

2021 Essays Autumn



by Michael Erlewine

2021
Dharma Essays
AUTUMN

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These are not all, but they are the most useful essays from 2021, sorted by the seasons. I don't have time to 'fine edit' them and still get them out there, but these are certainly in good-enough shape to be readable. And I don't expect many, but hopefully 'any' folks will find these useful. They are eclectic, yet the overriding theme is dharma and dharma practice. Those of you who reach a certain point in your own trajectory of dharma practice may find some of these useful.

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Oct 1, 2021, 4:46 AM

THE CAUSE OF CHANGE

Of course, I see how having so much 'stuff' weighs me down. I have to watch myself, because the advent of intense solar activity of this coming sunspot cycle, with its solar flares and the occasional CME (Corona Mass Ejection hurled at Earth), indicates that we are soon to be inundated with change, ready or not. It's been happening lately.

I have to watch out and be careful, because packets of intense solar change can throw us into a tailspin, and where we stop nobody seems to know. If sudden change impacts us and we are inundated, when we come out of it, there is no telling how we have changed, and having changed, no telling what we may do because of that change as to how we see things.

Once again. Solar change changes us, and once changed, it is not very predictable what we will do in response to that change. I hope I have made the sequence clear: the Sun changes us, and we then change our life.

As to how long it takes us to recover from a solar inundation, it varies. And further, how long beyond that does it take for us realize we have actually changed and just how we might remedy that (if need be) by doing something about our situation. Or do we just accept the effects of change, without examining them? Is that the best we can do?

Anyway, that's the main point of this blog, to acknowledge that when we are plunged into confusing times, so that we get all turned around, our direction in life

is altered in the process, and in ways we may take a while to realize, if ever. And given that, just what can, or will we do about changes that we don't understand or even are aware of?

There is something exiting or even wonderful about change's ability to, well, change us. As to how or even 'if' we are aware enough to respond to our changes, that seems to depend. I am reminded of those old clothes washing machines with their agitating motion, rotating back and forth, repeatedly.

I am drawing attention to the steady rate of change brought by regular sunlight, as compared to intense packets of solar change that stir everything up, big time. I am looking at that stronger kind of influx and how we respond to it if we even are aware of the effects. Many of us sleepwalk life's changes.

I am amazed how one day, after perhaps quite a long time (weeks or months) of pursuing a given direction, methodically and with interest, a packet of pure change explodes or implodes me, and I come out of it altered or changed, I don't know just how. Further, after such a change, it takes me time to reorient myself, set a new course, and figure out where I am now headed and just what I 'feel' like doing from then on. Change can redirect us a little or a lot. And we may wake up, so to speak, and see that we are heading for one of life's cliffs.

In other words, we are subjected to change, or another way to say this is that our inner impetus or intuition to change comes from the Sun, and not from any other definable inner sanctum. If you will investigate the genesis of change, at least IMO, we find nothing as strong as solar influx. They seem to work with change in lockstep.

And, if we get in tune or work with this inner solar change, everything conspires to work with us. And the opposite also seems true, that if we fight and resist change, we are hung out to dry and immediately find ourselves retrograding into the past (no change) and not progressing toward the future from this moment now.

You might want to check this out.

Oct 2, 2021, 9:19 PM

AS YOU LIKE IT

I'm still in the basement of the center next door, sorting through stuff, and giving as much to 'Habitat for Humanity' as I can stand, and we still have too much. And if we move, what are we looking for and why does the Leelanau Peninsula area call to us? For me, it's pretty simple.

I want to walk the shore of the Great Lake, and for a long way, listening to the sound of the waves washing up, and looking for smooth stones. Lake Michigan does not compare, IMO, to the ocean where I grew up in my early teens, mainly because the smell of the ocean penetrates deep into the brain, deeper than a lake can smell. That salt water kind of pickles everything.

And I yearn to watch the sun set in the West over deep water, something I miss living inland as we do now, where trees block the sunsets, and it is a little too dry and often much colder. And what is called the ‘lake effect’ along the shore of Lake Michigan means warmer weather and more moisture all around.

And wherever I live, I would like to have near me a small pond, one that frogs like. And I would paddle around the edges of that pond in a small canoe, observing what’s in the water and on the shore. I am a bit of an expert on frogs, toads, and salamanders and it makes me happy just to see them.

Aside from that, I like my life as I live it now, sedentary as it is. I would to continue with my Internet life and of course seeing my family. And, as long as I’m speaking of ‘druthers,’ I would rather have a house with some extra rooms or a couple of cabins on the property for visiting family and friends.

It's time to quietly give me back to nature. I have seen what is there for me to see out in the world.

Oct 3, 2021, 5:42 PM

WHERE WORDS FAIL

And when it comes to talking about the dharma, in particular the non-dual dharma like Mahamudra or Dzogchen Meditation, there are no words that work for that. All the classic dharma texts tell us that language and concepts, by definition, are unable and cannot express (put into words) non-dual meditation. So, what are we supposed to do?

Apparently, there is nothing we can do about that, other than squeeze from those words and descriptions whatever 'juice' we can and let it sink in, hoping that some small amount of sense will register with us. And this is not new; it has been going on for centuries; many of the very best of the great siddhas and Mahasiddhas expressing in words what cannot be put into words, or trying to.

So, despite all the warnings about intellectual concepts being, practically speaking, unable to communicate what it is like to do and realize these great meditation practices, even the experts drone on with words. And so, I am allowed to as well, even though I am not an expert.

Speaking from my own minimal dharma experience, when it comes to comparing all of the many text descriptions (in words) about, let's say for example, Mahamudra or Vipassana Meditation, it took me years to realize that what the words in the text seemed to say and my actual dharma realization of what the words were pointing out did not match – not even close.

And, when I slowly began to grasp that what these words were trying to describe, and my actual realization of that description, were vastly different, almost unrecognizable, and what recognition did occur took a very long time to register and the whole thing was like "looking through a glass darkly," as they say.

Wow! That was a surprise, thought I. “Who woulda’ think it,” as the vernacular might put it.

Anyway, that realization about ‘realization” set me back quite a long way, on the one hand, and yet opened doors for me on the other hand. My step back was to take a better look at the whole equation, so to speak, and I begin to grasp the enormity of the problem that words cannot express the higher dharma practices, like it or not.

It was like two trains running at the same time (or crossing my eyes), unable to realize that these two trains were the same train, only disfigured by my very colloquial rendition of what the classic dharma texts are vainly trying to point out. Doing the impossible is what is asked, and that is, well, impossible. Impossible, but true. Yet, all we have to do is uncross our eyes.

And that truth itself, that it is ‘impossible but true’ is the ground we need to stand on to sort out the reality, the wheat from the chaff. And that was not a quick walk around or circling of the problem to better conceptualize it, but was a big part of the problem itself. You can’t salt the salt, as they say, and we can’t grasp at the problem because that very grasping (being dualistic) only further separates us from a solution. Indeed, that is a perfect example of a Catch-22.

And so here we sit, with our eyes open (or trying to), unable to draw any conclusion because, there is no end or conclusion to be drawn. It’s a circle, where the end is the beginning and the beginning the end. We can’t close a circle because a circle is already closed. That, my friends, is the conundrum.

Oct 4, 2021, 6:49 PM

MEANING THROUGH ARTICULATION

The standard dictionary description of the word ‘articulation’ typically is twofold. “Articulation” is the careful and precise pronunciation of words. Articulation also is used in the sense that we articulate our limbs, for example, articulating our thigh and ankle based around a joint like the knee. That’s articulation.

I find that both of these definitions come into play in understanding dharma and how it works. At least this has been true in my experience, although I must say that in my younger years, I was less concerned about articulation than I am today at eighty.

Perhaps the reason for this is that as we age (at least as I have aged), I’m gradually losing touch with my senses, feeling life less. Perhaps this is simply some anesthesia that time brings to ease our way out of life. I can’t say, but I very much do experience this and have wondered why this is so and what I can do about it, if anything.

It’s almost as if I dream a net or launch a kite to catch the winds of change, which slows me down enough so that I can savor what otherwise is running through my fingers, like time itself. It’s as if the tips of my fingers are losing their sense of touch, or my tastebuds can no longer savor taste as they once did. If you are older, you know what I refer to here.

Of course, I know that time is running out, but I wonder how I can best appreciate what I experience from day to day. Does anyone else have this experience? It has to be common enough. And, IMO, this is where “articulation” comes in.

For me, I believe I first learned about the beauty of articulation in the late 1950s when I encountered Zen Buddhism, and back then this was the only kind of dharma that was around where I lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, my home town.

It was the fact that with Zen, it was not only about what you did sitting on a cushion in a corner and meditating. Zen also made it clear to me that ‘off the cushion’, in everything I did the rest of the day, my every action could be exercised, and here I will say ‘articulated’ with greater care and attention. There was nothing that we do that cannot be articulated in this way, carefully and attentively – with awareness.

Anyway, the long and the short of it is that as I age, I find that carefully articulating each moment and action is the best way I have found to add meaning and substance to a life that otherwise is, well, evaporating before my eye. And this is not only a remedy for old folks like me.

This same principle is true in learning and practicing dharma, in particular the non-dual dharma of practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen. And here is where I get off from this conceptual description and take to the air so-to-speak, so please be kind. Hear me out.

In the rarified air of the non-dual practices, where mistaken ideas of emptiness abound, anything that catches the winds of change acts like a kite, and can slow

the mind down and further our inner awareness. At least I find this to be true, if you follow me.

This was taught to me by my root lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, over the 36 years I worked with him. It took a while, and the first time or so that I had this pointed out to me, it went in one ear and right out the other. I didn't realize what Rinpoche was pointing out. And then I slowly began to.

Rinpoche was getting my attention by pointing out, and a lot of this was something like osmosis, that using the mind conceptually, intellectually, was merely a form of mentation and did not necessarily bring any life experience along with it. As they say, it was all hat and no cattle, in country-music slang, just empty words that result from a purely conceptual approach, and good for nothing more than, perhaps, an academic view and approach. Yet, that was not what I needed more of.

What Rinpoche got through to me during a particular 10-day intensive on Mahamudra meditation was that words, no matter how beautiful they might be, cannot but point beyond themselves to what they mean, to the sense they make. Words and language have to make sense, otherwise they are what we call nonsense and don't reach the level of experience. And it is experience and increasing familiarity with the mind, can I say 'viscerally', that is the key (at least for me) to what in our lineage is called 'Recognition' by us of the actual nature of the mind.

Anyway, that year I bridged the gap between conceptuality and actual experience, and by this, I mean I began to understand what was required, and over the next several years, I worked to implement the teaching in practice. And then, in a kind of perfect storm of insight, I experienced what (for me) could be realized, to the point that Rinpoche told me that I had been introduced to the

nature of the mind. And I understood that from that point onward, that the rest is up to me. I had been introduced and recognized, in my own way, the nature of the mind.

And now, to return to 'articulation', which has to do with making things real, and I don't by that mean reification or any kind of gilding the lily. Instead, I mean getting my hands down into the clay of life-experience and grounding my tendency for conceptualization in reality. Of course, along the way I realized that the standard image of Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha of this age, is telling us this by what is called the earth-touching gesture, reaching down with his right hand and touching the earth. It was right in front of my eyes all these years.

And this, again, is where my Zen introduction comes into play. Like a spider climbing across a web, handhold by handhold, that is what I mean by 'articulation', the careful and with-awareness articulation of each moment or movement and act we undertake. That articulation is the bridge between ordinary mundane mind and awareness itself.

And it's tricky. By that, I don't mean deliberate effort that wears us out. What I mean is, with loving care, to articulate and exercise our mind like we do with our physical body by moving our limbs and training our body. That kind of exercise is what the body requires to be healthy. And it is the same with the mind, relatively.

The mind also needs to be exercised, and by that I don't mean intellectually or conceptually exercised. We already do plenty of that, conceptualizing. What I do mean is more difficult for me to define, and the dharma textbooks say that it is impossible, by definition. The great siddhas and Mahasiddhas have been trying to define the impossible for centuries.

It seems to me that the stream of time is fluid and flows along, and we with it. If we want to slow it down or somehow punctuate it, we have to throw up a net or create a bridge from conceptuality to the sense world. We have to at least launch a kite that catches the wind and pulling us along, and slows us down.

In my experience, this is best done by articulation, articulating each moment and action clearly --decisively. By that we are connecting earth and sky, bringing two opposite poles together, and mixing them, mixing experience and its realization.

The careful articulation of each moment exercises the mind and slows time down, and in that punctuated and articulated window in time, slowed way down, we experience what has been called non-duality or poetically 'eternity'. That is our awareness of the whole enchilada, so to speak.

I should write more on this and perhaps will, but to repeat, the main idea is to articulate each moment carefully and in the punctuation of articulation, the process of time is slowed down and can be felt more directly in the present moment. We are being put in touch with and reconnected to our senses.

Oct 5, 2021, 3:45 PM

PUNCTUATED TIME

Still getting questions as to what I mean by articulation. We don't have trouble understanding articulation when it comes to training our body, moving our arms and legs – articulating them. I agree, it is more difficult when it comes to articulating our mind, but really it is the same or very similar.

Punctuating, somehow breaking up or down the seamless flow of time and events into bite-sized pieces, something measurable, something sensible, graspable.

Punctuation, some 14 marks, typically the period, question mark, exclamation mark, comma, colon, semi-colon, dash, hyphen, brackets, braces, parentheses, apostrophe, quotation marks, and ellipsis, used to separate and break up sentences and their elements to clarify 'meaning'.

The phrase 'to clarify meaning' is operative here, and the key to what I call articulation. Articulation, enabled by punctuation, is how we slow down the stream of consciousness from what can be a raging torrent until it is a gentle meandering stream. Without punctuation to articulate our words, we would have this:

“The phrase ‘to clarify meaning’ is operative here, and the key to what I call articulation. Articulation, enabled by punctuation, is how we slow down the stream of consciousness from what can bear a raging torrent until it is a gentle meandering stream.”

That's how important articulating our communications can become. And, as mentioned in the previous blog, if the unified stream of our consciousness riding the unity of time, runs faster and faster as we age, it is all the more important that we can articulate it down to something manageable, and even enjoyable. Articulation brings meaning to our lives or retains it.

Articulation grasps the stream of time directly, and by separating its components, almost recursively, reduces what otherwise is an express train to oblivion, one with no stops, to something palatable, something meaningful, and perhaps able to be savored.

And as we grow older, time apparently speeds up. The days and hours go by faster and faster, until weeks flash by like looking out the windows of a speeding train.

If we go all flaccid and cease to articulate what moments we have, the continuous stream of time carries us away like a drop in the ocean. However, we can dream up and create a bridge to hold back what we have by, as mentioned, careful articulation, thus clarifying and bringing meaning to each moment in the stream of time.

In other words, we create a filter that can sieve and capture moments from the stream of time that are memorable, i.e., so that they can be remembered!

Oct 6, 2021, 10:50 AM

SEARCHING FOR HOME

Looking at houses can be a fun game, certainly a popular way to pass the time, that is: if I follow a few rules.

One rule that I should know as a photographer, is that wide-angle lenses expand and magnify an area, making it look larger. And I proved this to myself just yesterday, when Margaret and I drove a couple of hours north deep into the Leelanau Peninsula of northern Michigan to look at a couple of houses.

And, as mentioned, once I entered the main house that we thought might interest us, sure enough, it was tiny compared to the photos, almost like looking at a scaled-down micro version of the house we had hoped would hold us, like being in a doll house. Wide-angle lenses strike again. I had been telling myself (and Margaret) about wide-angle lenses a number of times yet witnessing this in real life was still a shock. A house in a teacup.

And, of course, none of these houses is as nice as the house we now live in. If only we could move it nearer the Great Lake and closer to some of our kids.

While we were waiting for our next house appointment, we did try to find an easy access to Lake Michigan, following about twenty minutes of windy roads, only to roll up to a cliff overlooking the lake, with no time or interest in scrambling down a collapsing trail and trying to climb back up. Not right then. We had to see another house too soon for that. Both houses were disappointing small. And so expensive, when we have a perfectly great house where we now live, all paid for.

One thing that was satisfying is visiting the Oryana Food Coop in Traverse City. It was a real shock to see all of this incredible natural food, most forbidden to me by my doctors, and to imagine that I could live close by and be allowed in such a place. Wonderful to behold, at any rate. We each got a veggie Ruben sandwich, and I bought a container of Kalamata olives to take back home.

We got home late, after dark, and talked all the way back. That was fun.

Oct 7, 2021, 6:56 AM

ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT, AND THEN SOME

Well, it looks like I have caught a bit of a cold, so that has slowed me down. Sometimes I just have to rest for a day or two.

I'm done boxing up my music CDs, some 275 boxes, not to mention a couple hundred CDs that I have in the bedroom that I still have to box. And now I am looking at my DVD collection, which are only about 1000. Remember, that I created AllMusic.com (the largest music database), and also founded one of the two largest film/movie databases on the planet, AllMovie.com, and for years I got sent a lot of free product.

As far as looking for places to move, houses up north, we have had a pretty sad result for time spent. For one, there is about nothing available, prices are through

the roof for even shoddy places, and nothing compares to where we live now. We have no choice but to wait the market out and see what pops up. We like places that are a little funky, so that makes it a little easier, as opposed to those big, vaulted ceiling things they produced for so many years, with balconies above the living room. A waste of space, IMO. Yet, we are used to many rooms, particularly me, one for various interests, and so on. The real estate business right now is tough.

That being said, I am still avoiding writing about what I am learning these days, if anything, and that's more about not wanting to dwell on that just now, rather than keeping anything from readers.

As for where my head is at these days, I have not spent much time monitoring it of late. I'm too busy taking care of things I have to do, although I have set a flag to keep one eye on my state of mind. I worry about drifting too far from the shore, so to speak. Maybe I can share a few words.

I am enjoying little thought and thinking just now, but as mentioned, just the doing of what has to be done is kind of cleansing in itself. As mentioned in several previous blogs, this is what I call the "Zen" in me. Just the exercise and articulation of living itself is pristine.

I am still kind of nauseous from any kind of residual effort to reflect on the dharma. Reflect, yes, of course, but (at least right now) making an effort to reflect or respect? I need a break from that. Of course, thoughts run through my head, but right now they are more like a river flowing past me. I am comfortable with watching the flow and feel no need to get carried away over just about anything. I am just doing stuff.

Anyway, I find this approach refreshing and it has a certain clarity and lucidity that I appreciate. And it seems that I am a bit on a tear to remove reification, my attachment even to such a good thing as the dharma itself. It's not that I don't want to respect the dharma, as much as it is not dharmic to put dharma on a pedestal. The dharma deserves more than that, IMO. It is more pristine. It is enough in itself, without my trying to gild the lily.

As my first dharma teacher used to say to me, "My God is no beggar, needing me to help make the ends meet. The ends, they already meet."

So, what that tells you, I can only guess. I am putting off taking (perhaps permanently) what I call a 'faux' reverential attitude to the dharma and, as mentioned, putting the dharma up on a pedestal and worshiping it. Even in the dharma, we don't need to worship 'false gods' (reified dharma) or whatever you want to call it.

This thought keeps running through my head "When you said 'Wait', you meant a long time, didn't you?"

SOLAR EFFECTS AFFECT

[I am posting this a little early, so that you can have a head's up as to the particular solar flare that just took place and the CME that it hurled directly at Earth as a result.]

I don't want to sound like a stuck record, however, the solar sunspot cycle is increasingly growing stronger. The sunspot AR2882 exploded again, with a M1.6 solar flare, followed by a CME (Corona Mass Emission), which this time is headed directly toward Earth. It was an extreme ultraviolet flash, which was so strong that it ionized the top of the Earth's atmosphere. And this caused shortwave radio blackout over the Indian Ocean, and other effects.

Scientists call this a 'Halo CME' because it completely surrounds the sun with a halo. Anyway, this CME is supposed to reach Earth late October 11th or on October 12th, probably sparking G1 to G2-class geomagnetic storms. That's the physical effect.

As for how it affects us emotionally and what it does to our psyche, we shall see. However, I have come to understand that from the moment a large flare explodes, it somehow affects us directly, even before its particular CME is heading directly for Earth. And from my point of view, this is wham-bang of a CME on its way. So, expect a strong packet of change to, well, change us, and after, we can put back together the pieces of our Self into whatever new form we can manage.

In my understanding, a CME (or any intense solar influx) brings pure change, and as explained, pure or intense change changes us directly, so that we (our 'Me, Myself, and I') actually changes, with the result that as we change, we then can see (or not see) to change our life for better or for worse. It's up to us whether we change for the better or for the worse, depending how stable we are.

If we can hang onto our hats while the CME inundates us and don't lose our better angels, this is good; otherwise, we can tear down and take apart whole themes we have worked with for years, all in a burst of change.

And these intense packets of change, like we have going on just now, are not just affecting me; they are affecting all of us at the same time, although we may be too wrapped up in the change to realize what is happening to us, until (afterward) we try to put the pieces back together again. This is an Earth-change, what can be called a sea change or inflection point.

We may wake up from this kind of change (come out of it) as a changed person, a different 'Me, Myself, and I', someone who will take a different tack or path. Or, vice versa. And this current change is affecting all of the political situations going on around us right now as well.

Oct 10, 2021, 7:13 PM

SNEAKING UP ON A MIRROR

How a Catch-22 sneaks up on us is hard to describe, yet it does. And it's important to understand why this is so. We traditionally think that change is something that we can't help but notice, because it is a change. We notice change. Yet, that is not always true, especially when it is we, ourselves, who are changing. Then, all bets are off.

And that's just the point. With intense change that fully immerses us, like that coming with solar influx from the sun, we can't see it coming, because it is not something that we can watch happen. And this is because 'We the Watcher' of

change is what is changing, and we can't both change and watch our change at the same time. The change takes place and afterward, we determine what has changed, if we have not also changed too much to remember.

In a word, we are swept away in the process of self-change and are too much immersed in the midst of self-change, so that about the most we can do is feel or sense that we are changing, or are aware that something is changing. I.e., in this case it is us.

When we as the 'looker' are what is changing, we have no place to stand on, no perch to watch from, because that's exactly what is changing, our 'everything.' And until the change calms or settles down, the situation is not stable enough to be seen or evaluated. There is nothing (yet) to see until the change has run its course; then we try to figure out what happened.

This is the case with extreme packets of change, such as that which comes from solar flares that hurl CMEs into space, especially when they are directly aimed at Earth. Our normal stream of energy change, sunlight, takes about 9 minutes to reach us and we are used to that. Yet, when very intense packets of change are hurled directly at Earth, such change can be overwhelming. We are inundated to the point that we, ourselves, become (or can be) unstable and no longer can control, manipulate, or direct our changes. And this because we are what is changing.

We tumble head over heels in the space of time, like bobbing for apples, or even total immersion for a day or part of a day. In that case, we often don't know which way is up and have to wait for things to stabilize before we can see the lay of the land, much less evaluate it.

So, if you imagine you are going to surf a powerful CME as it inundates you, be my guest, and good luck with that. Most folks seem to ignore or even kind of black out during the inundation. Or, at the very least, they have to go and lie down for a spell, until the smoke clears, so to speak. It can be difficult to remain aware and conscious when we find ourselves feeling our way through the corridor of life.

Oct 11, 2021, 9:04 PM

DANCING AT THE EDGE

Meanwhile, it's like my life has been on a sidebar, cleaning out decades of accumulation, more recently going through hundreds of key CD-ROMs and various data collections, seeing which deserve being copied to a hard drive, and then I do just that. It's taken two days of dawn to dusk work to get this far, which is almost done. Tomorrow, I should be able to wrap it up and move on to the next tasks, which are many. I have been saving CD-ROMs for decades, but not organizing all of them, and only backing up the ones I want to pay forward, as they say.

As for relocating north to the Traverse City area, still no new houses that seem to fit. While still checking the housing market, it's been straight-ahead work around here for weeks now.

Another idea is to open up our dharma center here for short retreats, whether dharma or for the Arts and let some folks live here for a while. No details yet, but it would have to cost something, just to heat the large center, with five or more bedrooms. The center is right next to our house.

We used to have the center filled, all of the rooms, with an odd collection of interesting folks, like a swami, the main astrologer for Hari Krishna, a jazz expert, Sanskrit scholar, famous astrologers, mathematicians, and on and on.

It's a nice quiet house, with access to our external shrine building for practitioners, our stupa to circumambulate, lots of music CDs and movie DVDs, and so on. A full kitchen, two bathrooms, a 10-foot table for meetings, a lovely breakfast nook, new six-burner gas stove, and lots of books to read, and so on.

At this point we are just considering the idea once again.

Oct 12, 2021, 8:18 PM

POLISHING THE DHARMA

Try and find a place where the dharma is not present. What to you constitutes dharma? Where is it and what is it? Did Buddha invent the dharma? Was the

dharma there before the Buddha? In fact, it is said that many Buddhas preceded Shakyamuni Buddha, said to be the 4th Buddha.

Buddha realized the dharma, became aware of it and pointed it out to the rest of us. Is this why images of the dharma always refer to those images of the Buddha, the Mahasiddhas, Siddhas, in general, the Sangha?

Those are lineage holders, who have realized the dharma, but what is this dharma they have realized? Where are images of the dharma itself or are there none? What exactly is the dharma? Please help me define it.

It can't be what is reified, our attempts to gild the lily, so to speak. How far are we allowed to wander from the standard Buddhist images so that we would consider it 'not dharmic'?

I guess where I learned about this was through Zen Buddhism, which was the only kind of dharma I could find back in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Ann Arbor Michigan. The idea was simple. Everywhere and anywhere is where dharma can be found. Everything we did could be done dharmically. That concept made perfect sense to me, that dharma is not a thing, but a process, a way of living or path and not something we can actually lay our hands on.

With that in mind, I can't but note that I am increasingly less interested in reenforcing the concept that dharma is just the gold leaf on the statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. Of course, I have no problem in making everything dharmic as 'nice' as we can, although if dharma is everywhere and in everything, we are going to need a lot of gold leaf. And if, as mentioned, dharma is not a "thing," but rather how we approach everything, life in general, then we might best pause and consider what that means in day-to-day life.

If everything must be layered in gold leaf, then nothing needs to be done up in gold leaf. It's up to us what is sacred and up to us to make it so. It's how we live and behave that benefits from being dharmic. That idea.

If it's all about paying it forward, then what about the present moment? How do we get past that in order to pay something forward? Obviously, we can't, so there is something about this present moment that in fact is 'present', and this is not true about anything that sounds like reification.

Let's not let our 'worship' get in the way of our reverence for the dharma. That reverence is not for anything in particular, but rather it is how we handle, think of, and treat any 'thing', IMO.

Just as with the offering of a traditional sand mandala, the offering is not the intricate sand design that is swept into a river, but the offering is the 'offering' of that sand mandala. This is similar to that.

I don't want to be caught up in attachment to the dharma any more than I want to accumulate any other kind of attachment. It took me years to realize that my reification of dharma, piling it on, was no more worthy than any other kind of reification. It only accumulates further obscurations and not any merit.

So, adding a patina to our dharma practice is no help whatsoever. We can't salt the salt, so to speak. We don't have to polish the dharma; it does not need it. We can, however, work on practicing the dharma, learning to work with the dharma, to work with what is.

Oct 13, 2021, 3:33 PM

THE EXPONENTIAL VECTOR

More "space weather" these days, as I like to call it, and so do others. Check out the latest here:

<https://spaceweather.com/>

As for me, I am coming off a workaholic high-energy drive to accomplish a lot of stuff in a short time. Perhaps, that's why my dharma refuge name is "Dondup Dawa," which translates to "Moon of accomplishment." I like to get things done and am not too happy unless I am doing something full bore.

As for searching for a new home in the Michigan northlands, hope never fails to keep our chins up and it find us venturing forth to the Traverse City and the Leelanau Peninsula to check out houses. It is kind of fun and kind of tiring, all at the same time. It reminds me of binge-watching TV.

And of course, my reach always is greater than my grasp, so to speak. One result of these last weeks of unearthing source material is that I see clearly that I have many audio and video interviews of famous poster artists, astrologers, and

other creative people that deserve to be made available for those interested in learning about their art.

In fact, yesterday I set up a recording system and am already digitizing and transferring audio interviews to hard drives in preparation for a series of podcasts and videos to be put up on YouTube. I have a great many mini-DV tapes, not to mention VHS and Super-VHS tapes, that need to be put to hard drive, and with mini-DV, it has already become very difficult to find players and the proper cabling to make this happen. I have been working on this, talking with experts, and experimenting with the transference process.

And so, I envision a series of interviews of rock n' roll concert poster artists, to be called (perhaps) "Classic Poster Artists," along with some fascinating discussion with some of the great astrologers I have been fortunate enough to spend time with. It's enough to keep one busy.

[Photo by me of a very rare poster by one of my favorite concert poster artists, Bob Fried. It was printed on transparent plastic of one sort or another, and there are only a few left in the world. I took this photo. I am digitizing a fascinating audio interview of Fried's wife Penelope Fried, her husband having passed on decades ago. Penelope Fried, a dancer and artist in her own right, is very articulate and bright. This is an example of what I am working on, in my spare time.

Oct 15, 2021, 12:44 PM

SHEDDING HISTORY

Well, after weeks of working away at what initially appeared to me, at least for a few moments, as an impossible task, I'm gaining on it. Yes, there was a moment there of a bit of panic, as it dawned on me that I am a victim of my own accumulation of 'stuff', be it meaningful stuff or not. It seemed it would be close to impossible to do anything other than to stay where I am, live out my time here on Earth, and this due to my own inertia – the physical inability to move because of all my stuff!

I had a couple of barriers to cross and no certainty that I was up to crossing them. Part of this is just physical, being eighty years old and not as strong as I once was. Certainly, I am losing muscle mass by degrees as I age. So, the first decision was to get a weight training bench and sets of barbells and have at it. I have done that, and the results are good. I am much stronger than I was even a few months ago.

And second, there was a problem of getting my arms around, as mentioned, the sheer mass of materials that have to be moved and gotten out of here where we now live. It is daunting. This is all my problem and not Margaret's. I am the archiver, the collector of much stuff.

One step, like losing a booster rocket at a space launch, was selling our recording studio and library building. Three years after putting it on the market, it just 'happened,' all at once, but also was aided by my willingness (finally) to just let it go, to 'not need it' around any longer. I could live without having the studio as a talisman. And it is in good hands and will continue to be a recording studio.

And once that happened, I could turn my full attention to our dharma center, which has been like a magnet for everything I wanted to hang on to. And while my archiving abilities are useful, in a relative sense, to help preserve various parts of our popular culture (astrology, music, film, concert rock posters), my constant interests in preserving what I see as valuable to our society in the future, I am a bit indiscriminate about, meaning I collect anything of value, like nuts, bolts, tools, and whatever might be useful to myself (or others) in the future. It's my 6th house Saturn/Moon/Uranus, and Virgo Midheaven/north-node/Neptune/ conjunction.

That tendency turned out to be a real problem, like accumulating water in our body (and thus weight) at certain times and not being able to shed it easily. It is that which I have been concentrating on these last many months, my unwillingness to part with what has value, just because it is valuable, and even if it weighs me down like an anchor and, in a very real way, is 'killing' me.

I believe I have finally broken that habit, although I can't just jettison everything, but instead I feel that I must find a home for whatever work I have done, so that others can carry on where I left off. In that way, I have been a good steward of my archiving abilities, patiently seeking out recipients of what I am quite willing to donate to them.

One by one, almost all my interests that I have archived and accumulated, I have found homes for. I first learned this from my friend John Sinclair, who is a famous radical, poet, and expert in blues music. John explained to me that he had placed almost everything he owned in the hands of the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library for their safe keeping. I saw what a brilliant move that was on John's part, to divest his accumulations in the hands of a non-profit organization

who would care for it, freeing up John not to have to cart it around anymore and also helping to record the history of his work for future study.

It was one of those 'Aha!' moments in life we can have, inspired by others. John did that for me and I have gradually placed almost every archived collection I have in the hands of universities and similar non-profit organizations. A brief accounting of those I list here:

(1) My library of music and film books and collaterals I sold as part of AMG, the All-Music Guide and All-Movie guide.

(2) My collection of music CDs (and film DVDs) was donated to Michigan State University, over 720,000 CDs, etc.

(3) A large collection of Tibetan Buddhist dharma teachings on audio tape, which was a backup for what our main monastery has archived, has been returned to them, where a number of them replaced what they accidentally lost. I was told that all of these tapes would be sent to Tibet where they would be archived for some reason or other.

(4) The Heart Center Astrological Library was donated to the University of Illinois, said to be the largest collection of its kind in existence, some years ago. It took an Allied Van Lines (huge truck) to move them, along with a second truck of my papers, notes, and collaterals about the size of a UPS truck. I still have a pile of about 14 or so large boxes of my remaining collaterals and personal items sitting in the living room of our dharma center waiting to be picked up soon.

(5) I also have about 40 large boxes of dharma books, plus a lot of other materials waiting to be picked up and donated to the Columbus KTC, since their large center was destroyed by a fire. Margaret and I have enough books for our own use and practice.

(6) I donated my collection of Rock n' Roll concert posters, a database, of hi-res images, measurements, and annotations to the Bentley Historical Library, and the Haight Street Art Center in San Francisco (a rock poster non-profit), plus I am shipping out my last collection of archived images, writings, plus over 300 e-books soon.

(7) I am in the midst of donating about 500 pen & ink very fine drawings of dharma deities and related images to a non-profit organization, drawings done by a Bhutanese monk (Sange Wangchuk) who lived at our dharma center for some year and created all these drawings. They are beautiful indeed.

(Eight) I also have a fair-sized collection of writings, interviews, and historical notes on blues music (and other genres) related to the original Ann Arbor Blues Festivals and the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals (AJBF), plus interviews of people involved in those festivals that have resulted from my various times as a member of the board of the AJBF and 'The Ark'. I was appointed the official historian for the AJBF, and have a lot of materials, etc. related to that, including the original posters, programs, etc. I have been invited to donate these materials to a Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi and am preparing to do that. They also have requested my collection of blues CDs, some 30-40 boxes, which I am not quite ready to do, but I intend to make that donation.

My only remaining collection, aside from the remnants of my previous donations, would be a large mass of nature photographs that I should find a home for, so

people who would like to use them are free to do so. Which kinds of sums it up to this present moment.

Now that I have broken the back of my need to accumulate and sit on various collections, without breaking my actual back by hauling it around here and there, as mentioned, various stacks of boxes (many boxes) of 'stuff' sit around our center (and my house) waiting for trucks to take them away to one institution or another. This also clears my head to kind of look around a bit at life.

“ENOUGH! OR TOO MUCH!”

A quote from the mystic/poet William Blake. While I'm attempting to juggle all of the logistics of downsizing the center, while looking for a house that we might like to move to, I also have the problem of protecting various work I have done over the years, most notably of late a large number of audio tapes and a large number (around 200) of mini-DV video cassettes. And this is no easy out. The audio tapes, which I am over half done with are not difficult to digitize, and I am working on them while I do the other stuff I need to do.

However, the mini-DVs are very difficult because they don't make players for them much anymore, and they need Firewire ports in the transfer computer to make file transfer at all easy. And those are no longer that common. I have had to order a special board that will fit my computer and then a special power configuration to run that board.

And, of course, each tape has to be played at normal speed, so that hundreds of hours of recording take hundreds of hours of transfer. I am still putting together a system to do that. The project will take weeks and months of careful minding, not to mention the enormous time it will take to, after being transferred, to turn them into videos that play on YouTube.

However, aside from family videos that are precious, I have hours and many days of recording of (what I consider) important interviews, in this case with video, of many astrologers, musicians, and other interesting creative individuals. I have not even started on these, and my interviews are often long, an hour or two.

You know me. I am a 'long' writer, not doing short stories. That's how we know when we have had enough, by having a little too much. I'm definitely a 'too much' sort of person. In my interviews, I like to get more than enough, with my questions getting down into the details of life. So, if you are looking for the 'Cliff Notes' version of an interview, you will want something more brief and to the essentials than what I like to offer.

Anyway, I am working on these audio and video interviews and other coverages.

SKIPPING STONES ON A POND

Welcome to the Full Moon this morning. No particular words of wisdom do arise. Rather, I'm still taking care of organizing things around here. I have finished transferring all (or most) of my analog tape cassettes to digital versions on a hard drive. In fact, I have two copies on two separate hard drives, around 65 GB each. So that's done and the original tapes can be filed away and hopefully never accessed again. OoopS! I just found two more boxes of analog tapes. I am doing them as we speak, and will hopefully finish them up tomorrow. However, right now I am solving hardware problems pertaining to installing a firewire card in my main computer. The problems come with finding power via molex cables. Working on it.

However, that is just the tip of the iceberg. What remains are some 200 hours of Mini DV tapse to be transferred to hard drives in real time and then, eventually, made into YouTube podcasts of videos as need be. And that's not all. I also have two large tubs, two layers deep, filled with VHS and Super-VHS tapes of all sizes. These to have to be transferred. I include a photo of the two tubs of VHS tapes, each tub, as mentioned, has two layers of tapes.

And so, I am all set as for having something to do with my time, something that takes constant watching and careful timing. That will give me loads of time to write blogs again, I would imagine, if I find a thread, as I process these hundreds of tapes, one by one, labeling them, and preparing them to be the source material for a great many YouTube podcasts or videos. If nothing else, they will now be ready for others to easily work with them.

Beyond all that, there is me, 'myself, and I' in whatever form I can manage. I seem to be in a state of suspended animation these days, with all thoughts and

thinking kind of put on hold. It's not that I can't think thoughts, but rather that I choose not to for a while. It's like I'm enjoying a bit of mute time. Speechless. Or I'm like a skipping stone across the water, just sampling the water a bit at each skip.

Oct 20, 2021, 2:52 AM

THE POWER OF PLACE

America is a place, a locality. And no matter what comes here from Europe or no matter what comes here from Tibet or anywhere else, it's going to be absorbed in North America, and along the way shuffled off in favor of this land, this country. And I don't mean our politics and all of that, but rather something more basic, something created by the land itself. The rest of the world, Europe, Tibet, etc. are just influences that ultimately are absorbed into the nature of the land itself, North America.

The appetite of the land, whatever land we live in is ferocious, and all influences will eventually morph to that form, sooner or later. This is what makes Native Americans such a powerful symbol for us. They are and have been the product of this land, this place, for many centuries.

It sad that their lineage, hose of tNative Americans, has been so interrupted and distorted by all of the immigrants that arrived here and took over, rather than our getting in line with them and being more shaped by them. And this because what they are and represent is what we also will learn to share and represent, after the

wheat and the chaff are separated, after foreign influences are either absorbed or cast off. We are at heart more basic than that.

Yet, if we are looking for our North Star, we should look at the philosophy and religions of the Native Americans, not perhaps word for word, but to get the idea or gist of what the North American experience is about long term. We should not just admire it in the movies.

We have it too because we live here. The land speaks. We are all representatives for the land, sooner or later. Native Americans are the example to note because they have had a long time with the land to be shaped by it. If Native Americans seem foreign to us it is because we are foreign to their experience and should recognize that and also take it as a warning or sign.

The logic is that the land shapes everyone who lives on it. If we are clinging to the heritage of our race, religion, or country that we came from, and so on, we have another thought coming. No, we may never attend a Native American Sun Dance ceremony, much less participate in one, yet there is something there that is root level and sooner or later we will dance to that tune, if only in our own way.

The Tibetans are deep into the concept of what they call Earth Lords (the Sa-Dak), the inherent nature and spirits of the land. Over the sixty years or so that I have been studying astrology, I have been particularly interested in whatever relates to the space directly surrounding me, my local area. I developed an astrological technique in the early 1970s that is now used by astrologers all over the world, called "Local Space." Local Space is primarily used today as a relocation technique, but I always used it for much more than that in counselling.

So, it should come as no surprise that I am fascinated by the concept in Tibetan astrology of the Sa-Dak, the spirits that surround and protect a particular place and land, the lords of the land - Earth Lords.

Particularly, in these times in which so much wide-scale destruction to nature and the land has taken place, one cannot but wonder about the consequences. In general, modern society has adopted as a world view the very materialistic concept that land and sea are just dirt and water, so many atoms, and have in themselves no innate essence or "soul."

Yet, the Tibetans and the Chinese don't feel this way at all. They respect the land and everything about it. This is why Feng Shui is so popular in these countries and much consulted. These Tibetan Earth Lords are similar to Feng Shui, but they have to do not so much with where and how things are positioned, but with the very energy of a place and the respect shown to it - how it is treated. Let me explain:

According to the Tibetan and the Chinese, every place, that is: every mountain, stream, and canyon is something more than just the sum of its physical parts and whatever beauty it may or may not possess.

There is some kind of force or energy connected to the way things have come together in this spot to make it what it is. In other words, there is such a thing as an energy or indwelling nature spirit - whatever you want to call it.

From this point of view, locations are not just atoms of rock and water, but there is some subtle and perhaps indescribable energy that makes a particular valley or forest "beautiful," a place where we can sense a power or presence that takes our breath away, if only for a moment. We intrinsically sense that some places

are special. What makes them special? The Tibetans tell us that these special places (and most places are special to someone) are power places, and that to wantonly destroy or deface them is not without consequences to us. If we mess with these power points, the energy bound there can be unleashed and perhaps react to harm us.

North America is no different. We too have Sa-Dak or Earth Lords, places of power and great beauty that we should recognize and be empowered by. Here is a little free e-book I wrote about some of the Tibetan Earth Lords, their Sa-Dak.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Earth-Lords.pdf>

Oct 21, 2021, 2:47 AM

PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT

[I got my Covid booster, which turned out to be the same Moderna shot I received twice back in February of this year which is good because it is full-strength.]

There comes a point where the training wheels come off the bicycle and we ride free of them. Training in anything is just that, something short of freedom, other than the freedom to train.

Just as there is no shame in taking off the training wheels, it's no shame to stand on our own, free of the effort to practice. It has to happen sometime, and it does. After which, once again, we find ourselves on our own, walking point by ourselves in life.

Our practice shapes us, points us in the right direction, and keeps us on course, yet never confuse practicing meditation with actually meditating. They are different. Practicing meditation always has the over-shadow of effort, while meditation does not.

Perhaps not intentionally, yet in a very real sense, we are chaperoned through much of our life, and I don't mean just talking to ourselves. The comfort of guidance and being taught, no matter how secure, always carries with it the edge of effort, perhaps a minor but very real obscuration. At some point we walk beyond effort, free. Be prepared for that too. It is perhaps a little scary, but also clean and clear.

This effort is not the fault of our teachers or guides; it is all on us. What we don't like is our own effort to be free. It gets in our way and is itself an obscuration, although apparently a necessary one. In the end, we just want to be free from even the shadow of effort. Free to just walk outside at night and look up at the stars in the sky.

Oct 22, 2021, 1:01 AM

IS IT STILL DHARMA IF?

How do we know what we are doing is the 'dharma'?

Well, if it looks like the dharma and feels like the dharma, is it dharma? The answer, IMO, would be, not necessarily. To be dharmic, does what we do have to be dressed in Tibetan prayer flags or other Buddhist attire? What if we stop coloring the dharma with labels from foreign countries (Tibet, India, China, Japan, etc.) and just let it go nakedly American? Are we ready for just our own awareness without being aware that it is Tibetan or whatever?

Or is it like finding a white rabbit in a snowstorm? Unless we clothe everything with some kind of Tibetan coloring, is our dharma just too American, too common or mundane for us to recognize as dharma? Can't we take dharma straight, just as it is in America, or do we have to earmark and dress it up so that we can call it 'dharma' when it seems to be too vanilla-American? I'm just asking, not to cause trouble, but because I am wondering and feeling this out.

Dharma in America is going to be just that, dharma as found by us here and right now, and not because it is brought to us by some dharma book or teacher. Is not the dharma, and hasn't it always been, fully present in America (as in everywhere else), but are we just shy of our being aware of it unless it has a label on it saying so? Do we dare wander away from labeling our increasing 'awareness' "Dharma?"

Is there a uniquely American take on dharma, and are we just beginning to see it? Does in partake of the 'ugly American' in us and have an accent to that affect, or do we still speak of dharma with a Tibetan twang? Are we embarrassed of the simple awareness of an American dharma? And why?

For we Americans, the dharma has been the pointing out of it to us by Tibetans, Zen, Japanese, etc., as to how we can become more aware, and this by those who can teach it to us, and by whatever means. 'Dharma' is signaled by our growing awareness and familiarity with the mind itself, however that can be achieved, and does not have to be accompanied by where it came from, Tibet, China, etc.

'Awareness' has no nationality, color, race, or creed, yet do we trust it without a label saying so or is unlabeled awareness, as mentioned, like trying to find a white rabbit in a blizzard?

Oct 23, 2021, 4:03 AM

A SAVING GRACE ...

It's 2 o'clock in the morning and I'm over at our dharma center vacuuming and mopping floors in a 14-room house. I must say that one of the most useful modern inventions is the cordless stick vacuum. It is very light, powerful, and easy-to-use. It comes with two large batteries. I used one up on the center and was into the other before I was done. They are both recharging. We have the LG cordless stick vacuum and while I can't say it makes extensive housework painless, it comes very close. And it is so quiet compared to other stick cordless vacuums. I praise it every time I use it. No more dragging a cannister around banging everything.

And now for a little rest, because today is my turn to polish the kitchen and dining area from top to bottom, vacuuming and moping the floors, and the counters, appliances, refrigerator – everything. I like cleaning kitchens because years ago I worked in them as a dishwasher for an Italian place on Telegraph Ave. (Caffè Mediterraneo) as a dishwasher and then later as a closer for a larger (greasy) seafood place down by the marina in Berkeley, California. I had to do the floors there, twice in one night, just because the grease was so deep.

That's about all the wise words I have for today. I may get some time to write later today.

Oct 24, 2021, 3:54 AM

BEING ALONE TOGETHER

I am trying not to write blogs like these, but left to my own devices, this is just what comes out now and then.

It's not like we have never been alone; we have always been alone, yet alone with others who each are also alone. That's our form of togetherness. The mystics like to phrase the word 'alone' as 'all one', which is fine by me. We just don't realize we are alone (or do we?), much less that we are all one. And then there is the little fact that there is no 'other'. We are interdependent and not independent. This is the problem facing America right now via Covid.

Remember the old Zen saying, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." Well, I never liked that phrase much, but the point is that there is no 'other' to be found or encountered, except in Samsara, whose main attribute is its duality, the separation of ourselves from others, something or someone outside ourselves. Removing that otherness, becoming 'One', is what awareness is all about. Aware that we are already one, as this little poem I wrote for the Greek philosopher Parmenides, who said "Being Alone Is."

PARMENIDES

Each to each the sorrow tells:

Find another.

Alone is borne the pain,

Alone the sorrow,

Alone the joy,

Today's tomorrow.

As for competitiveness? Compete with whom? That's a sure sign, not of realization, but of the tightness of Samsara's grip, that we are independent from others. In reality, we are each alone, yet interdependent with others. We are all in the same boat, together.

If someone else (as 'other') is in the picture, we have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Non-duality is just that, non-dual, where we are just out there, walking point, where we have always been. In that, we are either 'alone' or 'all one' And I should add:

Being 'Alone' does not thrive on toughness; that just does not cut it. No such thing; our tentativeness and inquiry discovers. Realization is realizing awareness, which is more often gradual than not; I mean tentative, and not assured. We inquire, not assert. We have nowhere to stand and yet there we are.

ONCE UPON A POSSUM Well, I have normalized from my third vaccination of Moderna, which they call a booster shot, although I am told that it is exactly the same strength as my original shots. Anyway, it made me feel achy for a day or two, or to be more exact, it made me feel like not doing much of anything at all, which mostly I did – nothing at all. Now I am up to speed and back at it once again, almost full bore. And right now, ‘back at it” means busy digitizing for computer-use my backlog of audio tapes, DV tapes, and VHS (and Super-VHS) tapes. My office looks like it has shrunk because all kinds of wires, equipment, etc. are strung around and my floor is piled high with plastic bins of hundreds of tapes. It’s going to be a little crazy for a month or two, yet after than I can store the originals knowing that digital copies exist and, as I am able, begin to produce videos for YouTube on astrology, dharma, music, not to mention family movies. Many interviews of great persons. I was just watching a video of my three daughters lotis, Anne, and May feeding and holding, mostly holding, three young possums... and loving it. We used to have our backyard filled with stainless steel cages full of various injured or orphaned animals, getting them to a state where they could be released back into the wild. Some of these family videos I might even post publicly, since they are a riot, and some perhaps not. [Photo is a single frame from a video shot by my wife Margaret many years ago. Left to right: lotis, May, Anne.]

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Oct 26, 2021, 7:43 AM

THE FAIRNESS OF TIME

I can only take so much of the national news, and it does run on and on, with never much good to say, as it metastasizes, only growing heavier like a rain cloud on the horizon. I can't or don't want to try to keep up with the news or I would get nothing done in a day.

It's unfortunate that our lives run tandem with all of this turmoil, yet they do. It's hard to reach back to before all this set in, to a more quiet and uneventful time. Will it ever return is hard to say?

As those who check in here know, I am keeping busy working through all of the collateral materials I have archived over the years, because unless I do it, it won't get done. It's very tedious work.

Yet, in the background of my mind there plays a music of a higher strain, something I am aware of and like to keep in mind. That would be an awareness of living and of whatever I do.

Well yes, years ago I started out focusing on the more sacred elements of my life, in particular meditation and dharma practice, anything that I considered was holier than the non-essential tasks of living. I kind of hung on to that sense of sacredness. I identified with it because it was, so to speak, perhaps a higher sense of me, myself, and I. Yet, that also was just another attachment.

Like a drop of water falling into a placid lake, the effects of this sense of sacred spread out, like ever-expanding circles, including more and more of my life, and

this goes on until I have to look twice to keep it all in mind. And so, it goes. Gradually, in our practice, everything and everyone becomes sacred. What is not sacred ?

Yet, I am not used to not having something elevated, something more sacred than not, so to speak, something that is put on a pedestal in my mind and revered. However, as mentioned, the ever more inclusive nature of awareness knows no shores and wants to sacralize it all, this whole enchilada we call life.

And that somehow takes the specialness of the sacredness away, reducing it to an everyday rarity. That, for me, was a little bit scary, at least at first. If everything is special, what is special?

This is the difference between dualism and non-dualism. In dualism, something is always excluded and must play the part of the 'other', while with non-dualism, it is all of one taste, something I at first knew relatively little about.

Yet, the truth is that it was OK that everything was special, because everything is 'special', a tautology or recursion that doubles-down and ostensibly has no end. I guess it depends on what we double-down on.

The fact that it has no end brings up the specter of a 'vanilla life', a life of the hum-drum, with no excursions into the realm of specialness. Of course, that is the fear that makes us not go there, even if we could go there, which mostly we can't. We don't know how.

Yet, that is not the reality. When everything is 'special', well, everything is special, not just vanilla. The real truth is that we don't know how to have

everything be special, so there really is no point in avoiding it. We can't make it special, even if we try because, as mentioned, we don't know how. We have not been shown and have not done the work to make it so.

How do we know it is special if we don't know it is special? The world of the tautology is defined as "that which is true by necessity." It is also defined as "saying the same thing twice in different words, generally considered to be a fault of style.' Which is it?

Well, both of course. Yet, the world of tautology seemingly has no end in its recursiveness. It steps outside of time, just like that. When we encounter a tautology, we get a little bit of infinity in a nutshell, fast.

Do we fall out of the timelessness of a tautology, or do we fear never emerging from a tautology? Is it OK to invoke tautologies or is it somehow a cop-out? Are we afraid of the freefall that tautologies invoke? It reminds me of the statement of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche when he said:

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

Tautologies are like that, IMO, a little bit of infinity in the present moment, like falling down the rabbit hole. Non-dual meditation, as best I know it, is like that. There is no end to it and God knows how we ever become aware of non-duality, until we fall into it. However, there does not seem like this is anything to fear, because mostly we are out of it all the time. LOL.

As meditators, we try to get into nondual meditation, and not out of it. There is a world of non-dual meditation where, like a groove, we fall into that groove and are as hard to dislodge from the groove as it is difficult for us to get into the groove in the first place. Non-dual meditation is learning how to get into that groove. Falling out is only too easy, until, with training, we settle into that groove. In other words, the same forces that prevent us from getting into the groove prevent us from falling out of it.

How's that equation for a natural law?

Oct 27, 2021, 1:38 AM

IN THE TIME OF TRANCE

It seems that I can't avoid the thought that these times we live now have kind of stunned us, put us into something like a trance, and pushed us over the edge into the beyond, or suppressed us. Perhaps we just can't take the pressure anymore and retreat behind the curtain of the conscious mind, almost as in having a spell cast on us, only voluntarily. It's like a trance. This happens on a small scale all the time, a 'bad' thought arising within a group, and all close down and turn inward to wait it out.

Yet, can a spell come over an entire nation and envelop us all? Are we now stunned, forced, as mentioned, into a trance-like state, like some kind of hibernation until this is all over? Do we go inside to wait out this perfect storm of

Covid and politics, like we do when anything untoward overcomes us? Is this just a larger instance and scale of that? Do you know what I am talking about?

Stunned, we go inside ourselves to wait out this difficult time, to wait until time itself will see us out. It has come to that, or so it seems. I don't recall this happening in my life up until now, that a mass trance is forced on us by circumstances. Perhaps we voluntarily block out this time.

This is a major change or event, an inflection point, a nation taking (or being forced to take) refuge in a trance-like state of shock.

Oct 27, 2021, 11:43 PM

DHARMA GOLD

[Solar Update: The largest solar flare in years just took place at 11:35 AM this morning, an X1-Class flare, the highest class, as the sunspot cycle continues to ramp up. Scientist tell us that the flare was directly facing Earth, so a direct CME (Corona Mass Emission) is headed for Earth and will impact Earth around Saturday or Sunday, October 30-31st. A pulse of the X-ray and extreme UV radiation, the advance guard, has already ionized the top of the Earth's atmosphere, causing a strong shortwave radio blackout centered on South America.]

Is the gold of the dharma real or does it rub off? Anything real or 'true' is not just a patina or gild. It does not rub off. And here we are talking about the dharma, which is an awareness of what is and what isn't.

All of the teachings state, again and again, that when it comes to dharma, you should, and you must, test it, and test it with all that you've got. The dharma is not meant to be taken on faith, but rather tested in every way possible so that we know it is not another wooden nickel, and that there is nowhere else to go.

And it is true, no matter who told us about it or what we have read in the teachings. That's what makes dharma the dharma; it's not about surface truth. Yet, if we don't test it out, how are we to be sure?

Heaven knows that I don't take much in this life on faith, other perhaps than life itself. I test stuff out, every which way but loose, so to speak. And I came across the dharma after I learned to avoid and escape from the religion I was brought up in. Literally, I took refuge in the dharma for lack of anything better. The dharma held fast, whereas other avenues, at least for me, dried up.

Yet, the dharma was not simply a slam-dunk, because I was not a slam-dunk, and that was not any fault of the dharma. For me the dharma was like a funnel, something more like a channel that I found myself headed into. There was no going back because there was nothing to go back to, IMO. Only the dharma was where opening was.

The dharma for me was the default, and it took me years to find it, not because it was not fully present, but because I was still wrestling to extract myself from the religious training I was brought up in as a Roman Catholic. I never had much

trouble with the life of Christ or with Christ himself; It was Christians and how they behaved that troubled me and that I could not accept.

The fact of all this is that in the dharma, especially when I was introduced to what are called the Common Preliminaries, also called “The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind the Dharma,” was when the dharma first caught my attention. And that was that these four thoughts were, to a great extent, something I had come to on my own, in my kind of patchwork-quilt form of a life philosophy.

And those Four Thoughts were, pretty much, what I had come up with myself, or something very close, so of course that attracted me right off. I was already thinking almost the same thing, so it was love at first sight. I didn't have to be indoctrinated because I already was indoctrinated through my study of Mother Nature. She taught me the same thing.

In other words, when it came to learning the dharma, I was already good to go.

Oct 28, 2021, 10:03 PM

Oct 30, 2021, 3:53 AM

THE OFFERING ENVELOPE The Tibetan culture, and in particular the Tibetan dharma culture, is the envelope (one of them) in which the dharma is being delivered to the West. This culture and tradition are the form or mold in which dharma is cast for many Americans. And similar to making Tibetan statues, once the mold is set and the form secured, the clay mold is shattered, revealing the

finished statue, in this analogy, that would be the dharma itself. And so, the importance of the mold cannot be underestimated, yet neither can the eventual breaking of the mold, releasing the dharma onto American soil. IMO, it seems the importance of maintaining the Tibetan tradition (and its importance) was of particular interest to my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. This Tibetan tradition was like the white scarf that is commonly offered in Tibetan rituals and empowerments. The white scarf is said to be like the envelope in which any offering is offered, and the Tibetan tradition in America is one of the envelopes in which the dharma is being offered to Americans. [Drawing by Tom Erlewine.]

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[Drawing by Tom Erlewine.]

Oct 31, 2021, 3:57 AM

SOLAR CYBERNETICS

Every existing organism only coheres or 'hangs together' by virtue of certain parameters and conditions that regulates that coherence. This is true for all organisms, anything with a nucleus, from each single cell in our body (or in any 'body') up to large scale structures like the Sun (the nucleus of the solar system), the galaxy (which also has a nucleus), and beyond to structures like the Supergalaxy with its extensive nucleus.

None of these structures coheres or sustains without some sort of regulation and that regulation comes from beyond itself in the hierarchy of structures in which it is embedded and, as mentioned, farther on up the line. Every last cell in our body depends on constant and continuing information that sustains, regulates, and

holds it together. Without that regulation of information, the cells collapse and are removed from the body.

This is true not only for single cells, but for whole systems like our solar system and beyond that, to still larger cosmic systems like the galaxy. Without our Sun as the nucleus, our solar system would cease to cohere and just collapse.

Anything with a nucleus can be considered a coherent system of one sort or another.

So, the takeaway here is that all coherent systems require information to regulate them enough to exist and they need continuing information (a constant) for them to continue to exist. This is obvious with organic systems like our body (or even a single cell), and astrophysicists also study larger cosmic systems, which have centers, and also depend on continuing regulatory information for coherence and to continue to exist. The sun inundates us with information (sunlight) day in and day out. We are one with and because of that.

A single cell in our body collapses into a mass of jelly without regulatory information from the body as a whole. What is that regulatory information and how does it travel and work?

One insight from such a discussion is that we too, as also an organism, depend on continuance, a continuing flow of information to regulate our body and life in order to exist. We are part of a larger interdependence of information that make up, not only our body, but also every body on the Earth we live in and on, and Earth itself is part of the organization and organism of the solar system, and so it goes, on up the line to the galaxy system, and beyond that to the supergalaxy system and so on.

There is one being or 'existence' as we know it, and all of that existence is interdependent; the parts of any organism all depend on one another. We all are interdependent and depend on one another.

What helps is to grasp how each organism or 'system', anything that has a nucleus, like a cell, a body, this Earth, this Solar System, this Galaxy, and this Supergalaxy is regulated and continues to cohere by information that flows and continually informs these systems. Information continually breathes life into these systems. This is called cosmic cybernetics.

Just like a hive of bees has a pile of dead bees on the ground surrounding the hive, while the hive continues to live by bee replacing bee, and so on, so does any 'organization' exist by a succession of members. This appears to be the succession of lives necessary to maintain the organization or system.

The light coming from the sun every minute of every day sustains us, not only with warmth and light, but with the information necessary for the Earth and each cell on the Earth to cohere and continue to exist. What does not arise from the Sun itself (as a cosmic organism itself) is passed through the Sun from deep space on down to Earth and to each organism on Earth.

This coherence is not just of Earth, but of every cell of every organism, organic or celestial in the universe. The universe is organized and depends on the regulation and regular distribution of information necessary for continued existence.

Nov 1, 2021, 7:08 AM

JOHN SINCLAIR AND THE BLUES SCHOLARS

OK, watch out, because here comes a concert from years ago with John Sinclair, backed up by Michael Erlewine, family, and extended family on instruments. Not for the faint of heart, but for blues lovers all around, If you have tender ears, skip it. Rough language is involved. Here is the actual concert on video:

<https://youtu.be/rTb2HX9INw4>

John Sinclair, poet, activist, and blues expert and I have known each other some 50 years or more. John Sinclair was the manager of the band “MC5” and I was lead singer and harmonical player in the ‘Prime Movers Blues Band’, and those two bands were often on the same bill with one another. I believe we met at the Grande Ballroom in 1966.

In later years, John was visitor to our complex here in Big Rapids and we spent time together. I’ve had the privilege and pleasure of playing behind my friend John Sinclair as part of his pick-up band that he calls the ‘Blues Scholars.’ Most anywhere John goes and has an invitation to perform, he forms the Blues Scholars out of local musicians he knows and picks up.

I’ve played amplified harmonica behind John Sinclair a number of times, both at our restaurant ‘The Two Sisters’, and our studio, then called ‘Library Hall.’

John recites blues-related lyrics to blues music. Often my daughters sit in for a few songs and musicians and friends like Seth Bernard (guitar), Luke Winslow-

King (guitar), and Sam Guidry (bass), and others make up that night's rendition of 'The Blues Scholars'. Our friend Dustin Edwards was our engineer.

Here is one of the shows John did with us. It is way too long to post here, but I hope you enjoy a few clips from that performance. It was in August of 2006. We had a great time, although I must warn those with tender ears (as I mentioned above), there is some rough language here.

<https://youtu.be/rTb2HX9INw4>

Nov 3, 2021, 7:06 AM

THE TRAUMA OF REACTION

Each reaction that we have, no matter how small, leaves a mark or groove in the mind. And if that reaction is repeated, that groove cuts deeper until it is (practically speaking) permanently engraved in the mind itself. Those marks and grooves don't just erase themselves but take years and perhaps lifetimes to be removed.

Like the old line from the laundry, these 'deep down stubborn stains' are very hard to remove. And, we all have them. They are ever further engraved by each reaction of a similar kind we endure. These, then, are what endure in the Alaya sub-consciousness from lifetime to lifetime, even though the situations that

caused them are long gone and forgotten. These marks are, practically speaking, almost indelible.

And we can gauge the existence and depth of these reaction-scars by just looking at a photo of our class reunion or any photo in which a lot of folks we know are in, whatever that might be. Or we can have the same reaction by bringing to mind individuals we have known, good, bad or indifferent, one by one, and note our reaction. The status of our 'one taste' (or lack thereof) is immediately obvious. We react, positively, negatively, and neutral, and not just a little, but a lot.

A quick review of such images should be more than enough to blow away any imagined accomplishments in the area of our having acquired 'one taste', which should be unmoved regardless of our impression of these people as good, bad, or indifferent.

Our reactions are our friend and like pain in the body are our early-warning system that something is wrong physically; monitoring our reactions is like a lie-detector test keeping us honest or at least pointing out where we are unable to accept reality exactly for what it is.

Nov 4, 2021, 1:19 AM

WHAT IS 'BAD' KARMA?

I find it helpful to remind myself what 'bad' karma actually is. If the dharma is the measure of the real, of the truth of things, meaning the inherent nature of reality, then dharmic actions are those that are aligned with this truth as it is and nothing more, or less than that. Anything else, whether it seems positive or seems negative is 'bad' karma, karma that engraves itself in our mind and has to be reckoned with at some point.

Some people seem to believe that any attachment on our part to dharma is 'good' karma, just because it is about 'dharma', so it must be good. Wishful thinking, IMO.

If we stray from appropriate actions (appropriate actions are those that don't vary from the truth of the dharma), then somehow such variant actions (karma) on our part pile up like gild or create a patina on the truth that is not real, and at some point have to be shed because of their untruth. In other words, 'bad' karma does not stand the test of time (and truth) and is at some point eventually eliminated.

This misalignment on our part is what is called 'karma', whether you consider it 'good' or 'bad', and often it is just bundled together and called 'bad' karma' if it accumulates negativity and perhaps (mistakenly taken to be) 'good' karma, if through reification on our part we attempt to gild the lily and make it seem more true than the truth. These two types of misalignment are both considered 'bad' karma.

This is where such phrases as 'the middle way' come into play. Not too much or not too little is the idea. Like the 'Three Bears' in Goldilocks, what we want are

actions that are 'just right', actions that are aligned with the ways things inherently are, call it dharma ('the truth') or whatever.

Perhaps this concept of non-alignment with truth (with dharma) makes is more clear, the idea of the dharma as neither too much or too little, but rather that perfect dharma is 'good' (aligned with the dharma), and the so-called 'bad' karma is defined as overshooting or undershooting the reality of dharma, either way, negatively or overly positive, i.e. getting it wrong.

As mentioned, 'Good' karma is karma that aligns with the dharma (inherent reality) exactly, and it is not good karma if we try to make the truth better than it is, as with reification (gilding the lily, as they say. And of course, we have what is called 'bad' karma if our actions fall short or intentionally avoid the truth, avoid the reality of the dharma. This 'Bad' or impure karma accumulates in or on us and (as said by the dharma teachings) has to be dealt with sooner or later. What is interesting to me is:

What becomes of the karma that we accumulate, karma that is more or less (exaggerated) than reality, the reality of the dharma? Either way, this accumulating karma is excess and amounts to 'bad' karma, karma which eventually has to be removed or somehow dealt with by us. And we have to do this ourselves.

All the books and teachings say, if I read them right, that bad karma takes time to remove or rectify, often a very long time, even lifetimes if needed. What I mean by that is that this kind of 'bad' karma, just because of the fact that it does not fit the reality of the dharma as truth, does not simply vanish or fade away. This karma somehow accumulates and becomes an increasing problem for us as it continues to accumulate.

Remember, that karma is (for the most part) based on our conscious intent and not on accidental acts that we make. And it is 'we' who are accumulating this karma, which means it is we who have intentionally strayed off the path or track of dharma (missed the point intentionally) enough to accrue it. How do we get back on track? That would be by correcting whatever deviance (karma) from the actual dharma we have accumulated. And, apparently, that takes time and lots of it.

Otherwise, there would not be these endless references in the Buddhist teachings about karma and the attrition we have to undergo because we have accumulated it. Remember the teaching motto that "Karma Burns Twice, 'once' when it is formed or accumulates and 'twice' when it ripens and has to be removed. The point is that we can't just ignore karma. It hangs over us. We have to work it off by our actions to counteract our karmic accumulation. We have to get aligned with the inherent reality of what is – the dharma.

And almost all the teachings I have studied say that the easiest way to remove 'bad' karma is not to accrue it in the first place. Let me repeat that. It is far easier to NOT create karma in the first place than it is to remove it after it is formed.

In summary, our every intentional action inscribes our mind with its quality, not just once but repeatedly, and we do it probably hundreds and thousands of times a day. Over a lifetime, such actions that are not truthful or dharmic are almost innumerable. It's no wonder that we carry the scars of our intent with us as karma.

Nov 4, 2021, 11:52 PM

TRAPPED BEHIND THE VEIL

Or better yet, the passage from '1 Corinthians 13:12'. "Through a glass darkly."

Some days it is as if there is no place to go and nothing I want to do. In that case, there is always available to me to just look at the state of mind I'm in at the moment, like it or no. One of the great dharma maxims has to be "Bring it to the Path,' whatever is at hand, especially if it is troubling us, find awakening right where you are.

What concerns me from time to time are all the veiled obscurations that dim my mind and kind of hang over me like a bad smell. Mostly I don't even realize it because I've made a habit of ignoring the off-color obscuration that I sense, yet its shroud weighs on me often enough that it eventually attracts my attention with its nagging discomfort. And it can be very subtle. I hate to just give in and not even bother with it, so I often just put up with it as it is. Sooner or later, I find I must bring it directly to the path and work through it, whatever it is.

And, as mentioned, it seems that it is too vague for me to be aware of it all the time. It's in the corner of my eye or just around the corner of the mind. I can't quite see it, but I can feel it and I know it's there.

I sometimes just turn away and carry on, like whistling in the dark, and after a while it seems I have turned away to the point that I don't turn back, but instead,

just somehow surrender and live for a while in that slightly obscured state, like having a pesky mosquito buzzing around my head. After all, it's just a little obscured, just a little dimmer than life as I remember it. Yet, I sometimes don't have the energy or insight to face it directly and, as mentioned, get on with working through it.

I'm not talking here about the big upsets, those I endure and am aware of, but rather the veil of shadows that sometimes hang over me. Even if I slow down enough to attempt to focus on this veiling, it can remain subtle, most often offering nothing to precisely pinpoint on my part, but is just a general cloudiness and dimming of what I imagine should be a normal brightness. In other words, I'm aware that I am not aware as I would like to be. I remember clearer times than these.

And to remove this veiled sense of obscuration takes exercise and actual effort on my part to burn it off and find my way back to what we could call the 'bright and the beautiful'. Instead, I can at times remain out of touch, just shy of that clarity, somehow languishing in my own obscurations until some event or insight of awareness sheds enough light on my situation for me to take action, work through it, and emerge again into the light of clarity that I remember I should feel like. I'm back to where I think I should be or can't tell the difference. LOL.

Again, I am not talking about the eclipse of anything; nothing that obvious, but rather feeling just enough out of sorts, enough beside myself, that I am aware of my own condition and am able to do something about it. Yet, what to do?

Well, I imagine that varies for each of us. For me, it often takes some kind of exercise, and I don't mean just physical exercise, although that usually helps as well. Instead, I'm talking about mental and psychological exercise, some kind of definite articulation on my part. That type of exercise.

And by 'articulation' I mean something like kneading dough, massaging my mind vigorously until something catches hold in me, call it energy or insight that suddenly I can wipe the slate clean again, burn off this dross of a veil like the sun does the mist of the morning.

It's like shedding this skin or veil of obscurity I mentioned, and very much like a cat throws up a fur ball. Or, it's like a snake shedding its skin. We work off the cloudiness by energetically articulating until our inner vision is clear again, until we feel 'normal', if we can accurately remember, whatever normalness is.

It's like a sacred dance around a fire.

In other words, we bob on the surface, going in and out of clarity until our glass seems half full again rather than half empty. I can live with that.

Nov 5, 2021, 9:54 PM

NATIVE AMERICAN ARTICULATION

Articulation clears the air. It is like a mantra or more apt;, it is like a dance in which we articulate our steps, enunciating perhaps a chant, and we define the dance by each step we take, one following the next, in an order that defines the

process. Such a dance clarifies the mind. It is the same with dharma practices like sadhanas and other rituals. 'Dharma practice' here means the articulation of ritual that clarify the mind and make us lucid.

Articulation is, for me, an action I perform. And the more carefully or deliberately I act, the clearer my mind and awareness becomes. In my case, this is primarily verbal these days, by writing blogs like these, yet for others it could be anything that we do that clarifies our mind and helps to shatter and breakdown the stale fogginess that stains our awareness.

By articulating clearly and carefully each thing that we do (quite Zen-like), we burn off the dross and this sense of being encased in concrete, shattering all that, to emerge in clarity and lucidness to what we call feeling 'normal'.

It brings to mind Native American dance, which arose naturally in this country, out of the land itself, and probably better defines what I am trying to say. That dance is articulated by the steps involved, the sound of the drums, an attitude, and the chants that are enunciated.

No, most of us don't do that particular kind of dance, yet my guess is that we would benefit from doing so. After all, it arose from the land itself that we live on and must somehow encapsulate its essence. Whether we can realize that dance is another matter, yet IMO one worth considering.

After studying (in-depth) Tibetan dharma (and some Zen) for over 50 years, and traveling to Tibet a number of times, I realize that every land and continent produces its own sense and flavor of dharma, including, of course, our own North America. And the Native Americans are the natural result of the nature of this particular land. Native American rituals are not the anachronism that some

suggest, but remain today a living example of what our land demands and brings forth. It's a living talisman.

Native American dance rituals are the proper articulation required by this North American continent to clarify the mind and render it lucid. I'm a slow learner, but have come around to these thoughts and am gradually understanding that my familiarization with the Tibetan culture and dharma is the same as American dharma and what the Native Americans also represent. Each culture echoes the nature of the land it lives on.

My friend and Michigan poet Gordon Henry introduced me to the Sun Dance Ceremony some years ago, and it made a strong imprint on me. I have always been interested in Native American ritual and habits, but I could not find a lineage there I could join. I found that in the Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Vajrayana dharma, and have spent many years practicing and learning within that lineage, although it is based on the land of Tibet.

I now see (and understand more clearly) that Native American ritual and ceremony are the product of this North American continent we live on and the local space surrounding us. With that in mind, I now want to revisit Native American ceremonies with my newfound understanding that these American rituals were born from this land and that I could very well enter into them and learn from them as I have from the Tibetans.

I imagine that every Native American dance, chant, and act, many of which are still practiced, carry with them and display the effect of this land we live in. And Michigan is very strong in this regard. I am not Tibetan, but I was born in America and am an American. I plan to look to and study some Native American rituals to see what this land has wrought and has to say for me. Deep down there should be some familiarity.

Nov 6, 2021, 9:44 PM

THE LOCALITY WHERE SPACE AND TIME CONVERGE I became interested in

THE LOCALITY WHERE SPACE AND TIME CONVERGE

I became interested in the space immediately surrounding us over five decades ago. And I called it, appropriately, 'Local Space' and went on to publish an article on it in 1977 in the magazine "Cosmology Bulletin." Perhaps more to the point, I described and gave life to an astrological technique I called "Local Space" by programming it, a technique which is now used all over the world in astrological software based on interpreting the Horizon Coordinate System of azimuth and altitude. I mention this because this was how affected I was by this technique. In that article I wrote things like:

"Local Space is no "subtle plane," but a personal landscape painted in bold and clear strokes, tailor-made to fit the psyche of each individual. Here is a world where the modern man or woman is learning to move across the face of this earth in an endless dance of adjustment and tuning of his radix -- of his or her self. Individuals driven in particular directions on a checkerboard world, unable to resist travelling toward a goal that is no particular place on earth so much as it is a direction imprinted within them, the direction of a force or planet, "There! Where Power hovers", to use Don Juan's expression. In a word, here is perhaps the most direct astrological system, where the obvious is enthroned and the subtle unnecessary."

The entire original article is here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=312&t=1361&sid=ee812866027df47fb51c06c3fefec5df>

Also, a free e-book describing this technique is available as well:

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

So, it should come as no surprise that I became fascinated by the concept in Tibetan culture of the ‘Sa-Dak’, the spirits that surround and protect a particular place and land, the lords of the land - Earth Lords.

Particularly, in these times in which so much wide-scale destruction to nature and the land has taken place, one cannot but wonder about the consequences. In general, modern society has adopted as a world view the very materialistic concept that land and sea are just dirt and water, so many atoms, and have in themselves no innate essence or spirit. Years ago, I published a little book titled “Tibetan Earth Lords,” in which, and I quote:

“Yet the Tibetans and the Chinese don't feel this way at all. They respect the land and everything about it. This is why Feng Shui is so popular in these countries and much consulted. These Tibetan Earth Lords are similar to Feng Shui, but they have to do not so much with where and how things are positioned, but with the very energy of a place and the respect shown to it – how that space is treated. Let me explain:

“According to the Tibetan and the Chinese, every place, that is: every mountain, stream, and canyon is something more than just the sum of its physical parts and whatever beauty it may or may not possess to our eyes. There is some kind of force or energy connected to the way things have come together in this particular spot to make it what it is. In other words, there is such a thing as an energy or indwelling nature spirit - whatever you want to call it. From this point of view, locations are not just atoms of rock and water, but there is some subtle and perhaps indescribable energy that makes a particular valley or forest "beautiful," a place where we can sense a power or presence that takes our breath away, if only for a moment. We intrinsically sense that some places are special. What makes them special?”

A free e-book on Earth Lords is here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Earth-Lords.pdf>

In other words, places and locations have their effect on us, and this especially includes an entire continent like North America. Up until rather recently, I always looked at Native Americans as just that, the native peoples of America. It just did not occur to me that these Native Americans were the product, so to speak, of the very land where they lived, that they were also formed and affected (spirited) by the nature of that land.

Of course, I was influenced by the Sa-Dak or Earth Lords of the Tibetans, not people, but the spirits of places. So, it was only a hop, skip, and a jump for me to eventually realize that our land, North America, itself grows people that reflect itself, its essential nature. And it was a more jarring insight (for me) to then realize that while I was busy studying the Tibetan culture along with their dharma

and philosophy, that right here in North America we have the same thing or something very similar.

It never occurred to me that the Native Americans are the living result of the effect of this land of North America. Their very existence is telling us something we need to witness and learn from, along with their spirit and practices. I found this to be true from studying Tibetan dharma, which is based on the land of Tibet, a land that is very different from our American land.

If we want to see what North America as a land or space produces, we have to look no further than to Native Americans. They are the living proof of generations of life here in North America. I have always been fascinated by the speech of Native Americans, although much has been only movie-speech. Yet, this has been confirmed by actually being with Native Americans. By listening, I am aware of something I am missing, something that seems to slow time down by the manner of enunciation. What is the land we too live on saying to us through these longtime residents of North America?

Their presence and activity sum up generations of familiarity with the continent of North America. And yes, I see Native Americans are different from the Tibetan people, the culture of Tibet being something I have studied for many years. I learned a lot from that study. However, I have not studied our own Native Americans and their rituals, in particular as reflections of our land (and its innate spirit) as carefully as I could and now I intend to.

Little did I know that my interest in Tibetan and its dharma was also a mirror reflection for American dharma and its progenitors, Native American people, their spirit and dharma. For me, there was this shift in insight when I discovered that what I first assumed was a singleton, a one-off, my Tibetan experience, turns out

to be the first member of a tribe of many. Dharma is dharma, Tibetan, Native American, or just North American.

Nov 7, 2021, 3:54 PM

FLEXIBILITY IN DHARMA

When we first get into the dharma, it can be through many ways, some perhaps more natural to us than others. We may be shown how to sit and practice Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), or recite a series of prayers or even sadhanas, or perhaps we are given some mantras to say – all kinds of things. It is up to our interest to sustain it.

All of these different approaches have at least some learning curves to them. We have to start somewhere. And what may be new to us at first (and interesting) can become old pretty fast until we find ourselves reciting just because that text is there in front of us and we have decided to recite it each day, and not because our original enthusiasm is still intact. It can become something we just recite to get through it and every word is no longer as fresh and striking as it once was.

How useful is rote repetition without fresh intent and, well, some kind of joy? This is a standard problem that many beginning dharma practitioners face.

What I have found, although it took me years to admit the truth of this to myself, is that (at least for me) the dharma is meant to be more flexible and moveable than I thought. Another way to say this is that it is up to us to remain interested, to find joy in practice, and to migrate across the web of dharma techniques, keeping it interesting, and making sure to stay fresh with our approach. The dharma does not owe that to us; we owe it to ourselves.

The idea of migration through the realm of dharma techniques appears to be something that is not well understood by dharma beginners. The whole idea of dharma practice is to become increasingly aware, increasingly, and not to become dulled by our practice or bored, although boredom is something we must learn to recognize in ourselves and negotiate.

We each have a thread of interest in our lives, and this goes for our dharma practice too. It is up to us to remain interested in our practice and not vice-versa. In other areas of our life than dharma, we know how to follow the vein of our interests, like a thread, as it appears to us and as we can find it.

I can say, at least in my own case, that as I actually began to recognize the dharma in my life more, that there was a natural evolution or migration of my interest, if I would dare to allow it. Again, the key to my interest is obviously my interest, and that it interests me. If it no longer interests me, then I am not interested. This is a tautology, but one each of us might consider.

The line of my interest, as I know it, is more like a burning fuse, threading its way through dharma practices as they bring awareness to me. I need that awareness!

I don't know of any other way. Of course, practices like sitting meditation, learning Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), may involve repetition until we get the technique down and develop the needed memory-muscle. Yet, that does not mean that all dharma practices are like that. We do have to find and maintain our own interest in dharma. It is up to us.

And this is done, IMO, not by doubling-down on what bores us, but rather by flexibly moving around through the various dharma techniques, led by our interest. Keeping that alive. And this often means one step forward and two steps back, or the reverse, two steps forward and one step back – remaining flexible.

Pliability and flexibility are not only natural but required for us to stay fresh and interested in the dharma. And for me, when I finally allowed myself to begin to follow my natural interest in the dharma, instead of forcing myself to repeat rote texts, texts that had for me lost their freshness or interest. There is nothing wrong with those texts, but only with my loss of interest, and that may be only temporarily. Yet, there it is.

I need to move around at least enough to retain my interest in the dharma. This is natural. In fact, if you continue to remain interested in the dharma, this eventually leads to what is called (appropriately enough) 'Insight Meditation' (Vipassana), which is all about our interest and is as close as I know to what we might call a perpetual-motion machine, only here it could be labeled a 'perpetual-interest' machine. Once established, Insight Meditation, IMO, is like the oxygen of the dharma.

The whole function of Insight Meditation is to spark, and continually at that, our insight with its freshness and from that grow awareness. And my point is that we may have to migrate from our more rote dharma practices to Insight Meditation, and do this before we, so to speak, run out of interest.

IMO, pliability, flexibility on our part is crucial to maintaining interest and to continually growing the awareness that is the sign of deepening our dharma practice. We must care for our flame of interest so that it never goes out. And this is not, as they say, rocket science, yet it is something we may need to be mindful of.

And that flame of interest depends on, of course, our continued interest in the dharma. And that interest is tempered by its being flexible and pliable, moving in, out, around, across, and back across different areas of the dharma, making sure to protect and keep that initial flame of interest lit and alive.

This is where it helps to have a dharma teacher or at least someone with more experience that can help us to not get caught up in a waste of valuable time because we don't know enough to be flexible, to come in out of the sun, so to speak.

Nov 10, 2021, 9:22 AM

ARTICULATING RITUALS

What does it take to clarify the mind? What activity allows us to be interested in the mind to the degree that clarity and lucidity naturally arise?

For me that activity can be one of several things, all activities or articulations that I do. In the Tibetan dharma that I have practiced, this includes chanting mantra, fingering malas (beads), performing mudras (hand movements), playing instruments, and so on. In other words, these are activities that I articulate. Of course, there can be activity just within the mind itself, yet most (or many) ritual practices include physical activity of one kind or the other, often the ones mentioned above, as well as perhaps dancing and singing poems or songs of spiritual experience.

I am not an anthropologist or even that interested in various cultures, yet I am interested in whatever sharpens or clarifies the mind and renders us lucid. And in my experience, that always seems to involve some kind of explicit activity or another that I articulate and exercise. This articulation clarifies the mind.

And I am also interested in rote activities I have done that are little more than wasted time. By this I mean activities that involve no meaningful intentions on my part, activities I may recite just to have done them (or to have them done for the day), activities that, so it seems, do not clarify my mind, or if they do, then not so much. This, IMO, is a real problem and is what I do not recommend folks do. And I should know. There is no automatic button that works for our intentions, so we have to have heartfelt intention in dharma practice. Otherwise, we find ourselves in rote recitation.

And of course, I could find no more convenient example as to a failure of intention than my own rote recitation of various dharma sadhanas or prayers, recitations over the years that were perhaps well-meaning, yet were essentially mindless on my part and probably had little to no merit. I believe that these kinds of relatively rote practices are more common than we like to think. I am not saying there is no virtue in such mindless recitation, but rather that the virtue is very little and not what these practices were designed for. They were designed to have intention and to be intended, not just rattled off.

And so, in my own dharma practice, I find myself gravitating not to a set of required prayers and sadhanas that I cannot seem to keep in mind even with the intention to do so, and where on occasion I seem to embarrass even myself, but rather I am drawn to wherever I actually find interest and thus the possibility of true insight. And that is not in rote recitation.

Over the years, I have found that what is called Vipassana (insight Meditation) of the kind that is part of Mahamudra Meditation in the Kagyu Lineage is what is actually exactly the kind of articulation or exercise my mind requires to clarify itself. I am all about that.

And it is to this particular kind of Insight Meditation to which I have gravitated over the years, and at the same time I have gradually ceased to perfunctorily perform rote meditations that do not quicken my mind, at least until such time as I can have the proper intention. I realized this years ago, but was frozen in place, afraid to do anything about it. Mostly, I didn't know what to do. So much of my dharma practice had become mere repeating, without any real insight.

In the beginning, I was reciting classic dharma by rote, yet after a while without enough heart and perhaps with not the proper intention, and like a seed without soil and water, nothing (or very little) grew there. And, as mentioned, I was afraid to let go of the rote practices and venture beyond that rote recitation, because it was all I knew, even though I became increasingly aware that this rote recitation was quite often meaningless. It was quite frightening to see my dharma practice atrophying over time.

I am not saying this meaningless recitation will damage us (perhaps it will), but I have no doubt that it does damage us by wasting time that we may need to better prepare ourselves for this and the next life.

The answer to all this is to migrate from rote practices, using our natural sense of interest, until we find ourselves fully immersed in Insight Meditation, the particular form of Vipassana used in Mahamudra Meditation. How we might make this migration I plan to discuss.

Nov 11, 2021, 4:00 AM

DHARMA MIGRATION

How do we move or migrate from being stuck or trapped in what we could call rote meditation practice, a dharma practice that is essentially boring, to awakening the self-perpetuation of Insight Meditation? That, IMO, is a tall order, but doable, yet not without great effort and some guidance.

In the previous blog I sketched out how we can awaken enough to realize that we are too much trapped in rote dharma practice and lack the insight as to how to get out of that. It happens because, while perhaps originally, we were inspired by reciting texts, over time we lost the way or path of our own insight, and its thread more or less died out for us, leaving us with rote reciting. You can use your own words to define this, yet if that definition includes losing track of insight and practical intent, you know (if you are in it) the boat of which I speak.

The dharma is not a static state, but always a process and journey that we are on as travelers, wanderers. And if we have managed to paint ourselves into a corner and lost our insight to whatever degree, that's our responsibility. It's up to us to remedy this.

In other words, the first step here is to admit to ourselves that our dharma practice is stale and no matter how good our intention was, we have to that degree lost our way. If we can't do that then, no problem, yet we have a problem.

As mentioned, dharma is a path and a journey, not a static state, a migration that IMO follows our inner sense of natural interest. We do have such interest yet may have lost track of it. Find it once again. It is not intended that we start out with joy and interest in recitation of the dharma, but then let it die down or die out. It is up to us to keep the inner flame of interest burning.

And we do that by following our interests wherever they lead or beckon. Letting our thread of interest go fallow is not a solution. Just the opposite. We become impacted, unable to flex or move.

And so, finding that trace or trail of interest is imperative, no matter where it leads. It may lead right out of dharma practice for a while. We may need to just give it a rest. Yet the courage to find interest has to be there or be developed. I mean, after all, we are talking about OUR interest and no one else's. If we don't have that, we have no guide at all other than the awareness of our own stagnancy.

Turn over the soil; dig deep. Find what you ARE interested in and go there. Follow where it leads, even if it leads away from where you think it should. It can come back around, but not unless we find our thread of interest and follow it.

Vipassana (Insight Meditation), in particular the type as implemented in the Karma Kagyu style of Mahamudra Meditation is where and when our insight comes alive and becomes constant, IMO. I say “IMO” because people vary and your experience may vary. I can only relate what I have found to be true.

Nov 12, 2021, 3:07 AM

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART IN NEW YORK CITY

I was very happy to learn today that the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City has requested to add to their permanent collection our set of some 500 pieces of Tibetan art (drawings and pen & Ink work) created at our dharma center “Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Chöling)” by Sangye Wangchug who lived with us for some years. Sangye Wangchug later became the Cultural Minister of Bhutan, and unfortunately has passed on a few years ago. Here is that story.

In 1985 I invited Sangye Wangchug and his wife Tseten to come live and work at our dharma center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. Wangchug, a former monk, Omze (chant master), was a skilled calligrapher, an expert graphic artist, and was fluent in seven languages, including Tibetan, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Hindi, Pali, and Sanskrit. He lived at KTD Tibetan Monastery for some years before

coming to our center, and while there he built a scale model of the forthcoming monastery, taught Tibetan language classes, and did all kinds of lettering, including the huge Sanskrit Lantsa mantras in the main shrine room. He actually created the large Sanskrit mantras while staying with us.

Sangye and his wife lived with us for 2-1/2 years, during which time we translated Tibetan astrology together from the original manuscripts into English, mostly the astrological works of the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. During that time Sangye did so many things. I have over 500 original pen-and-ink drawings of Buddhist deities, and all kinds of other dharma graphics, plus calligraphies of major sadhanas. We taught Wangchug how to use a Mac computer and Adobe Illustrator, and he soon produced wonderful dharma graphics electronically as well. Sangye Wangchug also designed and help build the Bodhi stupa that we have here at our center, overseeing it all, and measuring everything to scale.

When we decided to run a mail-order dharma item business for KTD Monastery from here in Michigan, Sangye Wangchug help to design the whole thing, including traveling to Nepal and India, securing the best statues, incense, and all manner of stuff.

Earlier in his life, as a monk, Wangchug had been Omze (chant master) for one of the four regents for the Karma Kagyu lineage. Sangye was also renowned for his singing of the Dohas (songs of spiritual experience) of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa, which reminds me of this story.

When it came time for Sangye and his wife Tseten to leave us and return to Bhutan, we had a goodbye party with Sangye, his wife, Margaret, our friend David McCarthy, and myself. We asked Sangye to sing for us one of the songs of Milarepa. He said he would, but wanted the rest of us to sing a song too. We agreed, and so we did. Sangye, of course, sang beautifully, David too, while

Margaret and I did the best we could. Then Sangye's wife Tseten's turn came, and she also sang. We had not considered her much as a singer, because, well, that was Sangye's forte.

To our amazement Tseten sang a Tibetan mountain song that struck to the heart all present and had all of us crying. We had no idea that Tseten could sing like that!

Sangye Wangchug went on to become the Minister of Culture for Bhutan. I had dinner with Sangye a few years ago and have been in touch with him by email over the last years. We had a true and genuine friendship. I will very much miss him being here on the planet with us. The world was better for me just knowing he was around.

Here is a little poem I wrote, which I offer to the memory of Sangye Wangchug, along with my sincere prayers for his transition.

CLOSE FRIEND

We can't replace,

What there is,

Only one of.

Here are some examples of Sangye Wangchug's work.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Sacred%20Images%20of%20Sange%20Wangchug%20FIN%20V3.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Word%20Images%20Dharma%20ART.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Dharma%20Pecha%20Images.pdf>

This pretty much completes the placement of my major archives and life collections. I have tried my best to be a good steward of this data. Here are the collections that Margaret and I have donated, plus the music and film databases we sold.

Rubin Museum of Art, NYC (dharma art and calligraphy of Sangye Wangchug)

Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan (33,000 rock poster art images, dimensions, and commentary)

Michigan State University (AMG CD Collection -- over 720,000 CDs)

University of Illinois Library (Heart Center Astrological Library, probably the largest ever assembled)

Haight Street Art Center (Copy of 33,000 rock poster art images, dimensions, and commentary)

Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (Thousands of backup teachings on tape, mostly from Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche)

All-Music Guide (AllMusic.com), said to be the largest music database on the planet.

All-Movie Guide (allMovie.com) one of two largest film and movie databases ever assembled.

[Photo of Sangye Wangchug back in the 1980s, working on his drafting table doing calligraphy or dharma art. Wangchug did the calligraphy for many, many Tibetan practice sadhanas, which we then published. His handwriting was lovely and much in demand. We have many dozens of hand-lettered sheets of the main Tibetan sadhanas. Here is a pen & ink drawing of White Tara.]

Nov 13, 2021, 1:07 AM

NORTH AMERICAN DHARMA

I have some questions for all those who practice Tibetan dharma in America. I don't have all the answers, just some of the questions.

We know something about how the Buddha dharma reached Tibet. There are many stories. We know that the great Lord Marpa made three trips by himself to India and brought back the dharma. I am sure some Tibetans may know, yet I'm sure I don't know just what that means. What exactly did Marpa bring back?

I believe there were sacred texts, perhaps, yet the most sacred thing Marpa brought back was the realized dharma in himself as a living realization, whatever he absorbed from all of those Indian and Sanskrit teachings and teachers. And here is where some of my questions begin to come up.

Did Marpa teach the Tibetans the Indian form of dharma he was taught or, instead, did Marpa express the dharma and his realization directly through the Tibetan culture, meaning by using the dharma that he absorbed from Naropa. Did he express it in Indian or in Tibetan terms, or some of both?

I know that my own Tibetan Lama did his utmost to teach us the dharma through the Tibetan language. We even had to recite all our sadhanas and practices in Tibetan for decades. That's how Tibetan those teachings were.

In other words, we learned Tibetan dharma and not primarily Indian dharma. And with this thought comes another question. How natural for us was doing our practices in Tibetan in an attempt to absorb as much as we could from their tradition? Will we be eventually realized through our Tibetan practices or will we absorb the blessing and training from those practice, get the idea or gist of the dharma (which is called appropriately enough 'Recognition'), and from there express it in the American language and style? My thought is the later, of course.

Will we eventually abandon the Tibetan forms and influence and, using that realized dharma, express it in our own language, English? Even more interesting

to me: will our native land, North America, be for us what the land of Tibet was for Tibetans? Will there come a point where we let go of one culture and express it in another, in this case English and our own American culture. And I now pull out the stops and go full into 'blue sky' mode. And this will perhaps seem like an excursion from what many currently assume, that we will be enlightened in the Tibetan culture.

Like handholds on the web of dharma, the dharma beyond culture, beyond any country, is always present in one language or another, yet these cultures differ. Will we let go of one culture-style of dharma and pick up on another, in this case as mentioned, our American dharma? Those are some questions that arise in my mind. Now for some experiential accounts, such as I have had, and perhaps a little testimony.

In my own case, while I have chanted many sadhanas. I have primarily done a small number of Tibetan dharma sadhanas with real focus, mostly Chenresik, Amitabha, and eventually there was Karma Pakshi and Vajrapani (Dorje Tumpo). Of course, I have had scores of empowerments, blessings, and so on. Yet, for the above sadhanas I mentioned, I have had the empowerments, the lung, the instructions, and actually practiced these, including completing the mantra requirements for most of them. However....

And there is an 'however' to relate. And that is when there came a time in my life when I actually engaged with what I can only call, 'Recognition', an actual introduction to the nature of the dharma of my mind, 'The Mind', and I share this with you as best I can, just in brief:

And this is what happened, and it was surprising to me. This breakthrough dharma-event did NOT happen on the cushion as I always assumed it would,

and not before the shrine, or wrapped in any of the above sadhanas. Not even close.

Instead, through something like a 'perfect storm' of coincidences, including some very upsetting news personally, I found myself, when under extreme duress, reverting to my first love, something I had known as early as perhaps six years of age, which simply is my love of and intense experience of Mother Nature, this natural world. It was like when I entered this time of trial, when the chips were down, I went home (not to the meditation cushions), but to where I first came from, natural history, nature in all her beauty and her laws.

In this process of coming to terms with the reality of that time, after decades inside, I just up and left my office where I spent most of my time and went out in nature, armed only with a camera and some shock and sorrow.

In fact, I went off by myself for something like six months straight, going out into nature, the fields and meadows, and I did this each and every morning it was not raining. I immersed myself in nature, going out before dawn and watched the sun come up. When was the last time you watched the sun rise... for months at a time?

And at that point, I abandoned my worries (which I had a lot of at that time) and I gave myself completely over to identification with the natural world. And what happened or what came out of that is interesting.

What came out of that was me, yet a 'me' discovering what I believe is called 'Insight Meditation' (Vipassana), not thinking or studying it, but doing it, actually meditating. Not practicing meditation which I had seriously attempted to do for at

least 30 years, but just meditating, and non-dual meditation at that. And now I am getting the main point here, after all this as preamble.

Was this rather odd way of discovering for myself 'Insight Meditation' just something personal to me? Of course, it was personal, this so very vivid awareness. Who could miss or forget it? Yet, was it just me or was I touching into and perhaps re-linking into this North American land I grew up in as natural a way as I could remember, which I had full-heartedly done since a small boy?

I had been raised out in the country, in a house my family had built, with no neighbors on either side. Just our home stuck between two huge farms. As the oldest child with four brothers, I had no one to play with my own age, so I spent my time in nature and came to study it. That's a piece of knowledge you may need, to understand why I reverted to Mother Nature, when my personal situation was in crisis and I had nowhere else to turn. Even the dharma was not familiar enough to me for such a severe situation.

Anyway, it makes no difference. Where I did turn was to Mother Nature. I went back to the land and can't help but wonder: is such an event the next step?

Of course, it most certainly was for me the next step, one that was unexpected and life shattering when it comes to my dharma practice. It was not practice of any kind, but instead just straight-ahead meditation that dawned, as mentioned, what is called 'Insight Meditation' (Vipassana) of a special kind.

I cannot but wonder if other forms of meditating or other dharma techniques and training will manifest in the same manner as this did with me. Will dharma recognition happen to Americans in its own way, not as it manifested for the Tibetans or perhaps for the adepts of India, but for America and Americans?

Does our North American land have its own spirit and sense as does Tibet? Certainly, dharma in India and Tibet were markedly different for each other. Will this be true for North America?

I know. I risk sounding crazy here, so color me crazy if you must. I don't care. I have no choice because exactly this is what happened in my life, and nothing other than this. When asked will we always do our practice in Tibetan, my blessed dharma teacher once said that Americans will have their own experiences and write their own sadhanas, etc. What else could he mean?

Yet, it is hard for me not to think of us rewriting the Amitabha, Chenresik, and other sadhanas, not in Tibetan, but in English. Yet I am not talking about translation here, but recreation from scratch. However, what if it is more different than that? What if our land is a different land than that of India or Tibet? What if there is an American dharma just as there was a Tibetan dharma different from Indian dharma?

And what, and this is my last question I hope: what if the nature of the land in North America (and the dharma) is more like the Native American rituals and ceremonies? Certainly, my own insight and the something-like-a-ritual that has come out of that special time is not exactly like any Tibetan technique I know or have studied.

Yet, I keep calling it 'Insight Meditation,' talking with American experts of Vipassana and Insight Meditation, yet wondering if perhaps what I do is a distinct variation. I can't say for certain because I have no way of comparing, yet something is dawning on me.

What I can say and what I do know is that this ritual practice that I do each day functions or works very powerfully. Perhaps I should stop trying to match it up to what I perceive as its Tibetan equivalent, and just let it be what it is, because it already is what it is. How about that?

All of my Tibetan dharma training is just grist for this North American mill. It is all being absorbed and how it comes out in final form may well (or perhaps has to be) part of North American dharma. And I will even bet that if I compare my experiences to Native American views and rituals, I will find that they agree quite well with one another. In other words, my actual dharma experiences are already fitting the mold of what perhaps will be North American dharma, and what already is clearly Native American dharma?

Too long I have considered as a cause, this or that reason, this way of seeing or another, when the whole thing (this American dharma) is perhaps just simply a reflection of the land itself, a reflection of the North American land mass of which we all are children.

I have spent years trying to make my actual dharma-breakthrough fit into all the Tibetan dharma teachings I have received, and it never has exactly. Am I going at it backward? For the longest time I blamed my peculiarities just on me, but now I am at least tempted to consider that the way dharma will roll here in America will be North American, and not to expect a replica of Tibetan or Indian dharma. What are your thoughts about this (perhaps) at-odds view?

In other words, I may not be as weird or unique as I feared or imagined, but instead just tuning into the American land, psyche, and spirit... as regards dharma. The dharma of North America.

Nov 14, 2021, 9:01 AM

ENTERING THE STREAM

According to the dharma teachings, the process of Insight Meditation, which is a non-dual form of meditation, is impossible to describe, simply beyond words. Period. End of story. Of course, dharma practitioners have endlessly tried to express this in language for centuries.

What we are looking at here is a process of increasing awareness becoming aware of itself, *ad infinitum*. To be aware is to be aware of something, and here we are aware of nothing other than the process of awareness itself.

We are aware of the “Seeing” itself, not just of what is seen. ‘Insight Meditation’ short-circuits the dichotomy of the subject and the object. This process is the ‘process’ itself as ongoing, continuing.

And in that endless process is lost any sense as to a freeze-frame state of the process, which like a circle, has no end. Because it is a continuing process, it is not a state, any more than a single movie frame is a movie, but just a snapshot from a movie. All circles have no beginning and no end.

Or is this all simply misdirection, where enjoying continual awareness of the continuing process distracts us from falling out of the process into any particular static state. This happens when we ourselves are part of the equation and are so

immersed in that process that we can't observe ourselves because we are absorbed in the process -- hall-of-mirrors. Is this what they mean by 'ignorance is bliss?'

We can't sit the process out because we have already been included in the process, meaning that we have already joined in the process. Is eternity a matter of our being so 'in the process itself' that we can't observe the process and be in the process at the same time, like a self-cleaning oven?

The sense of our being a wallflower, just an observer in life, is overcome by simple inclusion, by being included, by joining and including ourselves. Sooner or later we each are tempted to be drawn off the bank of the river of time and into the current itself, giving up our perch there as an observer. In other words, as the Buddhists say, we enter the stream.

Nov 15, 2021, 2:14 AM

TURNING THE WHEEL OF THE DHARMA

I have found that understanding how to turn the 'Wheel of the Dharma', as it has been called, is important. Let's take for example the common wrist mala, also sometimes called 'worry beads'. Fingering those beads becomes automatic, each bead being felt, one after the other, most often while reciting a mantra. This too is a method of articulation that generates clarity, often even producing a trance-like state.

If we look around, this is true for all dharma techniques. They are performed or articulated to generate an effect that affects us. By definition, dharma techniques exist to increase our awareness. As to an awareness of what, the answer is an awareness of awareness itself, and exponentially at that.

If you will take the time to examine the various dharma techniques, it is clear what I mean about ‘articulation,” that we articulate or ‘practice’ dharma to achieve a particular effect. And, as mentioned, the way or manner in which we articulate a particular practice determines that effect and how it affects us.

My experience with these dharma techniques is that they are not automatic, but require deliberation on our part. Dharma practice is deliberate. It takes intent, which is why I like the word ‘articulate.’ We articulate a specific dharma practice until we achieve the desired effect. Performing the technique mindlessly or sloppily just does not cut it. It does not work without intent and mindful deliberation.

Try it out, which I’m sure most dharma practitioners have already done, probably to excess, meaning not articulating it properly and getting nothing (or very little) back. So, what to do?

Start simple and start wherever you have actual interest, because maintaining interest is the key to sustaining dharma practice, in my experience. Without interest and intent, no amount of articulation will amount to anything much.

In brief, it’s up to us what we get out of our dharma practice, little or a lot. It’s like one of those old grain grinders where you turn the wheel and ground grain

comes out. It's the same with dharma practice. If you don't turn the wheel of the dharma with deliberation and intent, no awareness will accrue. It's up to each of us.

And so, there is no such thing as putting our dharma practice on automatic, while we read a book, so to speak. Inch by inch and millimeter by millimeter, to the degree that we successfully turn the crank on the wheel of dharma, we can progress. Without this, we just tread water until we run out of life.

The point being: perhaps we can see why our interest in a particular dharma practice is so important. Without that interest we will never be diligent enough to make any real progress.

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Nov 15, 2021, 9:00 PM

RECURSIVE DHARMA

This is about remaining active and the 'kind' of activity in articulating and practicing the dharma. 'Practicing the dharma' is not just an exercise. Like breathing, it is a necessary part of dharma, to be actively cultivating the dharma, even if that means actively doing absolutely nothing at all.

It is similar to the fact that sharks must continually keep moving (their whole lives) in order to breathe. They can't pump water over their gills, so they have to always be in motion so that oxygen flows past the gills. Practicing dharma requires the same kind of constant articulation, some degree of activity, even if it is the lack thereof. And this is true, even if going out ends up coming in. That's the geometric shape of the 'torus', a rotating surface where the inside is always going out and the outside is coming in.

Dharma 'practice' alone does not ensure progress or realization. That's why it's called 'practice'. It depends on the skillful articulation of the practice technique, the intent, and the degree of heartfelt involvement involved.

It is easy for these words I write to go in one ear and out the other, and there are perhaps only a few who even read this; yet, even one reader would be enough, one who will understand what is written here enough to spark some understanding.

And the understanding would be, IMO, that dharma practice by itself is just that, 'practice'. However, the realization of the practice, actually meditating, depends on properly articulating the particular practice technique. If this is done with skillful means, then actual awareness can arise. And the awareness is why we practice and why we meditate.

A technique of key importance is the understanding of the two terms "skillful means" and 'awareness', usually called "Merit & Awareness." These two terms are connate, meaning they are two sides of the same coin, and almost always go together. In fact, they not only reinforce one another, they are recursive, which means that the one invokes the other, which then reinvokes the first, which then invokes, the other, ad infinitum. The important point of recursion is that the output of one cycle becomes the input of the next, and so it keeps building, each cycle on the fresh output of the other.

How this relates to Merit (skillful means) & Awareness is that the merit of our practice, how well we articulate the practice technique, how 'skillful' we are, determines the degree of awareness that is generated. And then, with that increased awareness, we are able to be even more skillful, and by that skill, create even greater awareness. And so, it goes, escalating.

And with merit creating greater awareness, so that increasing awareness makes it possible to be yet more skillful, and so on forever. This is the escalator of dharma practice, merit bringing forth increased awareness, and greater awareness making it

possible to be more skillful. That, IMO, is how realization grows until Recognition occurs, the recognition of the true nature of the mind.

If you understand and can implement this process, great progress in dharma practice is possible.

Nov 16, 2021, 9:00 PM

THE MOON IS BOTH OUR MOTHER AND OUR CHILD

The veil waxes thick to thin. When it gets translucent, I can see to write. If not, I can't even find words. And so, I make hay while the sun shines, so to speak.

Over time, the translucent has become more transparent until I can see what I see most all the time. I am not a seer, but for me its like looking in the rear-view mirror. And I am not a dharma teacher, but a dharma sharer. I find myself sharing whatever insight I have with others who perhaps may benefit from it.

Those who know better and see farther than I, I don't even see. How could I? I can't see them no matter how hard I look because they are finer yet than I see and remain invisible to me. I'm sure they see me though. That's kind of how it is.

We can't see beyond where we ourselves are, yet we can see where we have been, although we are no longer there. In astrology this is called gazing at the Moon, but we are unable to see into the brilliance of the Sun.

And this is why the texts say the Moon is a mystery in that it is both our mother and our child. It is a mother because we ourselves were born from it, from the stuff of the Moon, and our child because we can see others who are now where we once were but where we no longer are. In other words, we came up out of an unformed mass and took on character and persona; that's the Moon as mother. And when we get older or more advanced, the Moon is like our child because we see others, often mostly younger souls, being born from wherever we come from, just as we were.

The Sun and the Moon are called in astrology "The Lights" and rightly so. While we cannot look directly into the light of the Sun, we can see by the sunlight reflected off our Moon, the moon here being (as mentioned) younger people who are now where we once were. We see by the reflected light of the Sun on the Moon.

This is an example of what is called esoteric astrology. The astronomical facts remain unchanged, but what they mean can go from focusing on the outer physical facts to what these facts mean in an inner sense. I happen to like esoteric astrology and have studied it for decades.

Nov 17, 2021, 10:12 PM

The 'LHA' OR ENERGY BODY-DOUBLE

What makes this eclipse so long? The Moon is near apogee, the farthest point in its orbit around Earth. Because the Moon moves slowly at apogee, it takes longer to cross Earth's shadow. This will be the longest partial lunar eclipse since Feb. 18, 1440 — and we won't get a longer one until Feb. 8, 2669. – from "SpaceWeather.com."]

Something that I imagine few readers here will know much about is what the Tibetan Buddhists call the "Lha'." The "Lha" is an energy-body we each have that links or is superimposed between the physical body and our mind or mental body, what we might

call the 'psyche'. It is often described as a shadow of the physical body, a complete mirror-reflection of our physical and psychological makeup. The 'Lha' appears to be what western theosophists and psychics call the 'etheric body', which term itself originated from Tibetan texts.

What is interesting about the 'Lha' is that when we die, our mind-body or consciousness (in some form) goes on into the bardo (and perhaps is eventually reborn), while our physical body dies and decays, and the 'Lha' remains behind with the physical body as a kind of body-double, a psychic duplicate. It lives on for a while as an etheric mirror-image, but decays as the body decays. It does not migrate to the next lifetime. The 'Lha' does not continue beyond death.

In other words, the 'Lha' is somehow useful when we are alive, as long as we have life, as a supporter or link between the physical body and our psychological Self. It is tempting to think of the 'Lha' as being a mirror-reflection of the image of our Self, if not the Self itself. I am not yet clear about that, although I am learning to treat them as one.

Remember that Tibetan Buddhists point out again and again that what we call the 'Self' is nothing more than a collection of our attachments (likes and dislikes) and does not have any permanent existence., even in this life we are living now.

Our sense of Self changes with every new desire and craving, so what made up our Self when we were a kid (a new bike, etc.) may not be anything like what makes up our Self as an adult (a new child, new car, etc.). It is not clear to me how the 'Lha' relates to the 'Self' image. As mentioned, is the 'Lha' the same as the Self or is it different? Both have no permanent existence, in any case. Both decay at death.

When we feel good and are healthy, the 'Lha' and our physical body coincide or are somehow in synch, and we feel like ourselves. We feel energetic. But we are not always in equilibrium. Each of us sometimes get, as I like to say, 'beside ourselves', out-of-synch, and out of sorts. In fact, we can be separated from our 'Lha' when our connection to it becomes weakened. If we become too separated, it can result in physical sickness

and psychological upset, and in extreme cases, according to Tibetans, even in death of the physical body. So somehow, we all need our 'Lha' to stay with us and not wander too far away from the body. This smacks of what we call here in the West, 'out-of-body-experiences'.

The 'Lha' can be disturbed by sudden shocks to the system, accidents, emotional disturbances, and so on, at which time the 'Lha' can separate and wander away from the body, leaving the physical body depressed, out-of-sorts, and subject to illness and anxiety. Perhaps we all know something about how this feels. This reminds me of when our Self is shattered at some untoward event (death in the family, etc.) and has to gradually reanimate due to such a traumatic event in our life.

The 'Lha' is said to be a direct copy of what links our physical and psychological Self. In fact, the Tibetans say that what western mediums and psychics claim to be as contacts with departed spirits (as in séances, etc.) is not our actual consciousness (which has gone into the bardo and perhaps on to another rebirth), but our 'Lha'. It is the 'Lha' that is channeled in every case, and never the consciousness of the deceased. As mentioned, the dead person's consciousness has already gone beyond. Only the 'Lha' remains for an indeterminate time while it decays.

In summary, after death our consciousness and 'Lha' separate, with the consciousness going beyond death, but our 'Lha' staying here with our body. The 'Lha' stays with the body as long as it takes the body to decay or until the body is destroyed. This is why Buddhists tend to cremate the body or tear it up, so that vultures can eat it. In that way the 'Lha' or energy reflection of our Self is completely destroyed and does not wander around in some kind of afterlife Limbo. This is what the teachings say.

It is claimed that it's not easy to become aware of our own 'Lha', except by its absence. In fact, Tibetan doctors take a pulse reading for a person's 'Lha' from a different point of the body, the ulnar artery, than it does for usual medical pulse. The 'Lha' meridian or channel goes from the heart to the ring finger along the ulnar artery.

As mentioned, the 'Lha' can be weakened by accident or when we are in shock, very sad, or depressed. It can at those times also go away for a time. One account I read likens it to a radio and a transmitter; if the radio gets too far away from the transmitter, there is signal loss. The connection weakens or is lost. The same is true if the 'Lha' gets too far out of the body. Not only can you feel out of sorts, but if it continues, you can become ill, disassociated, and so on.

And it is possible to permanently lose your 'Lha', which Tibetans consider very unfortunate indeed and they have rituals for restoring the 'Lha' to a particular body. This is kind of a scary thought, and some people have been said to lose their 'Lha' and never be reunited, in which case they gradually wither and die. This is not said to be common.

I am not sure how much personal awareness of or conscious experience I have had with my own 'Lha'. There have been times when I have not felt fully present in my own life (you know: "beside myself") and have had to consciously work on getting back into my body, pulling myself together, and getting centered, so please note that I am not an expert in this, but just interested (as some of you may be) in this fascinating topic. Here I convey only what I have understood from the teachings I have attended and the texts I have read. In the next blog, I will look at this more from our Western viewpoint and our 'out-of-body-experiences' to see how they match up.

Nov 18, 2021, 9:32 PM

OUT OF BODY EXPERIENCES

The following essay can be very helpful if it is taken in and understood.

The Tibetan concept of the 'Lha', the psychic energy-link that connects the mind and the body, is very similar to something we also have in this country.

Here in the West, we have a long tradition of exploring what are called ‘out-of-the-body’ experiences or astral-travel, getting so far up into the intellectual that we lose contact with our common sense and physical body.

And while out-of-the-body experiences or ‘astral travel’ are romanticized and hyped up, they are also symptomatic of a loss of touch with the physical and the real. Too often, attempts to leave the body and explore the metaphysical end up with actual detachment and at least some difficulty reconnecting and re-grounding ourselves. What then remains is a sense of loss and loneliness, what is sometimes called ‘ennui’.

This sense of loss and always ‘wanting’, of having ‘not enough’, and the need to reify (try to make real) our situation, to blow it up, exaggerate, and to try and make our identity (being) more permanent than it in fact is. Especially when, with even a little thought, we know this has never worked in the past. And here is the point of this blog:

Just as pain is the body’s warning system that something is physically wrong, so this sense of loneliness or ennui is our psyche telling us that we are getting too far out of the body to sustain life as we know it. Loneliness is a warning sign that we are not interdependent enough, that our mind and body are separating.

What is called here in the West ‘out-of-body’ experience is just that, separating enough from the mind/body link in perhaps an attempt to see our situation better by our getting ‘outside’, gaining perspective, yet at the same time it carries certain dangers that must be kept in mind, chief among them the tenuousness of our mind/body connection.

We can get into the intellect (out-of-the-body) to an extent that we lose contact with our physical body, which begins to atrophy or at least show signs of neglect. We are all constantly going in and out of the body, yet it is a matter of degree. If we get too attenuated, too strung out, we can lose touch with our senses, which require constant update and articulation, just as lungs have to breathe.

Our whole schtick is that of the mind/body connection being connected and working together. Get too far out of our body and the sense of loneliness raises its head; we are then separating or being separated from our common senses, our physical body. Our ennui and this sense of feeling 'void' or empty are telling us this, that we are drifting too far from the shore of the senses, and it is time to update and reconnect. This is very much similar to what the Tibetans call 'The Lha', something like the etheric-body or even better known to us, perhaps what we call the Self.

And to make it clearer, this is what articulation is all about, maintaining the connection between mind and body. We can see it in the Native American ritual dances and chants. We see it in the Tibetan hand mudras and mantras, fingering the beads, offering mandalas, anything that promises our reconnection, working our way back into becoming one with our body once again. It's like driving a car. We have to be in the driver's seat to do that effortlessly. If we get too far out mentally, we lose touch. We become unrealistic and prone to mistaking reality.

In fact, there are endless rituals that exist in almost all spiritual traditions (not to mention in daily life) to maintain the mind/body connection and to encourage us to remain in our body and not to just up and drift away. As mentioned, in Tibetan dharma there is what is called the 'Lha', which is like the energy force or link that holds our mind and body together. And people can lose their 'Lha', this link, and specific ceremonies exist to reintegrate the 'Lha' with the body/mind complex. Dharma is NOT about becoming enlightened beyond or outside the body, but rather dharma is becoming enlightened in the body. It's called incarnation.

And the Western esoteric tradition is rife with out-of-the-body suggestions and instructions. As for me, I see this as pretty much a dead ringer for what the Tibetans call the 'Lha', the etheric double or psychic component that amounts to a link between the mind and the body. We can call it a 'soul' as long as we don't try to make it an eternal soul, but just a temporal soul, one that lasts just for this lifetime. After death, the so-called Self (soul) and the Tibetan 'Lha' stay behind and gradually decay. In fact, the Tibetans say that the "Lha" is what psychics and mediums encounter in seances, and that the actual consciousness of the individual is already long gone into the bardo and busy with that.

Hopefully you get the idea. We all are in outer space, quite literally. The Earth is moving at 67,000 miles per hour around the Sun, and the equator is moving at 1000 miles per hour, not to mention that the Sun (carrying us with it) is moving at 483,000 miles per hour around the Galaxy center. So, we are not exactly standing still.

As they say, we have to work to keep body and soul together, and we do this by our activity, by articulating various rituals or actions that help us to cohere and hang together. It's like breathing. If we stop breathing, we die. If we stop articulating, reenforcing the body-mind link, they can drift apart. As the British say, "Mind the Gap," only here we are talking about minding the mind/body link and staying in our bodies. "Intellectuals" who are out of their body and not in it as well, are just fluff blowing in the wind.

Nov 20, 2021, 3:11 PM

MICHAEL BLOOMFIELD AND HOW I BECAME A GROUPIE

Looking back from today in 2021, there is so much water over the dam. Recently, I watched the new video of the great blues and folk guitarist Michael Bloomfield. It's called the "The Mike Bloomfield Story" and in runs one hour and forty-one minutes, which means that not everyone will watch it. Of course, I'll watch it because, as mentioned, I knew and hung out with Michael Bloomfield back in the mid-1960s, mostly when he was with the "Paul Butterfield Blues Band," and later with "The Electric Flag." I had the chance to meet and interview scores of the greatest blues players, most of the great Black bluesmen and women. Here is that Bloomfield video for those interested:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4rQVnFF5zk>

Back in the 1960s, the musicians I really loved and looked up to were players like Muddy Waters, Big Walter Horton, Junior Wells, Otis Rush, Little Walter, Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, and the list goes on, mostly the great blues players. And I had the chance to meet these artists, interview them with audio and later video, and hang out, plus hear them playing live in clubs and other venues. I was a total fan of these folks.

I am sometimes asked why I didn't spend more time listening to my own peers, groups like the Grateful Dead, Janice Joplin, The Band, and so on. My answer is simple. Their music didn't interest me.

If that sounds flip, it's not meant to. It was because those players who were my peers were people much like me. No matter how great they were, we all drank from the same cup. We were all derivative, all drawing inspiration from the same musical root-sources, those great blues, and jazz players who came before us. It was not disrespect, but simple camaraderie.

For example, I met and hung out with Janis Joplin at the Grande Ballroom, where we both played. She was cool, no doubt. But I had already heard the original "Take Another Little Piece of my Heart" by Erma Franklin and "Ball 'n Chain" by Big Mama Thornton. I had spent a whole late-night talking and drinking whiskey with Big Mama Thornton, so I know where Joplin was getting her stuff. Joplin was a popular singer, but she was no Big Mama Thornton. We both revered Big Mama Thornton. Joplin herself would be the first to say so. That's how it was.

It was the same with the Rolling Stones. Of course I like their tune "Time is On My Side," because that is an Irma Thomas song. What's not to like, but I like the original by Irma Thomas much better. Thomas is one of the greatest woman singers I have ever heard. Period. I had the chance to have dinner with Thomas and hang out with her some years ago and it was out of this world. Later that night at the gig, Irma Thomas changed her set list to include many of her early songs that I especially love, just for me. We are exactly the same age. I can't say enough about what a great artist Irma Thomas is. My wonderful singer/songwriter daughter May Erlewine was raised on Irma Thomas tunes.

So, you get the idea. It is not that I was somehow too good for the music of my peers. It was because it wasn't their music and in almost all cases the original was better, and they knew it too. That's why they covered it in the first place.

It's the same with the Grateful Dead. We were all studying the same root music. I remember jamming with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead in West Park in Ann Arbor one sunny afternoon in the 1960s. It was fun, but we were both reading from the same playbook of those great artists that we revered, most of whom were still living. An exception would be Jimi Hendrix. Although he too had roots, he transformed those roots into something really new, IMO. Hendrix was unique in this way.

There is one other exception, only one group I can think of among my peers that I would acknowledge myself a "groupie" of, and that was the Paul Butterfield Blues Band." When the Butterfield band burst on the scene in late 1965, we were spellbound. Although Butterfield and his band made a number of albums, IMO none of those albums captured the experience of hearing that band live. And I should know. As a 'groupie' I heard them many, many times live.

And we hung out with the Butterfield band and even recorded them. In the spring of 1966, my brother Dan and I recorded an early version of the Butterfield band's landmark tune East-West in "Poor Richard's" club in Chicago, before it came out as an album. "East-West" is considered the first extended rock solo (13 minutes) ever issued on an album, and it served to fuel the future of any number of rock and heavy-metal artists.

Our recording of East-West is the first complete rendering of this tune that is extant. If I remember right, we were sitting behind a curtain on the stage recording this, but I could be wrong. My brother Dan might remember. Anyway, the recording we made was issued on an album called "East-West Live" by the Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin in 1996. I sent him the tapes. Here is the album for those interested. Our recording is the second cut. But I digress.

[http://www.amazon.com/East-West-Live-Paul-](http://www.amazon.com/East-West-Live-Paul-Butterfield/dp/B0000034D7/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1392441358&sr=8-1&keywords=east-west+live)

[Butterfield/dp/B0000034D7/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1392441358&sr=8-1&keywords=east-west+live](http://www.amazon.com/East-West-Live-Paul-Butterfield/dp/B0000034D7/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1392441358&sr=8-1&keywords=east-west+live)

There were many reasons the Butterfield band's imprint on us was so profound. For one, they were just that good, and they were a racially mixed band as we sometimes were. That first Butterfield album stopped us in our tracks and our band was never the same again. That was probably the time we added the phrase "Blues Band" to our name, making it the "Prime Movers Blues Band." That first Butterfield album served as a wakeup call to an entire generation of white would-be blues musicians, a notice that we could go ahead and try to play the blues, "whiteness" and all, and so we did.

Even to this day, Butterfield remains one of the only white harmonica players to develop his own style (another is William Clarke) -- one respected by black players. Butterfield has no real imitators. Like most Chicago-style amplified harmonica players, Butterfield played the instrument like a horn -- a trumpet. He tended to play single notes rather than bursts of chords. His harp playing is always intense, understated, concise, and serious -- IMO only Big Walter Horton has a better sense of note selection.

When I knew Butterfield (during those first three albums), he was always intense, somewhat remote, and even, on occasion, downright unfriendly. Although not much interested in other people, he was a compelling musician and a great harp player. But Butterfield liked to mess with your mind. Here is an example.

I can remember one time Butterfield and I were sitting out in our van, probably smoking something or other. He was explaining that he was left-handed and that only left-handed people would ever amount to anything in this world. The rest of us were shit-out-a-luck. That was Butterfield's humor. It is true that he held the harmonica opposite to the standard right-handed player who holds it in his left hand. Butterfield held it in his right hand, upside down, with the low notes to the right.

Michael Bloomfield (lead guitar) and Mark Naftalin (keyboards) in the Butterfield band, also great players, were just the opposite -- always interested in the other guy. They went out of their way to inquire about you, even if you were a nobody like we were. Naftalin continues to this day to support blues projects and festivals.

But it was Butterfield's lead-guitar player, Michael Bloomfield, who most stands out in my mind. Bloomfield actually was our friend. He cared about us. We could feel it. Michael Bloomfield also played lead on Dylan's album "Highway 61 revisited." Michael Bloomfield is one of the greatest guitarists I have ever heard, and I have heard a bunch. Bob Dylan thinks so too, as this quote from a Rolling Stone article (May 2009) shows:

"The guy that I always miss, and I think he'd still be around if he stayed with me, was Mike Bloomfield. He could just flat-out play. He had so much soul. And he knew all the styles, and he could play them so incredibly well. He was an expert player and a real prodigy too. He could play like Robert Johnson way back then in the 1960s. He could play the pure style of country blues authentically." – Bob Dylan

In my experience, Michael Bloomfield was always filled with light, positive, and interested in helping others into the future. If there are bodhisattvas wandering around in this world, Bloomfield has to be one of them. I am running out of space here, but let me give you just one example of Bloomfield's compassion that I personally experienced.

For those of you who are too young, the "Summer of Love" was San Francisco and the Bay Area in 1967, when more than 100,000 hippies showed up at the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco wanting to hang out. I happened to be there for that summer. In fact, I made a point of it.

My entire band and I drove all the way across the country (and back) in our 1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name (The Prime Movers) all over that van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company even though across the front of the van

we had the slogan “Gonna Ring a Few Bells in your Ears” a quote by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song “Ooh Poo Pah Doo.” Any of you remember that song? Here it is for those of you with open ears:

<http://youtu.be/3qhxE5z9xRI>

How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (I think there were five of us), not to mention five suitcases into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. We just did it, took turns driving, and made it a non-stop trip. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail's pace surrounded on all sides by a huge flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco and Haight-Ashbury.

And of course we had no money and no place to stay once we got there. We just went there cold because we knew it was happening. And here is my point:

It was our friend Michael Bloomfield who cared enough about us to find us a free place to live for the summer, which turned out to be the Sausalito Heliport, where many music groups practiced. We crashed on the floor. I remember some famous woman singer gave us \$5 at the heliport for food. It might have been Gale Garnet (“We’ll Sing in the Sunshine”). We had zero money.

In fact, we played blues outside on the pavement next to a local Sausalito Black rib-joint for food, just to have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs that summer. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north. However, the band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco and Berkeley, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. We also played in Berkeley at the New Orleans House and other places

And there is more to my Bloomfield story. It was also thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore Auditorium. Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay, but asked us to fill in for his band the "Electric Flag" when they could not make a gig, at the Fillmore itself. It was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium that we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don't know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit "Sunshine of Your Love."

In fact, I watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham at that time about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but I wanted them to mic our amps through their own speakers, so our particular (old Fender Concerts) amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required in those days.

Anyway, I wanted to share with you my history as a groupie and my undying respect for the compassion and genius of Michael Bloomfield, certainly someone worthy of my respect. Michael Bloomfield came up in the same wave of young white musicians that made up the Folk Music Revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s. We knew the music of the past and this was before people like Dylan were writing their own music. I know because I hitchhiked with Bob Dylan and hung out with him in 1961.

Here is a very beautiful tribute to the blues of that era by Michael Bloomfield called. "If You Love These Blues, Play 'em As You Please," that I very much like:

https://www.amazon.com/Love-These-Blues-Play-Please/dp/B00064VQQM/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=bloomfield+if+you+love+the+blues&qid=1637477588&sr=8-1

Also, a bio I did on the Butterfield Blues Band here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=148&t=53&sid=67fe8580b0baa8fe627efe1bf823d3c2>

Nov 21, 2021, 8:26 AM

HITCHHIKING WITH BOB DYLAN

[It seemed you liked the Mike Bloomfield piece yesterday, so I might as well run past you something about my time with Bob Dylan, although I have run it here before by popular request. I don't have any photos of Bob Dylan from back then. I wasn't taking photos as I do now. Instead, here is a photo of my friend and artist Kevin Morris and myself talking with one another at the yearly Harvest Gathering in Lake City, Michigan not too long ago. A couple of old timers enjoying each other's company. Below is my Dylan story.]

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

I remember being there with Perry Lederman and Bob Dylan back in the spring of 1961. Lederman is how I met up with Dylan. They were already friends. Perry Lederman was a phenomenal instrumentalist on the guitar. If Dylan and I were in touch, we would still marvel at what a player Lederman was. Lederman played Travis-style, which we used to term '3-finger picking' and his playing was unmatched. Lederman was not a vocalist, and when he did sing it was not special, but he could play instrumentals like no one I have ever heard. When Lederman took out a guitar, people would listen and marvel. Each

song was like hearing a mini-symphony, with an overture, the main them, variations, and an ending.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I can't remember whether Dylan played a few songs later that night himself or perhaps he and Lederman played some tunes elsewhere. I can't recall. But I do recall his being irritated by Kalb, and dissing Kalb was not hard to do. He was just a little full of himself at the time. After all, Gerdes was 'the' place to be.

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

Keep in mind that back then Bob Dylan was still trying to find out for himself who he was. This was before he recorded his first album. I can remember another time in Ann Arbor sitting with Dylan in the Michigan Union for hours drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes while we waited for a review of a concert or 'set' that Dylan had done the night before.

I am not sure if the set was part of the Folklore Society performance or some other one, but I remember that Dylan was very concerned about how it went over. That is most of

what we talked about. He wanted to know how he was received. This was before he had the world at his feet. He put his pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us back then. When the Michigan Daily paper finally came out and we got a copy, sure enough Dylan got a good review. With that he was soon out at the edge of Ann Arbor and hitchhiking to Chicago and the folk scene there.

Back then there was an established route that folkies like Dylan and me travelled. It went from Cambridge to NYC to Ann Arbor (sometimes to Antioch and Oberlin) to the University of Chicago to Madison and on out to Berkley. It was the folk bloodstream that we all circulated on, either hitchhiking or commandeering some old car for the trip. Most of us hitchhiked. Early folk stars like Joan Baez, the New Lost City Ramblers, and groups like the Country Gentlemen did not hitchhike, but they still sat around with us in the Michigan Union drinking coffee. I can remember sitting around with Joan Baez drinking coffee at one of those little gray Formica tables in the Union.

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

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

Cambridge was where we left Dylan that time. He was heading out west hitching along the interstate toward I believe it was Saratoga Springs or perhaps Schenectady, New York for a gig. Perry Lederman and I were hitchhiking on over to New Hampshire and Laconia to attend the annual motorcycle races there, which is another story. I don't know

where we slept at the races. I remember it being just on the ground somewhere, but still kind of cold out at night.

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

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

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

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

Something that I got a lot, mostly years ago now, was the comment that Bob Dylan really can't sing. I addressed this in an article I wrote years ago, some of which appeared in the biography of jazz guitar great Grant Green in the book "Grant Green: Rediscovering the Forgotten Genius of Jazz Guitar" by Sharony Andrews (Grant Greens daughter) and

published by Backbeat Books. The full article is called "Groove and Blues in Jazz," which is at this link for those interested, and below is an excerpt. Here is the whole article:

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

Grant Green: 'THE' Groove Master

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

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

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

Billie Holiday is another voice that is filled with microtones that emerge through time like an ever-blooming flower. You (or I) can't hear the end or root of her singing, not yet

anyway. As we try to listen to Holiday (as we try to grasp that voice), we are knocked out by the deep information there. We try to absorb it, and before we can get a handle on her voice (if we dare listen!) she entrances us in a delightful dream-like groove and we are lost to criticism. Instead we groove on and reflect about this other dream that we have called life. All great musicians do this to us. Shakespeare was the master at this. You can't read him and remain conscious. He knocks you out with his depth.

Grant Green's playing at its best is like this too. It is so recursive that instead of taking the obvious outs we are used to hearing, Green instead chooses to reinvest -- to go in farther and to deepen the groove. He opens up a groove and then opens up a groove and then opens a groove, and so on. He never stops. He opens a groove and then works to widen that groove until we can see into the music, see through the music into ourselves. That's what good music is about.

He puts everything back into the groove that he might otherwise get out of it, the opposite of ego. He knows that the groove is the thing and that time will see him out and his music will live long. That is what grooves are about and why Grant Green is the groove master.

Nov 22, 2021, 8:20 AM

THE MIDDLE WAY

The one in the middle of what? That would be in the middle of Samsara, this world we all live in, as the one big dualism, just waiting for us to connect the two into the single interdependent existence that it is. My dharma teacher once referred to us as 'the dregs', the ones who in all the time there has been have yet to get it. We remain dualistic, divided in our outlook of subject and object. Like this country of America just now, we think we are independent rather than the truth that we are all interdependent.

How we got divided in the first place we could discuss, although the dharma teachings tell us that we have always been this way, until we can manage to reconnect so that, as

the Bhagavata Gita states, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea” and we realize that we have two arms on this one body. The dharma has been called “The Middle Way” because it forges a path between the extremes of self-indulgence on the one hand and self-denial on the other -- keeping that balance. The ‘Middle Way’ forges a path between being and non-being, between attachment and aversion, and between form and emptiness. It’s all about being ‘a part of’ as opposed to feeling ‘separate from’.

There are always those two extremes, and both offer a problem, and each has a remedy. So far in this series, we have looked at the ‘intellectual’, someone who perhaps is too much in their head, while neglecting their physical body. They need to be talked down into taking possession of their incarnation.

On the other extreme are those who are too much in their body, emotionally inundated, and almost constantly overwhelmed by life. These folks have to be raised up into their head, at least until they become aware enough to see beyond what obscures them and find guidance there.

It is not difficult to see why the dharma suggests we take a middle way or path between these two extremes, a choice between the ‘crush out’ (trapped in the body) and the ‘fade out’ (trapped out of the body), between being overwhelmed ‘in the body’ or lonely ‘out of the body’.

And either of these extremes admits of the same remedy, controlling our incarnation (or lack thereof) by articulating, practicing, and performing ritual actions. It’s not rocket science, yet it does require a certain awareness on our part, which is why we practice dharma, to develop that awareness.

It is not too difficult to diagnose which of these two extremes we lean toward, either the more cold, intellectual, and lonely type (out of the body) or the too hot, emotional, and overwhelmed type (in the body). In either case, the remedy is some particular type of activity. In the case of those overwhelmed, they have to get out of their body enough to

better pilot their life, and in the case of those too intellectual and distant, they have to get more into the physical, back into their body.

Either way, the goal is, as the dharma states, to find the “Middle Way” between these two extremes. And we don’t have to type ourselves as one way or the other, although we may. We all have extreme moods and can use the helpful activity or a particular ritual articulation to counteract our particular mood and mitigate the extreme.

Nov 22, 2021, 9:23 PM

FENG-SHUI: SIZING SPACE

What is ‘Feng Shui’ and can it be protective and, if so, protective how?

I have worked with Feng Shui for years. I have gathered and studied about every book on Feng Shui I could get my hands on. I probably have at least three full shelves of books on the topic and I published one free 578-page book on Feng Shui, which is here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The-Art-of-Feng-Shui.pdf>

Now, please balance all those books by one walk through my home with a Feng Shui master, H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, one of the four heart-sons of the 16th Karmapa, H.H. Rangjung Rigpe Dorje.

H.E. Situ Rinpoche has visited our center twice and it was wonderful to be with him. On one of those visits he decided to walk through our house with us, and it was then that I got some kind of empowerment or transmission directly as to what Feng Shui is all about. Of course, I had absorbed the many hundreds of rules about proper Feng Shui

from the many books I had read and studied, many of them classics. Being with H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, it was nothing like that at all.

As we strolled through the house, Situ Rinpoche began to remark on this and that in the various rooms. It's not very useful to try and explain each comment Rinpoche made. Behind or emanating through his comments was something more important, IMO.

I don't know if it was because Tai Situ Rinpoche was walking us through all this personally or some kind of transmission was taking place because I came away from that walk, from that time, with an uncanny sense of Feng Shui that has never left me since.

In a word, the message that imprinted is to just feel your way through space and spatial arrangements. All of the hundreds of rules from all the books, while still interesting in specific cases, sort of went out the window in a flash.

And what remained, as mentioned, was to just use my own common sense as to what feels comfortable and right as opposed to that which impinges on my consciousness and comes to my attention in a not gracious way. That's the whole message.

I (and I imagine any of you reading this) can stop guessing, thinking, and wondering about the placement of objects in space, and just shift gears from thought (and thinking) to common sense and feeling your way along. If something in a room impinges on your sense of space, move it, shift it around, or relocate it to somewhere else.

Adjust your room, like you would your seat on a couch. Settle in and get comfortable in your surroundings. As to whether you or I could do this for another person, I'm not so sure, but probably we can to a degree that it makes common sense. As we get down to the nitty-gritty of personal space, we would probably have to fine tune it with the person we are helping to arrange space with.

In brief, the essence of Feng Shui, as I understand it, is to simply arrange our life situations until we are comfortable with it as a living space, a space we could live in. At least for me, that's all I need and all I need to know.

And that natural sense of 'comfort' is the best protection for each of us. IMO.

[Here is what is called a 'LO-PAN" I designed for my work with Feng Shui. Also, a photo of H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche.]

Note: If you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

Nov 24, 2021, 9:57 PM

A GHOST OF A CHANCE

[Well, Thanksgiving is past. For the first time in probably over a year and a half, I travelled from where we live here in Big Rapids, about two hours south-east to East Lansing, Michigan where my son Michael and his partner Micah Ling live. This was my first visit to their new home that they just bought, their first house, where we celebrated Thanksgiving with them, with Micah's mom Christie, and with my daughter May Erlewine. I did not have a computer with me and my iPhone ran out of battery, so I was not able to write a blog, which was just fine with me for a change.

However, I'm back now and heading into a solid week of jam-packed events, so I have no idea how much time I will have to share anything. However, I do have the following,

which is very abstract and may well test whatever connection I have with my readers. Nevertheless, here it is.]

Much of my reference over the last few years has been based on what I experienced after my major stroke. After the moment of the stroke, I could see life going on around me, but I was unable to signal or be heard. I couldn't find the touchstone that I call (and have known) as myself, if you can follow that. And this may get a little subtle.

We, as we know ourselves, are each based on our particular attachments (positive and negative), for the most part. Take away or lose track of those attachments and, in a very real sense, we (as we know ourselves) no longer exist. At least we could not recognize ourselves. The present moment is adamant, crystal clear, and devoid of our attachments. And the one thing the Present is missing is us, what we could call 'Me, Myself, and I.' That is ephemeral.

The value of my sharing this information is that perhaps it can help us to touch on or grasp, however obliquely, that what we call (and know) as our identity, which is similar to focusing a pair of binoculars or a telescope, where turning the focus barrel can throw everything out of focus. Suddenly removing or losing our attachments can do this. And the shock of an untoward life event, like a death in the family or, for me, a stroke can do this.

In other words, I find this similar to voiding or losing (temporarily or permanently) the web of attachments that reference and define what we call our Self. A simple shift of perspective or focus can tune out this world of our Self and project us into null space, 'beside ourselves', still present in some fashion, yet no longer in touch with the world as we have known it up to now. Where are 'We' then?

We could call this another dimension in the sense that once projected into it (stripped of our habitual attachments and Self) we lose touch with everything we have known up to now, meaning that we have lost our habitual way of seeing or finding what we call the Self, and without that touchstone (those attachments), we, instead, have the

unembellished (natural) framework upon which our Self is inset or based, i.e., in the main, we lose all of our myriad of attachments, which have been up to now almost our sole touchstone.

To the degree that our identity is based on untruth, on reification, miss-takes, and the variance between of what has been called the 'true nature of the mind' from our exaggeration or failure to grasp this true nature, if we take away that untruth (those attachments), then everything we have used (up to now) to measure this variance or difference is no longer available to us. Then, simply put, "We," as we know and have known ourselves vanish and become like a ghost to that and those still living in the world, yet invisible, both to others AND to ourselves, at least for a while. We tune our 'Self' out when we encounter the truth. With something like a stoke, this happens in one fell swoop. Bam!

It's much like tuning in a song on a radio station, one that is just a little off-station, and we can't quite hear the music. Only here, in this analogy, the tuning mechanism is the presence or absence of all our attachments. Without all our attachments (positive and negative), and this can happen when our Self is temporarily shattered due to some dramatic event in our lives, such as a death in the family or something like a major stroke, we suddenly have little to no reference to refer to. We are at almost a complete loss.

Although in most cases, what we call our Self (our various attachments) does manage to reanimate and reinstate itself, there is a lacuna or empty space and time (a gap) during which we can experience, probably much to our shock, the clarity of the absence of this Self and all its attachments.

As much as we are beside-ourselves when in such a shock, this gap has a crystal clarity to it during which we can, so to speak, see forever, forever being the truth. And, although that clarity is only temporary, until the Self reanimates and again asserts itself, nevertheless it is an invaluable time to see the truth (or close to it) of life.

And that's why I write this, to point out that the shock of reality that can come with great loss (loss of Self) is a powerful dharma teacher and greatly to be savored.

Nov 27, 2021, 4:03 AM

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY

It seems that I am so linear-oriented, meaning that I tend to think there is something waiting for me at the end of the line of whatever I am doing. In other words, if I do this, then that, and so on, even though it may be very difficult, there is a reward waiting for me somewhere down the line. It's the old 'pie in the sky when you die' refrain.

Well, we know that reward can't be physical, because the end of the line for each of us is identical; we die. And so, just where and when does any reward for our efforts come? Of course, we could bet that any reward, at least from dharma effort, may come in our next rebirth and the lifetime that comes with it. For certain, that is one approach that is very common.

For myself, although I do try to prepare myself for the bardo and passing on, I have not found that approach alone functional 'enough' or useful. This waiting for a reward eventually, many years from now IMO, is not efficient. I believe that we need constant encouragement.

What has evolved in my life, is the need to get out of any situation something in exchange, call it a 'transactional' reward. Instead of always putting any reward in some kind of 'cosmic bank' at the end of life or far down the road of time, I have found it more useful to extract from my current, momentary, situation enough of a little something so that I am encouraged to continue moving forward and putting out the effort to do so. How is that done?

Well, to begin with, whatever satisfaction I need or insist on getting from the current moment varies on the situation. It is especially clear from any exchange I have with other people, so let's start there. I don't enjoy or allow myself to simply put up with situations in which I am not participating or getting something out of them. With that in mind, this is particularly easy to see in what could probably be called my lack of 'politeness' in social situations.

If someone is just droning on, sucking all the oxygen out of the moment, I won't simply be polite and just take it, just put up with it. I will interrupt and interject myself into the conversation and insist on a dialog, rather than listen to an endless monologue. I don't care how famous or higher-up that person is supposed to be. It's either dialog or I close off the connection by leaving the conversation or by some kind of interruption by changing the subject. In this regard I have been told I am sometimes rude.

So be it, is my response. It is unhealthy for me to have no involvement. At least, I believe that. I can point to the fact that, in many astrological conventions, instead of supporting the 'professor' approach of giving lectures, my good friend and astrologer Charles A. Jayne, Jr. and I introduced at major conventions like American Federation of Astrologers (AFA) and the United Astrology Conference (UAC) a separate track that ran throughout the day devoted to panel discussions.

Instead of having one person speak to a group, we would have a panel of up to 10-12 experts on a subject speak, not 'to', but 'with' an audience, also inviting audience participation, subject only to a moderator. I found this much more comfortable and useful than just one expert professing. I don't suggest that panel discussions replace lectures, but rather that they become available as an alternative way of learning along with the standard lecture format.

I mention this only as an illustration as to how I want to keep my interest, but I believe many folks like to feel that they can join in a group discussion if the spirit so moves them. And I have used this same approach, not just with formal events like conventions, but

also when talking with small groups or even with one-to-one. I seek dialog, some back and forth.

I need to find a point of interaction in any exchange, where instead of endlessly waiting out a monologue, we have a dialog, a back and forth discussion, where both parties are involved and I believe this keeps the interest level high, IMO.

And, if you follow the above approach and idea, then it is simple to use this same approach in every transactional exchange that comes up in life. Get your two cents out of the exchange, so you are not just standing there in the middle of life treading water, waiting for what may be boring to end. Of course, if I am listening to someone that is, for me, a real teacher, this approach is not used.

My first dharma teacher was so brilliant that I would spend a whole day with him without ever opening my mouth and saying anything, and certainly not needing to interact to feel a part of the conversation. I was taking it in, being imprinted, and totally happy to do so. Yet, this is the exception and not the rule.

And so, the point here is that maintaining interest in a conversation or exchange, at least for me, is very important if not crucial. I will leave this monologue as it is for now, and you are free to join in with questions and we will have a conversation but were I to continue I would want to go further and begin to examine how we can rest in the mind from moment to moment. I will see if I can present that in another blog, yet this is a start.

Nov 28, 2021, 2:48 AM

TIME'S LOSS

This blog is about learning to rest in midstream, and this in order to allow the mind to rest in its own nature. And we may have to learn how. And to learn how usually takes actual practice. We all have to start somewhere.

And as clumsy as this may sound, this involves our stopping surging forward in time and, to begin with, just allowing the mind (in this case our mind) to rest. Notice that I don't say, stop and just rest the mind because that suggests we can make the mind rest. We don't make the mind do anything. What we can do through our own action is to get out of the way, stop making effort and trying to do anything, and allow the mind to just rest naturally with us within it, which it will do if we can stop making effort and noise. We are our own problem.

And no, unless you are very fortunate, even allowing the mind to rest will probably not be as simple as these words may make it sound. Initially, there may be 'no room in the in', so to speak. Even if we don't intend it, we still may be trying to make this happen, and that will never work.

My point is that allowing the mind to just rest may at first result in our sliding off into the future, where we seem to rest, and getting back on the train of thought, with no rest forthcoming. Time is tight like that and just marches on, and we with it. Again, there is no way into the mind to get any rest, at least initially. This takes time and, as mentioned, actual practice.

We first start with the intention to rest in the mind or, as mentioned, to allow ourselves to rest, but probably we are still impervious to resting, because that has been our habitual tendency for most of our life. So, having enough awareness of our own intention to allow the mind to rest is where we start, but probably there is no to little actual rest in the beginning.

And we somehow have to get from our intention to rest, which perhaps is effortful on our part, to actual resting, and that may involve some reorientation which, as mentioned,

can't be effortful. Effort just clouds the mind in this case. So, this involves somehow letting go on our part. It reminds me of the old folk-blues lyric:

“Take your fingers off it. Don't you dare touch it, because you know it don't belong to you.”

We start by making some kind of 'nest' or resting place in time, perhaps by some effect from our intention to get out of our own way and just allow the mind to rest, which of course it (the Mind) already is at rest. It is we who have to let go and allow this to happen. And we don't just do this once or twice or for ten minutes, but rather we do it, very gently, all day long, over and over and over again. When we can think to do it, we just let our mind (with a small 'm') rest.

In time we can actually make an impression or nest within time itself in which we can rest. And such rest itself is timeless; it is beyond time as we will eventually realize. Or we could say that in addition to time as we all know it, there also is this resting aside from or besides time. And we rest in the 'Now', instantaneously, and not life we rest after a hard day's work, so to speak. This instant is forever new, like a pure spring from which everything springs. And it is in, within this instant, that we eventually want to actually rest.

With practice, we eventually develop a habit of not waiting for the future to occur, but before that, before the future arrives, we learn to take a timeout and get some rest. And it is this rest in the moment that we most need. We are exhausted from times freight-train-like movement hurrying us ever onward, with no relief. We very much need that relief.

We need to rest in the present moment as time flies on, so that we have the strength and energy to persist. It will never come by waiting, but will only occur if we allow it, if we get out of the way by letting go, allowing the mind to rest, allowing ourselves to rest in the nature of the mind.

Now, there are specific rituals, specific instructions on how to do this with the various 'realization' forms of meditation, but that is way too complex to just lay out here. Of course, such instruction is the easiest and most efficient way to proceed, but it takes a discipline most of us don't yet have and it does not involve brute force, but systematic letting go of all our obscurations, whatever prevent us from relaxing. It is way too complex to elaborate here, not to mention that such practices defy words by definition.

And so, for starters, about the best I can do is to suggest that we entertain the idea of resting in the natural interstices that can be found or made in time. Begin to pause, take a deep breath, a time out, so to speak, and just allow the mind to rest, to be just as it already is. That practice, if nothing else, offers a place to start, allowing a moment of rest and, eventually, resting in that moment over and over and over. This may be as obvious (and perhaps even embarrassing) as stopping what we are doing, quite consciously, and, as mentioned, taking a deep breath, resting in the moment, as self-conscious as that may feel. At least rest for a moment before moving on. And do that frequently.

I think of it as getting the rest we need now, in this present moment, and not at some time in the future.

Nov 28, 2021, 8:56 PM

RITUAL RITES

Most of all, what we do daily, ritually, the particular rites involved, are not just something perfunctory that we have to imitate or drag through. They are rites and rituals because they work; they accomplish something. For example.

When I was a boy scout, I can remember using a piece of flint plus a piece of steel and striking them together in order to start a fire. I didn't do that just to do it, but to accomplish something; get a fire started. If I did not do it properly, there was no spark

and thus no fire. This is the approach I take (or attempt to) for any ritual process in my life that is articulated or performed. It has a purpose.

Just how we separate religious rites, which become rituals and any non-religious secular processes that we do in a day, I can't say. What is the difference between a religious rite and any rite that we do religiously? If I consider my early introduction to Zen Buddhism, every act we did during the day, like chopping wood, cutting vegetables, or even bathing and brushing our teeth can be done with awareness and intent. Where religious rites are separated from any other kind of secular action or rite gets blurred. As opportunities for practice and mindfulness, I see no difference. It's all good.

If I keep in mind that, at least for me, any repetitive action that I perform for a purpose, for a particular end, becomes a rite. When in dharma training, we consider what is called post-meditation, meaning what we do when we are not sitting on the cushion, when we are not formally practicing, in time the difference between the two vanishes. We are not just consciously practicing only when we are 'on the cushion', but we can be formally mindful and aware all the time, on the cushion and off.

As to any action, call it a rite or process, that is ritually done, like brushing our teeth, taking a shower, going to the bathroom, etc. Or, considering things like cleaning the house, washing the dishes, vacuuming the floor, cleaning the toilet, these are all particular actions that require articulation on our part and often in a particular order. Again, calling them rites treads on the toes of the religious, but we can be 'religious' or aware doing these secular activities just as we are with doing what is formally recognized as sacred.

IMO, it's all sacred and it is 'All Good', 'Always Good', or 'Ever Perfect', just as the deities of Kunuzangpo and Kuntuzangpa (Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri) in Sanskrit portray in Tibetan Buddhism.

The distinction as to what is sacred in our life and what is not has become, at least for me, meaningless. Yes, some rites are more formerly 'religious', but none are not intrinsically sacred if their result is, as the deity Kuntuzangpo represents, 'All Good'.

I have found that if I am looking for opportunities to become more aware, to have greater awareness, I need to look no further than the various rites I articulate each day, including the secular, the day-to-day rituals I mentioned earlier in this post.

Instead of performing the tasks I have each day mindlessly or as something I just have to drag through, these same tasks can be articulated with mindfulness and clarity. There is a whole sea of awareness to be reclaimed by changing our attitude about those things we have to do, like cleaning the house, putting the dishes away, preparing food, and 'what have you?'

'Carpe Diem' (Seize the Day) makes sense for any and all of what we have to do each day. However, we actually have to seize the opportunities we have (like: what we have to do anyway) and exercise them, articulate them positively.

[Image of the deities Kuntuzangpo and Kuntuzangpa as one, often defined as the 'All Good', 'Always Good', or 'Ever Perfect'.]

Nov 30, 2021, 4:24 AM

THE THINGS WE HAVE TO DO

I can't help but be struck by the fact that most all of what we do each day are various small rituals, repetitive steps that if done properly, articulated well, get the job done; they

produce a result. It seems to me like that's all I do most of the day, and if that's not done, nothing much is accomplished, which may be fine too.

We all have been doing these little rituals, meaning this is what we already have to do anyway. The only difference that I can see is that there are the things I like to do each day and the things I don't like to do, at least not so much.

Well, those things I have to do that I don't really like to do and perhaps I even just march through them to get them done, are lost opportunities. Of course, like so many things, I can see that now, yet I have tried to avoid them for years. To repeat: the things I don't care for doing (i.e., the things I don't do with care) are just a waste of time if they are not articulated with care, properly.

My point is that these things I have to do (whether I like it or not) result in whatever the purpose that the rite (procedure) promises. That's why I do them, although they may not be my favorite pastime. For the same money, so to speak, the same investment in time and effort, these tasks, if done with mindfulness, could also produce clarity and lucidity, something I've yet to get too much of.

All I have to do is to stop whining and just do these tasks properly, with skill and attention. Then, instead of accumulation of what has to be negative karma, my dragging my feet, I can produce clarity and perhaps no karma that has to be dealt with down the road. There is no reason I could not just straighten out this attitude that some tasks are fun and others just drag me along. The being dragged is not helpful and creates karma that will come back on me sooner or later.

Of course, the dharma way of stating this is that by doing this, I would be removing the negative attachment I have to those things I don't like to do.

Dec 1, 2021, 6:23 AM

ARTICULATION

Articulation. Are you articulate? Do you articulate? To me, that is a good question, in fact a key question. How articulate are you, or to put it another way, can you articulate? Or perhaps best said, do you take the time to articulate?

Dharma practice is nothing but articulation. As to how articulate we are or how well can we articulate, that is the point. Dharma practice is not intentionally cloudy or foggy, but just the reverse, clear and lucid. That's why the word 'articulate' is just right.

And we can see, hear, and feel proper articulation. I sense this in Native American rituals. I see it in the dancing. I hear it in the drums and especially in the voices and singing. The same is true for poetry and stories. Whatever Native American ritual is or isn't, to function, it has to be exact and articulate. And this because it is by articulation and skillful practice that we evoke an effect of clarity and awareness.

As I de-culturize a bit from the Tibetan of my 50 years or so with Tibetan Buddhism, meaning as I begin to turn more to American dharma or North American dharma, it is clear to me that spirituality in America is just that, and that I should look carefully into Native American spirituality to see how similar it is to my de-culturized Tibetan dharma realization. The dharma behind any country's implementation is the same. And I am talking about the dharma and not the culture, any culture. Although, I would do well to consider the dharma of my own North American culture.

My first thought is that these two forms of spirituality, Tibetan Buddhist and Native American may be very similar. And if so, I would like to meld the two for my own work, into my own life, if possible, and begin to work the spirituality of this land as exemplified by Native American ritual or even my own adaption of Tibetan Buddhism to America, as fortified by my fifty-odd years of Tibetan dharma training. Equally important to me is my

76 years of natural history training, ever since I was about six years old. I have been studying natural history, what has been called “The Lama of Appearances” all these years, so I am not stranger to American spirituality.

I had hoped to join in Native American rituals, but that may not be practical. A Native American friend of mine explained to me that before an 80-year-old white American gets up and dances a round-dance at a Pow-wow, I had better ask permission from the Native Americans present. I never thought of that. It seems, she explained, that some (perhaps many) Native Americans feel such dancing by non-indigenous people is offensive, which may be understandable by those who feel this way, but it does not speak well of inclusion or growth.

If Native American ritual is something to observe but not to take part in by all who are sincere, any of us who were born in this country through no fault of our own, and that public Native American rites have become more of an exhibition than it is inclusive. That's fine by me too and I understand. Yet, as mentioned, my experience with Mother Nature since I was a young boy, as being sacred, stands solid. I'm not Native American any more than I am Tibetan, yet I am a native of America.

I have been to Tibet a number of times and can speak from experience that the land there is very different from North America, just as the land of India was very different from Tibet, and so these land-mass differences must count and affect us in some way. And I would like to account for that if I can become sensitive enough.

What I need is a little orientation as to where I would find those Native American representatives that practice dharma who would like to share in a similar way to what Tibetan dharma practitioners do. In Tibet, everyone seemed welcome to participate.

There may be some synergy between these two approaches (Tibetan and Native American) and I will look for that, in hopes that the Native American view can supplement and fill out what I have understood from the Tibetan view, if only because I live in the land of North America and not in the land of Tibet.

The Tibetan dharma lineages are very much intact and unbroken, while I have little idea what shape the Native American lineages are. And while I hope to learn from the Native Americans, they perhaps could learn something from the Tibetan lineages and the fact that they are unbroken. There may be a synergy. Then again, it may be a bridge too far. I hope to find out. No matter which way the wind blows, my connection to the spirituality of this land of North America has already been cast.

Dec 2, 2021, 2:25 AM

THE BIGGER THE FRONT, THE BIGGER THE BACK

To master any of the realization (nondual) meditation practices requires, as the Bhagavat Gita says, that “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea,” which here means that we let go and embrace something larger than just our own skin, that we realize that we are interdependent and not just independent. Or, as the poets say, we are ‘ALL ONE’ and not ‘ALONE’.

As far as I know, this requires an actual physical dharma teacher, someone (or some ‘thing’?), outside of ourselves, that we can trust enough to allow them to point out to us what we need to know. If we don’t trust anyone or never have trusted anyone with our well-being, then we have a problem. Before we can enter the non-dual meditation practices, we first have to do something about our insular condition and realize, as the old saying goes, that ‘no man is an island.’ Or woman.

There is no magic potion that we can take that dissolves our insularity, other than perhaps LSD, and it can be difficult to stabilize the effects of that drug after taking it. The Tibetans have very detailed methods for removing that insularity called the ‘Pointing Out Instructions’ as to the nature of the mind. And, while eventually effective, these are not

just a walk in the park. What is pointed out (or introduced) is the actual nature of the mind and a side effect of those instructions is experiencing the process of non-duality.

I know from experience how difficult it is to have the nature of the mind pointed out. I was given those instruction a number of times, including one time personally by one of the heart sons of the Karmapa (just me and His Eminence alone together in a room), and I managed not to get it. I could not see or recognize what was being pointed out. Eventually, I had to just walk away, out of the room. LOL.

Then, after some time, and a quite lengthy process, including years of intense practice, and the Pointing-Out Instructions from an authentic teacher, I managed to be introduced and recognize the nature, of the mind, so I have some idea of the difficulty involved. We are habitually so insularly ingrained that popping us out of that shell or cocoon is relatively impossible. Yet, there IS one encouraging thought.

As hard as it is to get in the groove of the dharma recognition of the mind, once in and the nature of the mind recognized, it is equally hard to fall out of it. The bigger the front, the bigger the back.

Dec 3, 2021, 1:45 AM

ARCHIVE-LESS

Margaret and I have been babysitting two of our granddaughters, Emma and Josephine, since Tuesday, and I have been (with some help from Margaret) the chief cook and bottle washer, so to speak. The kids move on tomorrow morning, heading up north to visit their cousin Iris and Margaret and I look forward to some popcorn and watching the Michigan Wolverines play football. I grew up in Ann Arbor, so I used to scalp tickets for this team.

And I am in somewhat of a celebratory mood as these last few days saw the two final collections that I have curated for many decades picked up by truckers. This would be about fifty boxes or packages, mostly my fairly extensive collection of dharma books and dharma items heading to Columbus KTC (Karma Thegsum Chöling), our sister dharma center, that burned down and is being rebuilt. And secondly, a special truck-service picking up some 500 pen & ink dharma drawings by the Bhutanese former monk Sangye Wangchug, heading overnight to the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City to be part of their permanent collection.

And that, my friends, leaves me collection-less for the first time ever. Sure, I have perhaps 9000 music CDs and 1000+ movie DVDs, but that's small potatoes compared to some of the other archives I have curated.

Yesterday's pickup by the Ruben Museum of Art in NYC pretty much completes the placement of my major archives and life collections. I have tried my best to be a good steward of this data. I have posted this before, but just for completeness, here are the major collections that Margaret and I have donated to non-profit organizations, plus the two major music and film databases we created and sold.

Rubin Museum of Art, NYC (dharma art and calligraphy of Sangye Wangchug, who lived with us for years, and went on to become the Cultural Minister of Bhutan)

Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan (33,000 rock poster art images, dimensions, and commentary)

Michigan State University (AMG CD Collection -- over 720,000 music CDs)

University of Illinois Library. The "Heart Center Astrological Library," probably the largest ever assembled.) It took a huge Van Lines moving truck to move the collection and a

UPS-size pickup truck to get all my letters and papers, and I just send another 18 boxes about a week or so ago.

Haight Street Art Center, a non-profit center for rock n' roll concert posters. Another copy of 33,000 rock poster art images, dimensions, and commentary)

Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (Thousands of backup teachings on audio tape, mostly the teachings of Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche)

All-Music Guide (AllMusic.com) largest music database of albums, sidemen, tracks, bios, etc. on the planet, sold some years ago.

All-Movie Guide (allMovie.com) one of two largest film and movie databases on the planet, also some years ago.

[Here is a photo of the dharma books being loaded by our indefatigable friend Zach and a photo of the three 4x4-foot packages of dharma drawings ready for pickup, to be shipped-flat. And here are my granddaughters Emma (9 years) and Josephine (5 years), whom we have been taking care of since Tuesday of this week.]

[Photo by me.]

Dec 3, 2021, 5:38 PM

THE ENDLESS BLAST OF NATURE LIVING THAT WE CALL SILENCE

Learning to recognize when I am in transition-mode and not stable enough to write this way or some other way is rare, yet it is something that happens. Some days I just don't feel like doing anything. I can't find the thread of my interest.

Of course, that's a good time to just rest and let things be whatever they are, rather than push, pull, and tug at the moorings of my mind. I know from experience that given a little time, and usually not so much time at that, I will once again seize upon a topic of interest and find myself writing.

As to what exactly that is when I am betwixt and between writings, I can't quite say. For all I know, it may be a very good thing to just do nothing and perhaps I need to delve into these moments of void a little deeper. However, usually that awkward silence from writing on my part is not welcome, but rather best serves as food for thought and even worry. I am learning not to do that (so much), meaning not to worry.

Still, rather than feeling like a place I have arrived at, these down times or empty moments feel more like I am treading water and waiting, of course, to find my thread of interest once again. Yet perhaps that comforting thread of interest is just another drone or white-noise that covers or drowns out some important signal or source. I can't quite say or be sure.

I reach the point where even the various Internet sites and links (mostly photographic) I often go to each day or so no longer interest me. And so, here I sit, suspended in the passing time, more or less motionless, doing mostly nothing. And I am still not quite used to that state.

And so, of course, given nothing to do, I turn my mind to just that, investigating where I am and what is happening now, since I have no other 'leads' at the moment. Why do I need leads at all? That's a reoccurring question. What happens if I just accept the status quo, this state of non-interest, and see where that leads. Does going nowhere also go somewhere? Or are we always just making waves?

If we allow those waves to die down, what remains? Or is it like the mathematical torus, endlessly turning inside out and outside in? It seems that everything is always in process. If that entire process appears to come to a halt, what remains? Is there clarity or fog behind all this? Which is it? Or is it just like the shark that must keep moving in order to breathe, since it has no moving gills.

Are we similar, in that the process of what I call Insight Meditation wants to be in constant motion in order to sense where we are, like rolling a tiny piece of grit between our fingertips? And if we don't have that process constantly in motion, what then?

What happens if we allow the clarity of Insight Meditation to pause? I'm not saying we can. It seems we need that clarity to see by. Awareness kept aware by the movement of Insight meditation, meaning always requiring something (some 'thing') to create awareness, like rubbing two sticks together to create fire or using flint and steel to get a spark.

What happens when that Insight 'breathing' process falls fallow and gently rolls to a stop? Do we try to jumpstart it, or do we just fall silent and lose the awareness being generated? Is the awareness still there without Insight Meditation? Or is awareness endlessly created in real time, like our breathing has to keep going to make life possible? Or, if we pause in the process, does awareness remain? Is awareness always just there?

Try this. Is there always awareness of something, as dualistic as that sounds? Or does Insight Meditation always have to be penetrating something, causing the duality that Insight-seeing requires as input then collapse into unity – non-dual awareness? Is Insight Meditation the endless reduction of duality to unity (to non-duality), always breaking Samsara down? Are these insights spiritual synapses that endlessly fire?

Is there a subtle exhaustion from Insight Meditation that behind which intones or rings a solitary sound that is like the monotonic Sumburgh foghorn or the Tibetan long horns (Raddung), as shown here? Well worth hearing.

FOGHORN

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

TIBETAN HORNS

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

The endless blast of nature living that we call silence!

Dec 5, 2021, 8:26 AM

THE PRESENT MOMENT

[Sometimes I can't explain or get my arms around a concept, but only can share it with you and contemplate. Beyond words, it's enough to just behold.]

We can't stop time anymore than we hold back the tides. Our futile protests are just an echo in the wind. Somehow, we have ended up on the wrong side of something, struggling against, rather than working with, what is. How that originally happened I have no idea, nevertheless, here it is.

And turning that around is no small feat, and it's hard to even know where to start. This is what's called 'Samsara'. It equally could be called, as Shakespeare put it, 'Much Ado About Nothing.'

Folds enfolded on folds, like Filo Dough, or like one of those slip-knots we made as kids that vanishes under the least extension. A certain subtle something that when stressed stretches, extenuating, meaning it gets thinner and thinner, until it almost is nothing at all. That's what we call our 'being.'

As the Greek philosopher Parmenides put it, 'Being Alone Is'. There is no comparison because there is nothing to compare to. There is only this very present moment, 'Now', and nothing other. And this very moment is clear and lucid; all else is just attachment: positive, negative, and neutral. Remove or clear that away and we are left with nothing more to it than the clarity and lucidity of the present. And try to grasp that!

Beyond this Present Moment, there is only the impending future and the disparate past. Those aside, there is absolutely nothing at all. Nada. This present moment is empty of both Self and Other. I have verified this for myself, yet it's hard to convey what that emptiness entails. There is no suchness there, no accumulation, and no permanent being whatsoever.

I find this a difficult concept to convey because the present moment, as mentioned, is emptiness itself, not empty as a bowl is empty, but empty of all and everything that could be used to describe it. Without that, what have we? Yet, at the same time, this present moment is perfectly clear, perfect clarity, and lucid. It makes no sense at all and cannot.

This is pure awareness that cannot be described, cannot be measured, yet exists beyond existence. It just is, clear and lucid. That's all.

The future crowds the present on one side, and the past on the other, yet there is infinite room. Not a problem, because this present moment cannot exist, yet here it is.

Dec 5, 2021, 10:53 AM

PRESENT TENSE

[Yes, I should break this up into several blogs or not even post it at all, yet that would be counter-intuitive for me. I will take it standing up if I can.]

I keep writing about this because the whole event made such a powerful impression on me. It's not as if I could just absorb it and not talk about it, but rather what I learned was so potent that I can't believe some of you reading this won't learn something from it. I certainly did. I did not volunteer to be a harbinger. It was permitted and I accept it. I feel I have no choice.

The point is that in the midst of my major stroke, I discovered that everything was gone, everything except this present moment we each share. It was not like I was 'sick" and everything was sick-like, foggy, or unclear. This present moment was just as it is now, as it always has been, crystal clear and lucid. The only thing was that the rest of what I was used to (my Self, habits, entertainments, and attachments) were no longer there, were not present at all. Just gone. This was startlingly new for me. Only this present moment was present. Other than that, I was no one. I just was not there as I knew myself. As mentioned, there was only this present moment to live in. Past and future memories and identification were not available.

In other words, I was stuck in and with the present moment, with no access to what I call my Self or any of my familiar habits and usual entertainments. As they say, this Present Moment has no end; it is forever, and I discovered this to be true. Any memories I might have had were gone or at least very distant, mere shadows that I had not the energy or know-how to reach, much less reanimate.

I would normally say that I was beside myself, but in the aftermath of the stroke, there was no self to be besides. Yet, as mentioned, there was only this present moment, more

obvious than I had ever known it, clear as a bell, lucid, unending and, well, just right here! It could not have more there and was as familiar as it ever had been, particularly as this present was so vividly framed by the loss of everything else that I reached for, like memories, refuge in my Self, entertainment, and closure. Compared to my dimly perceived loss, this present moment was an open book as it is right now for you reading this.

In other words, there was just this present moment, emphasized by the starkness of there being nothing else. I was at a total loss of anything familiar to me other than the right-here and now, a bubble that was closed and all encompassing; it seemed to extend out to forever. And, as mentioned, that moment was clear, clear, clear, and totally present, as if nothing else existed but this perfect clarity and lucidity. It was like the old phrase, 'On a clear day you can see forever'. And here, 'Forever' means that's all there is. Period.

WHY THIS IS INTERESTING

This is interesting because, at least to me, it showed me more about the makeup of Samsara than I had ever seen, and by a long shot. You could say that it is all in my mind and I would response, "Right you are..." and the same goes for every one of us. The takeaway for me was that we are so wrapped up in and captivated by Samsara that there is hardly a single crack in our cocoon. We are signed, sealed, and delivered to Samsara and apparently have always been so. I had no idea! Now I do.

Having my Self shattered and blown away, stripped of every bit of entertainment, and my busyness reduced to nothing, I was left standing there naked without any cover whatsoever, at first almost totally, and subsequently, bit by bit, as Samsara was reanimated, restored to something like it was before. However, this took days, weeks, and months.

The hard-to-believe part was that Samsara is so totally encompassing, and our being wrapped up in it to the exclusion of even a window-peek beyond it most of the time. And

there was my genuine terror and desperate attempts to reach and once-again to re-wrap myself in the entertainments, attachments, and busyness I had so long serviced. That failed.

Well, all of that was at least temporarily shattered and removed from my grasp, leaving me with some kind of empty framework, looking at the bare bones of what must be Samsara as I know it. Why had I never seen this before? I had been jarred loose.

To repeat, what was immediately obvious is how complete my immersion in Samsara was and had always been. Talk about going behind the curtain to see the Wizard of Oz. My first impression was that this was hopeless, hopeless, hopeless, and that I could never communicate this to anyone else who had not experienced it. It simply is a bridge too far for the human experience to fathom. No one ... there are few people who ever go there and are able to communicate what this is. As well read as I was, nothing even in the ballpark had ever occurred to me. It is not written about.

Who could express the terror and ache for me in my attempts to hide and take refuge again in all the attachments, Self, and endless entertainments in which we are and have been totally immersed in our entire life? We have no idea. I had no idea until I did.

This death grip that Samsara holds us in is not totally impervious to light, but close, yet it admits but cracks and gaps, some small and others, like strokes, larger. I can well remember being brought into a small room with several stroke doctors, in order to view on a computer-monitor the particular damage that was done by my stroke.

As they gathered around, I told them something like I am trying to share with you here, and they listened intently, saying that they never heard anything as detailed as my account. And my own doctor, taking me aside, began to tell me of his own life and problems, in particular trouble in his marriage, asking for my advice and counsel, and even giving me his own home phone so that I could reach him. Doctors don't do that. Perhaps these doctors had never considered that a stroke contained anything like spiritual insight beyond the damage done.

In the course of my life, I, like many of us, have had a number of illnesses, etc., but none that had as much spiritual insight as this. It's not like I can just forget what I saw and went through. I feel an obligation to relate the implications of that time on the chance that some of you, even one of you, can take to heart the greater message that was implicit in what took place, like that here was a premonition of what awaits each of us in the bardo. What was that you say?

That's how I took it and of course, as I had the opportunity, I related my stroke experience, the same experience that I am trying to share with readers here, to my dharma teacher of some 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who told me that my stroke experience was good practice for entering the bardo after death and that he himself had something like eleven or so small strokes in his own life. Rinpoche totally understood the spiritual implications of what I had experienced.

I can't help but bring to mind the poetry of Dylan Thomas and his poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," and the refrain "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Only, in my case, I have flipped it, because I "raged" not against the dying of the light, the light going out, but rather I struggled against the light and my looking at it directly. It had been my habit to hide from it all my life.

The fact is, that so brilliant a light, fixed as it is in the firmament of our own mind, cannot be stood. I could not bear to look at it directly, but immediately turned away and sought out the shadows and shades of my familiar Samsara to better lose myself, to hide in. The comfort of that Samsaric darkness is all that I had ever known and faced with the intense purity of that vivid light, I desperately sought to immerse myself again in obscurity, by any way possible, and to re-clothe myself in forgetfulness and the dim light of the flesh. Yet my eyes remained stuck open for a long time.

Stepping beyond, or being pushed beyond, conventional psychological states, is not somewhere other than here, but it exists just outside our normal parameters. The fabric of the conventional mind breaks down under pressure and whatever guidelines there are

fail. There is little to no map or guide beyond whatever everyone sees. Step beyond that and we find ourselves just out there, walking point, and on our own recognizance. It seems there is no one else around, no Jim Dandy to the rescue.

As to what's urgent, it is simple. If, as my dharma teacher made clear to me, that my stroke experience would stand me in good stead when I die and enter the bardo, then it is not rocket science on my part to conclude (from my own terror) that I am not exactly ready to "go gentle into that goodnight" of the bardo but had better do something to better prepare myself.

Or am I to throw up my hands and consign myself to accepting whatever comes and trust that fate will sort it out for me. Of course, that is the default experience which we have taken probably for many lifetimes, yet it reminds me of driving a car without a steering wheel; not my chosen choice.

I know. I should get one of those folding signs and wear it on my front and back that says "Repent! The Bardo is Coming." I apologize for that edge in me, yet I cannot but react and act on this information.

Dec 6, 2021, 7:39 AM

A CUP OF TEA?

I've reached a point of pause where the sands of time on various of my projects have run out. I am grateful for that. Yet because of that, reorientation of some kind is inescapable, and clearing the decks, so to speak, is in order.

At the same time, little of real importance has changed. Insight Meditation of the Mahamudra variety is still the order of the day, much like the fact that the shark has to keep moving in order to breathe. Insight Meditation (part of Mahamudra Meditation) is

how we know the nature of the mind, as far as I know, just as breathing air is what keeps the body alive.

At the same time, all things are possible. I have no idea how close I come to catching a glimpse, much less segueing or slipping into another dimension, one closed to me up until now. Meanwhile I bob on the surface. Muscle memory means so much. It's so important. Just as breathing is automatic if we want to live, Insight Meditation is required in order to rest in the nature of the mind. And rather than being learned, Insight Meditation comes naturally to the meditator once 'Recognition' is discovered, once we are introduced to the nature of the mind. It is an automatic byproduct.

If I even look around or search the mind for something to do, all paths lead to Insight Meditation as far as I can tell. They all turn inward and end up in the same direction, like the old phrase "All Paths Lead to Rome." My fear or worry of falling out of the groove defined by the process of Insight Meditation is a waste of time, just a bad habit, and this is due to the addictive quality of Insight Meditation. Is breathing addictive? So is Insight Meditation.

Just reading the dharma texts for me is a double-edged sword, much as a rising tide raises all boats and an ebb tide can ground them. Getting caught in the past, in the history itself, even of our own dharma, is (at least for me) a caution, something to be aware of.

I keep coming back to the freshness of the present moment as the solution, the solver of problems. And perhaps because I have chosen writing essays as the medium of the moment for me, freshness is the thing.

As for me, what I value most in creativity, at least in my work, is this freshness. And I do this because what is fresh one day for me is often stale by tomorrow, not the truth of things, but rather the expression of that truth. I guess I am that fickle or changeable. I often write one essay tonight and by tomorrow morning when the sun comes up, it no

longer represents me, so I either discard it or update it recursively until it represents or reaches today, this moment now.

I can't promise to not change my mind, or that my mind won't change, yet I am sure that what I feel this minute is 'of the day', so to speak. I don't know how much of what I feel in this moment is common to all of us here on Earth, yet I find that if what I write is fresh this moment, that is the best I can do. I can stand behind that. If I read my own writing a year from now, I may not agree with myself, but tonight I try to write what I feel and that is fresh.

And as to my own writing, I don't just write linearly, from left to right, and from top to bottom of the page. I do my best to plummet as deep into the topic as I need to find what for me is true insight. It's like digging a well until you reach water, and then drinking from there. That way, I am not just repeating stale words that I have said or thought before. I know that if I reach deep until I strike interest that I never have a problem. Often, when I finally reach that fresh interest, all that I have written up until that point is out the window and that fresh writing becomes where I start from. IMO, that's the nature of Insight Meditation.

I always go for the depth as described above. And I do the same with both grammar and word placement – juxta positioning. I like the words to rise and fall, and the vowels to weep and moan. And I am all about the clash of consonants and their rearrangement.

Although I love poetry, I am more didactic than I am the poet, because above all I would like my readers to understand what I am saying. Therefore, I always try to articulate each sentence I write so there is no confusing what I am getting at. I treat what I write as pointing-out instructions for the topic I am writing about. That's what I mean by 'didactic'. I blame this approach on what I call Absolute Bodhicitta, the insatiable need to share dharma with others.

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Dec 7, 2021, 2:02 AM

DEPRESSION: “WHAT YOU FEAR SHALL COME UPON YOU”

The above is a quote from Proverbs 10:24, but here I am talking more about the fear of depression. What is depression? It comes from the Latin, from deprimere, ‘to press down’. Is it as simple as something pressing down on us, like whatever casts a shadow over our clarity? Whatever it is, I don’t like it and have learned what to do about it. I don’t often get depressed in any serious way, but if something or someone (including myself) casts an untoward thought over me, I can and do feel it. I usually can just shake it off, but some shadows themselves cast a shadow, so to speak, and I have to do something about that. Couple that with the gray days of winter approaching and any shadows seem to linger.

Of course, I try to get out from under that shadow, but it usually takes a little time to do that, more than enough time to dim my light and taint my mood. Another approach seems to be to just look at or through the shadow and burn it off through rites and practices. That any of us can try.

I don’t like to find myself holding up crossed fingers to keep these shadows at bay, because that does not work. If that’s happening, I have already lost a battle that I didn’t even know until that moment I was in. I can’t speak as to what obscures others, yet when depression casts its shadow my way, I don’t like when I find myself reacting in a kneejerk manner. That’s always a bad sign.

Such shadows or shades are a good example as to the value and need of articulation, of exercising the rites of purification carefully, exactly, in order to address and burn off what’s hanging over me and return to the normal amount of light and clarity that I am used to.

To recap, the very fact that I find myself reacting, being defensive, is a sign that I've already let the pig into the garden, as they say. As my dharma teacher put it: the time to keep the pig out of the garden is when he pokes his nose through the picket fence. Once he gets past the gate, into the garden, and thrashes around, it is very difficult to remove the pig and save the garden.

That's why the fact that I find myself reacting to what I find depressing is sign enough that the pig is already in the garden, and so its best to get out my flint and steel and strike fire, initiating the rites of purification of one kind or another. When it comes to shaking off depression, we are all dharma practitioners or should be for our own welfare.

A better sign would be, instead of reacting in kneejerk fashion, that I become aware of, accept the shadows, and get right to working them off through the articulation of one rite (practice) or another. That's what the dharma teachings call bringing it to the path, whatever it is that troubles us.

In other words, engage (be aware of) the depression head-on instead of trying to avoid it. As mentioned, our attempt at avoidance is immediate proof that we have already failed at keeping the depression at bay. The pig is already in the garden.

The whole idea of moving on or toward a problem, instead of trying to get away from it, is the lesson here. Ideally, it would be best if we could be aware of the shadow the moment it is cast, rather than discover it after it has affected us by depressing our mood or state of mind. It is enough to become aware of the shadow, note that, and then either just drop it or invoke some sort of appropriate reaction, preferably for something as strong as some depressions I enact a particular purification ritual.

It is hard not to begin to picture this world as one where we are performing endless purification rites (everywhere we look) rather than to become a victim to all the shadows that could (and do) depress us. There is lots to face in this modern world and our turning

away or hiding only cements that fact. Full engagement on our part, tackling it head-on so to speak, seems preferable to falling victim to our own fears. As the old saying goes, "What you fear shall come upon you."

It's hard these days not to become a medicine man or medicine woman, complete with dance steps and chants, finding or picking our way through this modern world through enacting (articulating) one rite after another in order to remain clear of victimization.

It seems that today it is not enough to have a few dharma practitioners, shamans, and medicine men (or women) to care for our wellbeing. We, each of us, must do the dance, chant the chant, and perform the rituals needed to free us from the encroaching shadows of our worst fears. At least, this has been true for me.

I must not only practice these rituals, but must also effect the change that these rituals are intended to bring about. And when illusion and delusion glaze over the clarity of the public mind, we all best each perform the dance, beat the drum, and chant the chant (whatever it takes) that clarifies the mind and the situation we find ourselves in.

In my case, I know I must pay more attention, slow down, and articulate (enact) the particular ritual practices needed to clear the mind of any shadows. In these dark political times in America, it seems to me that we each would do well to enact the rituals we know (or could learn of) to purify and clarify our general state of mind. As for me, I have learned and trained in the ritual practices of Tibetan Vajrayana dharma. Your practices may differ from mine. Each to our own. These can be prayers, chants, dances, mudras, meditation, etc. Equally, they can be walking, cleaning the basement, painting a wall, whatever action is to some degree transforming and gets us out of the dark mood. A key component is distracting ourselves from our fixation on what depresses us, letting go of that attachment.

The one thing I have learned is that these rites and rituals must be deliberately articulated with intent, great care, and exactness to have any effect on us deep down.

Dec 8, 2021, 4:27 PM

POOLING

[Heading into winter, day by day, always a little too channeling for me, meaning: no choice. I have to remind myself that the Sun turns northward in less than a month and light will begin to return. Still, like a horse led into a chute, I tend to balk a bit, especially when the mind runs a little slack.]

I know that my writing, by intention, is didactic. I have said so. However, by 'didactic' I don't mean that I write like reading a textbook course. Quite the contrary. I use language as a foil to slow down the time a reader takes, so that they are better able to understand. And this because there is no end of the sentence that is the point of it. The point of my writing is to step away from linear discourse and get used to finding ourselves aware right here in the moment, rather than assume there is always something we are supposed to get at the end of the line. As far as I can tell, the end of the line is the end of the line.

There is no 'place' we are going to other than here and now, and we are already there. Perhaps we don't realize it. What can I say? And that's just the point. How to say nothing at all and mean it. Nothing is really something.

We are used to hurrying on, always looking to the end to get the point, perhaps because we imagine there is something there to get, yet the end is just that. Much of dharma is turning directionality around at itself in the here and now. In that way, by 'Seeing' seeing itself, we become still at last. And heaven knows we need the rest.

In other words, we don't know where what we are looking for is. Otherwise, we would have found it by now. Yet, simple cease and desist is hard to accomplish. As they say, "Trying does not do it; doing does it." And here we are talking about doing nothing. And we can't try and do that.

Wrap all this up into a ball and let it roll. Are you getting this? That we are going nowhere and doing nothing? How to accept the obvious is the question. How do we break this truth to ourselves? That's what this writing is all about.

And we do this by feel and not by thought or thinking. Better to be blind to the intellect than to have lost our feelings and not even know it. My suggestion? Just give it a rest, as they say. We dream a bridge to hold back what we have.. We pool.

Dec 9, 2021, 1:28 PM

NATIONAL DEPRESSION

I live in the state (Michigan) currently having the most invasive Covid surge. And in that state, I live in the one county (so I read) that has the most percentile increase in Covid cases. Why this is so, I have no idea other than the fact that around here many folks are proud not to be vaccinated. I feel like a reporter or journalist stuck right here in the middle of all this Covid activity. It is like a pall or cloud hovering over this whole area of the country.

I don't usually suffer from depression, but instead am pretty positive all of the time. Always have been. However, and there is an "however" here. Lately I feel something very akin to depression going on. If I look carefully, I find I am not depressed. Yet, if I just feel what's going on, I have to say that as to we as a nation, and as a state, and even as a county, there is an almost viscous shadow or cloud hanging over us. We can feel it. Call it psychological weather.

Now, this may be over the entire country or perhaps over most of the world. I can't say. What I can say is that we, collectively, are going through something that apparently affects all of us, or at least most of us. I too can feel it and, as mentioned, have to snap my head to be aware that I personally am not depressed, yet all around me (and me in it) things are confused and shadowy or cloudy.

As to what we can do about this, I am telling myself the following: this would be the appropriate time to be definite and articulate in our actions. And by that I am referring to rites and rituals we may know that can be practiced or articulated with great exactness and care, especially during these particular days.

If I tend to lose the thread of continuity, something I usually have no trouble (or very little) finding and following, I associate that bit of confusion with the cloudiness of these times we are living through. This Covid, not to mention the absurd politics going on around us, are an enormous distraction for, probably, each one of us.

And we can snap out of it by putting one foot in front of the other and performing actions with great articulation. Rites and rituals that define our space and time by their enunciation, by their precision, and emphasis, whether it be done with chants, mudras, prayers, offerings, purification rituals, or what-have-you are very appropriate just now. It's time to practice and perform them.

Why? Because these kind of ritual rites and practices can distract us from these depressive distractions and allow us to at least clear our own minds, restoring clarity and lucidity to our lives. Our communities and even our nation may or may not be able to do this for us just now, yet we can do this for ourselves, and thus effect a change of attitude.

Which leaves it for each of us, individually, to enact these rites ourselves, and emphatically enough, by articulating them vigorously, to effect the clarity of our mind and

pull out of whatever we feel is depressing us, whatever is pulling us down personally and thus nationally. My two cents. This is what rites and rituals are all about, what they are designed for.

For example, just writing and enunciating this blog has helped to clarify my mind and shake off the depressiveness.

Dec 10, 2021, 7:47 PM

MEANINGFUL ACTS

[I refuse to cede the right to be a patriot and to value our American flag to the naysayers, those that seek autocratic rule here in America. I too am a patriot, albeit a liberal one. I draw your attention to the collage created by the famous rock poster artist David Singer. Singer and I published this poster (“America Be Vigilant”) as part of ClassicPosters.com in quantity in 2003, almost twenty years ago. It features the maxim attributed to John P. Curran in 1790 “Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty,” quite apropos of the attacks on democracy happening in this country at the present time. We need this vigilance now. How to be vigilant (at least in our own life) is what this blog is about.]

I admit, what follows is a little Zen-like, in that we can find opportunities to be present all through our day and night. Ritual actions, performing various rites that articulate us to greater clarity and presence of mind I find important. It does not matter what religion or spiritual persuasion you are comfortable with or even if you like to ‘pat your forehead and rub your tummy’; if it works and does the job, that’s your ticket.

If we observe a surgeon, a craft-person, or any deliberate mastery of a particular technique or ritual, we can get the idea as to what meaningful activity entails. The goal of any ritual or repeated activity is greater awareness, greater being present, and lucidity on our part.

These various rites are a way of grounding us and being present, as opposed to getting distracted and carried away in the moment. That's why it's hard to say that this, that, or some one technique or ritual is right, and others do not work. If it works for you, it works. The whole idea is being present and accounted for. If we can do that, whatever technique works for us is golden, said the old lady as she kissed the cow.

One of the features of the dharma is the wide variety of functional techniques available to anyone. I tired of the pie-in-the-sky platitudes of the religion I was raised in early on (Catholicism) and skipped Sunday mass as soon as I could get away with it, because it did nothing for me. Certainly, the only awareness going to church on Sunday and Sunday School, was the awareness that I did not want to be there. My 'religion' has always been nature herself.

You might be very happy with this or that religion that does little for me, so have at it. What I am saying is that we have to cast about and find rites and rituals that do work for us, rituals that result in greater awareness and clarity. I hope I am being clear.

Perhaps we normally go through life as best we can, rolling when life rolls and gliding when we can, with no special thought to articulation. Articulation and various more formal rites and rituals are the province of the yogi and the dharma practitioner, but probably not what the rank-and-file person is concerned with.

IMO, these times now are different. They seem to require a slightly more deliberate execution and articulation of specific techniques, those techniques that have proved to work for us in the past. What they are in your case only you would know, yet they no-doubt exist.

Properly articulating, purposefully doing specific rites or what amount to ritual articulation on our part are a hedge against being swept away with whatever psychological states may be sweeping the country during these times.

We need something that will help us snap out of our lemming-like tendency to do nothing, to not raise our level of awareness to action, but rather not feel much like doing anything at all. Rites and ritual actions, when performed with intent and consciousness, allow us to put our foot down and stand up and be counted.

By that I mean learn to maintain an awareness that is clear and lucid, something both we ourselves and those around us, our family, friends, community, etc. need right now. Perhaps this is a local phenomenon, something we must do ourselves even as our elected leaders fail to enact it.

Someone has to stand vigil in the midst of these times, lest we all, lemming-like, be swept into the sea of mass confusion that seems to be brewing these days. Someone has to put their foot down and stop just going along with the dissolution of democracy and the invitation for autocratic rule. We value our freedom. At the very least, we have to stand up ourselves and be present as indicated by our actions.

Dec 11, 2021, 5:22 PM

DHARMA EXPRESS: EXPONENTIAL PROGRESS

As I look around, it would seem that there are nothing but intentional acts, some helpful and some not-so-helpful. If nothing else, everyone is breathing, moving the air in and out of our lungs.

Beyond that, it gets individual fast, what kinds of ritual-like acts each of us does to maintain the coherence of our mental and physical systems. It's not random, what we do, but deliberate, even if at this point muscle memory has taken over and much seems automatic by now.

Since I have trained in many of the ritual acts that dharma practice provides for almost fifty years, I have a quite real idea as to what they are about and what their purpose is. And, as I look around me at what others who do not practice the dharma do, it's not that each of us don't already have our intentional acts. We do. I can see that in what is being done by others aside from dharma practitioners.

And what is the point or product of all these dharma practices, all these rites? And the byproduct of dharma practice is simply awareness. We become aware enough to realize that whatever we do can also be done with care and full attention. It is that enhanced awareness that allows us to enact any practice or rites with more mindfulness. And increased mindfulness when we act produces more coherent actions, and so on.

This is recursion in its truest form, what the dharma teachings call the duo of 'Merit & Awareness' or 'Skillful Means and Awareness.'" And the product of each of these connate qualities (Merit and Awareness), the result, serves as input to fuel the other, recursively, and so on, ad infinitum. This dynamic dual alone provides the exponential curve of a successful dharma practice. This is true of so-called 'secular" acts as well as formal dharma acts.

Like spinning tops, plates, or coins on a table, as we have increasing mindfulness (skillfulness), we can bring that enhanced attention to bear on everything we do, and that alone produces increasing awareness. And, as mentioned, with that increased awareness we can better see to act skillfully, which then produces even greater awareness, and so on exponentially. However, the recursiveness has to be jumpstarted consciously.

For starters, nothing else needs to be done, except that.

Dec 12, 2021, 2:04 PM

DANCE TO LIVE

[As the quality of life as we knew it grows thinner in these times, I wish I had more to offer than just words.]

Perhaps I have been just skimming the cream off the top, as winter puts the icing on the cake, so to speak. I'm not under house arrest, but nevertheless confined by Covid. I suffer less than most because my life has not changed all that much. I spent a lot of time inside (and inside my mind) before Covid. Now I just have less choice in the matter. Yet, I see others suffering more.

I don't know how to be of much help to those that feel more isolated than I do. I have mentioned articulating various rites, sacred or secular, but with very little response from readers, although this is a powerful antidote to the confusion and disorientation caused by Covid. Perhaps we are beyond the help of words.

The dilemma brought on by this virus increasingly eats into our sanity, IMO. It's confusing enough that our sense of 'being', as the dharma texts have long put it, is already naturally as tenuous as it is, without the turmoil of this epidemic causing further dissolution. The temptation to reify everything, to attempt to make life more real than it is, runs rampant just now. This is desperation.

That is why purposeful, deliberate, recitation and enactment of rites and actions is so clarifying. We define by our actions our sense of being present, and benefit from the accompanying awareness and clarity that comes with that. The image of Native American round dancing comes to mind, the kind we see at pow-wows. This speaks to me. I want to dance that way. However, when I asked a few of my Native American friends how would other Native Americans react to an 80-year-old white man round dancing at a pow-wow, one said: "Michael--No worries. Let me put it this way. A pow-wow is not the place to start, unless you want to be a spectator." A second friend said

"Well I know, some Native Americans are particular..." And a third Native American friend just said "You go out there and just cut a rug. The Earth knows why you want to dance." I decided to be a private dancer and not create waves for anyone." LOL.

When all around us falls apart, like in Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," and the lines:

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;"

Now is the time to dance with all that we have, to enunciate, to articulate, and restate the status quo emphatically. And by that to create a center that does hold, something we can move or dance around, something more solid than just a slowly vanishing hologram of a past sense of normal .

Dance at the edge of sense,

As if our psychological life depends on it.

[Dec 13, 2021, 8:54 AM

COVID END-GAME?

[I don't like these themes, but I follow them out to see how dangerous they might be for us. Here is one based on the new very contagious Covid-19 strain named Omicron. Naming viruses after the Greek alphabet is a tradition. "Omicron" is the 15th letter in the Greek Alphabet. The preceding 14th letters either fizzled out or were considered

significant. And, in the case of Covid-19, two letters were passed over (and not used) for various reasons.]

I post this quickly because we may not have that much time until the COVID Omicron variety takes hold of us in this country. I had not thought about it until now, that Covid's successive variants, such as Omicron, as it has appeared in the UK, may be increasingly contagious and this seems to be the case in that country. What then?

If it sweeps into the U.S. and takes over from the Delta variant, it may become practically impossible not to get it, meaning what if it is so contagious that most everyone gets it. My friend and photographer Lloyd Chambers points out that Omicron may well be the 'vaccine', a natural organic one, that we have been waiting for and that if most everyone gets it, that will end the pandemic. That is, if it turns out to be as mild as they hope it is. If not, we are in big trouble.

I'm not volunteering to get it, mind you. If the Omicron variant is mild and we can survive it without too many long-term side effects, that may be a solution. It is said to be two-times MORE contagious than the Delta variant which, by the fact that the Delta took over, was more contagious than what went before it.

What this leaves me with is that the KEY factor that we might want to consider is how to prepare for a mild case, especially if we can't avoid it, and how to help our bodies better absorb all of the nutrients and supplements we are now taking to prevent it. As it is, my guess is that much of our vitamins go in one end and out the other, with our difficulty (especially as we get older) being absorbing what is essential in taking these supplements, etc. in the first place.

If we can't absorb nutrients and supplements, that is a problem, IMO. Consider vitamin C. Here is a blog by my friend and photographer Lloyd Chambers about a more absorbable form of vitamin C.

https://windinmyface.com/blog/2021/20211212_1442-Wuhan-Coronavirus-COVID-VitaminC.html

I could do worse than have some of this around, in case I need to beef up my immune system or my ability to absorb vitamin C. Read his thoughts and also check out this special form of the C vitamin.

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000CD9XGC/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_asin_title_o00_s00?ie=UTF8&psc=1

This is a big 'if', yet IF the Omicron variety of COVID is both milder AND 2-3 times as contagious as the Delta variety, this could mean that most (or almost) all of us may get it, no matter what we do to prepare for that. That could mean that all the unvaccinated or protesters against vaccinations would also get it, and suddenly, aside from whatever attrition this new variety demands of us, COVID would have no more victims and die out. That is one scenario.

I don't know if this is a realistic scenario or not, but I feel it is worth at least our consideration and preparation. And today the U.K. reports the following to CNN:

"While Omicron represents over 20% of cases in England, we've already seen it rise to over 44% in London and we expect it to become the dominant Covid-19 variant in the capital in the next 48 hours," Javid told Parliament on Monday. Earlier on Monday, he told Sky News: "It's spreading at a phenomenal rate, something that we've never seen before -- it's doubling every two to three days in infections." He added that it was too soon to tell if cases of the new variant are milder.

If you remember how fast Delta came into the U.S. and how quickly it was dominant, then consider what this Omicron variant (which is twice as contagious) may do... and probably will do, if history is a teacher.

A question I have, if anyone knows, is how much more enduring is the antiviral response we get from having Covid-19 than the protection we get from the vaccines and booster shots? Are they similar or very different?

And if Omicron is coming soon at an expedited rate of contagion, what can we do to protect ourselves? From my view, that would be to strengthen our immune system now. Here are a couple more quotes that just came out:

"This virus will eventually seek out and land on the people who are the most susceptible, and those are the ones that have not been vaccinated, A, and also the ones that have not been boosted. It's not a matter of if. It's a matter of when," Los Angeles internal medicine specialist Dr. Jorge Rodriguez told CNN.

"A new study out Monday from researchers at Oxford University adds to evidence that two of the main vaccines deployed against Covid-19 -- the AstraZeneca vaccine used widely in Britain and around the world but not in the US, and the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine used widely in the US, Europe and elsewhere -- won't protect people as well against the Omicron variant. "Our findings show that vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic disease with the Omicron variant is significantly lower than with the Delta variant," the researchers wrote."

Dec 16, 2021, 10:05 PM

DREAMING A MANDALA

[CNN described the state of our vaccinations this way. 'Omicron' effectively removes the value of one of our vaccinations, meaning that if we have had two vaccinations, Omicron erases one of those, leaving us with one shot that is useful. Not enough. If we have had

two vaccinations and a booster, Omicron erases one of those, leaving us with the value of two vaccinations which is enough to ward off Omicron. Do the math. CNN also reports that the latest research from the UK says Omicron is not milder than Delta, and today (also on CNN) Dr. Fauci said there is no way that two doses without the booster can battle the new Omicron. Please note that.]

I have had the same or a very similar dream two nights in a row. And no, it's not about the perfect storm called 'Omicron' that is said to be a 'blizzard' heading our way or already present. That's beyond my imagination, meaning I believe we can't imagine how upsetting it's going to be.

The dream I've had on successive nights, almost the same dream, was not overly clear because it is many layered, deep, and complex. And, instead of contemplating it dualistically as I might like to do like watching a movie, in this dream I was fully immersed in this mandala, part of the dream.

In general, the dream was in the shape of a standard Buddhist mandala with four basic directions or gates and probably a center, making it five. I am reminded of the Five Dhyana Buddhas, the five Buddha families, the Tathāgata Family (Vairocana, center and white), the Vajra Family (Akṣobhya, east and blue), the Jewel Family (Ratnasambhava, south and yellow), the Lotus Family (Amitābha, west and red), and the Action of Karma Family (Amoghasiddhi, north and dark green).

I've known about the five Buddha families for many decades. In fact, early on I decided I liked (and thus probably belonged to) the Lotus Family (Amitabha Buddha). In fact, I even dedicated our main shrine room here at our center to Amitabha, the buddha of the western direction (enrichment), the directions of the setting sun, dying, and death. A large rupa (statue) of Amitabha sits atop our shrine and above that a thanka of Amitabha. I've done that practice, completed the mantras, received the empowerment for Amitabha many times, and even directly from the emanation of Amitabha in our lineage. So much for that. It is what it is.

However, as time passed, I realized, meaning I 'Realized', that in truth I belong to the Karma Family, and Amoghasiddhi, the family of action and accomplishment. Of course, we each have all five of the buddha families within us, yet I have accepted that the Karma Family is where I most belong.

What this dream means in this time of impending crisis, I can't say other than something is going on internally within my consciousness that I am part of. I include a basic mandala I have put together of my particular orientation to the five buddha families.

Dec 18, 2021, 4:19 AM

A LACK OF REFLECTION

A mirror reflection is at the heart of spiritual discovery. When we clear the fog off the surface of life's mirror, what is reflected is our own nature and not ourselves, just as what is seen from the space station is not so much what is in outer space as it is seeing a complete image of the Earth itself for the first time.

The dharma texts say that what is missing is 'detachment' from whatever we are attached to. A sense of floating free, free-floating from whatever seemed to hold us back or down -- attachments. And where are we going?

Well, we are going nowhere at all that I am aware of. 'Nowhere' is also somewhere as far as I can tell. Like Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing." Similar idea.

What language, 'words mean' or point to, the references that point beyond themselves for their meaning, and ultimately end up reflecting and pointing back at where they came from. That's the whole idea of 'reflection' or 'mirroring'.

In other words, the buck stops right here in this present moment rather than out there somewhere else. In fact, all roads lead to this moment now. What does that tell us?

Well, for one, it tells us we had better get used to the here and the now, because that's essentially all there is and ever was. Everything in the future leads to the present moment and everything that is past is but a reflection of it. The present is our crystal ball, so to speak, and so we best allow ourselves to relax, sit still, and gaze into it. Every last thought, word, and idea came from the well of the present moment.

When we begin to realize there is nothing to it, that also tells us something. There is nothing at the end of the rainbow and that too is something to know. In other words, the present moment is as substantial as it gets and scientists tell us the present is so momentarily as to be non-existent, yet it lasts forever.

Dec 18, 2021, 8:23 PM

COVID ON THE MIND

I apologize, yet it's hard to put COVID out of the mind, at least for me. The experts tell us that it is too early to say whether the Omicron variant is more or less contagious, yet the news is filled with stories saying it is more contagious. The experts tell us that it is too early to say whether the Omicron variant is more or less deadly than the Delta, yet the news is filled with stories saying it is less deadly.

I don't have the luxury of being an expert, so I am left (once again) having to use my own common sense to figure this out and I do this by just looking at the numbers and graphs, those indicators that tell me 'something' IS more contagious because there now seems to be a surge on top of a surge going on. And I want to stop short of throwing a

rant here because the experts don't know yet, and the rest of us (including tons of doctors, nurses, hospital staff) tell us they are being overrun with cases. It seems the experts are always 'a day late and a dollar short', as the saying goes. And it is disconcerting to me when the experts do an about-face and change their minds.

I have had to become an expert, at least for my own self and family.

Yet, the end result is pretty much the same today as a year ago. We are told to wait and see, yet we have to make real-life decisions right now, each day. I was going by the seat of my pants back then, and I am still having to do that today. By the time I find out something, it is already too late. Lucky for me, I have followed my own common sense all the way along. We have no choice.

As far as I can gather from the news, Omicron seems to be about to be MORE contagious, and not "we don't know yet" and as to how deadly it is, even the experts don't seem to know. So, what are we left with? We are, once again, only out there on our own.

Common sense tells me to button up my act, take more precautions. It tells me to stop using those airy surgeon's masks and stick to N95 masks, or even better find some N100 masks, tape over the exhaust valve (or wear a surgeon's mask over the N100) and use them.

We work hard to keep people (repairmen, friends, neighbors, etc.) out of our house, and to stop being polite and talking to delivery (or other folks) who come to our door and stand there wanting to talk 'for a moment.' Don't do it. And last but not least, I live in a town where many folks and tradesmen are angry about even suggesting they wear a mask if they come into your house, and Trump signs still abound. I also have been still trying to urge some members of our own extended family to get vaccinated or get boosted. What's with that?

I'm sorry, but one huge lesson I have learned of late about America is that we are INTERDEPENDENT and not INDEPENDENT as we like to imagine. Wake up America!

I'm trying to stay away from the grocery store as much as possible. I go at 6 AM when they open, to avoid congestion. We are careful about opening our mail and packages. We eat simply, but expensively because organic food is expensive. We don't eat processed food. And like many of us, we have been sheltering here since I can't exactly remember when.

Of course, this whole COVID thing overshadows us and can't help but be depressing. I try to understand that and not to get carried away by what I read in the papers or see on the news. I do physical exercise and have been actively upgrading my vitamins and supplements to ones that are more easily absorbed by my body.

Anyway, it's all these things and more. And I don't believe that not talking about all this helps. Perhaps talking about the obvious does not help either, but that's my style. It's not rocket science to read the tea leaves and come up with the fact that we are entering what looks to be another very difficult time. It's hard to turn the page on what now seems like a more innocent past, but it seems this page is getting turned. In many ways, this is a new time.

Dec 19, 2021, 6:25 AM

KEEPING THE MIND

Rudyard Kipling's poem "IF" comes to mind, and the line:

"If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs ..."

Yeah, that sounds about right just now. I hadn't thought too much about that sort of thing, our emotional and psychological health, but if the shoe fits and all that. For sure, this is a crazy time.

"Stir crazy," yes, but 'crazy' crazy, we'll see, because we are just getting to that time. My heart goes out to some of my dear friends who are having a hard time just now, and to all of us who are weathering this virus and will be continuing doing that.

It's coming at us from all sides, from each of our situations, bombarded by news, and looking for a safe place to be, and this is a serious shadow hanging over all of us... and on and on.

Certainly, this pushes all our buttons and that pushes us beyond what we have known as normal into uncharted territory. I know I feel it, and I sense it is about to get a lot worse. Of course, I listen to what the experts say, but by the time they declare something, I've seen for myself what they come up with. My own intuition has been spot-on about how this virus thing has gone. And it has not gone 'good', so to speak. I appreciate what the government has done, yet I am equally (if not more) impressed at how well all of us regular people have done out here on our own. We have no choice.

Thank God for the vaccinations, despite how inconvenient they are for some if not for many. We all struggle to hold our families together health-wise, and now perhaps psychologically as well, as the pandemic lumbers on.

I cannot but bring to mind the advice of one of my favorite dharma heroes, the Mahasiddha Tilopa, who pointed out:

Don't Prolong the Past

Don't Invite the Future

Don't Alter the Present.

Relax As It Is.

Tilopa gave six words of advice, but two of them were essentially repeats, which leaves four main points. How valuable those four thoughts have been to me in my life is hard to estimate, encouraging words as how to not dwell on what has already passed. And not to speculate or waste time guessing at the future. And of course, the most valuable of all, IMO, to not alter the present moment with our doubts or thoughts, but to just take it straight. And of course, to relax in the present moment, just as it is, without adding or subtracting anything.

IMO, that's all one needs to keep a level head and a steady mind in these times. It has worked for me for decades and is the very best concise advice I know of.

However, taking this advice to heart and living it takes understanding it carefully, experiencing it for ourselves, and actually realizing each of these four thoughts. However, their benefit has been (for me) beyond words.

And so, as we segue into what perhaps will be darker times psychologically over the next few months, I plan to keep a close watch on my own mental health and to take what antidotes I may need from Tilopa's four words of advice. Give these four bits of advice some consideration is my suggestion. They will not let you down by centering us on what is important, this present moment.

Dec 20, 2021, 7:03 PM

Dec 21, 2021, 5:34 AM

E PLURIBUS UNUM (OUT OF MANY, ONE)

Everyone needs our support just now is what I am finding out as I cast about. I don't have any special medicine for what is going on psychologically, other than some 50+ years of Tibetan mind training, which turns out to be very useful for me in our current situation.

I have to be aware of and to even work a little at balancing my own ship just now, as emotions (and the state we are all in) run a bit on the wild side. And that's the first point I would mention, our having an awareness that we are being pushed around by everything that COVID means and requires. That's a start, having the basic awareness of our own situation.

And we don't have to 'think' it all out and dwell on it. What seems to work for me is to just remain aware of what is happening, and for me that means just to remain aware, note it (take note of my situation), and then drop it – let it go. Getting on the freight-train of thought and a lot of worry does nothing other than further distract us and confuse the situation. Just be aware, take note that we are aware, drop it, and go on with our day as best we can. Like blinking to stay awake, do this procedure as often as needed to stay clear and be coherent in this way.

By keeping our own counsel, sailing our own ship is often the best thing we can do for others, and not be adding to the hysteria or upset. Yet, as I look around, I find many folks distracted by this, that, and the other thing. Among the saddest to watch, IMO, are those who are furious at the money Big Pharma is making on the backs of these variants.

Well, yes, I get that, and I agree with them, that this also is happening, but for me these are just convenient distractions from what is really important, staying on point, and not being carried off by this or that sidebar rant.

Or more insidious, people's outrage at having to be vaccinated and their imagined right to be free and independent. This glorification by Americans that we are somehow fiercely independent, is the first casualty of this virus. What a joke that is. As if!

We are all interdependent on and with one another, not independent 'of' one another. Have we forgotten "E Pluribus Unum" (Out of Many, One), which used to be our nation's motto until it was replaced by "In God We Trust."

Let's help each other hang in there and perhaps later, when COVID is managed, we can address the injustices and the outrage in it all. I hate to even mention the many people that I have seen lost in conspiracy theories. It reminds me of an admonition that my first dharma teacher used to say to me, using a circus analogy.

"Michael, if you spend all of your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone."

Dec 22, 2021, 12:06 AM

IMMERSED: "STIRRED, BUT NOT SHAKEN"

It is clear that we are entering a new level of experience as a country. I believe that what we are about to experience psychologically is our going beyond, meaning all of us, going beyond what we call conventional reality. After all, time itself is a convention defined psychologically at least to some extent by the majority of us. When the warp and woof of that conventionality begins to waver, we may find ourselves in odd backwaters of time, in

states of mind we not only are not used to, but ones we don't quite know how to deal with, to work with.

Right now, we are pushing beyond the known bounds that regulate our behavior and may find ourselves in extraordinary states of mind, and that because we have gone beyond the 'ordinary' as we are used to it.

And this in itself will infiltrate our own personal anxiety and mental states, so that we also become subject to any mass hysteria or general anxiety that is going around. And there won't be any refuge we can find outside of what we are going through, other than our ability to regulate our own mental state. Let me rephrase this, because it is key. There is no court of appeals for our sanity, other than whatever discipline or mind-training we inherently have or that we have learned.

I can sense this happening right now in my own mind, and this is further confirmed by the rising state of mass anxiety that is all around us. And there is no mask or vaccination for this mental state other than coping with the emerging reality of being plunged beyond the known directly into the unknown, and unknown that will be known whether we like it or not, whether we are ready for it or not.

I am reminded now, in these days, of states of mind I associated with decades ago, mostly related to LSD and the confusion that can arise from complete immersion in the current flood of events, as we realize we don't know what we are going through because, in fact, we ourselves are what is going through.

There is no point in freaking out because that will just make it worse, so we best hang on. In my own life, I find myself more easily slipping into rant-like states of mind, that quickly go exponential on me, until I find that I am beyond the normal sense of control I am used to. I have become aware of that.

I am starting to get the hang of it and to catch myself going into a thinking and recursive worrying states, and as I become aware this is happening, I can opt out of that, shut it down, and do my best to float on top of it, and exercise some degree of control.

I guess my bottom line here is that my personal sense of control and normal itself is being washed aside by the incoming higher tides of change that push the line of normal to a new level. And, as society itself does the same thing, the difference or line between me personally and what is happening to all of us in common blurs. So far, it all is being stirred together.

“Stir but not shaken” means here that perhaps our mass mind and psychological state, which has been up to now stirred, but not shaken, is now about to be shaken. We are venturing beyond what we know into the unknown, and by default cannot be prepared for it because it has been up to now part of the unknown. That is no longer true. We are going to know it.

It would be best if, as the floodgates of the mind open, we do not attach ourselves to the waves that roll in and out, but to the best of our ability, learn to roll with them, and not take them any more seriously than practicality insists.

In other words, like trees that sway in a strong wind, let's not get so stiff and rigid that we break down. Anyway, that's my two cents and what I myself am doing.

Dec 22, 2021, 3:48 PM

TAKING THE PLUNGE: 'TO BE OR NOT TO BE'

I don't want to interrupt our discussion and awareness of the COVID virus, yet I am reminded of another form of dis-ease that is even harder to heal than the virus, and I can't help but notice it as I observe how we respond to such an overshadowing event as this COVID virus. I also see the following happening. And this will take an introduction.

One of the first films by director Arthur Penn was "Mickey One" starring Warren Beatty, which was more or less a study in paranoia, but also one that presented a very philosophical dilemma. It was a Kafkaesque film that featured a stand-up comic, who was running from the mob. In the course of the film, Beatty realizes that life is a choice between the 'crush out or a fade out,' basically the same theme as in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and his line "To be or not to be." It's a choice that each of us gets to make as to our life.

I am talking here about those of us, or that part of us, who are trying to escape the physical reality of all this life-confusion by withdrawing into our intellect, as if that were a possible refuge. Wishful thinking, for sure, and yes, unfortunately that won't work, this attempt to leave the body and take refuge in what is called out-of-the-body experiences, more popularly sometimes termed astral-travel. Trying to leave the body before death is just our straining to get away from reality or, to put a kind word on it, perhaps to better see what's going on. It's very prevalent.

Take the Earth-orbiting Space Station as an example. The only thing we see better from outer space is not 'outer space', but rather the whole Earth, so think on that for a moment. The same goes for what is called astral-travel or out-of-the-body experiences. The only thing we see from getting out of the physical body is the body and life itself. This is not the same as actually living.

Cutting off ties with the body in favor of somehow getting beyond it is like cutting off our nose to spite our face. Trying to get ever more attenuated or remote is missing the whole point of living. We were made to live in the body, not hover over or outside it. There is little to no juice outside the body, and the farther out we get, the less juice we have. It is like slowly strangling ourselves.

I am not talking about our actual spiritual experiences, which are identified by realization of the nature of our mind and acting on it. Instead, I am talking about trying to live in the intellect, conceptually, i.e., withdrawing from our physical body up into the intellect. This can be a subtle distinction and may take actual awareness on our part to distinguish between the two. This difference comes up a lot while learning meditation.

Priding ourselves on our astral-travel, our out-of-body experiences, is some kind of oxymoron. People regularly mistake out-of-the-body experiences or astral travel for spirituality. They are not. It's just the reverse. Astral travel (literally) does not make sense (it avoids the physical), and is a simple (but telling) mistake, mostly made by those who end up as overly intellectual.

All of that over-intellectualizing has to be reversed and walked back, hopefully while we still have enough energy to make the trip. This so-called 'out-of-body' view is but a perch or viewpoint that tries to get outside or beyond the physical and into some imagined idea of 'spirituality', and is not a sign of spiritual evolution, but just the reverse. Instead, it is a sign of devolution, a failure to take possession of our own physical body in favor of mere intellectualization. In a very literal sense, these folks don't KNOW (or have yet to know) what they are endlessly talking about.

These out-of-body travelers mistake mere conceptualization for actual life experience, much less true realization. And it is not even that simple. These folks are by definition 'detached' and the polar opposite of being immersed in living life, so what they are measuring (or tell of) is already attenuated and strung-out, based on how far they can lean out and get away from the actual feeling and living of life. A photograph, map, or 'idea' of physical incarnation is not the same as feeling and living the earth of life.

I have been counseling this kind of dis-ease since the 1960s, especially in those who ended up in this boat by not being able to stabilize their acid trips. These folks are hard to reach and are loathe to give up their perch in the peanut gallery, and the sense that they are a singleton, the 'One' in a million that gets it. Helping to ease or take away their

pain of loneliness is the last thing they want to give up because that sense of aloneness is the only thing that makes them different from the masses – from everyone else.

I have lived this myself, very early on, and know from experience, step-by-step, that we first have to become aware of this situation in ourselves, accept that it is true for us, and only then can we begin to walk it back. Above all, we have to be willing to do that, to want it, to wake up. Only then can we very gradually (and often quite painfully) retrace our steps back into our body and learn to live for real, by actually fully incarnating.

You can't drive the car if you won't get into it.

This is not news. The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his seminal book "The Phenomenology of the Mind" states "We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

And Hegel goes on to write about what he calls the "Beautiful Soul" which today we might call 'astral travel' or 'out-of-the-body experiences:

"This soul lacks force to externalize itself ... the power to make itself a thing and to endure existence. And, to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from actuality and steadfastly perseveres in a state of self-willed impotence to renounce a self which is pared away to the last point of abstraction... and to give itself substantial existence or in other words: to transform its thought into being and commit itself to absolute distinction, that between thought and being."

To be clear, just what do I mean by out-of-body experiences? I do not mean what typically is pictured, a physical form hovering over a body or hanging out on the ceiling and looking down at itself, although that happens, but is not what is intended here.

What I do mean is the gradual withdrawal and retreat from the physical body (and world) into what can only be said to be an intellectual or conceptual state of mind, more or less devoid of physicality, like an escape from the physical into what has been called a 'metaphysical' state of mind, yet one out of touch with the physical, a way of squeezing ourselves into a space that has no room for actual life at all. What we are speaking of here is a spiritual atrophy, resulting from underuse or neglect of the physical body and the blood of life, an attempt to leave the body, rise above it, and take refuge in intellectuality alone.

If you are like me, this idea may take some time to sort out, yet if you will take that time, you may understand what I am explaining here. Actual spirituality is the realization of the physical and our life in the body, not a withdrawal from it. Please consider that.

I see this dis-ease being accelerated in this virus epidemic. I can't help but notice it.

Dec 25, 2021, 2:08 AM

MIND-CLOTS

Those little thought clusters, mini-rants, and episodes we all have that are just nothing at all good. They are not worth dwelling on or even investigating. All they do is raise our blood pressure. And it is best to, as soon as we are aware of them arising in the mind, just drop them. Let them go. Better yet is to drop them before they manage to fully register, and this is possible. Rinpoche once said that by even recognizing the content of such thoughts, we have already accumulated karma for ourselves.

That leaves me with a solution: the moment that a cluster or thought-mass of that 'temperature' or heat arises and we fall into attaching ourselves to it, the moment we are aware of it, just note or be aware of it, and drop it. Move on. It's like combing the rat nests out of long hair.

Don't further examine these thought-clots, think about them further, and especially don't follow those kinds of thoughts. In time, we can learn to drop them, unexamined, with no curiosity as to their content, and this because we can feel or sense them as they arise. We can know by the mere sensing of such thoughts that they are just a waste of time and energy and are best left unexamined. To do this, we have to wake up enough to be aware that we are lost in them.

We learn to recognize them as a conglomerate, a cluster or mass of thought, with a certain temperature or viscosity, one that we can sense as they arise and know to drop them right there and then, not with negation or hatred, but rather like avoiding a rock in the road when we are driving. We just go around them and they never manifest.

OK. I have run this past you in the above. Let me review and kind of lock it down. We each have the clear, undefiled, and luminous 'present moment' to drink from. It is very much distinct from either the past or future, neither of which has any presence, except in either reflection or imagination.

It's that present moment, the here and the now, from which every word, thought, and deed originates. However, that pure signal is blocked by the noise of what, for the lack of a better term, I call 'thought clots', little fits and starts that are not pure thoughts or real insights, but are simply the interference of the various psychological problems that trouble us. We all have them.

It could be as simple as something that someone says that sticks in our craw, so to speak. And we seize on it, expand it, and dwell on it recursively until we are (literally!) carried away in the noise of our own machinations. Such thought-clots can go on for days.

I'm not talking here about ideas, inventions, insights, and all the beneficial things that arise from the mind, quite naturally. Instead, I'm talking about those little fits and knots,

cluster-thoughts that end up being a chain of thoughts that lumber along carrying us with them. They could go on forever unless we become aware enough of them to let them go and stop thinking that way.

I'm talking about the little thought clusters(cluster-clots) that obscure the natural insight of the mind and, like spinning quarters on the kitchen table, take up our attention for no beneficial reason other than entertainment or fear. They literally are the waste of time.

With even a little diligence, we can learn to interrupt our own interruptions (become aware of these thought-clots) and stop supporting them. This is not something we do once and move on. This is a habit, requiring enough muscle-memory, that we learn, a habit that is repeated until we can delete these thought-clots automatically, before we even know what they are about, entertaining them as little as possible. Awareness is the key.

Dec 25, 2021, 9:23 PM

“WAKE UP FRIEND OWL”

There is no doubt that I am more worried about other folks around me than I am for myself, although I have to keep my eye on my own health issues, because they too are there.

Like a web of nodes, we are all interconnected and very much depend on the health of one another, psychologically as well as physically. Aside from monitoring my own immediate family's wellbeing, as I hear of the problems and worries of friends I care about, this news can't help but push me too toward the edge of the

coming instability of this time we are entering. I can feel the shift.

And I must accept that in the coming weeks and months, we are heading more into the shadow world of COVID and not yet out of it. Perhaps by spring. We gave it our best shot and came up wanting. We failed to get enough of us vaccinated, just as the stupid politics are failing to push through legislation that will benefit us, like in making medicine less expensive, and many other things. We are stuck, paralyzed, and many have become their own worst enemies, particularly the Democrats and Republicans.

Perhaps worst of all, we have sacrificed our own best companionship, that of each other, in favor of division and separation as a nation. Where did this dripping poison come from and why do we tolerate it?

If someone invaded our country, we would all stand together. Why is that different with COVID invading our life or the divided politics that devour us?

Dec 27, 2021, 9:08 PM

TIMELESS REFUGE

There is such a thing as taking refuge in the present moment, the right here and now. When I tire of prolonging the past (which is ever eroding) and tire of inviting the future (imagining it), there is always the 'just being present'. In fact, the present is all there is, which is perhaps why some call it the "Eternal Present," yet most of us spend our time and awareness elsewhere than in the present, noodling in the past or anticipating the future. We kind of ignore the present, just as we can't look directly at the sun.

I'm not used to hanging out here in the present moment on purpose, but gradually, through meditation training, all signs seem to point to do this. Everything other than the present has some kind of drag to it that drains energy, or so it seems. And I agree that

this seems like an odd way to learn this style or kind of meditation (being in the present), my being more or less kind of herded into it, but why not? What else is there?

At first, just being present here & now seemed kind of boring, as if nothing is happening, but that passes, and gradually doing nothing itself is actually something. It is enough. “Any port in a storm,” as the old saying goes, seems to eventually drive me to it, and I find that consciously being alone in the present is kind of awkward, yet as mentioned, that awkwardness subsides. It’s not like we have actually ever been anywhere else but in the present each moment of our lives. I guess we use of dips into the past and the future as ways of knowing we are present, if nothing else, then by the sheer contrast.

And I slowly am finding out that I don’t really have to be entertained ALL of the time and when that kind of nervous entertainment becomes tiring, being present is the obvious refuge. At least there it is, always available. It’s we who have not been aware of the present (or can’t stand it), and not any fault of the present.

However, if I think about my past, it seems that my urge is to always keep moving, much like the shark that has to keep swimming to breathe. I seem to have this need for entertainment and busyness for its own sake, and this becomes increasingly more obvious if I reflect.

Everywhere I turn (the past, the future) is so tiresome (and tiring), that it turns me back upon myself and drives me toward the present moment just to get some rest. Ultimately, if I follow my intuition, it seems obvious there is no choice. I end up becoming aware of the present, seeking it out. Is this true for everyone?

For one, it seems the present moment is relief from, well, everything, that is: if I will allow myself to just be still, rest in it as it is, and don’t try to alter or change it.

There is nothing I 'have' to do and my excursions into the past (with its memories) or into the future (and anticipation), as mentioned, tire me out. And that is why, if I manage to pay attention and be aware, the breadcrumb trail of my own effort leads to the well of this very moment, right now, and nowhere else.

If we lag behind the present moment, time drags us along. It's another way of being a masochist, delinquent enough that time has to force us forward. In a similar way, our forcing time too aggressively, pushing beyond the present moment toward the future, has to be a form of sadism. We are caught between the devil and the deep-blue sea, so to speak, between the past and the future.

And that particular place where we always are would be this present moment, which philosophers tell us doesn't exist because to exist means to be a victim of time and Samsara, and the infinitesimally fast split-second of the present is timeless, or so the experts say. Riding the present moment is what we already do forever. We just ignore and are unaware of it.

Dec 29, 2021, 4:14 AM

TURNING THE WHEEL OF THE DHARMA

Many of us look for that lifechanging event that will change us forever and then it turns out that that event is the moment when we start to change our own life, one step at a time. And the difference is that suddenly (or finally) we realize that only we can do that, and that we CAN do that, and we can do this just as we are right now. No reason to wait because it's up to us. That is when we begin to turn the wheel of our own dharma.

And what is the grease that turns that dharma wheel? That is when we let go of our death grip on attachments, throw caution to the winds, and immerse ourselves in not what is to be seen, but rather in the 'Seeing' itself.

In dharma practice, this event is when we first master Vipassana (Insight Meditation), master it enough to collapse the duality of Samsara and immerse ourselves in nonduality.

As for me (my own case), I could not do it all alone. It took a perfect storm of seriousness to get my attention enough to tear me away from what I was attached to, which was in a word 'Samsara' with all its trimmings. It had to be, a time when I just didn't give a damn, and I almost always gave a damn, worried about this, was sorry about that, and on and on for my whole life.

Yet in that perfect storm, I was already beside myself, and I was brought right down to where the rubber meets the road, the nitty-gritty, and it was that which pushed me over the cliff of my usual self-involvement just enough to jumpstart Insight Meditation. There was no warning. Vipassana (Insight Meditation) just kicked-in and started up. I was in it.

Only, at the time, I didn't call it that. I was too much immersed in the moment and in 'Seeing,' not seeing what could be seen, but rather in seeing the 'Seeing' itself. I was 100% present, immersed in that for the first time.

As I have mentioned a number of times before in these blogs, I was so changed that I was out in the meadows and fields just before sunrise, crawling around on my belly in the wet grass and watching the Sun come up, while taking photos of tiny critters and the small worlds they lived in. And I did this for something like six months straight, every day, watched the sun rise from out in the fields and streams. I never did anything like that before or since that year.

In those six months, something very unusual was happening to me. It has continued this way ever since, although I have learned to extend and expand Insight Meditation to include not only photography, but also writing and other forms of clarity in action.

Dec 29, 2021, 9:00 PM

DHARMA PLIABILITY

Pliability, meaning we need enough flexibility in our movement to negotiate the twists and turns that life requires. We can't have this if we are stuck in our attachments. They make us too stiff and are unwieldy. Attachments hold us back.

And it's not enough to just remove our attachments one by one, although that's a start; there are too many. We also have to (eventually) become aware of the whole idea or concept of being attached. That's the root and the individual attachments are just leaves. We must sever the root of attachment.

What this means is that, somehow, we have to become aware of our tendency and proclivity to constantly attach ourselves to what we like and dislike. We have to realize why these attachments (in general) make us stiff and brittle. With some awareness we can jettison the whole habit. We can cut the root.

This is much easier thought and said than done. Attachments and their habits are very, very sticky, and while one hand is removing them, we find what we have detached sticking to the other hand, and so on.

In other words, what has to happen is that we realize at the root why attachments are not helpful. Only then, can we sever that root or begin to.

And we can begin with examining our attachments and realize how we cling to and are attached to constantly being entertained, like a baby is attached to its mother's breast.

Constant entertainment is not a serial affair, but rather we tend to do it 'en masse' and all the time. Separating the wheat from the chaff piecemeal in this regard is (practically speaking) near impossible. we must cut the root.

The best approach is to gravitate toward and to what we find most boring in life, whatever that is. At least, such a move on our part helps to thin out the entertainment to the point where (perhaps) we can begin to see life through and beyond mere entertainment. Most don't even realize that we are captives of our own entertainments. That's the first step.

I find it VERY difficult to do this, yet if we persist in this practice of plopping ourselves down in the middle of boredom, we very gradually can begin to loosen what binds us, meaning our endless collection of attachment as to what entertains us.

It helps to have a breakthrough experience in this regard, yet we cannot count on having one because most breakthroughs either require an act of fate that befalls us or the (very rare) persistence on our part to endure what we find boring until it is not. Either way, that can work.

Think of it as if our attachments were like a closed cocoon from which we emerge as we remove our attachments and dependence on them. And to repeat, to sever the attachment-root involves our realizing our dependence, habituation, and sheer love for entertainment and busyness. And before we can do this, we have to become aware of how pervasive a habit Samsara is for us, like: forever up until now.

Dec 30, 2021, 9:10 PM