

Dharma Blogs

2017 Fall (pt. 1)



by Michael Erlewine

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2017 FALL (part 1)

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Image is carved wooden statue of Guan Yin (Chenresik in Tibetan), the bodhisattva of loving compassion, that is in the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City. It is titled "Guan Yin of the Southern Sea."

INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Fall of 2017, part 1, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

September 1, 2017

As I read the different dharma accounts of practitioners, I sometimes do learn some dharma, yet I almost always learn how each of us is different in what we require to attain realization. I can well remember when I first heard the celebrated dharma teacher Alan Watts in person. I was sitting in the front row, just a few feet from where Watts was speaking.

Of course, he said many fascinating things, but what I did not expect to find was how much he struggled to understand things. I came away from the event, not so much with Zen dharma quotes in my head, as with the distinct impression that if Watts was as dense as he seemed, then I too had a chance at learning dharma. What an unusual way of teaching!

And I have noticed this with other dharma teachers, especially Americans and Europeans, that while I do learn some dharma, they also seem never to fail to reveal themselves and the particular problems they have had learning the dharma. I think we all do, and of course I have myself have had MANY problems learning dharma, just not the same ones that others have. Thus my impression that, as the Tibetans say, there are 84,000 dharmas, 84,000 ways of teaching it, and 84,000 types of students. It is amazing that we can be so different and yet all learn the same dharma. And my point here is that we each end up tailoring the dharma to our specific approach, what it takes for us to learn it.

And, after thinking about all of this, I flash back to my childhood and how intensely I studied natural history.

Yet, in all that nature study (which lasted until I was in my late teens) was hidden another truth, one that was not at first at all apparent to me. And that is that during all those years of not paying attention in school, but instead just thinking about and working only on what interested me, I seem to have developed an ability to find a way to ignore the conflicting outside demands on my attention and stay with the “oxygen” thread of what interested me at the time. I just kindly tuned it all out as best I could.

In other words, I was totally interested (almost all that time) in what I was doing with nature and pretty-much refused to do the things by rote just because teachers “said so” or told me I had to do it. I followed my own thread of interest through the all those 11+ school years, rather than allow myself to accept being told what to do, if it was something by rote. Needless to say, I did not enjoy school and probably was not popular with the schools either. Yet, mostly I was oblivious to their demands.

And I continued this into adulthood. Of course, this had good and bad results. I’m mostly concentrating on the good points here. I’m not even sure what all the bad points are, aside from more or less falling through the cracks of social conventions. In the end, I had no certification, not even a high-school diploma, which has forced me to walk point at times more than I might otherwise would have.

However, in a very real way, I was careful with how I spent my time and this from an early age. I followed (and protected) the thread of my own interest through the years and seldom compromised the integrity of what I loved to do at the time. This is obvious to me now, but I never thought about it much all those years. I just did it. I was busy!

One possibly good result is that I emerged as an adult in a fairly natural state, at least natural to me. I had not been shaped or formed by much other than my own natural bents and interests. Whether that is good or not-so-good, who can say? For me, it was just natural and felt normal, i.e. good.

This tendency did have some dramatic repercussions when it came to my learning dharma, because I did not take to the rote dharma practices that beginning dharma students undertake to build up the muscle-memory needed to learn, for example, tranquility meditation. I was used to allowing myself to intuitively follow the thread of my interests, so learning meditation by rote (as well as deity practices) were a non-starter for me. Yet, it's not that I didn't try. Sad to say, I did my best to learn Tranquility Meditation (as instructed) for something like 32 years straight (!) before abandoning that approach and finding my own natural way into meditation, which I finally did on my own.

Another point that stems from all this: when I finally became interested in business (making money to support my family), all of my businesses were based on an outgrowth of what amounted to hobbies on my part. I was always an amateur, in the best definition of that word. When push came to shove in the hardscrabble of business, I was backed by a natural love and passion for what I was doing, because I already loved it. I knew it from my heart. Almost all my hobbies became businesses, so I continued on into maturity doing something I loved, although, of course, running any business is a learning curve and anything but easy. And I worked really hard.

So, I guess I am something of a maverick. I passed up a lot of opportunities that others were able to

accept, but I did so without thinking about it (or even being much aware of it). I fiercely protected that flame of interest I had inside me, despite what it cost me. Again, I did not do this deliberately or even consciously. I guess it was very selfish of me to only do what I wanted to do, but there you have it.

So, it should not surprise anyone that I'm in favor of keeping the flame of our interest alive and burning. I understand that my lack of compromise resulted in my missing out on many things. Still, I would not have had it otherwise, nor would I do anything different today, except perhaps be more relaxed about it.

Yes, I perhaps could have made more compromises, and probably should have to some degree. But for me, compromising my inner passions seemed like a slippery slope, with one compromise leading to another. Anyway, I was not even aware of and didn't think that I was not-compromising, thus compromising my own future; rather, I just held my interests close and was too busy following them to follow the directions others asked me to take. I was not hostile or against outside influences, but perhaps just too absorbed in what I was doing to pay them all that much attention. I did, however, follow the directions of my dharma teachers as exactly as I could.

It just was that since rote demands seemed non-intuitive to me, I was not interested or that successful at doing them, so I didn't.

OVERWHELMED BY DHARMA

September 2, 2017

As pointed out many times in this series, the Buddhists are VERY diligent at writing down the steps and instructions for all kinds of dharma practices. It is good to have these lists and this kind of detail available, but if we drink from that glass too often, the cacophony of instructions can be overwhelming. “Do this,” “do that,” remember to keep this in mind, but don’t forget that, and on and on.

We have to remember that these pith instructions or lists are just shorthand (freeze-dried dharma) for something, that when unpacked, is very much more involved, yet still simple if actually implemented with guidance. However, it’s not as simple as “just add water,” although just adding awareness might do it. If we want to be realistic (and save time), we need to find an authentic teacher to spoon-feed these instructions to us so that we don’t choke on them. Sure, we may understand conceptually lots about dharma on our own, but it’s what we don’t grasp (or even know is there) that may be crucial. And how do we teach ourselves something we admittedly don’t know and of which there is no physical trace?

And, after two or three sets of instructions, our mind may have trouble making sense of the complexity of it all. And trying to live-out the “we should “and “we ought-to” gets old real fast. Instructions pile-up and we can’t even assimilate (much less realize) them all. So, my advice is, as it is said, take it slow and not try to practice everything you think you have (or want) to do all at once, especially if it becomes obsessive or feels obligatory. “Do this” and “Do that” never works

out after a certain limit is reached as to what we can mentally absorb. We not only have to breathe in; we have to breathe out as well. So exhale! Let it go.

The answer, IMO, as mentioned, is to slow down and practice what we can get into and actually feel and not be driven by what we think (or have been told) we “ought” to be doing or it “ought” to feel like. As mentioned, dharma instructions can pile up until they, like a traffic jam, bog us down to a crawl. Nothing is worse than being a rule-ridden dharma practitioner. Well, almost anyway.

In summary, the original dharma was recorded in the sutras, the words of the Buddha himself. Then, because these words were aimed at so many different levels and kinds of students, it took an expert to sort it all out. Instead, the teachings of the Buddha were then organized into the various commentaries for a certain level (the first turning, the second turning, etc.) and it is these commentaries that most of us (at least in Vajrayana Buddhism) study and not the original words of the Buddha as recorded in the sutras. And there is no shame in that.

Then, these commentaries were further boiled down into what are called Upadesha or concise instructions, commonly called “pith” instructions. And even these are sometimes reduced to slogans or even single words. My point is that when we get down to the commentaries and especially to the Upadesha, what we have is essentially like freeze-dried dharma, so seed-like that they basically have to be sprouted.

And like freeze-dried food, with Upadesha, we just have to add awareness instead of water and these teachings can be expanded into realization... gradually. However (and this is a BIG however),

currently our degree of awareness may not be sufficient to expand the pith instructions into realization. We may just get them a little damp, so to speak. These seeds may have to be soaked in awareness, which can take time.

So, while it is fine to attempt to understand the many dharma teachings out there, we should not try to assimilate them all at once. And (this is key) the beginning practices are needed in order to properly understand the later ones. If we skip (or skimp) on through them to get to more advanced practices, we are headed for non-assimilation, and we will get nowhere until we go back and start over.

Or, another way of saying this is that we can't assimilate too many practices all at once without ending up constipated and unable to realize much of anything at all. If we relax and practice simply what we can actually experience and enjoy (or love to practice), this is best. The more subtle or more condensed teachings will expand as our awareness does, so take it slow. It's all about the process, as the Zen folks like to point out. Otherwise, its hurry up and wait. What we require is enough awareness to make sense of and realize the dharma we understand and experience; ultimately we have to recognize the actual nature of the mind itself.

IMO, learning about the dharma is like the proverbial analogy of pulling wool to make thread. It has to be done carefully and gently or the thread of our concentration will snap. At the same time, if we don't have the stability of unwavering attention, we end up with an amorphous mess of spaghetti-concepts and no realization. My two cents.

A THIEF ENTERING AN EMPTY HOUSE

September 3, 2107

This is one of my favorite traditional Buddhist metaphors about non-dual meditation. Keep in mind that non-dual meditation is also called absolute truth, as contrasted with dualistic-meditation and relative-truth. I know, all this sounds very conceptual.

Relative truth always pertains to Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs we live in and has a subject and an object, while absolute truth is non-dualistic. Examples of dualistic (relative-truth) practices include all of The Preliminaries (Four Thoughts, Lojong, The Ngondro, etc.), while examples of non-dualistic dharma practices include the Karma Kagyu style of Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen meditation, to name a few.

In these non-dual practices, we are, so to speak, all-in, immersed in the meditation itself to the exclusion of witnessing it or objectifying it. So, this non-dual meditation analogy goes like this, as Tulku Uryen states from an 8th Century quote from Guru Rinpoche:

“A thief entering an empty house does not gain anything and the house does not lose anything. All thought activity is naturally liberated without any harm or benefit whatsoever. This is the meaning of gaining confidence in liberation.”

Just as a thief entering an empty house can find nothing to steal, our desires, attachments, thirst for permanent existence, and habit of reifying everything can no longer find anything to glom onto and so just evaporate such that the “thief “wanders off empty handed, so to speak.

We are so used to attaching ourselves here, there, and everywhere; if that desire for attachment dries up and blows away, it leaves us singularly empty of grasping. This is why, at the end of The Preliminaries (dualistic, relative-truth practices) the true nature of the mind is pointed out to us by an authentic teacher, so that we can gain “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind and we can then begin to practice Insight Meditation.

In non-dual practices like Insight Meditation, our everyday habit of liking something, disliking something, or being indifferent gives way to full immersion and we stop conceptualizing everything. It’s like being plunged into a swimming pool. We can’t see the water in the pool because we are looking through it, but looking through the water we can see everything there is to see in the pool, which is that there is nothing. However, we realize in the SEEING that we are seeing all there is to see, even if it is nothing. Realizing (in that immediacy) that there IS nothing to see is not the same as conceptualizing there is nothing. In non-dual practices like Insight Meditation, our usual graspingness has nothing to grab on to and we abandon our dualistic “self” and “other” and experience directly. It reminds me of the immediacy (or oneness) that we experience in a life or death emergency situation.

This is perhaps why the image of astronauts floating free in space is so appealing to us. No gravity, graveness, or grave. And no recording of karma.

MY SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHY

September 4, 2017

I keep getting asked how I became so interested in the dharma and spirituality. In other words, what's my story? Here is a brief account of my trajectory as a spiritual phenomenologist, for those who have the time and interest. I will skip over my career as an astrologer, an archivist, systems-programmer, photographer, and naturalist for brevity's sake. This blog is mostly about my concern with the mind and the psyche, kind of my spiritual biography. Not sure how far I will get in one blog, but here is a start.

Phenomenology, from the Greek word meaning "that which appears," thus the study of consciousness and what appears, what we can experience directly (just as we are), has always occupied my attention, if only because here it is, right with me all the time. I can't avoid it and, like a book, the mind is so easy to carry around. I have always had trouble with conceptually based topics. For example, I had to take Algebra One three times before they finally pushed me through with a "D," but I got all A's in geometry because it was visual. I am visually oriented.

Even as a youngster I had transparent moments of "oneness," in which everything stopped and an incredible stillness overtook me. These were definitely time-out moments. Of course, my experiencing of these timeless moments was intriguing to me. Wondering what were they led to an interest in the psychology and the mind itself.

As a teenager (and then a young adult) I read the Russian author and philosopher Fyodor Dostoevsky, all 52 novels or novellas, so my interest in psychology

and phenomenology, in general, was already piqued early-on. I went on to study Russian in high school as a language. And, although I did not continue learning Russian past high school, my interest in my immediate consciousness in the present moment only grew.

Meanwhile, back in the late 1950s I was introduced early-on to the works of Jack Kerouac plus the Beat poets and writers in general. And I read, I believe, all of Kerouac, some of which were big heavy paperbacks from publishers like Evergreen Press that flopped around in your hands like they needed to be in hardback. Of course, "On the Road" captivated me as it did so many of my generation. I met and hung out with people like Ram Das, Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Norman Mailer, Anne Waldman, and others.

I dropped out of high-school in 1960 and hitchhiked to Venice Beach in Santa Monica, California, where I lived in the basement of an art gallery/coffee shop called the "Gas House" and tried very, very hard to be a Beatnik (I was painting in oils at the time), but I was a little too late (and too young) to get on the Beat train, not to mention that the bloom was already going off that rose.

Somewhere back in there I managed to read all the Loeb Greek and Latin Classics, which was an unnecessary tour-de-force that, unfortunately, taught me a little history and philosophy, but not enough for the effort involved. Although I never graduated high school, I was nevertheless granted admission to the University of Michigan as a freshman, but saw, after only three weeks, that this kind of education and I would never work. I was already too used to learning on my own and liked it. College was a disappointment

for me, even somewhat embarrassing in its formality. Looking back, I what I was looking for is mentoring, not more rote education.

So, I left college and took the rest of my life off doing various things other than being in school, including spending the year of 1964 in Berkeley, California studying independently with a professor of Political Science and roaming the Berkeley hills. I was mostly studying the philosopher Hegel at the time, although what I actually ended up doing is learning a great deal about classical music. However, the apex of that time was dropping LSD, which literally changed my life (and for the better), although stabilizing those experiences took decades! I don't suggest it. Dharma is far easier and demonstrates the same insights.

As a sidebar from that time, one day while walking my Italian racing bike up Grizzly Peak from Orinda to Berkeley, I encountered a wild mountain lion, which was huge, and only a few feet from me. As I cowered behind my bike, the mountain lion slowly walked across the road just in front of me, slowly turning his head only once to casually look at me, and then simply continued walking on across the road. Terrific!

For some years I studied Western philosophy, focusing first on Existentialism, which was all the rage back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but I gradually segued toward phenomenology and the philosophy of George Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel; I read almost all of Hegel's many works, albeit in English translation, and in particular his key work "The Phenomenology of the Mind." I was especially intrigued by comments of Hegel in that book, such as:

“We go behind the curtain of the self to see what’s there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.

After my year in Berkeley, which was mind opening (and bending), I returned to my home town, Ann Arbor, where popular music became my main interest for many years, but at the same time I always was carefully and extensively monitoring my own feelings and consciousness. This has been a lifelong habit for me. While others got their degrees, I continued to develop my degree of attention as regards to my own mind and psyche. This was before I merged my own personal musings with the more systematic approach of the Buddhists and dharma. Anyway, my own thoughts were already all expressed in the Buddhist framework, and it had much more. The dharma is really a work of art, including the art of consciousness.

Over time, I gradually lost interest in Western philosophy, mostly because they had no answer for something as important to me as the concept of the Self, although Western philosophers seemed to be preoccupied with it. To put it in a nutshell, on the one hand I was told to be myself and on the other I was warned not to be selfish. That’s an ultra-simple way of expressing my disappointment with European philosophy/psychology.

In 1961, I travelled and hitchhiked with a young Bob Dylan and for some years was part of what is called the Folk Revival of the late 1950s. This led to me (with my brother Dan and friends) forming a band (The Prime Movers Blues Band) in 1965, the same summer as the Grateful Dead was formed, but that would take a whole other blog. One highlight is that

Iggy Pop was our drummer. In fact, we named him Iggy, etc.

Through all of these early years I was increasingly intrigued by Buddhism, first with Zen Buddhism (trying to sit Zazen) and later with what is called Esoteric Buddhism, the works of Helena Blavatsky and others. I even served as vice-president of Michigan Theosophists for a time. Back then, there were very few books on Tibetan Buddhism and the few that were available were kind of through-a-glass-darkly accounts, like Lama Anagarika Govinda's "The Way of the White Clouds" and the various Walter Evans-Wentz Tibetan translations, etc. Still, I gradually found myself turning more and more to Eastern philosophy and Buddhism for answers, in particular for their detailed psychology, because it presented actual methods of learning about the mind, plus a path that I could see to walk. Perhaps my main reason for ending up in Buddhism was that everything I had been learning about myself, phenomenologically, was already present (and well organized) in Tibetan Buddhism. It was like an illustrated book about my consciousness.

My interest in Eastern psychology (and philosophy) was confirmed when I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa (Ranjung Rigpe Dorje), both in year 1974. That was a double whammy, something I have yet to recover from. Some years later, I met my primary Tibetan teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and have been working directly with him for the last 34 years. Rinpoche is now in his mid-nineties and speaks no English. And there is this funny story.

Rinpoche lives in the mountains above Woodstock, New York, where he is the abbot of KTD (Karma

Triyana Dharmacakra) Monastery. Some years before I met Rinpoche, strangely enough, Margaret and I visited Woodstock, where I met up with another astrologer I knew. And while at the astrologer's house, I met a Chinese Buddhist monk who was visiting there. And I was so interested in what he represented through teaching the dharma that I invited him to come and live at our center and teach us, which he did. Unfortunately, that arrangement did not last long and the monk departed, which is a story in itself.

Yet, the funny thing is that, perhaps subconsciously, I must have felt that my dharma was in Woodstock, NY. It was only a few years later that I met Khenpo Rinpoche, who had been in Woodstock all that time. That is the kind of serendipity that is hard to fathom or account for, yet it happens every once in a while in real life.

In 1997, during our yearly short interview with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, he told Margaret and me to go to Tibet and see His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, who was twelve-years old at the time. And he said to go right away, that summer. As I am not a traveler, this took me by total surprise, but when your lama asks you to do something, you trust and just do it.

And we did just that, managing to leave for Tibet in less than a month, taking three of our four children with us. We spent three days with His Holiness the Karmapa in his ancestral home (Tsurphu Monastery) at some 15,000 feet in the mountains of Tibet, and that is a whole story in itself, which I wrote out in the book "Our Pilgrimage to Tibet." Here is the link for those who want to read of our adventures:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

As for learning dharma, let me fast forward to the present because, at a certain point all I did (aside from run my businesses) was study and practice dharma. We established a dharma center in the mid-1980s and it is still going, although more virtually than it did in the past, when we had a house full of practitioners, a swami, aerospace engineer, jazz critic, Sanskrit scholar, all kinds of astrologers, and many others.

I feel that is enough for now. I have left many things out that would be perhaps interesting sidebars, but at least you get a snapshot of my spiritual trajectory. I should post a whole blog just on my astrological career, and at some point perhaps I will.

WHAT ABOUT PSYCHICS AND ORACLES?

September 5, 2017

I am not psychic and I have had only a peripheral acquaintance with psychics, séances, and related phenomena. And this only because, as an astrologer, when I was just starting out, I taught astrology, gave lectures, and did readings at many conferences that also had mediums and psychics present; so, we hung out some.

And being inquisitive as I am, of course I was interested in finding out as best I could what made these self-proclaimed psychics tick. So, I not only fraternized with mediums and psychics, but I went to message services, séances, mediums, and so on, just to see what's what. We even traveled down to Indiana and Camp Chesterfield, which is a community of spiritualists, to have our first-born daughter lotis baptized. That was perhaps my last attempt to follow my Christian upbringing.

And, of course, some astrologers are also psychics and almost everyone (astrologers and psychics) are familiar with oracles like the I-Ching, the tarot, numerology, etc. And as far as I'm concerned, astrology is just another (albeit sophisticated and complex) oracle. And let's be clear, an oracle is any method that allows the universe to speak to us, so we can use the kitchen sink as an oracle, if we like. Therefore, tea leaves, coffee grounds, and even spots on the wall can signify something to someone. Whatever floats your boat is my take on oracles. If they speak to us meaningfully, they're working.

As mentioned, I consider astrology an oracle. Yes, astrology, which is cultural astronomy, is based on

precise astronomical events, but it is how those events can be interpreted and communicate with us that can make them an oracle. I have met hundreds of oracle readers (tarot, etc.) over the years, but only one famous oracle and that was in Tibet. And I'll share that story in a moment..

Personally, I love oracles, but I only use them when I need to. Most of the time, I don't need help or guidance in my day to day goings on. Every once in a while I will use an oracle like the I-Ching (my oracle of choice) and of course I use astrology frequently to see what the planets are telling me.

Do I go to psychics? I have in the past in order to find out what they are all about, but I don't any longer and I can tell you why. Sure, perhaps there is a Nostradamus or two scattered around, but at least in America I have not met one. Of the American psychics I have consulted, if anything, they have told me too much of what I don't need to hear. Let me give an example.

Like certain chiropractors, many (not all, mind you) psychics seem to like making me dependent on them. They tend to like having the last word as to what they say is going to happen to me. I can remember one particular psychic (a very nice person) who told me that I should not cross a certain bridge in Ann Arbor, where I lived at the time, because of the possibility of having an accident there. Well, fifty years or so have gone by and no accident yet, even though I frequently use that bridge because it's the main way to get across town. Yet, I have had to worry about that bridge ever since the psychic came up with that thought.

This one case (the bridge) would not be so bad, but if you frequent psychics, such declarations soon add up until your mind is filled with admonitions, warnings, and worries. This is no way to live, IMO. And there is no point in arguing with the psychic about what they lay on us. Their word, at least to them, is golden, so they dish it out as it occurs to them. I understand, but that idea is why I don't enjoy psychics any longer. Anyone else notice this?

I have also been to séances, Ouija board sessions, readings with mediums, and especially to message circles. If you ever attend spiritualist Sunday services, they often include giving messages, and there are all kinds of formats in which this takes place. A psychic comes out and addresses the churchgoers and proceeds to tell them messages that come to them about individual attendees. Messages sometimes can be fun; I remember one person singling me out to say that my Indian spirit-guide was named "Drum Song."

Sometimes messages are anonymous and are just put out there into the ether, but often you can be called out by name or even pointed at. And, of course, the messages that come through are all over the place. Some may be welcome, but others are just like the bridge example I gave above. Beware of "this" and "that" is what the message is, and because "I say so." And, as mentioned, these kinds of warnings are cumulative; they add up until you have a hornet's nest in your mind, telling you don't do this and don't do that at every turn. I soon found out that the value of the messages was outweighed by their fire and brimstone admonitions. I'll take a pass on all that, please.

I have mentioned the following story here before, but this blog is exactly where it belongs. Before one of my trips to Tibet, there was a Tibetan astrologer (and

doctor) who was living at our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. We were working on reviving the Tsurphu (monastery) astrological calendar, which had somehow lost track as how to generate certain tables that were crucial, etc. Hearing that we were going to Tibet, he asked us that while we were in Lhasa, would we take a question of his to a famous oracle that lived at the Ramoche Temple. I said we would and he gave me the question written in Tibetan that I could, of course, not read.

Anyway, after we reached Lhasa and got over our altitude sickness a bit, we took a trip to Ramoche Temple and tried to find the oracle. We had a Tibetan guide with us, so this helped. Still, we went down many back alleys and byways trying to find that oracle. We finally did. She was a very nice woman in her forties who was willing to see us. She read my friends message and then looked into a dull copper mirror (which is what she used to get on her contacts) and wrote out a response, which we carried back.

However, as long as we were right there with her, we asked if she could look into our family, which she did. She went through each of our four children and called out various interesting things. For example, she said of my son Michael that he had been a Bhikshu, an ordained monk, in his last life. And what was remarkable about that fact is that he had kept all of the 253 vows that are required and had not broken any, which is very rare. She went on to say that we should keep him very “clean.” I have no idea what all that means, but I can say that Michael is very, very fair-minded and gentle, so that speaks to the oracle’s advice. And we have protected him. He was born at home, home-schooled, thereby missing the social gauntlet of middle-school, and allowed to develop

naturally. Everyone loves Michael. For, me she was spot-on in that statement.

I guess my point is that there are all kinds of oracle readers, some of them famous, like this Tibetan lady, and well-worth listening too. As an astrologer, folks often assume that I'm also psychic, but I'm not. I can use astrology as an oracle or "medium" for information, but my astrology is always based on strict astronomical observations, which are then interpreted. The skill is in the interpretation. For instance, I don't (and can't) predict the stock market. Astronomers (not astrologers) precisely predict the planetary events, and I, as an astrologer (to the best of my ability), interpret those astronomical predictions. In other words, astrology is basically cultural astronomy and is not predictive without depending on its astronomical touchstones. Nevertheless, I use astrology as an oracle, a means for the universe to speak to me and it does, IMO.

To sum this up, many of us use oracles of the I-Ching and tarot variety and love them, but rare oracles like the woman oracle at the Ramoche Temple in Lhasa are seldom found. And while psychics are fun to hang out with as people, being subject to their predictions and the hangover they can instill is more than I need. To play on a common slogan, "The information I'm getting is not worth the information I'm getting," if you understand what I'm saying.

I know. I know. This can be equally true of an astrological reading as well, so we should be careful what we ask for; we just might get it.

REALIZATION (A PROCESS LIKE BREATHING)

September 5, 2017

We all get glimpses of realization in the course of everyday life. For example, at some point a young child realizes how a light switch turns on and off the lights. That is an example of mundane realization.

However, spiritual realization has distinct thresholds that have to be crossed and the granddaddy of them all (in Vajrayana Buddhism) is a dharma event called “Recognition” (“Kensho” in Zen Buddhism) since it marks our recognition of the true nature of the mind.

And I should hasten to add, “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind depends on having it pointed out to us by an authentic dharma teacher, someone who has had recognition themselves. Trying to rationalize that we might be able to achieve “Recognition on our own” is an oxymoron. The great siddhas say that does not happen, so trust them and think again.

Yet, not everyone understands that spiritual realization is not meant to be just a static state or glimpse, but rather (as the teachings state) it is meant to be a process of realization that is extended and expanded, much like pulling and spreading pizza dough.

“Realization,” which initially is the result of the dharma event “Recognition” (of the true nature of the mind) is something we eventually each will have to negotiate. Yet, although the realization attained through “Recognition” is not enlightenment, it is the first major realization on the road to enlightenment. And realization is not a one-time static event, but, as

mentioned, must be expanded. In other words, we each will have to extend our own realization. If not, we will just sit there and eventually what little realization we had will fade away.

Also: it's not easy to "make" or force realization (once had) to do anything, like to extend or expand it. Whatever realization we do have and however it first occurred may seem to us to be fixed in time and context, like "it happened while I was doing this, so I should do that again if I want a similar result," but that's not how it is. Realization is not limited to our first contact and its context, but is (and has to be) extended and expanded, but, as mentioned, we have to do the extending and expanding ourselves. Note that please.

An authentic dharma teacher can spark realization or (metaphorically speaking) give us some starter dough though the pointing out instructions as to how this is done, but after that it's up to us. And the small amounts of realization most of us usually start out with have expiration (use-by dates), meaning that realization is meant to be continually expanded or it will fade.

And this is because realization is a process (like breathing) and not a static goal or state of mind. Glimpses of "realization," like flashes of insight, are not meant to remain just frozen snapshots, but rather to (like strobes) increase in frequency until they light up the entire horizon of our mind. In other words, like breathing air is to a baby, realization is a "process" that is not only meant to continue, but also expand in scope.

And this process of extension is easier than you might think because, once we have "Recognition" and have

recognized the true nature of the mind, several things happen that are very, very helpful.

First, from the point of “recognition” onward, we no longer have doubt. We don’t have to take anyone else’s word about the efficacy of the dharma because we know first-hand (we have certainty) as to what we have just realized. And whereas, before Recognition, our desire to practice was something that took effort and depended on others encouraging us on, now that trickle of inspiration has turned into a torrential river that works for us 24x7. It’s compelling.

After Recognition, we not only want to practice as much as we can, we suddenly realize that we have everything that we need to practice with us and now know just what has to be done. And we are on fire.

“Recognition” precipitates a pivotal or threshold change in our dharma practice, one from which there is no going back. Where before we looked to and depended on what others had to say, after Recognition we don’t require (but still can use) further support. We finally get it and have recognized how our own mind works for ourselves and can make our own decisions.

In other words, “Recognition” marks the end of what are called the dualistic Preliminary Practices and the beginning of the non-dual practices such as Insight Meditation, Mahamudra Meditation, Dzogchen, and so on.

In summary, the beginning “process” of realization is first reflected in those areas of our life where we are able to stably focus and achieve Insight Meditation. For me, this meant meditating through the process of close-up nature photography, where the improving photo results (like any mirror) reflected my own

improving realization and state of mind, but for you it could be almost anything repetitive that you can fully relax in that has stability. Like a wilting flower that raises its head when it is watered, the water of the realization-process found me slowly waking and holding my own head up.

Although we all have realizations with a small “r,” it is traditionally not until we achieve “Recognition” as to the nature of our own mind that we jump-start “Realization” with a capital “R” and it becomes a self-fueling and continuing process. Realization is a continuing process, not just a fixed state.

THE REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR

September 5, 2017

I realize that the following is only going to be useful to those of you who are working in non-dual dharma practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen, yet these kinds of topics should be talked about.

I've come a long way from those days when, while doing macro photography, I first discovered Insight Meditation for myself. You would think I would have discovered some realization while sitting on a cushion. After all, I had sat for almost 30 years, but that's not how it worked out.

Anyway, for quite some time after that discovery, for me Insight Meditation was inextricably bound to the detailed process of macro photography. In other words, if I wanted to have the clarity and lucidity of Insight Meditation, I had to grab my photography gear and go out in nature and photography for an hour or two. LOL. Otherwise, my mind remained quite ordinary, and I was so tired of that.

Gradually, slowly, as I realized my predicament, I also realized that I could perhaps somehow separate my newly-found practice of Insight Meditation from photography. Of course, I would always have the ability to perform Insight Meditation every time I did photography, but in addition I could learn how to mix Insight Meditation with other things I did in a day, like writing this blog, for instance. Anyway, all of the pith dharma teachings pointed out that it was up to each of us to expand any realization we manage to glimpse.

And, mixing Insight Meditation with something I also did, like writing, was at first just a concept, an idea. Implementing such an idea physically or practically in real-time was another order of reality away from just thinking about it. And this took me many, many months, more like a year or so to realize this very simple shift from photography to writing, in actuality. This is what is typically called in the texts extending or expanding our thread of insight into a river of realization. Every dharma student who enters the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, or Dzogchen Meditation goes through this. Realization has to be extended.

For some practitioners, I am sure this process may be intuitive and even quick, but for me it was like moving in slow motion toward something that I could easily conceptualize and imagine, but found very, very difficult to realize practically, in the flesh. Yet, there is little else that anyone who has a glimpse of realization has to do, but expand and extend that initial realization to embrace more and more of their life. Still, it is not as simple as sitting down on a cushion and connecting the dots, at least not for me.

It was a painfully slow process of recognizing the opportunity for Insight Meditation in areas other than where I first discovered it, in my case it, as mentioned, it was with close-up photography. For me, it was like cell division in an amoeba, binary fission, where my original instance of Insight Meditation remained the same, but I learned how to divide the Insight Meditation from the photography and use it elsewhere. Easier said than done is an understatement.

Yet, this was worth the struggle because, at least for me, Insight Meditation with its extreme clarity and

lucidity (and its certainty!) was a pearl of great price, worth whatever it took to find it elsewhere in my life other than just when I was photographing. I could see conceptually that this was indeed possible (and needed to happen), but I had to do it all by myself, one tiny step at a time.

Yet, I knew intuitively that I could find that kind of clarity and lucidity everywhere I looked, because that is what Insight Meditation (this particular type of Vipassana meditation used in the Karma Kagyu Lineage), is all about and why we practice it. To repeat (and I'm trying here to be crystal clear), the joy and light that we find in something like perhaps a hobby, something we love to do, is not only fixed to that particular hobby and its practice. That's the whole point here. It's transferable and can migrate.

That same "love-of" and clarity can be extended to other areas of our life and eventually (so I understand) to all areas of our life. There is no reason other than persistence on our part why this cannot be true. And I was finding this out on my own. And by "on my own," please understand how glacially slow (for me) this process was. And there were different components to it, which I will try to describe here.

It was not that I could make some huge initial effort to extend my Insight Meditation and that would just work. That's not the kind of effort required. It was more like an oxymoron, that the effort here was the effort to relax and rest in what I was doing and let the process of whatever I was doing speak to me, and not me to it. In my case, the first thing I tried to mix Insight Meditation (outside of photography) was writing, just as I am writing this blog here today.

Yet, it was not like a light-switch that I could just turn on by a flick of a finger. And it is helpful if the process of whatever we are doing is repetitive, just as in writing we work to put ideas into words. I had been writing for many years already, but not with the clarity and lucidness that I was now realizing from my photography process. Hmmm.

I wanted to “find” that same clarity and lucidity in my writing, but how to do that? By this time, I knew THAT it could be done, but I did not know just how. Yet, the physical repetitiveness of writing kept the ball rolling. However, it was up to me to relax enough in that process that I could find in writing the same incredible clarity that I did in taking close-up photos, where I often combined 100 photos, each taken a millimeter or so from each other, into a single image that appears completely in focus. How could writing be like that?

Well, of course it’s not, except for the repetitiveness of putting words together. So, how to relax in the process of putting the words together so that the deeper reaches of my consciousness could share the natural clarity of the mind and bless the train of thought I was writing with its inherent wisdom. Make sense?

And, while the process of extending Insight Meditation (and its realization) at first required me to have a process (photography, writing, etc.) that was stable or constant enough to rest in, ultimately these busy activities (writing, etc.) became like a mirror that reflects, not themselves or their results, but rather my own growing realization. That is the stability that is needed and why we combine Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) with Insight Meditation (Vipassana) in Mahamudra practice.

What was lacking in me all this time was the confidence and certainty of my own mind. Read that last sentence twice, because it's key. And that certainty is what is mirrored (and appears) through the process of Insight Meditation as reflected through writing, photography, or whatever we use as an object of meditation. Sure the photos are better than they were, the writing is clearer than it was, but they are just the results of the process. However, what is MOST remarkable is that these visible results (photos, blogs, etc.) serve to mirror and reflect the state of realization itself. And I could see that and gain confidence!

WHAT ABOUT PSYCHICS AND ORACLES?

September 4, 2017

I am not psychic and I have had only a peripheral acquaintance with psychics, séances, and related phenomena. And this only because, as an astrologer, when I was just starting out, I taught astrology, gave lectures, and did readings at many conferences that also had mediums and psychics present; so, we hung out some.

And being inquisitive as I am, of course I was interested in finding out as best I could what made these self-proclaimed psychics tick. So, I not only fraternized with mediums and psychics, but I went to message services, séances, mediums, and so on, just to see what's what. We even traveled down to Indiana and Camp Chesterfield, which is a community of spiritualists, to have our first-born daughter Lotis baptized. That was perhaps my last attempt to follow my Christian upbringing.

And, of course, some astrologers are also psychics and almost everyone (astrologers and psychics) are familiar with oracles like the I-Ching, the tarot, numerology, etc. And as far as I'm concerned, astrology is just another (albeit sophisticated and complex) oracle. And let's be clear, an oracle is any method that allows the universe to speak to us, so we can use the kitchen sink as an oracle, if we like. Therefore, tea leaves, coffee grounds, and even spots on the wall can signify something to someone. Whatever floats your boat is my take on oracles. If they speak to us meaningfully, they're working.

As mentioned, I consider astrology an oracle. Yes, astrology, which is cultural astronomy, is based on

precise astronomical events, but it is how those events can be interpreted and communicate with us that can make them an oracle. I have met hundreds of oracle readers (tarot, etc.) over the years, but only one famous oracle and that was in Tibet. And I'll share that story in a moment..

Personally, I love oracles, but I only use them when I need to. Most of the time, I don't need help or guidance in my day to day goings on. Every once in a while I will use an oracle like the I-Ching (my oracle of choice) and of course I use astrology frequently to see what the planets are telling me.

Do I go to psychics? I have in the past in order to find out what they are all about, but I don't any longer and I can tell you why. Sure, perhaps there is a Nostradamus or two scattered around, but at least in America I have not met one. Of the American psychics I have consulted, if anything, they have told me too much of what I don't need to hear. Let me give an example.

Like certain chiropractors, many (not all, mind you) psychics seem to like making me dependent on them. They tend to like having the last word as to what they say is going to happen to me. I can remember one particular psychic (a very nice person) who told me that I should not cross a certain bridge in Ann Arbor, where I lived at the time, because of the possibility of having an accident there. Well, fifty years or so have gone by and no accident yet, even though I frequently use that bridge because it's the main way to get across town. Yet, I have had to worry about that bridge ever since the psychic came up with that thought.

This one case (the bridge) would not be so bad, but if you frequent psychics, such declarations soon add up until your mind is filled with admonitions, warnings, and worries. This is no way to live, IMO. And there is no point in arguing with the psychic about what they lay on us. Their word, at least to them, is golden, so they dish it out as it occurs to them. I understand, but that idea is why I don't enjoy psychics any longer. Anyone else notice this?

I have also been to séances, Ouija board sessions, readings with mediums, and especially to message circles. If you ever attend spiritualist Sunday services, they often include giving messages, and there are all kinds of formats in which this takes place. A psychic comes out and addresses the churchgoers and proceeds to tell them messages that come to them about individual attendees. Messages sometimes can be fun; I remember one person singling me out to say that my Indian spirit-guide was named "Drum Song."

Sometimes messages are anonymous and are just put out there into the ether, but often you can be called out by name or even pointed at. And, of course, the messages that come through are all over the place. Some may be welcome, but others are just like the bridge example I gave above. Beware of "this" and "that" is what the message is, and because "I say so." And, as mentioned, these kinds of warnings are cumulative; they add up until you have a hornet's nest in your mind, telling you don't do this and don't do that at every turn. I soon found out that the value of the messages was outweighed by their fire and brimstone admonitions. I'll take a pass on all that, please.

I have mentioned the following story here before, but this blog is exactly where it belongs. Before one of my trips to Tibet, there was a Tibetan astrologer (and

doctor) who was living at our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. We were working on reviving the Tsurphu (monastery) astrological calendar, which had somehow lost track as how to generate certain tables that were crucial, etc. Hearing that we were going to Tibet, he asked us that while we were in Lhasa, would we take a question of his to a famous oracle that lived at the Ramoche Temple. I said we would and he gave me the question written in Tibetan that I could, of course, not read.

Anyway, after we reached Lhasa and got over our altitude sickness a bit, we took a trip to Ramoche Temple and tried to find the oracle. We had a Tibetan guide with us, so this helped. Still, we went down many back alleys and byways trying to find that oracle. We finally did. She was a very nice woman in her forties who was willing to see us. She read my friends message and then looked into a dull copper mirror (which is what she used to get on her contacts) and wrote out a response, which we carried back.

However, as long as we were right there with her, we asked if she could look into our family, which she did. She went through each of our four children and called out various interesting things. For example, she said of my son Michael that he had been a Bhikshu, an ordained monk, in his last life. And what was remarkable about that fact is that he had kept all of the 253 vows that are required and had not broken any, which is very rare. She went on to say that we should keep him very “clean.” I have no idea what all that means, but I can say that Michael is very, very fair-minded and gentle, so that speaks to the oracle’s advice. And we have protected him. He was born at home, home-schooled, thereby missing the social gauntlet of middle-school, and allowed to develop

naturally. Everyone loves Michael. For, me she was spot-on in that statement.

I guess my point is that there are all kinds of oracle readers, some of them famous, like this Tibetan lady, and well-worth listening too. As an astrologer, folks often assume that I'm also psychic, but I'm not. I can use astrology as an oracle or "medium" for information, but my astrology is always based on strict astronomical observations, which are then interpreted. The skill is in the interpretation. For instance, I don't (and can't) predict the stock market. Astronomers (not astrologers) precisely predict the planetary events, and I, as an astrologer (to the best of my ability), interpret those astronomical predictions. In other words, astrology is basically cultural astronomy and is not predictive without depending on its astronomical touchstones. Nevertheless, I use astrology as an oracle, a means for the universe to speak to me and it does, IMO.

To sum this up, many of us use oracles of the I-Ching and tarot variety and love them, but rare oracles like the woman oracle at the Ramoche Temple in Lhasa are seldom found. And while psychics are fun to hang out with as people, being subject to their predictions and the hangover they can instill is more than I need. To play on a common slogan, "The information I'm getting is not worth the information I'm getting," if you understand what I'm saying.

I know. I know. This can be equally true of an astrological reading as well, so we should be careful what we ask for; we just might get it.

SECULAR BUDDHISM

September 5, 2017

“Secular Buddhism” sounds like an oxymoron to me, yet it turns out that there are dozens of groups (if not more) that consider themselves secular Buddhists. What does that term even mean? It’s hard to secularize spiritual inspiration.

Many feel that calling it “secular” says that Buddhism is not a “religion,” which I would agree. I never thought that Buddhism WAS a religion; it’s certainly not monotheistic, because Buddhism has no god or creator. The word “religion” comes from the Latin word “religare,” which means “to bind,” therefore it could mean the “things that last,” although there are competing etymologies.

Others say that secular Buddhism is basically “Agnostic Buddhism,” one stripped of any “spiritual” qualities, limited to performing the bare meditation techniques as defined in many Buddhist texts. Talk about throwing the baby out with the bathwater, this would be funny if it was not such a profound misunderstanding of the dharma.

The bare meditation techniques of dharma were never intended to stand alone; they were the codified result of teachings, not separate. As there are many forms of Buddhism, perhaps some of them can be secularized and still offer the most significant subset of their style. However, this is NOT true for the Vajrayana Buddhism that I practice, where the teacher-student bond plays such a crucial part and the transition from the secular (Samsara) to the ineffable (Nirvana) is key.

I also see many psychological professionals (and therapists) selecting what they consider a subset of Buddhism and adding it to their particular set of therapies, with no awareness of what they are throwing out. And worse, because they have added some Buddhist practices to their bag of techniques, they suddenly feel that they are also an expert in Buddhism, as well, although most have not really practiced the dharma themselves or achieved any realization. In other words, they don't personally know what they are talking about or recommending to others.

Why is this? My guess is that emphasis on the word "secular" means that these days anything "spiritual" is excluded so as to avoid being accused of being non-scientific or "religious." Vajrayana Buddhism does not depend on "faith," but it does depend on trust in the teacher. So, with secular Buddhism, what are we left with?

Well, for one, with secular Buddhism, the word "Buddhism" is usually de-emphasized and gradually removed from the mix or else it is trumpeted. As far as techniques are concerned, secular Buddhisms are restricted to what are called the dualistic or Relative-Truth practices only, since the Absolute-Truth (non-dual) practices depend on an authentic teacher and intangible or ineffable qualities. This point is key and, IMO, definitive here.

Vajrayana Buddhism (and its lineages) depend on authentic teachers introducing the student through what are called the "Pointing-Out Instructions" to the true nature of the mind, which is ineffable and certainly not "secular." At minimum, IMO, qualifying as an authentic dharma teacher involves the teacher having recognized the actual nature of the mind, and

“recognition” is not enlightenment or anything close to it, but does guarantee that the teacher has familiarity with the non-dual advanced (ineffable) meditation practices.

All of the non-dual or teachers of the more advanced practices (that I am aware) of define “Recognition” (“Kensho” in Zen) as a threshold event, one that marks the gateway to the non-dual practices.

Otherwise, we have only the dualistic practices (The Preliminary Practices) and, as preliminary, they are restricted to Samsara and a dualistic view.

Speaking strictly for myself, I can no longer read Buddhist writings when I do not sense or feel that the teacher/author (unless the book is a simple history) is coming from a non-dual perspective. Otherwise, as the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said so aptly, “Your guess is as good as mine.” Through familiarity with the teachings, I believe that we can sense or determine for ourselves (at least I feel I can), whether the author/practitioner has achieved “Recognition” and speaks from an authentic view.

Perhaps in these hybrid dharma attempts, the word “secular” gives it away, because secular refers to this Samsaric (non-spiritual) world that we all share and the whole idea and purpose of the original dharma is to transform in our view Samsara into Nirvana, an enlightened state. If we only want to use Buddhist techniques to better live in Samsara, to feather our Samsaric nest and make it more comfy, then the Buddha’s teaching have been grossly misunderstood.

There is nothing wrong with bettering our life and living conditions, but if that is our only goal, Samsaric life will continue on just as it is for us. The traditional description of trying to improve Samsara is like the

fun phrase “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.” That would be a hopeless solution, meaning no solution at all.

This is not to say that Buddhist mind training won’t improve life in Samsara; it will and does. But that is not the main thrust of the Buddha’s teachings, to fix up Samsaric existence, to put lipstick on a pig, so to speak.

From what I can see from looking around the web, the general idea of a secular Buddhism seems to be focused on using what are called the Preliminary Practices (the dualistic practices) for secular training. I see very little mention of the non-dual advanced practices (other than some lip service) mentioned in the descriptions for secular Buddhism I have found.

Yet, the preliminary (dualistic) practices are just that, “preliminary.” Preliminary to what? And the answer is preliminary to the main practices, which are those more advanced (non-dual) practices that are only undertaken AFTER the threshold event “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind has been achieved. And, as mentioned, that is not a part of the secular Buddhism web pages I have located.

However, these non-dual (advanced) practices are the main or whole point to the Buddha’s teachings, to transform and realize Samsara as Nirvana, not to streamline or improve Samsara. Because there are so many diverse forms of Buddhism that are declared as secular Buddhism, my comments here can only be general ones.

And I’m not going to go into the fact in this blog that in Vajrayana Buddhism, the role of the teacher and the interactivity with the student are an essential part of that tradition. Seeing psychologists and

psychotherapists assuming the role of dharma teacher, without even completing the dharma preliminaries themselves is a recipe for confusion and this should be pointed out to them. Vajrayana Buddhism is not just another technique to add to your bag of therapies, especially if you have not practiced and attained some realization through them.

If there is one thing I have learned in my 40+ years of practice is that, at least in the Vajrayana tradition that I practice, the integrity, purity, coherence and ACTUALIZATION of the lineage is of paramount importance. Otherwise, there will be nothing to pass on to the next generation.

My own guess is that most of these so-called secular forms of Buddhism will either just implode or become rote mental exercise programs. If there are any “secular Buddhists” reading this, please explain your view.

REALIZATION (A PROCESS LIKE BREATHING)

September 6, 2017

We all get glimpses of realization in the course of everyday life. For example, at some point a young child realizes how a light switch turns on and off the lights. That is an example of mundane realization.

However, spiritual realization has distinct thresholds that have to be crossed and the granddaddy of them all (in Vajrayana Buddhism) is a dharma event called “Recognition” (“Kensho” in Zen Buddhism) since it marks our recognition of the true nature of the mind.

And I should hasten to add, “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind depends on having it pointed out to us by an authentic dharma teacher, someone who has had recognition themselves. Trying to rationalize that we might be able to achieve “Recognition on our own” is an oxymoron. The great siddhas say that does not happen, so trust them and think again.

Yet, not everyone understands that spiritual realization is not meant to be just a static state or glimpse, but rather (as the teachings state) it is meant to be a process of realization that is extended and expanded, much like pulling and spreading pizza dough.

“Realization,” which initially is the result of the dharma event “Recognition” (of the true nature of the mind) is something we eventually each will have to negotiate. Yet, although the realization attained through “Recognition” is not enlightenment, it is the first major realization on the road to enlightenment. And realization is not a one-time static event, but, as

mentioned, must be expanded. In other words, we each will have to extend our own realization. If not, we will just sit there and eventually what little realization we had will fade away.

Also: it's not easy to "make" or force realization (once had) to do anything, like to extend or expand it. Whatever realization we do have and however it first occurred may seem to us to be fixed in time and context, like "it happened while I was doing this, so I should do that again if I want a similar result," but that's not how it is. Realization is not limited to our first contact and its context, but is (and has to be) extended and expanded, but, as mentioned, we have to do the extending and expanding ourselves. Note that please.

An authentic dharma teacher can spark realization or (metaphorically speaking) give us some starter dough though the pointing out instructions as to how this is done, but after that it's up to us. And the small amounts of realization most of us usually start out with have expiration (use-by dates), meaning that realization is meant to be continually expanded or it will fade.

And this is because realization is a process (like breathing) and not a static goal or state of mind. Glimpses of "realization," like flashes of insight, are not meant to remain just frozen snapshots, but rather to (like strobes) increase in frequency until they light up the entire horizon of our mind. In other words, like breathing air is to a baby, realization is a "process" that is not only meant to continue, but also expand in scope.

And this process of extension is easier than you might think because, once we have "Recognition" and have

recognized the true nature of the mind, several things happen that are very, very helpful.

First, from the point of “recognition” onward, we no longer have doubt. We don’t have to take anyone else’s word about the efficacy of the dharma because we know first-hand (we have certainty) as to what we have just realized. And whereas, before Recognition, our desire to practice was something that took effort and depended on others encouraging us on, now that trickle of inspiration has turned into a torrential river that works for us 24x7. It’s compelling.

After Recognition, we not only want to practice as much as we can, we suddenly realize that we have everything that we need to practice with us and now know just what has to be done. And we are on fire.

“Recognition” precipitates a pivotal or threshold change in our dharma practice, one from which there is no going back. Where before we looked to and depended on what others had to say, after Recognition we don’t require (but still can use) further support. We finally get it and have recognized how our own mind works for ourselves and can make our own decisions.

In other words, “Recognition” marks the end of what are called the dualistic Preliminary Practices and the beginning of the non-dual practices such as Insight Meditation, Mahamudra Meditation, Dzogchen, and so on.

In summary, the beginning “process” of realization is first reflected in those areas of our life where we are able to stably focus and achieve Insight Meditation. For me, this meant meditating through the process of close-up nature photography, where the improving photo results (like any mirror) reflected my own

improving realization and state of mind, but for you it could be almost anything repetitive that you can fully relax in that has stability. Like a wilting flower that raises its head when it is watered, the water of the realization-process found me slowly waking and holding my own head up.

Although we all have realizations with a small “r,” it is traditionally not until we achieve “Recognition” as to the nature of our own mind that we jump-start “Realization” with a capital “R” and it becomes a self-fueling and continuing process. Realization is a continuing process, not just a fixed state.

SECULAR BUDDHISM

September 7, 2017

“Secular Buddhism” sounds like an oxymoron to me, yet it turns out that there are dozens of groups (if not more) that consider themselves secular Buddhists. What does that term even mean? It’s hard to secularize spiritual inspiration.

Many feel that calling it “secular” says that Buddhism is not a “religion,” which I would agree. I never thought that Buddhism WAS a religion; it’s certainly not monotheistic, because Buddhism has no god or creator. The word “religion” comes from the Latin word “religare,” which means “to bind,” therefore it could mean the “things that last,” although there are competing etymologies.

Others say that secular Buddhism is basically “Agnostic Buddhism,” a “dharma” stripped of any “spiritual” qualities, limited to performing the bare meditation techniques as defined in many Buddhist texts. Talk about throwing the baby out with the bathwater, this would be funny if it was not such a profound misunderstanding of the dharma.

The “bare meditation techniques” of dharma were never intended to stand alone; they were the codified result of comprehensive teachings, not separate. And there are many forms of Buddhism, so perhaps some of them can be secularized and still offer the most significant subset of their style. However, this is NOT true for the Vajrayana Buddhism that I practice, where the teacher-student bond plays such a crucial part in the transition from the secular (Samsara) to the ineffable (Nirvana) is key.

I also see many psychological professionals (and therapists) doing just that, selecting what they consider a subset of Buddhism and adding it to their particular set of therapies, with no awareness of what they are throwing out. And worse, because they have added some Buddhist practices to their bag of techniques, they suddenly feel that they are also an expert in Buddhism, as well, although most have not really practiced the dharma themselves or achieved any realization. In other words, while perhaps doing some of the preliminary practices, they don't personally know what they are talking about or recommending to others, much less have reached the realization practices.

Why is this? My guess is that emphasis on the word "secular" means that these days anything "spiritual" is excluded so as to avoid being accused of being non-scientific or "religious." Vajrayana Buddhism does not depend on "faith," but it does depend on trust in the teacher. So, with secular Buddhism, what are we left with?

Well, for one, with secular Buddhism, the word "Buddhism" is usually de-emphasized and gradually removed from the mix or else it is trumpeted, when it is but a shadow of the complete dharma. As far as techniques are concerned, secular Buddhisms are restricted to what are called the dualistic or Relative-Truth practices only, since the Absolute-Truth (non-dual) practices depend on an authentic teacher and intangible or ineffable qualities. This point is key and, IMO, definitive here.

Vajrayana Buddhism (and its lineages) depend on authentic teachers introducing the student through what are called the "Pointing-Out Instructions" to the true nature of the mind, which is ineffable and

certainly not “secular.” At minimum, IMO, qualifying as an authentic dharma teacher involves the teacher having recognized the actual nature of the mind, and “recognition” is not enlightenment or anything close to it, but it does guarantee that the teacher has familiarity with the non-dual advanced (ineffable) meditation practices. Any true dharma practitioner knows that without the non-dual (realization) practices, the preliminary practices make no sense dharmically.

All of the non-dual or teachers of the more advanced practices (that I am aware) of define “Recognition” (“Kensho” in Zen) as a threshold event, one that marks the gateway to the non-dual practices. Otherwise, we have only the dualistic practices (The Preliminary Practices) and, as preliminary, they are restricted to Samsara and a dualistic view.

Speaking strictly for myself, I can no longer read Buddhist writings when I do not sense or feel that the teacher/author (unless the book is a simple history) is coming from a non-dual perspective. Otherwise, as the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said so aptly, “Your guess is as good as mine.” Through familiarity with the teachings, I believe that we can sense or determine for ourselves (at least I feel I can), whether the author/practitioner has achieved “Recognition” and thus speaks from an authentic view.

Perhaps in these hybrid-dharma attempts, the word “secular” gives it away, because secular refers to this Samsaric (non-spiritual) world that we all share and the whole idea and purpose of the original dharma is to transform in our view Samsara into Nirvana, an enlightened state. If we only want to use Buddhist techniques to better live in Samsara, to feather our

Samsaric nest and make it more comfy, then the Buddha's teaching have been grossly misunderstood.

There is nothing wrong with bettering our life and living conditions, but if that is our only goal, Samsaric life will continue on just as it is for us. The traditional description of trying to improve Samsara is like the fun phrase "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." That would be a hopeless solution, meaning no solution at all.

This is not to say that Buddhist mind training won't improve life in Samsara; it will and does. But that is not the main thrust of the Buddha's teachings, to fix up Samsaric existence, to put lipstick on a pig, so to speak.

From what I can see from looking around the web, the general idea of a secular Buddhism seems to be focused on using what are called the Preliminary Practices (the dualistic practices) for secular training. I see very little mention of the non-dual advanced practices (other than some lip service) mentioned in the descriptions for secular Buddhism I have found.

Yet, the preliminary (dualistic) practices are just that, "preliminary." Preliminary to what? And the answer is preliminary to the main practices, which are those more advanced (non-dual) practices that are only undertaken AFTER the threshold event "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind has been achieved. And, as mentioned, that is not a part of the secular Buddhism web pages I have located.

However, these non-dual (advanced) practices are the main or whole point to the Buddha's teachings, to transform and realize Samsara as Nirvana, not to streamline or improve Samsara. Because there are so many diverse forms of Buddhism that are declared as

secular Buddhism, my comments here can only be general ones.

And I'm not going to go into the fact in this blog that in Vajrayana Buddhism, the role of the teacher and the interactivity with the student are an essential part of that tradition. Seeing psychologists and psychotherapists assuming the role of dharma teacher, without even completing the dharma preliminaries themselves is a recipe for confusion (if not a joke) and this should be pointed out to them. Vajrayana Buddhism is not just another technique to add to your bag of therapies, especially if you have not practiced and attained some realization through completing them.

If there is one thing I have learned in my 40+ years of dharma practice is that, at least in the Vajrayana tradition that I practice, the integrity, purity, coherence and ACTUALIZATION of the lineage is of paramount importance. Otherwise, there will be nothing to pass on to the next generation.

My own guess is that most of these so-called secular forms of Buddhism will either just implode or become rote mental exercise programs. If there are any "secular Buddhists" reading this, please explain your view.

THE ANALOGY OF MIRRORS

September 8, 2017

There are all kinds of mystical metaphors and analogies using the idea of mirrors and reflection. Some are easier to understand than others. Here is one for dharma practitioners that, if you will think this through carefully, you may find it, as I have, very useful. Read the words, of course, but also rest in the images that arise in the mind from articulating the words. And talk to me.

We all know that the eye cannot see itself, except when we look in a mirror. It is the same with awareness. We can't see awareness, if only because we are busy using awareness to look at anything at all. The awareness in any of us is pristine and brilliant, even if personally we feel lousy at the time. It's the "awareness" of feeling bad I am pointing at here, not the feeling bad that happens. In other words, since awareness is what we use to see with, we can't look at it directly. But there is an indirect way that we can see our own awareness and that is by reflection.

And the key to doing this is found in the results of anything we do well, but especially for those dharma practitioners who are working with the more advanced non-dual meditation practices. So please follow this train of thought and ask questions if it does not make sense to you. In this analogy, our "awareness" is like the eye and the mirror is like the results of our non-dual meditation. I will explain.

And, there is no need to look through the back of a mirror as frequently mentioned in occult lingo. Our native awareness (or inner clarity) is perfectly reflected in the results of whatever non-dual dharma

practices (or perhaps similar secular practices) we are doing. Non-dual dharma practices include, initially Insight Meditation (Vipassana), and then Mahamudra Meditation or Dzogchen. I can't say that all results of Insight Meditation produce reflection, but the ones I personally know, which are close-up photography and writing blogs like this one, do indeed, at least for me.

In my case, the results of doing Insight Meditation with close-up photography are reflected or perfectly mirrored in the photographs that result. I can "see" my reflection in them. It's the same with writing, the clarity of my blogs (if only to me) are reflections or mirror images as to my state of mind. These reflections are confirmation of my practice.

So, while I cannot look directly at my awareness itself because I am using that awareness to look with (not to mention that with awareness, there is nothing that can be seen), I CAN see the reflection of my mind in the resulting photo images I take and the written blogs that I write. My Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is stable enough to hold that mirror still, so that Insight Meditation appears and reflects.

If we continue to find more and more areas of our life that can be reflective, after a while we begin to get a pretty clear idea (or picture) of our progress in dharma meditation or in whatever life-skills we are good at. And, it is worthwhile to be sure you clearly understand what I am pointing out here. Ask questions here if they come up.

For example, if we are a cook, we can see it in the quality of the food we prepare. If we love fly tying, we can see it in the finished flies. If we write poems, we can see it in the poetry we write. If we play music, we

can hear it in our playing. If we fix cars, we see our work in how the engine hums, etc. Get the idea?

In fact, anywhere we master a part of life to our satisfaction, it becomes a mirror in which we can see by reflection the skillful means we have acquired at doing whatever it is we do. And, as mentioned earlier, if we learn to see the reflections we create in the results of the things that we do, then those reflections (like an array of solar panels) all reflect and focus the same sun of our own mind back to us to be seen.

We can see this, but we do have to look, which is why those who are doing the Karma Kagyu style of Insight Meditation may have a leg up on of you those who are not yet practicing one of the non-dual meditations. But those of you who do not practice the non-dual practices MAY be able to see something as well.

In other words, I am not saying those of you out there who are not practicing something like Insight Meditation (a non-dual practice) will not see the reflection or mirroring of the mind that I am describing here. You may (or probably will) see something at least to some degree, if the skill you mirror (for me, for example, close-up photography) is refined enough. The reason I keep pointing at one of the non-dual dharma practices (like Insight Meditation) is that it demands (first) a very high level of stability of mind (through Tranquility Meditation practice) and then (second), through Insight Meditation, the ability to look directly at the nature of thoughts, rather than just the content (what the thought may be about.)

There is not room in this blog to describe properly how to learn Insight Meditation, but I have written about the non-dual practices a number of times elsewhere.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=264&sid=9bfaca84003301ba085f2cf24c8d8241>

It's just that those doing the authentic Karma Kagyu Vajrayana style of Insight Meditation are assured (by definition) to have superior ability to stabilize the mind and thus hold still whatever result or reflection we have by having mastering Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and at the same time, through Insight Meditation, we look directly at the mirror-reflection I am mentioning here.

As a quick analogy of the process, the way I explain that it is like if we were to take a tiny needle that we wish to thread, but have very shaky hands, Tranquility Meditation removes the shakiness from the hands, so that with Insight Meditation we can then thread the needle. And here is the kicker to this blog:

With enough stability of reflection, we can gain certainty and clarity about our progress with meditation practice, such that whatever doubts we might have had about our progress in meditation evaporate in the clarity of the reflections themselves. This kind of confirmation is otherwise very hard to come by.

I know. Perhaps all of this sounds very analogical or metaphorical (which it is), but if you will take the time to examine and think this through for yourself, you will see that this analogy is quite accurate.

If you have ever wondered, as I have, what is the next step in extending and expanding our dharma realization (and how to do that), this approach works to help bring certainty and is the next step or at least one of the next steps. If you have followed me thus far, you may have some questions or comments. Post them here, please.

P.S. Something I did not make clear and probably can't make clear is that when I speak of the mirroring quality of something like my photography to me, I am not talking about just liking the quality of my own photos. I am talking about using photography (or whatever) in the process of Insight Meditation itself. The resulting photos are mixed with Insight Meditation and that process is ineffable, beyond explanation or words. However, the imprint of Insight Meditation is left or stamped on the resulting photos (or writing). I am not sure that you can get the same effect using whatever skill you have without Insight Meditation, but you may get some reflection nevertheless. I hope this is understood.

UNWAVERING ATTENTION

September 8, 2017

Something practitioners in the Tibetan Buddhist lineage I'm in (Karma Kagyu) recite every day is the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer. And in that prayer is the following line:

“Unwavering awareness is the body of meditation...”

Sometimes the word “awareness” in the above line is translated as “attention.” By saying that unwavering awareness is the body of meditation, the word “body” means that this is the main thing we practice or do, maintain unwavering attention.

I recite this line every day and, of course, I can't help but reflect on it and realize that I can't do that... yet. So, “unwavering,” obviously, means tireless attention, 24x7. How can I do that when it is hard for me to “unwaveringly” watch my 3-year-old granddaughter for a single day without hot-swapping with Grandma in tag-team fashion? I can see from the traditional texts where I'm eventually headed with such attention, but I will never make it with the kind of “trying” it now takes me. I somehow have to “try” less and pay attention more. I get worn out fast, which means I'm wasting energy and don't yet know how to hold my attention without a lot of effort. I know, I'm just supposed to relax-at-attention, oxymoron and all.

What this does signal is that aerodynamically-speaking my practice is not optimized, not even nearly. So, it does not take a genius to figure out that in order to be attentively spot-on around the clock, there is some training and practice that I have missed up to now, perhaps something I don't understand or

didn't do correctly. As an analogy, if our awareness is like a cone, with perfect awareness at the tip of the top, then it is easy to understand how great effort is needed the farther down toward the bottom of the cone we are. Sitting on or near the top of the cone must take less energy and effort. It has to, yet that's not where I am just now. I'm working on it.

Anyway, somehow my efforts to be mindful have to eventually become more effort-less and automatic for this to be true and I trust that my dharma instructions over the years about all this are true. Yet, from where I stand today, it is exhausting to even contemplate all of this becoming effortless. It's more realistic to note that I try (sometimes even struggle) to be mindful, but eventually I tire and fall back into some kind of rest-mode, but not the right kind of rest I fear, and certainly not what could be considered mindful. And, I am NOT the Lone Ranger in all this, either. Misery loves company. LOL.

So, all of that being said, thanks to various dharma practices, I have made some actual progress in being more mindful. The point in my writing about this is to remind myself (and any of you interested) that when the Buddhists say "unwavering attention," they do not mean halfway measures, but the process must go full-on until we effortlessly can be aware constantly. In fact, we must be able to totally relax and rest in that constant awareness.

I'm working on it, but still have a long way to go. I can see that it is eventually doable and that the Buddhist sadhanas and texts are not exaggerating. Yet, how I get from here to there is still (for me) a bit hard to fathom, except by continued practice, but I do have the idea. Right now, it is a bridge too far, but one I'm

already starting to cross. I don't see any other viable alternative. It's choice-less.

As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said:

“The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground.”

That's the spirit!

ACCIDENT PRONE

September 9, 2017

The Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said:

“The purpose of dharma practice is to make ourselves accident prone.”

And to me this means that in our air-tight conceptual straight-jackets, there are gaps or chinks in our armor, if we can reveal them. The preliminary dharma practices gradually loosen us up so that those gaps are more likely to be exposed and we can see through them. And then, at some point an accidental conflation of events will push us over the edge and we start to wake up to realization.

The preliminary dharma practices prepare us for a key event which is called “Recognition” as to the true nature of the mind, at which point we can begin what are called the realization practices. And this is true for any kind of practice, dharma or otherwise. We go through the motions of practice and wait for enough serendipity in practice for it to become more than practice. This is very obvious in learning to play a musical instrument. We practice, practice, practice and then in the midst of practicing, here comes a moment of serendipity, and we find ourselves playing music, if only for a few minutes. And we begin to extend our playing from there. We wait for serendipity to strike, quite by accident.

Dharma practice is like that, as well. The preliminary dharma practices are designed to loosen us up until, as Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out, we have an accidental breakthrough or opening and there is a glimpse of realization, which strengthens our resolve.

Who knows how tough a nut each of us is to crack. For me, it took many, many years, but I did crack, of course with the help of an experienced dharma teacher.

When I first heard about the preliminary dharma practices, especially The Ngondro, with its hundreds of thousands of repetitions, I was horrified to even think about doing them. “How medieval,” was my first thought. Yet, after I managed to get about nowhere with meditation for quite a while, I began to understand how these preliminaries could maybe just help get me in mental, psychological, and physical shape, and so I asked for permission to do them. I was given that permission and the verbal “lung” or reading of the text over me, and I began. It was, as I thought, not easy.

And, as mentioned, I was a tough nut to crack, but I finally finished The Ngondro. However, when I went to my dharma teacher and asked him what I should do next, his response was: “Do you want to know what I would do if I were you?” I said yes, and he responded with “I would do another Ngondro.” Gulp, and I did. And it helped.

With Vajrayana Buddhism, working closely with a teacher, there is a bond called “Samaya,” which is like a trust in one another. So, when Rinpoche asked me to do another Ngondro, I knew that he cared about me and would not suggest repeating that extended practice for no reason. As it turned out, my precious teacher did manage to guide me through the preliminaries and into the realization practices, something I could never have done for myself.

I call the Ngondro practices our dharma boot camp, and it is, a basic training that gets us in shape

mentally, physically, psychologically) and gives the spiritual flexibility needed to undertake the realization (advanced) practices. I can't say I loved all of it, but I am deeply grateful for what it (and my teacher) did for me.

In Tibet, so it has carefully been explained to me, basic Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) was NOT taught until the Preliminary Practices were completed under the direction of an authentic teacher. This is not true in America, due to the fact that Americans rebelled against the idea of Ngondro (just as I at first did), which makes completing the Preliminaries even more important in this country in order to prepare us for "Recognition" and Insight Meditation." Otherwise, we may practice like a stuck record and never get to the realization practices, which (as I see it) is the whole point of the Buddha's teachings.

EXPECTATIONS: “DON’T INVITE THE FUTURE”

September 10, 2017

The above line is one of the “Six Words of Advice” from the impeccable Mahasiddha and dharma master Tilopa. These words of advice or pith instructions are precious beyond imagination, which is just the point of this blog, that realization as to the nature of our own mind is beyond any expectations we could imagine.

If we have completed the preliminary dharma practices and are ready for the realization practices (non-dual), we have to first do something with all the concepts, conceptuality, and mental bric-a-brac that we have accumulated over the years while we were practicing the preliminaries. These include all the expectations that we have made up from the teachings, books, sadhanas, talking with friends, and whatever else we have gathered in our mind all this time. In my own case, all that I had imagined or expected about greater awareness or realization was mostly worthless and nowhere near the actually.

So, there is a point that will come when we finally start to realize how the mind actually works and it starts with an event called “Recognition,” when with the help of an authentic teacher we recognize the true nature of the mind. At that time, we will abandon our expectations “en masse,” because we realize that they are grossly inaccurate. Our expectations are like a dream we once had, something we made up out of whole cloth and imagined as best we could. This is why all of the great Siddhas keep telling us that realization of any kind cannot be put into words or

even imagined. We can't imagine realization or we would already be realized.

As they say, the realization-practices (the non-dual ones that come with realization) are ineffable. They not only cannot be put into words, they also cannot be imagined. And whatever we have cobbled together over the years, whatever we think realization is like, will be of little worth to us. In fact, all of our expectations are instantly abandoned when realization of the actual nature of the mind arises and is grasped. In fact, "Realization" is itself that abandonment. Just gone, evaporated. After all, realization is REALIZING!

If we want to take a lesson from the great rinpoches, that lesson is that we have NO IDEA how much we need guidance and someone to point out to us how to handle all of this, dharmically. That is part of why their compassion for us is so great. They can see our delusions and how far we deviate in our expectations from how the mind actually is. That deviation has to be rectified at some point (in some way) and the Rinpoches know this and are just trying (and able) to help. They have a way to do this called the "Pointing-Out Instructions."

So, is the takeaway here that all our study and conceptualizing is not worth doing? I'm not saying that and, anyway, how could we not build conceptions and have expectations all those years while we work through the preliminary practices? Without the actual realization, we have no choice but to guess at it and expect.

It can be helpful, even imperative, to understand that whatever we have imagined or expect is probably very far from the reality and so, perhaps, it is not

helpful to further reify our projections and expectations as we tend to do... making them even stronger yet.

It may be better to admit that we not only don't know what realization is, but that we can't know what it's like until we do realize. Instead of letting our imagination and concepts (as to realization) guide us blindly, we are better off just learning to relax and feel what we feel and let the truth of things come to us without further imprinting ourselves with what we imagine or "think" it should be like. We don't know what it is like (or will be like) and, in fact, our ideas about realization are by definition certain to be misleading. Otherwise, we would already be realized. So, don't be misled and understand that any expectations (by definition) are off track.

If we love the dharma and are dedicated to our practice, it is wise to spend some of our time (and real effort) in finding an authentic dharma teacher, someone who already has some realization, is willing to answer our questions, and can help keep an eye on our progress, so that we don't wander off into the bushes. We Americans are do-it-yourself folks and proud of it. This is fine when it comes to doing the preliminary dharma practices. We can do them with minimum instructions, sort of.

However, when it comes to the more advanced realization practices, we can't do them without an authentic teacher. This is not true because I say it; I say because the great Siddhas and Mahasiddhas tell us this is so. We can't recognize the actual nature of the mind without it being pointed out to us by someone who knows that nature. And recognizing the true nature of the mind (and the realization that results from it) is the main reason we practice dharma

in the first place, so put two and two together here friend.

There is not too much we can do about our habit of accumulating unrealistic expectations until we achieve “Recognition,” which is the first dharma Realization with a capital “R.” However, we CAN begin to deconstruct (and discount) our expectations as best we are able.

Yet, we can’t deconstruct our expectations as long as we keep reifying and believing in them, because they are our own projections!. It’s when we understand this that we begin to pop that conceptual balloon and understand that expectations are unrealistic by definition. Pay no attention to them. That’s when we can start to clear away some of the mental debris and help to open ourselves so that true realization can arise. And it does!

DHARMA AERODYNAMICS

September 10, 2017

I want to talk about jobs and work, what we do in life to make a living. Does it matter what that is as long as we pay the bills? For me, what I did for a living made a lot of difference. In fact, I found it very hard to work at a job that I did not love; I needed to have a job through which I felt I was growing just by doing it. This was a big problem for me.

If I trace my own work history back through my life, I can see that there were jobs I did along the way that were made easier by actually liking to do the work, as opposed to my rubbing up against the edge of every job out there that I didn't want to do, but that I was perhaps forced to do by circumstances like having to support my family. This was obvious with the jobs I hated, rather than the ones I enjoyed, loved to do, or at least tolerated. Ultimately I gave up even trying to work regular jobs and found myself only able to do what I felt like doing, so I started my own businesses. And gradually I also found that, at least for me, dharma was very much connected to how I made a living.

What I found helpful for me was to look at dharma practice as a form of aerodynamic training or engineering. Dharma aerodynamics can indicate, like a flying a plane in a wind tunnel, just how we can best handle the winds of time and fate. Are we fit to fly or are we always bucking headwinds? When I had a bad attitude or approach (bad aerodynamics), it seemed like all headwinds. The dharma taught me to adjust my attitude aerodynamically to take change in the best way possible.

When I look back over my life from childhood onward, I can see why I'm so sensitive to what I do all day. If I ask why (and how) I'm so into this whole issue, the only answer I can wring out of my

history is that from a very young age I concentrated on not-doing anything that I did not love to do, and because of this I rode the string of my hobbies (which I always loved) all the way to where I am today, at the age of 76. And I did not buck or go against the system out of spite (or in defiance), but rather from something more like a tunnel vision, driven by my natural love of (or need to love) what I was doing and thereby ignoring whatever else got in my way.

This attitude on my part cost me a lot socially and it was very risky not to have the safety net of a high school diploma, but I paid no attention and never liked to (and didn't) compromise my life-path – whatever I was passionate about. In fact, even as a child I refused.

And in this attitude I perhaps came the closest to perhaps seeing my own karma in action, how tendencies from deep within me affect my current circumstances. Something inside me, even as a child, was not afraid to ignore everyone (including my parents) when it came to what I did, how I spent my time. And the clumsiness of education and school was just not acceptable to me. I couldn't do it. The intuition that guided me from within was always right there with me and had to come from somewhere. Was this karma or am I just in society's eyes a difficult person or both?

So, given that tendency on my part not to compromise, why, how, and to what did that sensitize me to? Again, the only answer I come up with is that by steadfastly staying within the zone of loving-what-I-do for most of my entire life, some part of me is perhaps more intact than it otherwise might have been. It didn't get bent by forcing myself to do what I did not like to do.

And, as I get more into the dharma and the realization practices (like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation), I find myself (true to form) naturally discarding those parts of dharma training that I can't use, that are too formal, or just too conceptual to work for me. It seems that I need to, as they say, keep my dharma where the rubber meets the road. If it doesn't make sense, no matter what the books say, I can't use it, at least not right now.

And dharma is no different from any other topic when it comes to “conceptuality.” When we study and learn about a new field or topic, we get all-kinds-of-conceptual. And to the degree we don’t realize what we are dealing with, those concepts end up priming our expectations in a bad way, and effectively guiding us probably not in the right direction.

As I begin to realize the dharma for myself, there came a time when I started to deconstruct the massive edifice I had built up over the years in order to conceptualize and think about Buddhism. All of that which did not make sense to me had to be gotten out of the way somehow. Like the legendary phoenix, with the advent of realization, I arose from the ashes of my own conceptuality and began to take wing. We all have to break through the shell of the conceptuality in which we are bound.

Just as scaffolding is removed from a building once it is erected, when we reach the point in our dharma practice where realization sets in, we finally know for ourselves exactly which is the baby and which is the bathwater. It’s not an option, but as a butterfly has to break through its chrysalis in order to emerge and fly, so do we have to jettison whatever conceptual debris and habits from our dharma practice (and thinking) we have accumulated that are not helpful or make no sense to us, and also take wing – leave it behind.

A better way to say this is that the well-known dharma event called “Recognition” is not the RESULT of any realization, but the very process of breaking out of the cocoon of our own conceptuality IS realization.

P.S. It is also important to understand that the Buddhist texts state that when our dharma teacher has finally successfully pointed out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it, their job is finished. From that moment onward, we have everything we need at hand and it is now up to us. And simultaneously, we are up to the job.

This does not mean that we no longer receive guidance from our dharma teacher; we just don't HAVE to have it.

DHARMA AERODYNAMICS

September 11, 2017

I want to talk about jobs and work, what we do in life to make a living. Does it matter what that is as long as we pay the bills? For me, what I did for a living made a lot of difference. In fact, I found it very hard to work at a job that I did not love; I needed to have a job through which I felt I was growing just by doing it. This was a big problem for me.

If I trace my own work history back through my life, I can see that there were jobs I did along the way that were made easier by actually liking to do the work, as opposed to my rubbing up against the edge of every job out there that I didn't want to do, but that I was perhaps forced to do by circumstances like having to support my family. This was obvious with the jobs I hated, rather than the ones I enjoyed, loved to do, or at least tolerated. Ultimately I gave up even trying to work regular jobs and found myself only able to do what I felt like doing, so I started my own businesses. And gradually I also found that, at least for me, dharma was very much connected to how I made a living.

What I found helpful for me was to look at dharma practice is as a form of aerodynamic training or engineering. Dharma aerodynamics can indicate, like a flying a plane in a wind tunnel, just how we can best handle the winds of time and fate. Are we fit to fly or are we always bucking headwinds? When I had a bad attitude or approach (bad aerodynamics), it seemed like all headwinds. The dharma taught me to adjust my attitude aerodynamically to take change in the best way possible.

When I look back over my life from childhood onward, I can see why I'm so sensitive to what I do all day. If I ask why (and how) I'm so into this whole issue, the only answer I can wring out of my history is that from a very young age I concentrated on not-doing anything that I did not love to do, and because of this I rode the string of my hobbies (which I always loved) all the way to where I am today, at the age of 76. And I did not buck or go against the system out of spite

(or in defiance), but rather from something more like a tunnel vision, driven by my natural love of (or need to love) what I was doing and thereby ignoring whatever else got in my way.

This attitude on my part cost me a lot socially and it was very risky not to have the safety net of a high school diploma, but I paid no attention and never liked to (and didn't) compromise my life-path – whatever I was passionate about. In fact, even as a child I refused.

And in this attitude I perhaps came the closest to perhaps seeing my own karma in action, how tendencies from deep within me affect my current circumstances. Something inside me, even as a child, was not afraid to ignore everyone (including my parents) when it came to what I did, how I spent my time. And the clumsiness of education and school was just not acceptable to me. I couldn't do it. The intuition that guided me from within was always right there with me and had to come from somewhere. Was this karma or am I just in society's eyes a difficult person or both?

So, given that tendency on my part not to compromise, why, how, and to what did that sensitize me to? Again, the only answer I come up with is that by steadfastly staying within the zone of loving-what-I-do for most of my entire life, some part of me is perhaps more intact than it otherwise might have been. It didn't get bent by forcing myself to do what I did not like to do.

And, as I get more into the dharma and the realization practices (like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation), I find myself (true to form) naturally discarding those parts of dharma training that I can't use, that are too formal, or just too conceptual to work for me. It seems that I need to, as they say, keep my dharma where the rubber meets the road. If it doesn't make sense, no matter what the books say, I can't use it, at least not right now.

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P.S. It is also important to understand that the Buddhist texts state that when our dharma teacher has finally successfully pointed out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it, their job is finished. From that moment onward, we have everything we need at hand and it is now up to us. And simultaneously, we are up to the job. This does not mean that we no longer receive guidance from our dharma teacher; we just don't HAVE to have it.

THE OUTBREATH

September 12, 2017

The Very Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche is famous for his particular way of teaching Shamata Meditation, what in English is called Tranquility Meditation. When focusing on the breath going in and out (which is a common object of this kind of meditation), Trungpa accents or emphasizes the exhalation, the out-breath. And I know this from personal experience with Trungpa Rinpoche.

When I first met Trungpa Rinpoche and acted as his chauffeur for a few days, the first thing he did after I picked him up at the airport (and brought him to the professor's house where he was staying), when we were alone together, was to sit me down in a chair and teach me Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), although he never told me in words that was what he was doing.

He just sat me down and began asking me to focus on my breath and breathe in and out. I was nervous as all get-out (and self-conscious), but I tried my best to follow his instructions to follow my own breath as it went in and out. That was all good, but Trungpa Rinpoche was not happy with my out-breath. I was not breathing out far enough to please him. I did not know at the time that this was typical with how he taught Shamata Meditation.

Here I was, trying to breathe out as best I could, but Rinpoche would say. "Let your breath go out. Let it go all the way out." And I would try, when he said. "Let it go all the way out. Don't worry, it will come back." At the time, for me being there with Trungpa Rinpoche was like an acid trip, and when he said not to worry and to just let the breath go all the way out, my fears of death and dying came up in my mind. And when he said not to worry AND that it would come back, my fear of death mostly disappeared; it just vanished,, never to return to that same degree again. The whole experience was a bit of a life-changer as was meeting Trungpa Rinpoche in person. This was in February of 1974.

Now, it took me years before I began to understand what Trungpa Rinpoche was pointing out to me on that winter day. It was more than just Tranquility Meditation. This whole concept of the outgoing breath appears in some of the advanced realization-practices, which are very much about relaxing and allowing our mind to rest, just as it is. The idea in those practices is to let go and completely rest in the moment, however that moment is, good, bad, or indifferent. And in that resting, to allow the mind (and our consciousness) to re-organize and come back together as it will, not as we hope, expect, or imagine it should. In other words, let go.

IMO, this is perhaps why Trungpa Rinpoche taught this very special form of Tranquility Meditation, with its accent on the outbreath, letting the breath go all the way out, and without panicking about its return, allowing the breath (and the mind) to come back as it will, i.e. resting in the moment, as it is.

I didn't understand this back then, but today, as I practice the realization-practices, here it is again, reminding me to let go and allow the mind, just as it is in this present moment to speak to me, instead of me doing anything. In this way, Trungpa Rinpoche, in his approach to Tranquility Meditation, was laying the groundwork for the more advanced realization-practices in the heart of Shamata, by encouraging us to let go and fully rest with each out-breath. Even way back then, Trungpa Rinpoche had us practicing becoming familiar with what we would have to be doing many years later.

I had never before met anyone quite like Trungpa, someone so familiar, so friendly, and so intimate in his approach; he was almost like family. And today, when I sometimes listen to him speaking on this or that recording, I can hear that his English was not perfect, but back then, in person, he seemed to speak better idiomatic English than perhaps anyone I had ever met. His was a stunning presence.

The last words he ever spoke to me were after I told him that I had never met a younger person before him that I was not critical of, in some way. And he turned to me and said: “Well, Michael. We both are married men and we are about the same age.” And he left.

IDIOT COMPASSION

September 12, 2017

I don't care for the term "idiot compassion," but there it is, anyway. I certainly am not an expert in compassion, but I believe we all have sensitive areas in our life where we naturally feel compassion. Unfortunately for people, most of mine has to do with animals.

And a lama friend of mine advised me to, as the traditional texts put it, "Regard all things as a magical illusion." Basically, he was saying to stop trying to keep appearances up, reifying everything. Sometimes I wonder if seeing the illusory nature of things helps to dilute the bite of Samsara just enough so that the "illusion" acts like a buffer. Perhaps it's just like when we are knocked out for an operation (but are still sort-of conscious), we don't feel so much of anything. There is no doubt that I have to lighten up and deal with the illusory nature of life that the dharma masters tell us is there! Anyway, what about compassion?

Forcing compassion (or feeling) rather than feeling compassionate is, at best, a trial run or just an emulation. It's a lot like when folks ask me about how it was hearing the great American blues singers in comparison to what passes for the blues today. Of course I know that we all have the blues sometimes. But the young blues players of today, singing the old blues songs, is what I call "reenactment blues." It's not the same somehow as hearing Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf in the clubs of Chicago's South Side. You know what I mean.

What little I know about compassion (and being compassionate) is that it comes NATURALLY as the result of growing our awareness. In my experience, there is no greater cause of compassion than the realization of (or even a brush with) emptiness or impermanence to whatever degree we can manage (or are forced) to experience that. IMO, compassion and emptiness are connate, two sides of the same coin. They both arise together and are reciprocals.

In my experience compassion is a result, not of trying to be compassionate, but rather of a greater awareness, in particular the awareness of Samsara and the situation we (and all sentient beings) are in. So, making compassion into a rule or a set of obligatory instructions (rather than something we ought to feel with heart) is IMO not very helpful. Anyway, it doesn't work. Certainly that's not what I consider compassion.

It's the same with putting on a happy face (or smile) and being kind just to be nice; it may be well-intentioned, but it usually only clouds and confuses the issue. Much of social life is like a hall of mirrors, anyway. That way of treating one another (IMO) is not compassion, either.

The only way I have ever seen my sense of compassion expand is by becoming increasingly spiritually aware. They go together, awareness and compassion; the more awareness, the more natural compassion.

As for the traditional "idiot compassion," a term coined (I believe) by the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who said this compassion without wisdom, like offering your obese uncle a big bowl of ice cream because you think it would be kind of you. "Trying" to be compassionate may seem admirable, but it can often do more harm than good and is pretty much a superficial quality. It is best to allow compassion to arise naturally. As for Idiot Compassion: if we want to generalize, it is any action on our part where our lack of awareness only makes things worse, like wanting to help a situation when our help is no help at all, may be actually detrimental, or simply is just more vanity on our part.

Using Facebooks as an example (which will no-doubt irritate some readers; I apologize) is when I asked those who were not reading my blogs anyway to unfriend me to make room for people who want to Friend me. There were almost 1000 waiting to be friended.

And what happened? A bunch of those who do read (and do comment), just the friends I DON'T want to lose because they actually share here, all resigned to make room for others. How noble dear friends, but falling on our sword is not compassion, IMO. But it was my fault.

I'm the idiot who asked them to do that, when (obviously) the ones who DON'T read my blog don't read my blog, but are just there because they are there or wanted to be there. They will never even see my request for them to unhook themselves. Anyway, I won't do that again. LOL.

As for me, I am still on training-wheels when it comes to compassion. It arises spontaneously in me when it comes to animals (and their state of bewilderment), but I'm still working on the same degree of response with people. I'm getting better there too, but slowly.

I've learned not to feel bad if compassion does not arise for me in this or that situation (and I or others "think" it should). And I don't have to smile unless I feel like it. There is no obligation to feel compassion if we don't. In fact, it's false. Like the bud of a flower that slowly opens, in my experience, that is the way compassion arises when I allow it to emerge naturally, but for me it takes time. There is no point in forcing it or trying to rob the cradle.

My teacher in this "smiling" remark is the His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, one of the four heart-sons of His Holiness that 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje. Gyaltsab Rinpoche is famous for not smiling, accept naturally. I can get behind that, because I feel the same way. When I traveled all the way to Ralang, Gyaltsab Rinpoche's monastery in Sikkim, India and met him personally to ask him for a particular empowerment of which he is said to be an emanation of, there we were, like two peas in a pod, not smiling at each other, but totally good with that. Only, he had great realization and I little to none. Now, that makes me smile. LOL.

So, those are a few comments on compassion. As a closing remark, what sticks in my mind through my limited experience is that a brush or touch with the emptiness of it all brings forth compassion, naturally.

WHAT'S BEYOND SELFISHNESS?

September 16, 2017

Amazing weather up here on the Earthwork Farm and the Harvest Gathering. We are in the 70's and the 80's, when it's almost October. Not too much to say. Spent a lot of time with my granddaughter Emma, who is five-years old, and likes to hang out with me, especially to ride around the farm on a golf cart. She uses my pop-up booth, where I am sharing meditation instructions with those interested, coming into the tent and just throwing herself on the blankets, resting, and then vanishing out into the crowd to run around.

One of my Facebook friends, Thomas Fouts, showed up with a beautiful pot of mums, which I put in front of the image of the Buddha on the outside of the tent. Seeing a lot of Facebook friends here.

Not too much inside-stuff going on; this is more an outside time, but I did have one insight while I was watching all the people go by. I kind of sit inside of my booth on a cushion and folks stop by. Anyway, while I was sitting there, I realized that after all these years I may be coming to the end of anything that I can think of that I want to do. Call it the end of my 'selfishness' so to speak. I've done most of what I want in life, etc. Anyway, the thought was this:

That the last step of doing all the selfish things that I want for myself may be the first step of doing things more unselfishly for others. Now, I'm not a goody-goody type of person and certainly not too well behaved. It's not that I don't do things with and for others (I do), but there seems to be a touch of me in everything I do... and some selfish stain, as well. I don't think this is unusual or that I am the only one who feels this way.

The insight I had (if that's what it was) is that I may be reaching the bottom of the barrel with things I feel I want (or have) to do for myself... and more and more perhaps opening to doing things with and for others. And what could I do for others?

Well, I can't do for others what only they can do for themselves. I know that. What I can do perhaps is advise or instruct folks how to do some of the things they want to do, but maybe can't figure out how to do them.

The impulse or insight was that beyond my wants, which I may have pretty much exhausted, is the wide world helping others. If I have kind of run out of things I think I have to do for myself, there is an unlimited world of other folks that might need a hand. Anyway, it may sound odd, but the impulse or little vision was very benign and healthy.

Of course, as an entrepreneur, I could advise others in how to put a business together, but that is not what I'm talking about here. It's more the spiritual welfare of others that I have in mind, not that I am averse to offering my business knowledge. However, I am more concerned about sharing dharma knowledge, because it will go the farthest in being of use, IMO.

Clarifying the mind, helping to make it more lucid, so that greater awareness may arise is the single most useful thing that might benefit others. If we become more aware, then the light from that will guide us through the darker moments that life sometimes brings.

Anyway, that's the thought. If I'm running out of things that I want to do or feel I have to do, helping others to learn the dharma is perhaps the most useful thing that I can think (and feel like) doing. Make sense to anyone? But it's not done with goody-goody-ness or some kind of pride. It's done because I can't think of anything else I want to do for myself, but still like and know how to do things. Anyway, it's hard to put into the words, yet the original insight was

pure, that I would love to help others because I'm ready, willing, and able (so to speak) and I have else nothing to do. Sounds dumb, perhaps, but it was a clean thought when it came up.

And, with that I will get on with the entering the stream of this day which has not yet quite dawned.

THE INDELIBLE SELF

September 18, 2017

There is a trend in spirituality that imagines the more refined you get, the more attenuated, the better. It's almost like you whittle yourself down to the smallest possible size and paint it into a corner. Your self is harder and harder to find, almost not there at all. That is one approach, but one that only draws attention to yourself, no matter where you have hidden it.

In other words, the Self is not only there, it's conspicuous by your attempt to make it absent. I find this approach not very useful. My own preferred method of handling the Self is to acknowledge it as an indispensable function of our psychological makeup, one that if it did not already exist, we would be required to invent to get anything practical done.

I would hide the self in plain sight, so to speak, which is not hiding it at all. The Self is going to attach to whatever we like, dislike, or are indifferent to as long as we have karma. We could replace that to which we are attached with things that are healthier or "better" to be attached to, but that may be a case of Reduction ad absurdum.

In my own case, I recognized this problem fairly early-on, and stopped battling with myself. I kind of put my self out to pasture like you would an old cow or horse, gave it plenty of hay and sunshine and let it quietly be... itself and live out its life along with the rest of me, not as an undesirable, but as an equal part of the equation that is me.

And I stopped being ashamed of myself or hiding myself under a bushel, so to speak. It's clear to me that my Self is, well, selfish. What else would it be? It's not like this is unusual. My selfishness has plenty of company, the world around. And it's not like anyone

who sees my selfishness doesn't understand exactly what it is on first sight. They have one too, whether it is visible or kept in the dark. It is our shadow.

I believe in treating myself like I would treat another person, with as much tolerance, patience, and kindness as I can. As for improving myself, sure. I'm for that and I do see improvement on my part, to some degree. I guess myself will be more transparent (not a problem), the more I become a better person, and not before. So, relax and work with yourself, not against it. It's like raising a selfish child. What are you going to do? We created it. It is ours? And it is not a "thing" that we can cut off because it is embarrassing. It takes time, training, and kindness to improve our self. And most of all, like everything else, it takes love and care.

Someone with the least selfishness, still has selfishness, only somewhat less of it. I guess it is a Buddhist principle not to keep your enemies at a distance, but rather to keep them close. And, more important, is not to see the self as our enemy. The Self is our shadow and will follow us until we can learn to make ourselves transparent enough not to cast so much of a shadow or to see light right through it.

Making the Self our enemy or being ashamed of having a self is, well, selfish.

AWARENESS OF AWARENESS

September 19, 2017

The following is like a tongue-twister, but in the form of a mind-twister. The problem with seeing or being aware of our own awareness is that we are using that awareness right now to read this page (or for that matter) to see or do anything. Yongey Minjur Dorje Rinpoche points out that even when we feel lousy (and our mind is cloudy), the awareness used to make the judgment that we feel lousy, itself, is crystal clear. And that fact is something each of us can recognize and be aware of right now, that our inner awareness is already clear. And that is an amazing fact!

And that remark is easy for each of us to check out for ourselves. So, what do we identify with, the feeling lousy or the one who is aware of feeling lousy and how are they different?

Traditional dharma advice suggests that we not only identify with the awareness that is aware of feeling lousy, but that (through practice) we learn to fully rest in that awareness of whatever we are feeling, lousy, good, or indifferent. And it's hard to see that particular awareness when that same awareness is what we are using to look-through (like glasses) to be aware of anything. It's like the eye trying to look at itself. It can't be done unless we look in a mirror and even then it is backward.

If we have our lousy feeling-ness (and the awareness of feeling lousy) and, if we are aware that we are aware of feeling lousy, can we then be aware of our awareness that is aware of feeling lousy? How's that for a mind-bender question?

The answer is that we can be aware of our awareness that is aware of feeling lousy, but we cannot step beyond or outside of that awareness of being aware of feeling lousy. However, what we CAN do is to rest or just relax IN that awareness of that second type of

awareness (the awareness of being aware); and that is what a great many dharma instructions suggest.

And we can merge or be ONE with that awareness of being aware, because we already ARE that awareness; that's what is doing whatever being aware that we do. And not to worry; our mind is not a hall of mirrors, infinitely regressing. We can be aware that we are aware, but that's where the regression stops. In other words, we can be aware that we are feeling bad and aware that we are aware of feeling bad, but we cannot be aware beyond that. Try it out for yourself. I did.

Just so we are on the same page, the derivation of the word "Buddha" comes from the Pali and Sanskrit meaning to be aware or awake -- awakened. If we look for awareness, we are using that same awareness to do the looking. So, just as the eye cannot see itself, we cannot at the same time see the awareness we are looking through in order to see. Awareness can't see itself, but it can be aware that it is aware, but not aware of independently knowing what that awareness of awareness is. Again, it can't see itself.

So, to make it clear one more time: we can be aware of feeling lousy and we can be aware that we are aware of feeling lousy, but that's the limit. However, we can expand into and rest in being aware that we are aware of being lousy, and that is what a lot of the advanced realization-practices are all about.

But I can't be aware that I'm aware that I'm aware of feeling lousy. Like a stuck record, the awareness regression ends at the second aware. Sure, we can keep adding more awareness' and imagine we grasp that, yet no further understanding will result.

However, one thing we can do is rest in that awareness of being aware; it's like immersing ourselves in a swimming pool or taking an awareness bath. Fully immersed in that moment, we can see for ourselves and confirm that there is nothing to see; nothing that can

be seen but the seeing itself. And the SEEING itself becomes a place of rest in the realization-practices.

Sorry, if this is confusing.

FLYING A KITE IN THE MIND

September 19, 2017

All of the pith dharma texts say that realization, once it occurs for us, must be extended, yet they do not say much on exactly how that is to be done. It's not like you can just take Insight Meditation, like a shotgun, and point it at something in your life and meditate. At least I can't. The Realization-Practices are not something we go and "do" as much as they are something that we get out of the way of and allow to happen, while we rest attentively (if that's not an oxymoron). It is passive, not active or we could say that it is active passivity, i.e. actively being passive. Or, as the Beatles said, "Let It Be."

For me, it has been easier to find Insight Meditation in something where there is some stable repetitive activity that I already know how to do and enjoy, which is why Tranquility Meditation (with its stability) is usually taught BEFORE Insight Meditation, thereby giving us a base to stand on. In my case, it was easier to practice Insight Meditation with the process of photography or the process of writing, than it was to use a shotgun approach and try Insight Meditation out on just everything. Anyway, it doesn't work like that, at least for me.

The best I can come up with is that from those areas when I can implement Insight Meditation (for me, it's taking photos, writing blogs, and so on), the results of either activity are like mirrors that reflect (in the finished photos or in writing itself) the clarity of the process by which they were produced. As an example, for me, looking at my photos is like looking in a mirror at my mind. Aside from the subject matter, they reflect me as well.

My guess (and I don't know this exactly) is that if I can establish ENOUGH reflections (like my photos or writing), I will see the state of my mind in those mirrors enough to be myself convinced and feel certain of some progress, so that I can stop trying so hard and just relax more. "Certainty" in dharma is a big deal. And it is best if it comes through the guidance of an authentic teacher, but ultimately it has to also

be reflected or mirrored in whatever we do. And we can see the purity (or lack thereof) of our activity in those reflections, at least I can in my own photos and writing.

Given that, there must be a point when we have seen enough from the reflections (results) of our own actions to get the idea that we have grasped the teachings and simply let go of looking for it and relax even more. We can see that somehow we have made the cut in our own estimation and quit wondering how we are doing. That degree of relaxation alone will help propel us in the right direction. This kind of reciprocation is a good kind of Catch-22; it is self-sustaining and propulsive.

There is a whole tradition in the advanced non-dual realization-practices like Dzogchen that emphasizes letting go, relaxing, and not trying (making effort) to do anything. Let life sort itself out and we can work with that. One traditional image is that of letting the knotted snake uncoil itself.

And “Don’t alter the present” is one of the Mahasiddha Tilopa’s classic words of advice. However, this is not to say that we do nothing, but rather that we not “try” to doing anything (or nothing) in whatever we do, i.e. not make waves. There is meditation in stillness and there is meditation in action. Both are valid. I am more of the second type, myself; I can be busy doing nothing or, rather, doing nothing through all of my activity – that is, as best I can.

And by “doing nothing” while doing something is just a poetical way of saying we fly the kite of meditation in the winds and channels of the mind, effortlessly and lovingly. That is doing nothing, at least nothing “wrong” like accumulating karma.

Perhaps another way to say this is to love what we are doing, so that we are not going always against the grain of our self and accumulating resentment. Like the Christians say, “Let go and let God,” which must be similar. In the beginning or Preliminary Practices, we give all that we can to that effort, but in the advanced or realization-practices we learn another kind of giving, which is ourselves give way and let our mind rest, at least from our own effort. Let it all be just as it is... and rest in that.

This is a huge 180-degree shift from giving effort to giving way. This shift marks the change from the outer (preliminary) to the inner (realization) dharma practices, but it is also reflected for all of us to see in the arc of the Prime of Life, from being younger to being older. It's like turning your hand from palm down to palm upward or from giving to receiving.

In realization practice, making way for others becomes the most selfish thing we can do. Consider that for a moment. We stand effort on its head.

MEDITATING IN A CAVE

September 20, 2017

I don't do that, sit in a cave, unless you consider my tiny office a modern form of cave, and, ladies, it's not a "man cave." Additionally, although I do sit on a cushion each morning, I do not sit on a cushion that long. I have read many spiritual biographies of the great Tibetan lamas, what they call hagiographies or "Nam-Tars," so I know saints like Milarepa often sat in a cave on a cushion from morning to night, perhaps 24x7. I don't do that myself. So, what is it that I do each day when it comes to dharma?

Well, I do keep a shrine to honor the Buddha and my teacher. Although we have a large shrine in a separate building as part of our center, I tend to sit on a cushion at my tiny shrine right here in my "office-cave." I include a photo of it here.

My office shrine is inset into an abandoned sliding-door closet. I always open my shrine each morning, usually around 2-3 AM, which is when I get up, and fill the offering bowls. I then sit on my cushion and do a short practice, including the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer, some other prayers, mantras, and then various dedications. I also close the shrine in the evening, say more dedication prayers, and empty the water bowls. But these years I am not doing any deity practices, although I did those for many years. So, what else do I do?

Well, as mentioned, I don't sit on the cushion beyond opening my shrine and what-not. It seems what I like and insist on doing most of the day is Mahamudra Meditation, which is a special combination of Insight Meditation and Tranquility Meditation, and I concentrate on the Insight Meditation. Yet, I seldom sit on a cushion to do this. Rather, I do it while writing, photographing, and perhaps a few other things, like walking around, etc. Most of my practice is off-the-cushion.

The simple fact is that I love Insight Meditation. In fact, I want to do it all-the-time and resent doing other things like having to brush my teeth, take a shower, fix meals, and even sometimes (I am embarrassed to say) doing my opening dharma practice on a cushion. I don't like to "have" to do much of anything and prefer to be a free-agent, so to speak, doing just what happens spontaneously while I write or photograph. I practice off the cushion in whatever I am doing and this is my main practice these years.

So, perhaps my real "cave" is the writing and photographing I do while performing insight meditation. Be that as it may, I have just described what I do in terms of dharma practice that come the closest to what I imagine yogis perhaps do sitting in their caves. However, I really don't know much about what yogis actually do, but I'm curious. Anyway, I am sharing here what I actually do.

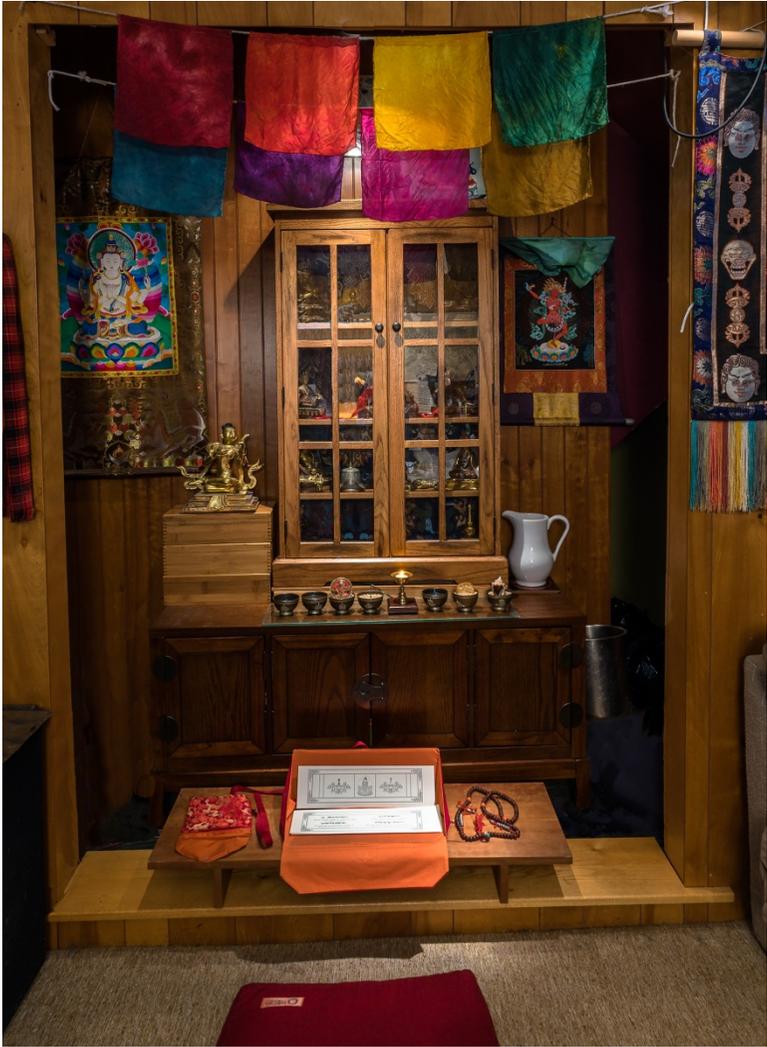
That aside, I'm afraid the other parts of my life are not very dramatic. I don't want to take the time, at least not often, to spend on making food. I just want to eat something and get back to what whatever I'm doing, as described above. And I don't care about clothes. I have had (for many years) three upright bins in our "closet" room, one for socks, one for shirts (all the same kind and color), and one for pants, pajamas, and everything else. That's it for clothes. The least upkeep stuff I have to do around the place, the better. I always want more time for meditating in the particular way I do. And, aside from time with my family (and the occasional visit of a friend), there is nothing more that I want to do. I do tend to watch a movie in the evenings, but while watching I am reviewing my day.

Perhaps my Insight Meditation, with writing and photography, does not count because I love doing it so much. Are we allowed to love dharma practice that much or am I just having fun? LOL. Who knows? I guess I don't like dharma practices that are boring and painful, but I did plenty of those (purification practices) for decades

and I point out that for me they were totally necessary to help get ready for the practices that I do now.

And I should point out that meditating as I do is in no way a deprivation; just the opposite. It is the most fun and wonderful thing to do with my time that I know of. I sometimes wonder if it is legal to do it or if dharma practice is supposed to be painful. LOL.

Why am I writing all this? Aside from sharing this with you, I also want to put out a feeler here to folks doing the realization-practices because I'm looking for some info and advice. I really do not know what Tibetan saints like Milarepa did in those caves all those years. If you know, tell me please. And don't just say they meditated! I already know that. What I would like to know is what kinds of meditation they did and how all that worked over the long haul. If you know, please share this with me here or in a private message. I do want to know.



“A HORSE WITH NO NAME”

September 21, 2017

The great dharma teachers point out that the personal Self that we have built-up and accumulated all our life (which we love so much) will be left in a heap, so to speak, when we exit this world. However, the desires and need for attachment that created our Self and person will continue on (but nameless and person-less) toward our next rebirth, i.e. I won't be called Michael Erlewine or have the personality I do now, much less be a “Soul.”

There is no continuity between who we are now and who we are when reborn, except for the karma and desires that drive us now and they are stored deep down where there are no “persons.” Our desires will keep on driving, but they are, so to speak, a “horse with no name.”

Yet, in the rebirth process, these same deep desires (and proclivities) will fashion a new Self, one based on the circumstances, parents, and surroundings into which we are reborn. And that is why we can't remember who we were in previous lives now. Perhaps some high lamas can remember, but I can't, although in some rare moments, some other identification hovers or seems to invasively overlay.

How does this approach differ from the Indian concepts laid out in the Bhagavad Gita? The main difference, as I understand it, is that the Hindu scriptures suggest that each of us is an eternal (permanent) Soul that continues on into our next life. “We” incarnate and thus the term reincarnation is appropriate in that view.

However, the Tibetan Buddhist approach is that the “we,” the “I” of this life does not “reincarnate” as a soul, but rather that we take rebirth, and in each rebirth we fashion a new personality from the unfulfilled desires and karma from our previous lives.

Perhaps it could be said that we create a temporary or imaginary “soul” for each lifetime, but not one that continues on to our next life intact. Instead, our basic desires and karma continue on at a subconscious level, but these elements are said to be nameless and not a unified aggregate like a “person” of “soul.” Yet, even if the Buddhist view is a little less comfortable to contemplate, there is always the fact that here we are right now. So, we have made it this far in one piece, even if it is only an apparition.

I’m sure there are other differences as well, but I am not expert in either of these systems. In fact, I am just a traveler, or as Tom Waits sang in “Come on Up to the House,” in the line “The world is not my home. I’m just a passin’ thru.”

Well, I can’t agree that the world is not my home and that “I’m” just passing through, or that the same “I” will (more or less) continue on, but I like the feeling of wait’s tune. This is my world while I’m here (and now) and it is one I am “passin’ thru.” However, when I’m through with this life, it’s not the “Me” in this life who will continue on when I am reborn; my own deeper desires and accumulated karma from many lifetimes apparently will create someone else at my next rebirth from a pool of unmet desires and other karmic forces, from a palette of my future parents genes and the circumstances of my next birth. This is what I have been taught by the Yogachara lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

What are we to think of all this? It would be so much more convenient (and comforting) if we could continue on as ourselves (who we are now), but with a lease on a new body, just as we buy a new car. And it gives new meaning to the concept of reanimation, the idea that our karma and desires are the re-animators of our continued existence. In this blog, I am just reporting what I have been taught, not what I know from experience.

Anyway, we shall all find out soon enough.

KUNTUZANGPO: “IT’S ALL GOOD!”

September 21, 2017

What if the object of meditation is the subject, the one who is meditating? And it is, so how do we look at ourselves without a mirror? That has been a puzzler to me for years. Where is the reflection we need to see our own nature? As it turns out, the mind itself, in its various appearances, reflects. And this is why we meditate, for the reflection in which we can see our own true nature.

And that nature is transformative, meaning it is a process and not just a snapshot or some state. The meditation techniques are interesting in themselves to study, but not compared to the resulting process. Again: the process of meditating IS the result. That’s why meditators like to do it all the time. It is like mainlining.

Here is a rather crude analogy, but if you have ever seen those cones of meat on a spindle (gyros) from which a sliver of meat is sliced as it turns, that reminds me of mixing Insight Meditation with various worldly techniques. As awareness of the actual nature of the mind is mixed with (in my case through writing or photography), the awareness illuminates the process and imprints the resulting writing or photos with a touch or signature of the essence of the mind’s nature. This perhaps is the “mudra” in Mahamudra.”

I don’t know how to put it into words any better, but contact with the mind’s nature, however oblique, touches us with its essence and leaves a trail of insight, a residue which shines with a light that we can follow. It illuminates.

I don’t know why I just don’t simply rest in the nature of the mind instead of mixing it with the world around me. Perhaps I don’t know how. Or, is it that without mixing the light of the mind with the darkness of this world, like light without shadow, we can’t see. Is this mixed-continuum the thread of lightning that (like a seam)

connects Samsara and Nirvana, and opening like a zipper, reveals the inseparability of the two? As Macrobiotics puts it: the bigger the front, the bigger the back. Or, as the Buddhists put it: connate, two sides of the same coin, Samsara and Nirvana.

I'm sure I don't know but a piece of this puzzle.

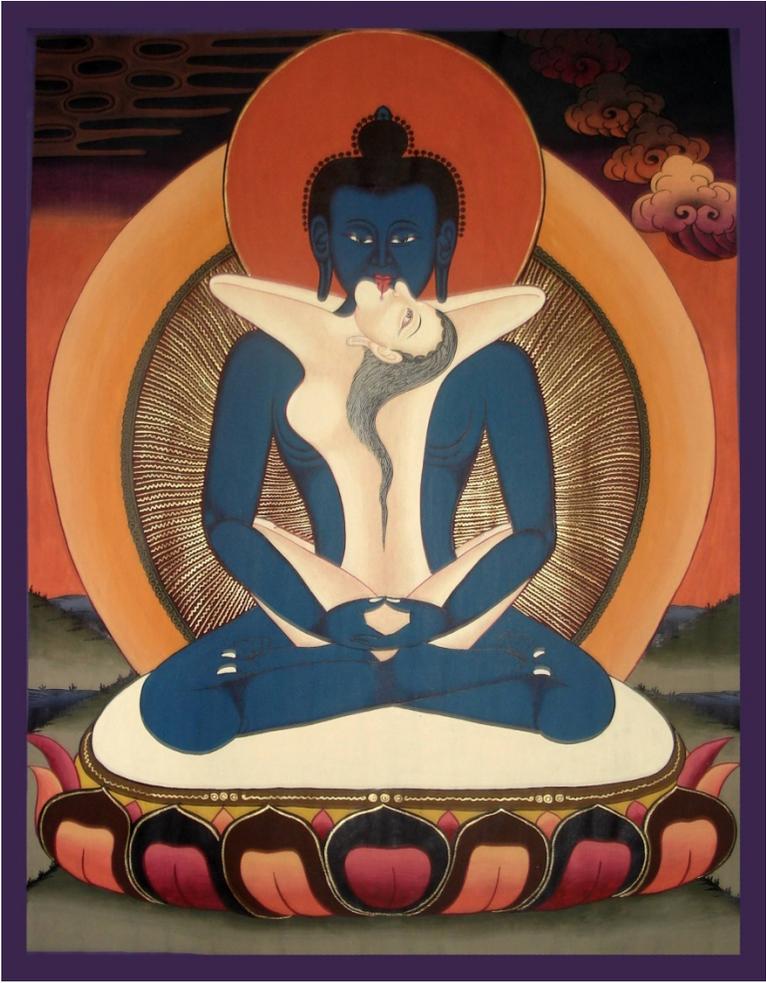
I do know that it's all about realization, which is a process of transformation. What is transformation and what is transformed? Transformation is the process of realization and what is realized is everything around us, our life itself, for what it actually is.

I can attest, through my own experience, that realization is cumulative and permanent, incremental as it may be. And although it may seem to be made up of static "Aha!" moments, those moments are part of an ongoing process (like a filmstrip) that is realization. We are "realizing" and not realized, at least not in this time-based Samsaric-zone.

The process of realizing itself is nothing mystical, any more than realizing how to turn on a light switch is mystical. It is what the process realizes that is remarkable, as in realizing the true nature of the mind and everything in it, including our everyday Samsaric world. Realization turns Samsara upside down and inside out, revealing Nirvana.

We are only led by what leads us, and not by our effort alone. This is why we have an authentic teacher to guide us into Insight Meditation like a mother guides an infant to her nipple. If we have an insight, we can see to use it. "Seeing" is what insight is. And realization is seeing the true nature of what is. And, again, realization is a continuing process and not just a moment or snapshot.

Kuntuzangpo and Kuntuzangmo – "It's All Good."



TRUSTING OUR TAKE ON THE DHARMA

September 22, 2017

First, it is essential to realize what spiritual realization is. I went for years, decades in fact, thinking that realization and enlightenment were one and the same – synonyms. They aren't. Enlightenment is the final state of realization, while realization is the long process of realizing enlightenment. Yes, we have realizations all along the path of realization, but they are like snapshots or single frames in a movie track. The movie is the continuous process of realization, which does not end in a static frame, but in an endless stable process of realization.

In other words, realization is not simply a state of mind (as in “an event”) that we are working toward or can somehow “get” for ourselves, but rather it is the process of realizing what has been growing inside us all the time. Words can't do justice to what I'm trying to communicate here. This process of personal dharma-realization for each of us is like the sun slowly coming up. For most of us, it can't be measured in lightning strikes; it just very gradually dawns on us that we ARE finally getting it. Yet, we are probably NOT “getting it” exactly as the texts suggest or even as we had imagined; we are getting it in our own peculiar (and intimate) way, so to speak. We are realizing the dharma as only WE would realize it. Yet, we may not even be aware of that.

Sorry, but I'm not able to quite get the point out here. The above words still don't capture the issue. And the twist that I can't seem to communicate is that realization not only dawns on us as the sacred texts purport to describe it, but we also begin to realize that we have up to now not realized that we have been already realizing it all along, albeit perhaps dimly.

What we thought was perhaps our own maverick take (or miss-take) on dharma was in fact just our own way of starting to realize the dharma. And please note this: It is the same dharma for everyone, but HOW we realize it is so individual.

The impact of this discovery that we are already realizing the dharma cannot be overemphasized. In other words, we are

already in the driver's seat, when all along we assumed we were not yet even in the vehicle. This revelation sneaks up on us because we do not dare to trust ourselves in how we interpret the dharma. Instead, we try to stay with the descriptions in the texts and teachings when, where the rubber meets the road for each of us, is highly individual, in fact dharma tailors itself just to us, but we have not only to breathe it in, but get the iterative process of breathing started.

And, in that lack of confidence, that tentative mistrust of ourselves, we find a major stumbling block to realization. Sure, we may initially have some of our take on the dharma wrong, but by stopping or blocking the process of TRYING to understand the dharma for ourselves because of that possibility, through sheer lack of confidence, we lose the opportunity to refine and smooth out the rough edges of our own interpretation. By clinging to the text descriptions in books and teachings, especially through our accumulated expectations, hopes, and speculation, we ignore the actual internal changes that are already fermenting inside us, i.e. our own take on all of this, which finally is all that will actually benefit us.

And yet our internal take on the dharma has to be accepted by us (just as it is) before it can be clarified and thus further refined. So, this is a Catch-22 of the most perfect kind, one that keeps us barefoot and pregnant, so to speak. Like a stuck record, we can be hung up in this mistake for a very, very long time.

And this is a key reason why working with an authentic dharma teacher is so important; they can prevent this, because they are able to (and will) tell us when and just how we are getting it, right or wrong. Yet, it is important for us to keep working with our own grasp of the dharma and not be afraid to trust ourselves. And we can learn to do that!

Without guidance, we may be too timid to dare to interpret the dharma for ourselves, just as we are feeling it. We wait and wait and wait for the confidence to get off that conceptual train and really start to work with dharma (hands on) as we understand it. It's not that we may be not understanding the dharma correctly, but without developing our ability to work up our own realization, we won't have much of any realization.

Or, if we do, we won't dare to trust it, which is required for the process to move us farther on the path.

If you think this through, what I am pointing out here should be pretty obvious. If we think that our eventual realization is something that will someday be served up on a plate to us à la carte, we could be waiting a very long time. Realization, in the general sense, is something we develop, like a muscle, but we have to exercise that muscle. Not trusting or exercising our growing realization, however small it may be, is a non-starter.

Here, I am not talking by the great pivotal events like "Recognition," which is a special form of realization, but rather the daily dawning of realization through our general practice. Like riding a bicycle as a kid, we don't wait until suddenly we can just ride the bike. We have to, by trial and error, learn to ride. It is the same with realization, which is a process that has to be exercised in order to learn. If we are too timid to even try out (and trust) our growing realization of the dharma, this is a problem. It will never amount to much.

Capiche?

Let me know if you understand this, please.

SEEING OUR OWN DHARMA PROGRESS

September 23, 2017

Our hopes, imaginings, expectations, and anticipations about dharma are mostly roadblocks to the actual process of realization and are (by definition) wrong. If they were correct, we would already be realized. It's hard not to have hopes and expectations, but it may be helpful to remember that they are always incorrect. They are nothing but something like our standard deviation error.

The same goes for looking for realization outside ourselves, as in "pie in the sky," some place we will reach. Realization is not found "out there," but always "in here." In fact, realization is the realization in here of what is out there as well as what is in here. So, how does all this pertain to our dharma practice?

It helps to keep in mind that any realization we do attain will be done by us, meaning we won't "get" realization from anywhere else. Instead, WE will be doing the realizing and (at least in the moment) it will totally occupy or fill us up.

Realization, by definition, is non-dual, a process in which we are "all-in," without any part of us (self-consciousness, etc.) hanging out in observation, looking at ourselves. No subject and no object. Like climbing a winding mountain path to the peak, every once in a while we reach a point where we can look back or down. Otherwise, we are climbing. Realization is all-involving, but for most of us, it is gradual. We may not realize that we are realizing. That idea. This is why they often characterize spiritual realization with an "Aha!"

And oddly enough, that "Aha!" is because we just realized something that was right there in front of us all the time and already an integral part of us. And this next part is very, very important.

We also have to realize that realization for us will be how WE realize, not how others did it in the past, in books, teachings, or what-have-you. In fact, we are already doing it right now. For most of us, realization is not a stroke of lightning, but more like the sun coming up. It is very, very gradual, but also very certain to occur.

Of course, dharma practice has its speed bumps, major points of level-change, but most of the time our progress is fairly slow. And this is made crystal clear in the teachings and even in the Tibetan calendars, where they have all kinds of days and hours where the benefits of practice are doubled or tripled. These auspicious (special) days are called multiplier days. It's like in the game shows, where you can double or triple your winnings. I even heard that there are multiplier days of ten-million. That's like winning the spiritual lottery. I don't know how these multiplier days work, myself.

And, if we have by now found our thread of interest in dharma, we are already in the process of awakening, becoming ever more aware. Perhaps we just can't see or realize it at the moment because it is too gradual. However, it all adds up and will pop up one of these days, like when we round the corner of our winding path, as given in the above analogy.

As I see it, the real problem is how to go from practicing a dharma technique that someone shows us and that (at least in the beginning), we march through by rote... and transforming that bare technique into an avocation, something we totally are behind, love, and can't wait to do? In other words, how do we try on a rote technique and make it our own, when we really don't understand what its results are supposed to be and do.

In my own case, as relates to realizing, the circumstances of my life at the time conspired to create the perfect storm in favor of popping me out of just following instructions and plunged me beyond conceptions into actually grasping some of the teachings. I'd wish I could say that my diligence and years of practice had brought me there, but I doubt it. Instead, it was an unfortunate life event having nothing to do with dharma that made me hurt enough that I popped out of my little life-bubble train on which I had been riding for who knows how long. And suddenly there I was, quite awake and hurting.

And without that "tough time," how else would I have thrown caution to the wind and said "Screw-it, I'm off the reservation and into the woods." How would I have shaken myself loose from being so respectful of the dharma that I never touched it!

The dharma is raw life, blood in hand, exactly where the rubber meets the road. I don't think I could have gotten there without those hard times that forced me beyond my safe routines and turned me out into unexplored territory. It seems I had no choice and, as they say, that's a good thing!

And how do I put this? It was (apparently) only by straying (or being pushed) beyond conventionality that I could manage to turn away from everything I knew, in order to turn back and see it again for the first time. I didn't give a damn and I had always given a damn. Suddenly, I was beyond caring what others (or even my family) thought about what I was doing, and what I was doing at the time was essentially nothing related to making a living. And I wasn't even sitting on the cushion! How terrible! LOL.

Instead, I went out in nature and watched the sun come up each morning for six months straight. And it was there in the morning dew, crawling around on my hands and knees (soaking wet) in the grass as the sun came up, that I found the purest love as to what I was doing, totally concentrated, so aware, and peering through fine lenses at miniature perfect worlds. It was there that Insight Meditation just naturally kicked in. I never saw it coming.

At some points in our life, we have to take chances. In my case, life events pushed me over the brink and into free fall. Apparently I couldn't manage it otherwise.

REALIZING REALIZATION

September 23, 2017

I'm still on this "realization" jag, so please bear with me. Realization (like expectation) floats ahead of us like an inner tube in a lake, pushed forward (and out of our reach) by our own efforts to swim. We first have to realize that realization is not beyond our reach and never has been. We already have been realizing all along, but have (so to speak) not realized this. And most of us may have not reached the critical mass needed to recognize the actual nature of our mind. Nevertheless, we are hopefully accumulating merit through the preliminary practices.

I love to tell the story of when the Rinpoche I work with (now in his mid-nineties) once pointed out to us that our every thought, word, and deed was either beneficent or maleficent. When I first heard this, it seemed like a bit of tough love. However, when I actually began to examine my own thoughts, jokes, words, and deeds, it was only too clear that Rinpoche was right. Little jokes, etc. that I thought were harmlessly funny really were not, and so on. I finally had to admit that they took a bite out of someone or something.

In a similar vein (actually the same vein), the same truth holds true for our dharma progress. We are either removing obscurations or adding more on. I have never been a goody-goody type person, but after evaluating what Rinpoche pointed out, I began to realize I was in the middle of a cow pasture and not watching where I step. I began tiptoeing a bit.

An authentic dharma teacher not only is able to point out to us the true nature of the mind, but also confirm us in our current direction when it is correct or when we are straying. In dharma, "certainty" is a precious commodity. To some degree, IMO, it is like feeding an ordinary worker-bee royal jelly so that they can become a queen. Of course, it's a two-way street. The student must also be ready, and there is a very special dance that only an authentic teacher and

prepared student can perform. It reminds me of the Imperial Japanese Court music called Gagaku, and a piece called “Etenraku.” If you have never heard this ancient music, you deserve to. Here it is, but you have to listen for at least a few minutes to take it in:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86BWg4zGh7I>

Something like this takes place between an authentic teacher and an authentic student. It’s like when my father taught me to drive in Boston when I was 14-years old and passed the wheel to me. It takes time to be confident in our driving. The dharma is no different. We have not only to be worthy of our teacher’s blessing, but we have to feel and know that we are worthy. We have to realize our worthiness and feel worthy, which for those of us who are somewhat insecure may be no easy task.

It is no joke doing the 100,000+ full-length prostrations and all of the many other preliminary purification practices of the 100,000 variety that make up Ngondro, the dharma boot camp of practices. But that, friends, believe it or not, can be the easy part.

More important (and perhaps more difficult) is to get our teacher’s blessing, which is more important than all the rest of what we have to do combined. And we won’t get that blessing by the numbers of practices we have done or even by the length of time we have practiced. That blessing only comes when our teacher perceives in us the signs of successfully completing those practices. And we sure don’t know what those signs are, beyond mere understanding and conceptual lip service.

If we have an authentic teacher, they will not acknowledge anything other than some actual realization on our part. I don’t even like to think about the many times I was given the legendary Pointing-Out Instructions as to the nature of the mind by great lamas, and failed to grasp it.

“Straight is the gate and narrow the way” is a Bible quote, but it works well here too. The path to Insight Meditation and the realization practices is also straight and narrow; since it excludes all conceptual thought and any BS we may have accumulated. If we are going to do the accumulation-practices, what are called the preliminaries, we can’t just step through them by rote. We have to do them with heart and confidence, and that is a bit of a tall order. It won’t work until we do.

As Americans, we are so independent that we forget that all life is actually interdependent. In the case of these subtle dharma changes, finding the key thread to our particular realization is difficult without an authentic teacher to point out the way. I have found this to be true in my case. I had parts of the puzzle, but just could not put all the pieces together. An authentic teacher, someone who has at least recognized the true nature of the mind is, IMO, necessary. After all, they call the great lamas “Rinpoche” because that word in Tibetan means “Precious.” And they are.

I have sincere devotion, respect, and love for my dharma teacher of the last 35 years; who else (other than my parents) have cared more for me than I knew how to care for myself.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF DHARMA PRACTICE

September 24, 2017

Somewhere along the line, I stopped considering my interest in dharma as a sidebar-issue and decided it was more interesting and important to me than that.

Of course, it became increasingly important from then on. What the dharma offered, I needed. Of course, once I got into it, Buddhism was very different from before, when it was something that I would casually look into for quotes or interesting stories and spiritual tidbits. I had to actually reorganize my approach to practice and dharma. In other words, it became a life path and not a subject or hobby that I would visit from time to time.

And since I tend to be a completist in anything I do seriously, I threw myself into the study and practice of dharma full-tilt. But don't get me wrong. That did not mean I knew what I was doing or was able to accomplish very much from a dharma standpoint. I was busy learning the dharma lingo and presenting myself as a dharma student, but I had no significant realization or even understood how to attain it.

And, like pushing a boulder uphill, getting used to dharma practice started for me was not all that easy. It was hard, if only because all my life had been spent avoiding "having" to do anything other than what I felt like. After all, this is exactly why I never took to school and had kind of held my breath for all those years while attending. So, although I was totally interested in the dharma, that interest did not warm to doing things that made no sense to me, yet I did them, at least tried. For me, that was a huge excursion from the norm right there.

Up to that point in my life, what I took as spirituality had segued from the religion I had been brought up in to a kind of pot-pourri of

spiritual interests that finally settled around astrology, which I worked hard to master out of sheer interest. Yet, dharma was a whole other thing entirely and much more defined and difficult to learn (other than the bare essentials), because it required me to really put my money where my mouth is. Mastering astrology (to my satisfaction) was far easier than trying to get even a foothold in the dharma.

Anyway, I went into dharma practice with guns-a-blazing, as they say, imagining that I could learn to master it as I had so many other subjects that I had taught myself. However, I soon found myself ramming my head against a wall because, although I sat right down on the cushion and tried to learn to meditate, nothing much happened other than my just sitting there.

And, at that time, what I did not know is that in Tibet they don't even teach meditation until the student goes through what are called the Preliminary Practices (Ngondro, in particular), which are like a dharma boot camp involving some 500,000 iterations of specific practices. I had done none of that and didn't even like the idea of Ngondro, and it took me quite a while to realize that before I could meditate as they all spoke of it, I had first to remove some of the obstacles that made meditating so difficult for me.

It would have been more than helpful had someone taken me aside and told me that it was not unusual that I was not getting anywhere with basic sitting meditation and that I had first better prepare my mind for that by a series of remedial practices, but no one ever did. Yet, I knew something was wrong, so over time I did learn about what they called the Preliminary Practices. Duh! The name "preliminary" should have told me right there.

However, all the other students and center teachers were all busy instructing everyone on sitting meditation, perhaps just because they had been given permission to teach that, so I assumed I should be doing that too. For me, this was a real mistake.

I had the best dharma teacher, a Tibetan Rinpoche, and a master at that, but he was 800 miles away and hard to reach. And he spoke no English. And when I had the first real sit-down with Rinpoche, he did not tell me to do sitting meditation, but rather one of the Preliminary Practices from what is called Lojong, a practice called “Tong-Len,” and I was learning that. Yet, everyone I met was doing sitting meditation, so I assumed that is what I should be doing as well.

Anyway, my practice was a mess. So, and my point in writing all of this is to make sure you have the general idea as to what to expect and that you don’t not end up in the dark as I did. So, here goes:

There are two distinct types or kinds of practice in learning Vajrayana Buddhism, the Preliminary Practices (often called the Accumulation Practices) and the Realization Practices. The titles roughly say what these practices are, the Preliminary Practices help us to remove obscurations and accumulate merit to prepare for the Realization Practices (more advanced) which are taken up AFTER we have completed the former.

In the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism that I have worked in, we do the Preliminary Practices first, so that we are ready (and able) to do the Realization Practices. And these two types of practices are not just that one follows the other in a linear fashion, but rather they are two whole orders or kinds of practice. They are very different from one another.

The Preliminary Practices anyone can do, although guidance from a qualified instructor, someone who has been themselves taught how to do them, can be important. The Preliminary Practices are remedial or purificatory practices that help to prepare us for actual meditation. They are conceptual and should be very familiar to us since they dualistically involve “we” as a subject and he, she, they,

or it as objects. This is dharma practice that can be practiced in the familiar Samsaric world we live in.

On the other hand, the Realization Practices are non-dualistic, often called the absolute practices, since they do not involve subjects and objects, but are totally immersive on our part. We actually meditate

These realization practices are ineffable, meaning they cannot be conceptualized or described in words because they are pure realization itself. Realization Practices, unlike the Preliminary Practices, can only be introduced to us by an “authentic” teacher (not just an instructor of technique) through a sometimes elaborate process called the pointing-out instructions. And what is pointed out to us is the true nature of our own mind. We may remain in the preliminary purification practices for many years, however long it takes us to come down to a “fightin’ weight” that would allow us to actually recognize the actual nature of our mind.

An “authentic” teacher is one who has themselves successfully, with the help of their teacher, recognized the true nature of the mind, plain and simple. And a lineage is a chain of teacher/students who pass down the preliminary and advanced instructions by word of mouth (and direction), one to another over the centuries.

So, we are either doing the preliminaries or actually meditating with the realization practices. And we can’t just appoint ourselves to the realization practices. We actually have to recognize the true nature of the mind before we can understand how to do the realization practices.

And that is a very rough overview of the two types of dharma practices, so that you can figure out where you are or might fit it. I am happy to help as best I can.

INSIGHT CONUNDRUM

September 25, 2018

With me, there is always the “state of things,” the fringe of fire up front, so to speak, where something is happening that I am concerned with. And it seems that I am stuck somewhere on something most of the time. Here is one: A problem that I think about a lot these days is how to universalize Insight Meditation, how to extend or expand it to include more and more of what I do in a day. As it is now I only real use (or know how to use) this form of meditation for my close-up photography and for writing.

I think it is amazing that I can use Insight Meditation in my photography or when I write articles such as this, but when I cook in the kitchen, and other things, etc., that faculty somehow gets turned off and is mostly absent. My mind doing ordinary things seems perfectly ordinary. LOL. I know; it’s all in my mind, but that’s just the point. There is no reason I should not use Insight Meditation for whatever I do, but I have to learn to tell my mind to let go and be more embracive is the issue. I keep working on this (and I believe I’m slowly getting it), but right now it still is like that rosy glow in the sky before dawn. The Sun has not come up on this particular concern of mind, at least not yet.

And what actually happens when I write or do photography using Insight Meditation? Well, for one, “time” (or the passing of time) is no longer obvious. When doing Insight Meditation, I am totally engaged and the lucky moments of inspiration that used to come along every once in a while suddenly seem now to be on-tap. When meditating in this way, the insight is pretty much there all the time. At the very least, I am totally engaged in the clarity of mind and the lucidity that accompanies this form of Meditation.

And the clarity of Insight Meditation is immediate and right there and, as it mixes with the more shadowy topics that I am writing about (things I don’t know or am wondering), clarity spontaneously

appears; it just pops out. And, unlike normal ordinary thinking, what appears through Insight Meditation seems “certain,” as a piece or whole, and is just clear as day. What comes out appears authentic or has the stamp or mark of authenticity that makes it remarkable and memorable, at least to me.

With Insight Meditation, it’s as if the slipstream of my normal thought process is somehow mixed with the pure oxygen of insight and the resulting finer-mix has a certain clarity or authenticity, what I would call the sign or signature mark of Insight Meditation. If nothing else, the process of combining Insight Meditation with my inquiry results in what seems to be total immersion and involvement on my part.

So, the qualities of Insight Meditation (as I understand them) are this total immersion or non-dual experience, the extreme clarity and lucidity in the moment, and the spontaneous freshness of the result that is appearing or being realized. It’s like time-out from time itself. To me, these are some of the signs of non-dual meditation in general.

What I can’t figure out (yet) is how (or why) I can bring Insight Meditation to bear on, say writing, but not wherever and on whatever else I do. It’s true; it took me a year (or years) to bring this type of meditation from my photography to bear also on writing. It seems to have been a process of becoming familiar with and mixing Insight Meditation with the writing process. Anyway, it took a long time.

Yet, I can’t believe I have to go through that same long process with everything I turn my attention to, if I want that special clarity. However, there are some signs of a universalization or globalization of this form of meditation taking place in me. I can kind of see the edges of it taking hold, but I wish I could just realize the process, universally.

And here is where I must beware of my own stupid expectations influencing the outcome. I implicitly trust that the kind of clarity that Insight Meditation brings could mix with the whole of my life and only enhance whatever I am normally doing during the day. If anyone has great experience with universalizing Insight Meditation of the Kagyu Mahamudra variety, please point it out.

A CHAIN OF FRIENDS

September 26, 2017

Folks, thanks for the input yesterday, interesting indeed, but the fact that you all shared and reached out to me was even more helpful. If you want to follow this more clearly, see my post yesterday “Insight Conundrum.”

As I reflect on it, the areas that are the most obvious to me as to Insight Meditation are its efficacy with things that have an actual technique, like (as I always point out) the complex process of photography (the kind I do) and its similar creative process of writing blogs like these.

I am reminded of my first introduction to the dharma back in the late 1950s, and that came mostly through Rinzai Zen with its koans, which I flirted with and tried on to some degree. Back then, I liked the decor surrounding all things Japanese as much as the teachings. Akira Kurosawa, even today, is still my favorite film director. In fact, when I eventually found my tribe or lineage in Tibetan Buddhism, which is quite ornate, I was sorry to have to give up those visions of rice-paper screens, teakwood floors, and carefully groomed sand gardens. LOL.

The teachings of Zen as applied to everyday life are still kind of my guide when it comes to off-the-cushion practice. That quality of Zen imprinted me deeply, even way back in the late 1950s. I am slowly getting a handle on using dharma in post-meditation (off-the-cushion practice) in everyday life. I did so many years (over three decades+) of the accumulation (preliminary) practices and I am sure that all added up to some accumulation and perhaps the groundwork for eventual realization.

Aside from the practices themselves, I also invested myself in many “good works” projects that hopefully benefited the dharma. And, of

course, after a number of false tries (on my part) to grasp the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind, Rinpoche finally connected with me, sending me home one year from the 10-Day intensive Mahamudra teachings with a crack in my conceptual egg. After that it was three solid years of intensive work on (and off) the cushion to further soften me up.

As The Bard sang:

“With a neon burnin' bright,
He felt the heat of the night,
Hit him like a freight train,
Moving with a simple twist of fate”

My introduction to the realization-practices was during an otherwise dark time for me, a real twist of fate, but it forced the rubber to the road and out popped a “me” that found my way into my own heart and the umbilical cord to constant conceptuality just snapped and gave way. And the rest I have written of here and there many times.

When it comes to thinking and doing projects or things, especially when mixing them with meditation, I am pretty good-to-go. No, I didn't build nine towers as did the great teacher Marpa, but in my own way I did some near impossible tasks, like document all recorded music from 10” records on up, document all film and music, complete with synopsis, cast, and characters, personally document all important rock concert posters, create what is probably the largest astrological library on the planet, and other things.

I have the idea and know the meditations that are beyond the preliminary practices. I can just do them, to a point. And, for some reason, perhaps because I asked for your help, yesterday's blog meant a lot to me.

When not meditating, as my dear friend David McCarthy, dharma brother and musician, points out (with cooking as an example), I am increasing mindful, more so all the time.

As my more recent sincere dharma friend Ken Holmes points out, the guru or teacher is “the head of meditation” and all things flow from there. The blessing of the guru, as Holmes mentions, baptizes us with his blessings and, as he puts it so well “... frees up the more technical side of “being there” more and more moments of the day.”

And as another dear old friend (and poet) Martin Wolf points out, “So, at some level, it seems that being present becomes more or less constant, although it does not make one an expert at everything.” No doubt! I wish I could cook like the incredible chef Wolf. LOL.

If any of you have wondered why I write so much, the answer is simple: because that is how I meditate, through writing and nature photography. I do lots of both, as well as sit on the cushion, which is why I am trying to extend my non-dual meditation beyond those two techniques, so that I can spare some of you from having to read all this. LOL.

I guess this extension of my meditation practice is actually happening, because I see it very clearly when I am engaged with in-person dialog and conversation, where more and more of the time questions evoke answers from me, without any thought. Like a glove that fits the hand, answers are natural responses to questions. And I can see that the clarity is just naturally there in the moment.

So, it’s all happening folks. I do find the current process of extending the clarity of Insight Meditation just a little uncomfortable, with its fits, starts, and stutters. However, I am a firm believer in the analogy of a pebble dropped into a still pond, which sends out concentric waves, each embracing the waves that come after it like a mother embraces a child.

And I'm especially happy to see the response that my friends (and meditators) made to yesterday's blog (and some by personal message). I believe it is time for Westerners like us to at least have an open discussion on all facets of dharma practice. We each have to walk our dharma path by ourselves, but we don't have to do it all alone. We can do it alone, together. Make sense?

I know there are said to be dharma practices that are supposedly secret or hidden, but I have never found any of those. They must be well hidden. LOL. All the dharma I know is written out all over the web and only benefits from discussion and airing-out. Nothing bears repetition better than the dharma. Like waves to the shore, the dharma teachings repeatedly baste us like a you-know-what.

I could run out and create a separate forum for dharma conversations (and I have done so several times!), but I have done too many of those kind of things over my life and they last for a while, but grow old. This personal blog will have to do for me. I invite those of you who are interested to more openly join me in sharing questions and answers (and time together) in the dharma.

The image included here was from stationary that I created many years ago (decades) for a group of like-minded people to share dharma with one another. It may be simplistic, but I'm sure Martin Wolf will remember it, since we (as well as David McCarthy) worked together.

True, we cannot adequately put into words (it is impossible) the realization-practices, but those of us who practice them know very well what others like ourselves have to be doing in those practices, and we can share that.



A Chain of Friends

IN MY TEACHER'S WORDS

September 26, 2017

You have heard so much from me here over the years; I would like to share some excerpts from a very precious teaching that my beloved teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche taught:

“The only way that anyone has ever achieved awakening is through recognizing, and gradually revealing, the innate dharmakaya. Therefore, this is the single most important aspect of all Buddhist training.

“First, to hear it, then to gain recognition of it, and then to sustain that recognition until your true nature is completely revealed. If having heard this, you gain recognition of your mind's nature to the point where you can sustain it and work with it, then this really is the great panacea of mahamudra, because it is all-sufficient. Sustaining this recognition alone is sufficient for the achievement of buddhahood, and as long as this initial recognition and ensuing stabilization do not occur, no other method can lead you to buddhahood.

“In our tradition, we use the term “root guru” to mean the teacher who successfully points out your mind's nature to you. By successfully, I mean the one who points it out and you actually get it, you actually recognize your mind's nature, and can sustain and deepen that recognition. Since that is the real basis for your eventual achievement of buddahood, there can be no greater kindness bestowed on a person than pointing that out.

“Even if you were to fill this entire galaxy with gold and offer it to that root guru who points out the nature of your mind, that would be utterly insufficient to repay his or her kindness. Finally, the source of great devotion in the Kagyu tradition is this: It is appreciation for what has been pointed out. It is appreciation for the root guru's giving us the actual means of achieving total, complete, and perfect buddhahood.”

End quotes.

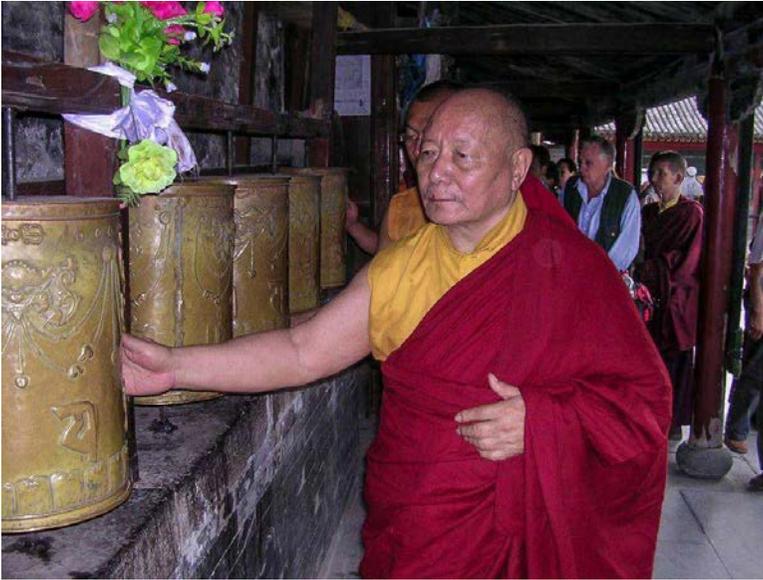
This is from a slim 56 page volume called “Single Sufficient Virtue,” a text written by the Most Ven. Kalu Rinpoche, the Milarepa of our time, and clearly explained by the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, as translated by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, the finest translator IMO that I have ever heard.

This book is available here:

<https://www.namsebangdzo.com/SearchResults.asp...>

This teaching is what I spend much of my time sharing with you, so that you will have heard and have the opportunity to take it to heart.

[Photo of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche by one of a group of us that traveled to China and Tibet with Rinpoche in 2004. This is in China. You can see me toward the back of the line.]



“IN A PIG’S VALISE”

September 27, 2017

I would bet that few of you know that phrase, which is taken from a book by Raymond Chandler called “The Little Sister” and later became a musical. It means “not on your life” or “it never will happen.” Just so; realization will never happen without it being pointed out to us by an authentic teacher, someone who has themselves achieved this realization.

If you had a chance to read yesterday’s blog “IN MY TEACHER’S WORDS,” with excerpts from a book by my dharma teacher (in his own words), then you probably have a better idea as to what I have been writing about in many of the blogs that I post here.

There is an overall shape and form to dharma practice and each of us fits in somewhere. It’s like getting on the subway; we each get on at the station where we happen to be at and go from there. Yet, we’re all on the same train and going in the same direction. And the end of the line is where most of us hope to get off -- enlightenment.

Once we rub off our rough edges (and accumulate enough merit) from the preliminary practices, we can learn to actually meditate and therefore enter what are called the realization-practices. At that point, our concern to share these practices with others grows exponentially. Why? Because, with “Recognition” (of the true nature of the mind), we then know that the dharma is doable for all of us -- everyone. And “realization” is not just for the “smart” people or the talented. We can all ride that train just as we are and realization can animate anybody, not just the gifted, rich, and famous.

However, we first have to hear and read about the dharma so that it begins to sink in, which is why I post here. I have been to many hundreds of live teachings, not to mention videos, books, texts, and articles. The repetition of teachings helps to get the dharma into all our little cracks and crevices. Repetition takes time, but it always adds up.

I'm busy these years extending what little realization I have. It's like rolling out pie dough to form a crust (rolled ever wider) or pulling and stretching pizza dough. We take what we know (or have) and gradually extend it to other areas of our life, yet for me it's not exactly been a piece of cake. It takes some doing.

I'm had hoped that realization might gradually extend naturally, but that's not what the pith dharma texts say. They all say something like "use it or lose it." We actually have to make an effort to extend realization, but how does one make an effort with what is supposed to be effortless? Go figure!

The answer (as I understand it) appears to be in what is called "mixing," where mixing means mixing our functioning-practice of Insight Meditation with other things we do in a day. Now (and I always mention this), mixing worked well when I originally extended my meditation process from photography (which I had accidentally mixed with Insight Meditation) into writing blogs like these, creatively. It took somewhat of a long time to synch, but it finally did. And, aside from some time on the cushion each day, writing is now my dominant or main form of meditating, with photography running a close second.

So, I am fairly confident (and experienced) that I can mix Insight Meditation with any repetitive technique that I have, given time. At the moment, I just don't have any more particular techniques that I want to do this with. A dharma friend remarked that one of the results of Insight Meditation is that we are generally more present (mindful) everywhere in our life. And we can bring or extend that "present-ness" to whatever ever else we are doing. I get that.

So, I have my areas of interest (photography and writing), where I tend to do the most Insight Meditation on the one hand, and then other areas of my life, where perhaps there are no particular techniques that I have mixed with meditation, like dishwashing. To these other areas of life, I can just bring my generally increased clarity of mind and "present-ness" (such as I have) and I took that notion from Zen many years ago. And that's what I am more-or-less doing these years with non-meditational areas of life. Yet, I would like all of my life to be meditation. Nice work if I can get it. LOL.

My question then is (or becomes) why can't I generate the same clarity of mind and lucidity (or bliss, etc.) with Insight-Meditation dishwashing as I do with photography or writing. They are both techniques. And one obvious answer is that I don't love and revere dishwashing as I do photography and creative writing. I'm not devoted to dishwashing. And I realize that is just a preference on my part against dishwashing, but there it is. I am not THAT "Zen" yet. I could probably turn this around, but that would take effort, and dishwashing does not naturally come to mind as something I want to mix with Insight Meditation, but I'm thinking about it. Actually, I am quite well trained in dishwashing when I have a mind to. I just don't "have a mind to" all that often. I just do the dishes.

And so, it appears that in many areas of my life I will have to depend on the general increase in the light of my mind (such as it is) to illuminate whatever I'm doing. As for my specific meditation with photography and writing, well, I'm doing that. In addition to those two meditations, I believe I can add in-person dialogs, talking with someone one-to-one, so my realization is extending. And so it goes.

MEETING RINPOCHE FOR THE FIRST TIME

September 28, 2017

What's important is to know how to begin, just where to enter the stream of dharma practice and not waste time with techniques that don't work for us or that we are not yet ready for. In the beginning, for what are called the Preliminary Practices (purification), we can get by with a senior dharma student, someone with more experience than ourselves, but someone who themselves has an "authentic teacher," but eventually, as we get to the realization practices (actual meditation), we will have to find an authentic teacher.

An "authentic," as I understand it, is someone who has recognized the true nature of the mind (and has that realization), someone who knows the path and can help keep us on it. "Recognition" is not enlightenment, but the threshold for the realization-practices, the first real meditation that we do. But to start out with, someone who has done most (or many) of the preliminaries can probably be of help getting us started.

Ultimately, each of us is going to need to find an "authentic" teacher that we connect with and can learn from. I had to, but it took a long time. In that process I met and listened to many teachers of all varieties, but like the story of the three bears, some were too hot and some too cold for my taste. This went on for years.

But I eventually did find a dharma teacher that I synched with but, as mentioned, I spent a long, long time doing that. I was 42 years of age, but I did find one. It was permitted.

And, as my dharma teacher says, we have to want it... really, really want it. And so I should tell the story (once again) of how I met my dharma teacher, since it might help those of you who want a teacher to have confidence that one will appear, when you are ready.

I can't express how fortunate I have been to meet someone like Khenpo Rinpoche face-to-face in this life. And meeting Rinpoche was a life-changer for me. My wife and I have been with Rinpoche now for some 34 years, and he has never changed in how he treats us or anyone, always with kindness. How fortunate to have come across someone like Khenpo Rinpoche in the sea of life in which I was swimming, although it was anything but an accident. In fact, believe it or not, Rinpoche first came to us in a dream. And here is that story:

It was in the fall of 1983 when I received a phone call from an old friend from Ann Arbor. We were living in Big Rapids, Michigan, where we live today. My friend just called to say that I might want to come to Ann Arbor and see this Tibetan rinpoche that he had met. Years before, my friend and I used to go "guru" hopping together, but that was then. At the time he called, I was already a businessman and a busy one at that. I thanked him for the invitation, but pointed out that this was a work day and that I no longer was meeting every new teacher that came to Ann Arbor. I wished him well and went about my work.

It was a couple of days later that I had the dream, very early in the morning, just before dawn. I dreamed I was driving to Ann Arbor to meet this radiant golden oriental being, some kind of monk or lama... but resplendent, and then I woke up. I sat bolt upright in bed and tried to reach back in my mind to savor that dream, but it was already too late. It had already slipped away. And as the dream vaporized, I felt a great sadness come over me, sadness that my life had become so work-oriented that magical moments or events of wonder no longer really interrupted my routine. They just did not happen anymore. And in that moment, all I could see was my life stretching on to an eventual dead-end one day.

The dream I had just emerged from seemed better than my life and I regretted that this was the case. I woke up my wife Margaret who, amazingly enough, had had a similar dream. We sat there in bed looking at one another. It was October and it was not really even light out yet. I decided that there was no way I was going to work

that day. I just felt sick at heart. Instead, we would drive to Ann Arbor and meet this radiant “golden” being from my dream that my friend had told me was visiting Ann Arbor.

By this time, it must have been around 7 AM. I dialed my friend in Ann Arbor, although I knew he was habitually a late sleeper. I woke him up and told him that we were coming to meet the Rinpoche he told us about. His answer was that we were too late. Rinpoche was leaving Ann Arbor for Columbus, Ohio at around 10 AM that morning and it is a three-hour drive to Ann Arbor.

I was already out-of-the-box, so my answer is that we were coming anyway. After that dream, I was just not ready to resume my normal life that day. For the moment, it had kind of lost its meaning. The rinpoche would either still be there or have gone, but we were coming there anyway. Margaret and I grabbed our kids and, literally, with toothbrushes in hand, we jumped into the car and headed south to Ann Arbor. We brushed our teeth as we drove and I drove as fast as I dared.

When we finally got to Ann Arbor, the place Rinpoche was staying was not easy to find. My friend was down at the end of the long driveway, waiting to flag us in. And by luck, it turned out that the Rinpoche had been delayed, perhaps with an interview, and was still there. As we drove up the long driveway I spotted a young Tibetan man with long black hair out in the yard. My heart fell, because this was not the golden man in my dreams! However, I soon found out that this was Rinpoche’s translator, Ngodup Tsering, who over the years has become a dear friend of our family. He came to a surprise party for me last year... and I was totally surprised. So, there we were, Margaret, I, and the kids waiting for Rinpoche in the living room. And then he walked in.

And here was, indeed, the radiant being from my dream and in living person. We connected at once, although the visit had to be brief. Even so, when Rinpoche left for his road trip, Margaret and I were already transported into a transcendent state. I remember that

Margaret and I (with the kids) all went out to a Big Boy restaurant and had a late breakfast. We had been blown right out of our bodies and were in the zone. And we went around in that state for days afterward, being kinder to others than perhaps we had ever been. Sadly, that wore off, but we now felt connected to the dharma in a more powerful way. Of course, we took meeting Rinpoche as a good sign, an extraordinary event in our lives.

And from that day onward, we were students of the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Years later, he became our Root Guru, and all that. My kids all grew up around Rinpoche, sitting on his knee, and within his influence, his mandala. Of course, to me, he has been the perfect teacher. We are so grateful for his presence in our lives.

[Here is a carved wooden statue of Guan Yin (Chenresik in Tibetan), the bodhisattva of loving compassion, that is in the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City. It is titled “Guan Yin of the Southern Sea,” It is exquisite.]





A PATH WITH NO FOOTPRINTS

September 30, 2017

My concern is how to encourage those of you who are interested in dharma to find your own path. For most folks, dharma is an unknown journey that is not even yet on our maps because our path is unique to us and as yet untraveled. What is dharma and how do we do it? Most simply put, dharma is the truth as it is. And it is not true because the Buddha said it was true; the Buddha said it because it is the truth.

In my own case, back in the later 1950s, the only dharma I knew was what I read and read and read in books. Back then, it was mostly Zen Buddhism that was around, writers like D.T. Susuki. Then, in the 1960s, as I became increasingly interested in the dharma, I did things like sit Zazen for an entire day with Roshi Philip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center and other things like that. I was feeling it all out.

Yet, back then, what little there was available seemed more like isolated mountain peaks sticking up through the clouds, rather than the massive mountain of dharma underneath what they represented. There was no general map of dharma as there appears to be today, much less any obvious path I could see to follow. Like Atlantis rising, it took years for the general shape of the dharma to appear clearly to us. It seems silly now, but back then the concept of dharma was still hard to grasp.

At that time, reading about Buddhism conceptuality was the obvious refuge for those of us who did not yet know how to act or proceed on the path. We didn't even see a path. In the 1950s, Buddhism was mostly an intellectual pursuit, something we stayed up late nights talking about while smoking cigarettes and drinking tasteless instant coffee with powdered creamer. Who had refrigerators back then? We lived in single rooms. We were young.

I was too shy to assume any action on my part when it came to the dharma and any attempts to sit on a cushion seemed pretentious and affected. Who did I think I was, a Buddhist? It took the encouragement of meeting the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in the early 1970s to push me over the brink into for me to get my feet wet in the dharma path of action. It was Trungpa who pointed out to a whole generation of us that dharma was a path and method, not a topic to discuss like we did Existentialism. Who woulda' thunk it?

Even today, I meet many (mostly younger) folks who are feeling their way into dharma as a path. And too many are, IMO, just spinning their wheels, whacking away at Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), without having the traditional preliminary preparation a student would have had in Tibet before they undertook sitting meditation.. That's how opaque the dharma can be for beginners.

In Tibet, the most common form of meditation, Tranquility Meditation, was not one of the preliminary practices, but a practice done AFTER the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries are completed. It's no wonder that for so many American's meditation turns into either relaxation therapy or else resembles banging our heads against a wall. And this, because we did not take the time (and were not taught) how to first clear away some of our obscurations.

When I first met my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Khartar Rinpoche, he did not suggest that I start with sitting meditation (Shamata), but rather with Tong-len, one of the Lojong teachings, which is a practice that is like the Christian "Golden Rule" ("Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."), but in Tibetan Buddhism it is a process exchanging ourselves for others, sending out our good wishes and taking on all the sufferings the world offers.

And with those interested in the dharma that I work with today, even before we begin Tong-Len, there is a special version of Tong-Len called Reaction Tong-Len that is more immediately useful. This practice is about responsibility, our ability to respond instead of just endlessly react to things. By toning back our reactions, we become more able to respond appropriately instead of just knee-jerk reactions. And Reaction Tong-len recommends itself for several reasons, which I will list out here for clarity's sake.

First, Reaction Tong-Len requires no real effort on our part since it is based on our own knee-jerk reactions, energy we can't help but spend anyway. Second, it is instantaneous and fresh, happening in the immediacy of the present moment, so it is never already a part of our past. Additionally, becoming aware of our own knee-jerk reactions with its endless winces and grimaces allows us to tone back our reactions and recoup the energy bound in them. And Reaction Tong-Len clearly marks and reveals areas within us where we have energy bound up that could easily (or fairly easily) be freed up for other uses.

Reaction Tong-len is totally portable, a practice that we can carry around with us and do 24x7 and at no extra cost to us in effort. Involuntary reactions are self-fueling. And finally, Reaction Tonglen can accumulate results much faster than any other beginning dharma practice that I am aware of.

As I used to tell myself, going to church on Sunday for an hour would never get a rascal like me to heaven. In a similar way, sitting on a cushion for a half an hour a day is not going to be enough practice for most people, IMO. We need something we can do all day long that actually works. Reaction Tong-len is an example of a perfect off-the-cushion (post-meditation) practice for beginners or advanced practitioners.

Therefore, if you are a beginning dharma student or even a student doing other dharma practices, Reaction Tong-len is something you

can add to your practice without taking anything away from what you are already doing. And, best of all, it works and quickly.

If you want to get a feel for this practice, here is a book that contains some chapters on Reaction Tong-Len and a series of articles you can read through, all free.

Book:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

Articles:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=373&sid=f77845efc9bd5dc87087a9cb7ca78101>

NGÖNDRO: DHARMA BOOT CAMP

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The preliminary dharma practices called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (more commonly known as Ngöndro) need to be carefully understood by any beginning dharma practitioner. As I understand (and it has been explained to me), back in the 1970s, as Tibetan Buddhism increasingly came into America, what I see as a crucial omission was made as to how dharma was taught here. I don't know exactly when this took place (or by whom), but I understand that the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was aware of it. It has to do with which dharma practices beginners were first introduced to in this country. In other words, where should we begin with dharma practice?

And it had to do with sitting meditation, what is called Shamata in Sanskrit, Shiné in Tibetan, and Tranquility Meditation in English. This is the standard meditation practice to calm and stabilize the mind, similar to what is called Zazen in Zen Buddhism. In this country, Tranquility Meditation is the most common beginning dharma practice, the first usually introduced to dharma students.

However, as it was explained to me by a Tibetan Khenpo (abbot), traditionally in Tibet Tranquility Meditation is usually taught only AFTER an exhaustive (and exhausting) set of preliminary practices are completed, which is called The Ngöndro. These practices are basically a dharma boot camp and they are technically termed the Extraordinary Preliminaries, because they are to be completed and go before meditation practices like Tranquility Practice are introduced. They are preliminary to meditation.

Why was this preliminary practice of Ngöndro not followed here in America where (instead) Tranquility Meditation was the first dharma practice introduced to beginners and the Ngöndro was ignored and not required to be taught. This, IMO, was a mistake that

has made dharma practice more difficult than it otherwise would be. Why and how did this happen?

The reason for this, I am told, is that when Ngöndro was first introduced to Americans, we Americans refused to do it because it was not only too difficult, but sounded downright medieval. I too felt this way when I first heard about Ngöndro, that it must be left over from the dark ages. So, what was so disturbing about Ngöndro practice?

In a word, it just seemed too difficult for most Americans to even consider and perhaps its purpose was not explained clearly enough to students. Ngöndro is like a dharma boot camp, an elaborate series of exercises that not only takes years (for most) to complete, but can appear culturally strange and foreign on top of that.

Yet, in this country we have many physical education programs that are undertaken and seem to make good sense to us. The difference between Ngöndro and a typical phys-ed program here in America is that the Ngöndro not only addresses our physical health (through exercise), but also includes our mental, emotional (psychological), and spiritual well-being, some topics of which are usually (in this country) relegated to religion in one form or another.

And the various exercises in Ngöndro are unfamiliar to us in “type” as well as somewhat overwhelming in number and scope. Briefly described, Ngöndro consists of five integrated practices, each of which is performed 100,000 times. That number alone disturbs most Americans or did back in the 1970s.

The first of these five practices is a recitation of the Refuge Prayer, taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (the three roots), which is usually recited as you perform 100,000 full-length prostrations on the ground. I wore out two large bath towels to shreds doing them and then was told by my teacher to do the whole thing all over again. Second, is a purification practice called

Vajrasattva, where a hundred-syllable mantra is recited 100,000 times. Third, is Mandala practice, where using a metal (usually copper) plate, various grains and jewels are carefully arranged, in conjunction with a particular recitation, again: 100,00 times, and finally, fourth, an extensive practice called Guru Yoga and that includes visualizations and it too is repeated 100,000 times.

Anyway, apparently to Americans, who usually got off on the colorful Tibetan culture and its ornaments, Ngöndro was a bridge too far, too foreign and difficult to be understood as something we would want to do, so we didn't. We refused or balked and the Tibetans, instead, started us out with sitting meditation, with little to no preliminary practices under our belt, certainly not Ngöndro. This is what IMO is the mistake I mentioned earlier, to exclude these preliminaries.

And the reason Ngöndro was traditionally considered necessary is that it helped to remove various obscurations to meditation practice that are common to almost all people, mainly mental and emotional hindrances that would prevent us from more easily learning meditation practices like Tranquility Meditation. And so it went and has not changed much even today.

The unfortunate result is that Americans being introduced to the dharma were thrust directly into what in Tibet was a more advanced practice (Tranquility Meditation), without the benefit of first clearing out some of the mental and emotional cobwebs and debris. It was that simple. Instead, beginners came face-to-face with meditation with no or little real preliminary preparation. And, if they had trouble with learning Tranquility Meditation, only THEN were they encouraged to consider Ngöndro as a way of preparing before undertaking sitting meditation. This is exactly what happened in my case.

After trying and trying to accomplish sitting meditation, I was finally (by myself) persuaded to take another look at the Ngöndro practices as a way of softening me up for the more advanced sitting

practices. And all meditation practices, even Tranquility Meditation, were traditionally considered advanced.

All of this makes sense in hindsight, but being unable to appreciate the benefits of Ngöndro right-off delayed my progress a great deal. I did not ask to do Ngöndro and so it was not persuasively presented to me. I had to figure this out on my own, turn around (from where I was in practice), and come back to Ngöndro, rather than just to have gone through it initially. It was left up to me (who knew nothing), when it would have better IMO if it had been presented as a required practice and explained why.

At the time, I was not equipped to make an informed decision. And so, a kind of vicious Catch-22 was introduced into the mix. I couldn't learn sitting meditation without Ngöndro, and I couldn't warm to Ngöndro without more knowledge as to why I needed to do it. For a long time it was a stalemate.

Well, it all eventually worked out for me, but this is not a hiccup I would like to pass on to the next generation. The traditional Common Preliminaries, Extraordinary Preliminaries, and Special Preliminaries are there for a purpose and they should be undertaken and completed under direction, if only to save us time and better prepare us not only for the realization practices (meditation), but for the eventual pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind.

The great artist Michelangelo, who also wrote poetry, once said “What if a little bird should escape death for many a long year, only to suffer a crueller death.” I feel this way about the preliminary practices such as Ngöndro. It is far kinder to do them, and do them properly, than to avoid them and suffer practice without their benefit. We can stain our practice by forcing it by rote effort. Just my two cents.

