the cushion into our day-to-day life off-the-cushion in post-meditation. And once we have completed whatever preliminary or purification dharma practices our teacher requires of us, we eventually take up what are called the "Realization" practices of Mahamudra or Dzogchen

In the lineage I work in, after the preliminaries, we may do deity practice, and eventually end up practicing Mahamudra, which is a special combination of Shamata

(Tranquility) and Vipassana (Insight) meditation. Mahamudra is what I tend to practice in post-meditation, in particular Insight Meditation

I must say that I am all about Insight Meditation. In this world, in my lifetime, nothing is as addictive and interesting as doing Insight Meditation. I am never happier than when engaged in Vipassana

Time not only passes in Vipassana, time has no dominion there. And there is "Clarity" to the end of confusion, and "Certainty" beyond the rough edge of uncertainty. To repeat: Certainty where uncertainty cannot reach and Clarity beyond the edge of any confusion

The extension and expansion of the realization attained at "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind reveals the nature of Samsara. That is amazing

If there is one word to define Insight Meditation, for me it is "Reveal" and "Revelation." Insight Meditation reveals the nature of Samsara

[Photo by me at the local cemetery where we often walk.]

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