

# Experiences with Mahamudra

The Lama of Appearances  
Learning Dharma through Nature



**Michael Erlewine**

Photography

and Experiences in Mahamudra Meditation



# Experiences with Mahamudra

## The Lama of Appearances

photos and text

by

Michael Erlewine

**Heart Center Publications**

315 Marion Avenue  
Big Rapids, Michigan 49307  
Michael@Erlewine.net

First Published 2009

© Michael Erlewine 2009

ISBN 9781450526258

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All photos taken by Michael Erlewine, © 2007-2009 Michael Erlewine

Cover, format, and graphic design by Michael Erlewine

**This book is respectfully dedicated  
to  
Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche,  
Who introduced me to the nature of the mind,  
And to my good friend,  
Lama Karma Drodul,  
Who pointed out to me the “Lama of Appearances “**

## Acknowledgements



First I want to thank my wife Margaret for joining me on many of my trips out into the world of nature and for helping me to carry equipment!

And thanks to my father Ralph Erlewine for starting me out on photography back in 1954 with the loan of his Kodak Retina 2a camera.

Thanks to my photography mentors Stanley Livingston, John Shaw, Thom Hogan, and Tom Erlewine.

And finally, thanks to my four kids and friends for enjoying the photos and encouraging me to take more of them.



The Lama of Appearances 08

Experiences with Mahamudra 26

The Seven Points of Mind Training 89

# The Lama of Appearances



## **The Lama of Appearances**

This book might have been called something like “Zen and the Art of Nature Photography,” but I don’t happen to be a Zen practitioner. However, after many years of working with a brilliant Tibetan Buddhist teacher and Rinpoche, I did manage (with the aid of photography and nature) to get a glimpse of recognition (not realization, mind you) as to the true nature of the mind, and it was nothing like I had led myself to expect all those years. That is why I am writing this.

There may be some of you, like me, whose expectations and imaginations are more of an obstacle to spiritual realization than a help. In fact, our expectations can make it almost impossible to have any realization. We think we know what we are supposed to be finding when it comes to spiritual experience and (by definition) that is exactly what we don’t know, and are trying to find out. For those folks, hearing my story might be useful.

Before I relate that story, it is important to say at least something about how appearances themselves, in particular natural phenomena or “Nature,” can assist us in our own realization.

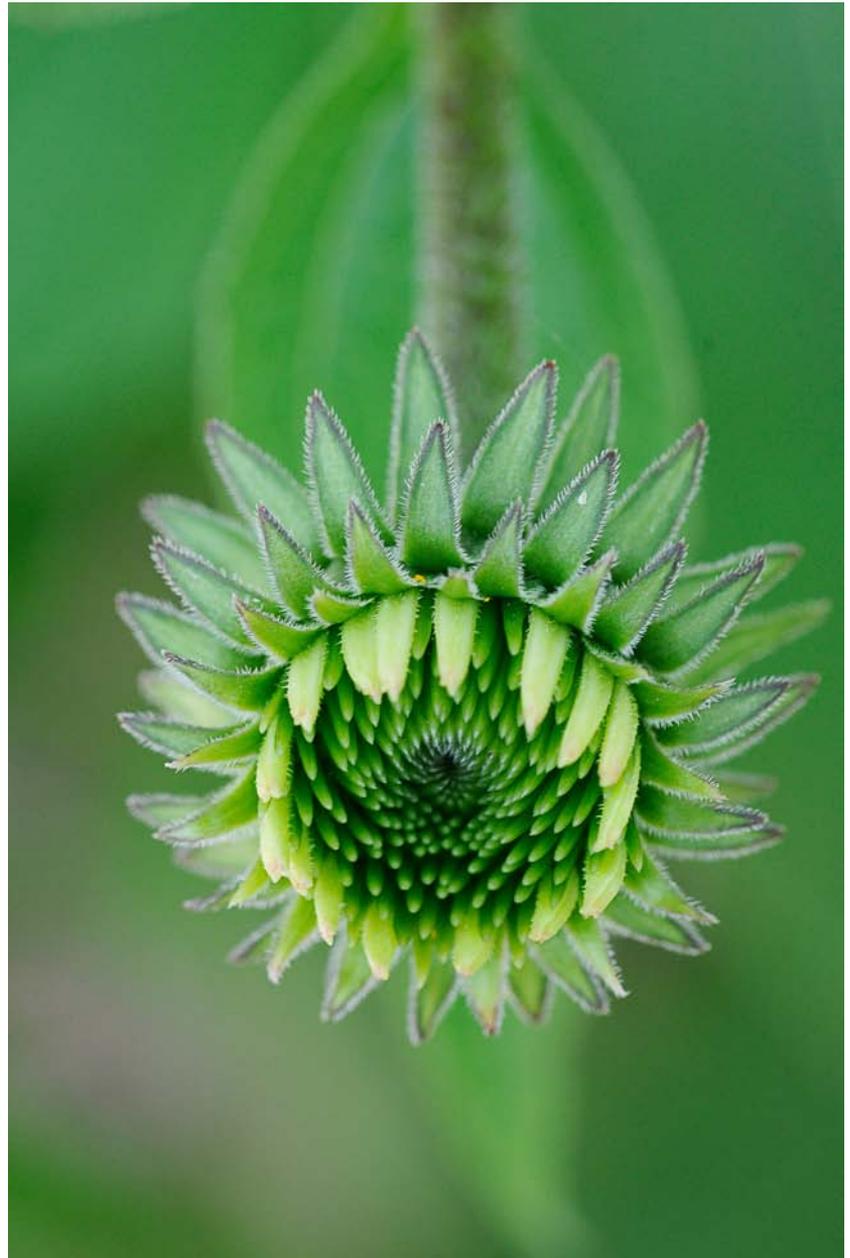
The word “dharma” is slowly working its way into the English language, but

## The Dharma in Nature

at this point most people would have a tough time defining it. Originally “dharma” referred to the teachings left by the historical Buddha (and subsequent teachers), teachings meant to point out the method or path for us to achieve realization. That is the point of all the Buddhist teachings. Therefore the word dharma generally refers to the path or means through which we can discover the true nature of the mind - enlightenment.

Our personal dharma is the specific way or method that will work for us to gain realization, the particular signs in the world around us that we can pick up on and through which (by following this path) we can eventually reach realization. It has been said that there are 84,000 dharmas or pathways to enlightenment, and it is up to each of us to discover our personal way to realization, our particular dharma path. We have no choice. We can't reach realization except by some particular path, and no one can do it for us. Teachers don't somehow enlighten us. We enlighten ourselves and the guide or teacher is there to point out just how this can be done.

And our particular dharma, the means through which we can find realization, is everywhere around us and always has been right here before our eyes. Our personal dharma path is present in the



# The Lama of Appearances



busiest city as it is in the most remote mountain cave, but due to our various obscurations we are not yet able to pick up on it. According to Buddhists, each of us has been wandering for innumerable lifetimes trying to find the path or dharma that will work for us, the particular method that will lead to full realization. Yet up to this point we have somehow managed not to see it. We have been distracted in all the other things we are doing instead.

There are thousands of books and texts available in which the basic nature of the dharma path has been carefully laid out for us to understand and yet, even if we have read them, we still have not gotten it. And that is why great dharma teachers are so precious. They are able to point out to us the true nature of the mind. In fact, in Tibetan Buddhism the name given to the very highest lamas is “Rinpoche,” which literally means: “Precious One.”

Of course today there are many who profess to teach the dharma. Some teachers know what they are talking about and some are only fooling themselves and others. And even if we find a good lama, the particular dharma or path that they teach may not be the right one for us. It may not work for us. It is written that the root lama for each of us (called ‘Tsawi Lama’ in Tibetan) is that lama or guide

that is able to finally stop our endless wandering by pointing out to us the true nature of the mind.

This, then, is the precious lama we each are looking for. Yet the personal root lama we need may not be easy to find or may not be available in the particular part of the world we happen to live in. And teachers that cannot actually guide us only waste our time and further distract us from finding a workable path, which brings me to my main point, that of the “Lama of Appearances.”

The word ‘lama’ has many meanings, but here I am using it to refer to those dharma practitioners with enough realization and experience to serve as guides for the rest of us. In the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, someone is called a ‘lama’ if they have completed the traditional 3-year closed retreat, which is a very rigorous practice.

It came as somewhat of a surprise for me to find out that there are other kinds of lamas aside from the particular root lama or personal guide, our main lineage lama. In fact, it is written and taught that there are actually four kinds of ‘lamas’ or guides to realization:

## **(1) The Lama of Lineage**

The Lama of the our Lineage, the



# The Lama of Appearances



particular school or approach to Buddhism to which we naturally belong, including our root lama. Today in Tibetan Buddhism, there are four popular lineages, the Gelugpa, the Nyingma, the Sakya, and the Kagyu. Although all four lineages share much in common, each of the four lineages has its particular approach or path. For example, I find that I naturally am most in tune with the Karma Kagyu lineage.

## **(2) The Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugatas**

The extant teachings and texts themselves are considered a lama. This “Lama of the Scriptures” refers to the dharma teachings themselves as guides, the actual texts and instructions left by the Buddha and his enlightened followers.

## **(3) The Lama of Dharmadhatu**

This refers to the final goal or state of realization, where the teacher or guide is the Dharmadhatu and true nature of the mind itself. I don’t know anything about this form of lama or guide.

## **(4) The Lama of Appearances**

And there is also what is called “The Lama of Appearances,” the lama of the natural world surrounding us. In other words, the world of appearances we find ourselves embedded in is also

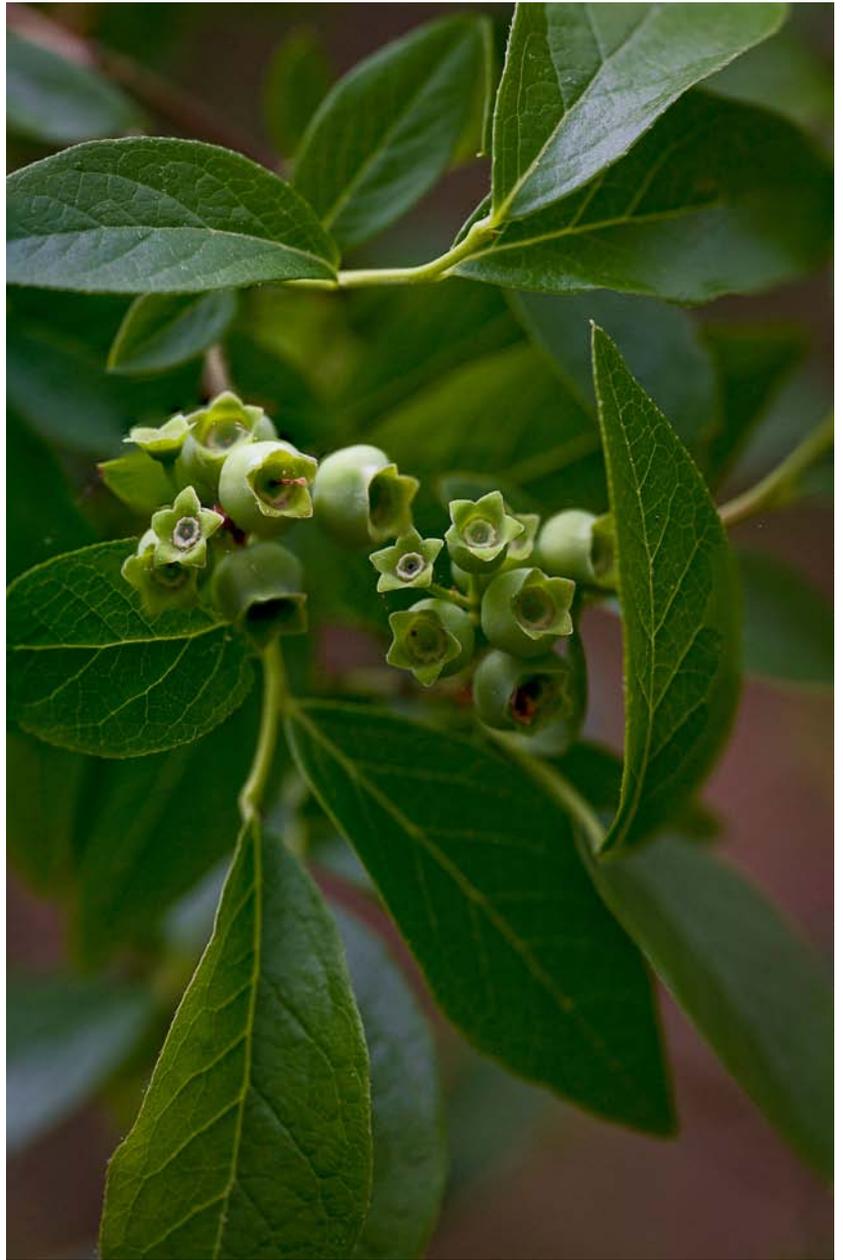
## The Dharma in Nature

a perfect reflection of the dharma and can serve as a lama and guide to us in pointing out the dharma path, if we will just take notice and observe carefully. Although all appearances reflect the reality of the dharma, I am mainly talking here about the world of nature that is as close as the nearest parks, fields, woods, and streams.

Nature is also a perfect reflection of the mind itself. All the truth as taught by the living lama or written down in the ancient dharma texts is also perfectly readable in nature herself. It is all the same text with the same message, and pointing to the identical path or dharma. In other words, there are different lamas or guides, but only one teaching that they all point out or toward.

In fact, while we are searching for a living lama that works for us, the world of nature is always present and is as clear and unflinching as any teacher could be. The message of the natural world and the message of the root lama are in truth the same. Let me give one example:

In all the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, there exist what are called the “Common Preliminaries” or “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward Dharma.” These four thoughts have real power, for only they can turn our minds away from the endless



# The Lama of Appearances



distractions of everyday life and toward real dharma practice.

That is why these four preliminaries are the entrance gate or starting point to the dharma for many forms of Buddhist practice. And although they are called ‘preliminaries’, they are hardly only that, for awareness of these four thoughts are also considered essential for the most advanced forms of meditation, such as Mahamudra practice.

The “Common Preliminaries” are also called the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” or simply the “Four Thoughts.” And they are not some abstract philosophical conundrums, but are the very essence of practicality and common sense.

## **The Four Thoughts**

- (1) This human life we have is precious.
- (2) Life is Impermanent and fragile.
- (3) We are subject to Karma. Every action or cause has an effect.
- (4) Undependable. Our daily world of business-as-usual is inherently unstable and can’t be gamed.

When I first encountered the Four Thoughts I was amazed at how real and practical they are, just what I had always been thinking about anyway.

## The Dharma in Nature

For example, the first thought about the preciousness of having a life: I always felt that my life was precious and I sure did not want to waste it. I want to be put to good use and for it to have a purpose.

And impermanence, a thought that has always been in the back of my mind whenever I can stand to think about it. Everything that is born will also die, and that includes me! How could I avoid coming to terms with that thought, at least once in a while?

And, although perhaps less obvious than the first two thoughts for me was the third thought relating to karma. Now here is something I am still learning about, that every action I take will have a corresponding effect depending on my intention and effort. I tend to be a slow learner, and it takes me a long time to examine the bad result again and again, before I finally am willing to stop doing the action that caused it, especially when it comes to bad eating or pleasure habits - whatever.

The last of the four thoughts is that this world around us (the Buddhist call it Samsara) is (by definition) inherently undependable. In other words, no matter how hard I try, I will never get all my ducks in a row, so to speak. I keep thinking that I am clever enough to somehow game the system and have



# The Lama of Appearances



only the upside and keep what I don't like at arm's length, but life proves me wrong consistently.

After having been raised Catholic, with Catholic school, Sunday school, and all of that (rules, warnings, threats, and admonitions), something as practical and natural as the "Four Thoughts" made perfect sense to me, a breath of fresh air. I was already well on the road to understanding these concepts on my own. So my introduction to the dharma was a welcome relief to the fear and trembling that my upbringing had instilled in me concerning matters of faith and certainty – this life and what comes after life.

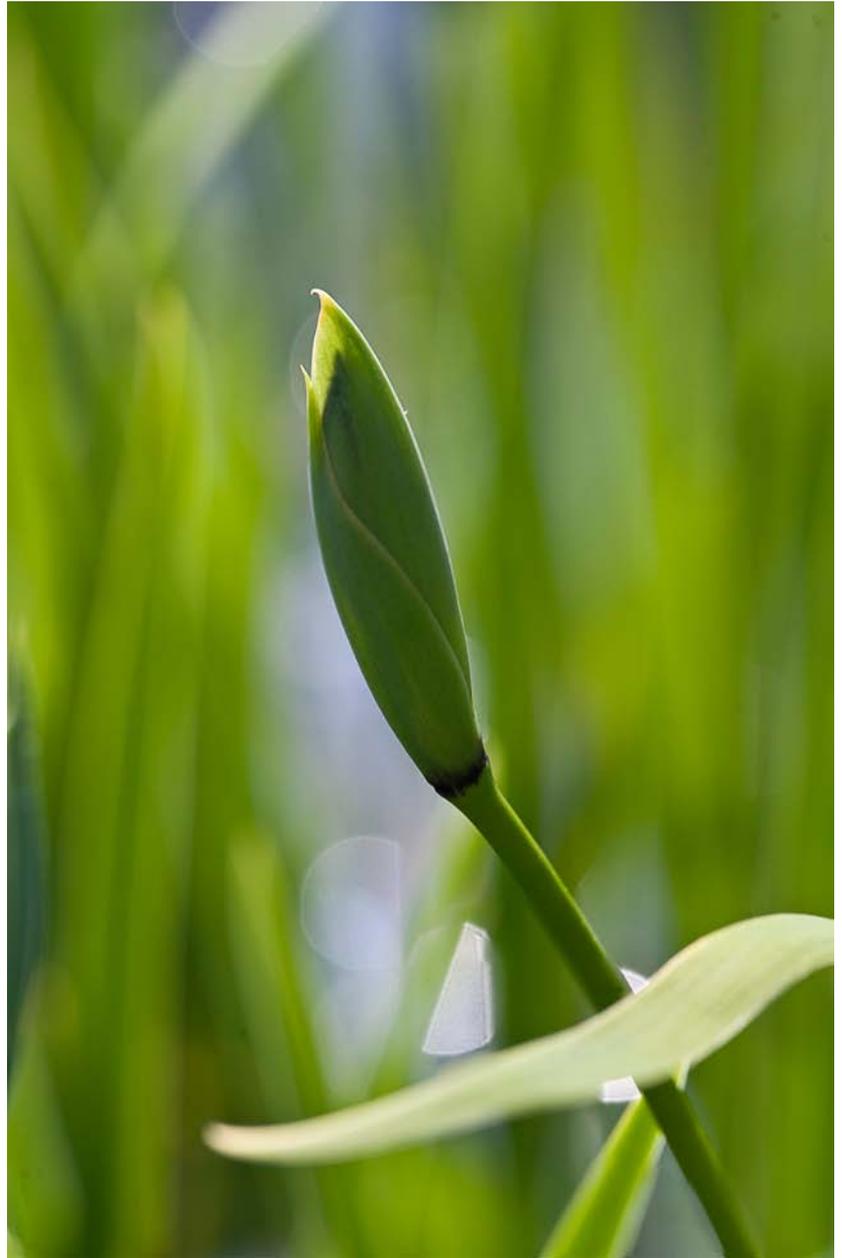
Since the four thoughts seemed more or less obvious and natural to me, I set about learning more about the dharma and its path. And my beginning meditation attempts led to more advanced practices and so on it went. Twenty or thirty years of practice went by and I gradually moved along to more and more advanced practices. But it was not until I was introduced to Mahamudra meditation (said by many to be the most advanced and sublime form of meditation as practiced in the Karma Kagyu Lineage) that I really encountered the Four Thoughts again, and head on at that.

Of course, I never forgot about the Four Thoughts, anymore than I could

forget about my eventual death or my wish to have my life used for a good purpose. Yet they were mostly on the back burner, so to speak, while I was concerned with these more “advanced” (or so I thought) practices. When teachings on Mahamudra meditation eventually came my way, the Four Thoughts were clearly presented not just as preliminaries, but as essential to keep constantly in mind when approaching Mahamudra meditation.

In other words, the Four Thoughts were not something to simply touch upon and then move beyond. The texts clearly point out that it is essential to keep these thoughts fully in mind (constantly) when undertaking to practice Mahamudra meditation because they keep things real and help to prevent our being distracted by everything going on around us in life.

So I discovered that in advanced meditation (like in beginning meditation), it is important to be aware that life is precious (and so very impermanent), that our every act will have results in proportion to our intent, and that try as we may (like the fable of the princess and the pea), we will never quite get comfortable in life, no matter how we feather our nest. Not only are the four thoughts important, but without them there is no advanced meditation possible.



## The Lama of Appearances



But how to keep these four thoughts always in mind? That is the question.

Of course, finding a qualified dharma teacher is key, and I have the good fortune to have found a most qualified lama to work with. But I am not alone in that. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the lama I have worked with for the last 27 years, has many, many students aside from me, and that involves sharing his time, and no one of us has as much face-to-face time with Rinpoche as we might like.

I am not complaining, only explaining. And the point of this whole story is that there is another very qualified lama available to us all of the time, one that is expert at helping us to recognize the Four Thoughts and keep them ever in mind, and that is the Lama of Appearances, particularly apparent in the world of nature. And nature is as near as your own backyard where you live; and the fields, streams, meadows, and woods nearby.

And she is a fully qualified and most-enlightened teacher!

Nowhere are the Four Thoughts more obviously and consistently pointed out than in Mother Nature. As the photos in this book hopefully point out, nature is beautiful. And that beauty is real beyond our imagination. But the reality of impermanence, the

## The Dharma in Nature

results of cause and effect, and the preciousness of all life are equally real in nature. Nature plays no favorites and she never blinks. All you have to do is observe. It is all carefully laid out, written in reality, and as clear as any dharma text. There is no confusion about the laws of nature. We don't break them; they break us. Nature is a harsh mistress indeed.

Even a casual acquaintance with the natural world takes one beyond sentimentality and into how things actually are, the reality. If you are emotional about all of this, then observing nature is an instant and prolonged heartbreak - all of time. Just look around you!

The first sentence from almost every Buddhist teacher I have met is this one:

“All beings want to be happy and no being wants to suffer.”

How simple and true! Every sentient being is struggling to be happy or at least content, just as we are, and no being enjoys suffering. That is how it is for all sentient beings. Most animals spend their entire lives looking over their shoulder, terrified of being eaten, while at the same time trying to find enough food to eat, often another being. And yet Nature is so peaceful and beautiful in appearance. Please



## The Lama of Appearances



connect the dots for me between these two concepts. How can something so sublime and beautiful be so terrifying?

When we observe nature, we are observing the Four Thoughts clearly spelled out for us in stark black and white. Nature shows no mercy, and the law of cause and effect is inexorably exact down to the last detail when it comes to questions of life and death. Life is so precious for many beings that it is hardly there for them but for an instant. In nature, impermanence is a stark fact, not an abstract concept.

For me (and many people), it takes something like a death in the family or the death of a loved one to remind me of impermanence. When something tragic happens in my life, I come out of my forgetfulness of how impermanent life is, and even then usually only for a short time. I tend to wake up when something terrific or striking happens to me. Otherwise, I kind of agree to forget about impermanence, which I find just too painful to remember all the time.

Well, Nature is the cure for that, if we will but observe. Everywhere in nature, the four thoughts are clearly demonstrated for all to see; impermanence, the preciousness of life, action and result, and no real resolution or permanent solution to

## The Dharma in Nature

life. We just have to spend the time and look around.

And Nature is a brilliant teacher. Talk about equanimity! Nature is always the same, always on the job, and she never pulls her punches. Nature tells it like it is, 24x7. But we do have to actually take a look and not turn away or flinch at the hard spots. For example:

It is painful for me to walk on the tarmac of a road after a rain and find it covered with earthworms and slugs trying to get from one side to the other just as the Sun comes up. The Sun will fry most of them to a crisp before they ever reach the other side, and I can't physically pick all of them up and move them to the other side of the road and safety. And some are even crawling in the direction the road travels! Here are these sentient beings struggling to live like we all do, wiped out by a decision they made to cross that road at sunup.

Or the broken blue Robin's egg on the sidewalk, with the tiny bird almost ready to hatch or still alive, and the cat or Crow raiding the bird nests and eating the hatchlings while the parents scream and can do nothing to prevent it. There are countless examples of the day-to-day tragedies that are played out all around us in the natural world. The same rules apply to the human



# The Lama of Appearances



world, but we won't go there just now.

I am not going to drag out all of the possible sentimental thoughts we could share about how cruel nature is. Nature is a harsh mistress, to be sure, but she is simply a reflection of a reality that, while beautiful indeed, is equally harsh, however much we may like to dress it up and perfume it. That is not my point here.

This writing is not about getting sentimental. It is about taking advantage of these natural facts to help wake us up to the reality so clearly spelled out in nature. The book of Nature is a tough-love read, for sure, but it is a real teacher available to each of us all the time. Impermanence is the smelling salts of the dharma, and we all could stand a whiff of it now and again. A careful observation of nature can provide that.

## **Where and How**

I don't have to describe to you where nature is or how to go about finding it. There are thousands of books and DVDs on nature, everything from field guides on down to pictorial coffee table books. I will say something about how I approach nature, which may be helpful.

Obviously, first we have to go out in nature. We don't get the full picture by looking from a mountain top or even

## The Dharma in Nature

by standing up. For best results, I have to get right down in the middle of it, like: sit down. Find a sunny field or meadow or a shady brook or woods.

When I first sit down, it usually takes some time before I pick up on what is going on, and this from both sides. On my side, I need to quiet down and just rest my mind enough to begin to see what is going on around me. From nature's side, my appearance probably stopped everything but the boldest critters from moving around, and it may take a while for everyone to resume their activities, but they do.

A good magnifying glass can be a help, as much to further slow you down as to enlarge things. You will soon find that there are a wide variety of insects, spiders, amphibians, and sentient life all around you, not to mention flowers and plants. And they all are eating and being eaten, being born and dying, fearlessly attacking other creatures, and at the same time struggling to escape being eaten themselves. It is all right there, and it is sobering. There is nothing like a whiff of impermanence to wake me up to the benefits of the dharma practice.

It is so easy to get distracted in the day-to-day hustle and bustle of modern life. I am swept away daily in a sea of distractions and it can be difficult to remember to remind myself of the



## The Lama of Appearances



Four Thoughts, much less manage to keep them in mind.

However, an hour spent alone in nature can not only be refreshing in itself but, more important, it can bring home to me clearly how things really are. There is nothing quite like seeing a beautiful butterfly suddenly caught and eaten by a praying mantis or other predator right before my eyes. It is all right there, the surprise, the struggle, the dying – the whole thing. And the analogies to my own life does not escape me.

What happens on the small scale, in these mini worlds, also happens in our own world, and a quick trip to nature can help to remind us of how the world actually works and puncture some of our imaginary balloons we have floated. I don't know who it was who said that most of us walk around as if we were immortal, with no thought to impermanence, but it is so true. Many of us have our lives set up so as to carefully avoid being reminded of our own mortality.

It can be hard to find a perfect teacher to work with, and yet that is what we each have to find to practice Vajrayana Buddhism. Finding a teacher that does not fit you just won't work out. However, Nature is always a perfect teacher and a good substitute until the human version comes along. You

can't get it all from books and you need the interaction that comes with a living teacher, and Nature is that. You can interact with Nature, and she is unerring in her lessons, and more than good enough until the real thing comes along. With that said, here is my story.

## **My Experience with Mahamudra**

This is the story of how I managed to get a glimpse of the recognition of the true nature of the mind. I write it not to boast or show off, but because having had this initial recognition, I immediately see how simple it is and how all those years I had managed to look every which way but loose in trying to see it. My wish is that something that I write here may make it easier for others to have this recognition. And, any teeny-tiny part of what I write here that is useful, I dedicate to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that they may further assist all sentient beings to become enlightened sooner than later.

## **Buddhism as a Philosophy**

Growing up in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan meant that I was exposed to a cosmopolitan atmosphere from an early age. As early as the late 1950s I had read a smattering of Buddhist literature, although my take on the dharma was



# The Lama of Appearances



that it was intellectual, something that, like Existentialism, we would stay up late at night talking about while drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. In the 1960s I toyed with some more advanced dharma concepts and certainly played a bit at meditation, but it was not until the 1970s that I actually did any real practice, February of 1974 to be exact.

This was the date that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche came to Ann Arbor to speak. I had read some of his books with great interest and was eager to see him in person. As it turned out, since few people knew of him back then, I ended up as his chauffeur for the weekend and the designer of the poster for his public talk.

After meeting Trungpa at the airport, one of the first things that Trungpa did after getting into Ann Arbor was to beckon me into a small office room and spend an hour or so personally teaching me to meditate, although he never mentioned the word and I had no idea what he was showing me. I was very glad just to be with him.

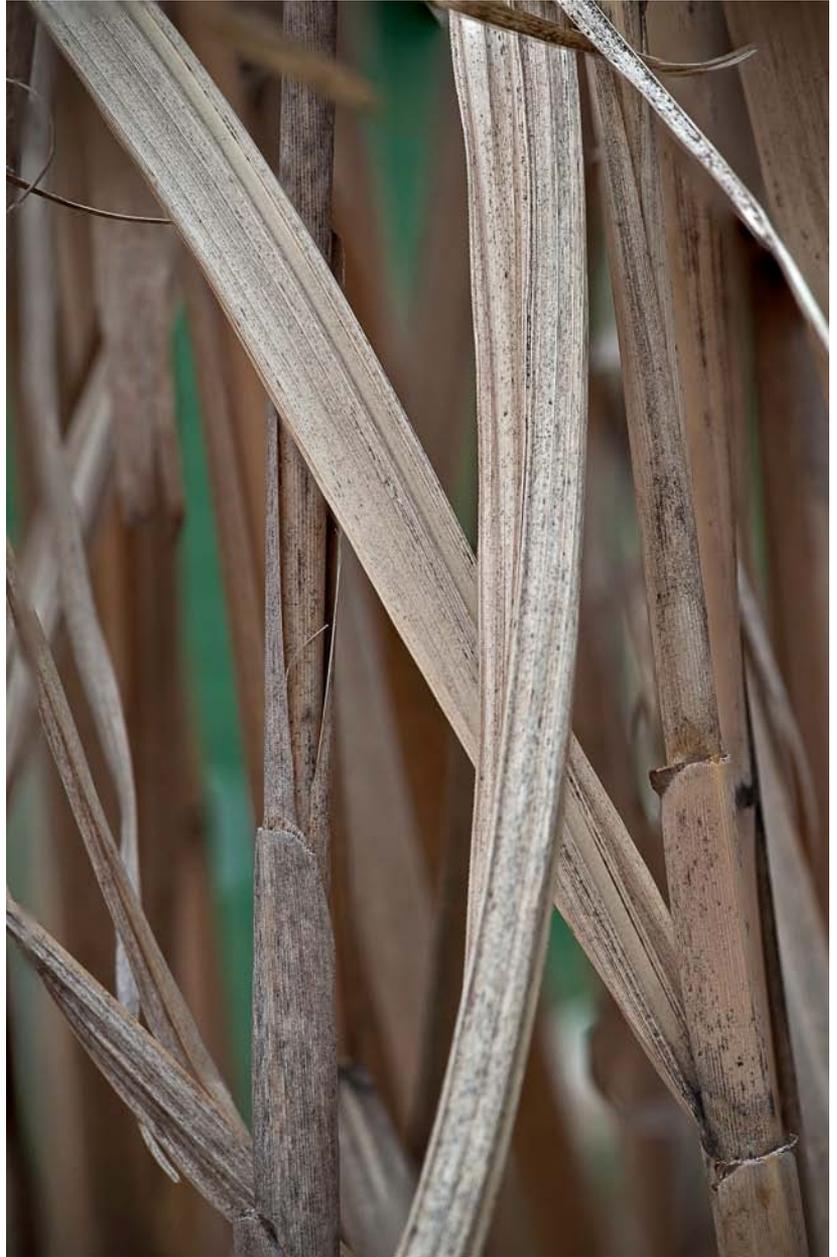
It was Trungpa who first pointed out to me (and to everyone I knew) that the Buddha always intended the dharma as a method or life path, and not as something just to think about. In 1974, that was real news to me. From that year onward I tried to

intensify my study of the dharma and learn to practice it. I was not all that successful at practice, but I continued to be attracted to the great tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

But it was not until 1983 that I found my personal or root teacher, the year that I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD) near Woodstock, New York. That's when I really became serious about dharma practice. Khenpo Rinpoche was the teacher I had always dreamed about meeting and I have been working with him ever since.

And of all the Buddhist teachings I have attended over the years since then, the yearly ten-day summer Mahamudra intensive with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at KTD has been the most striking and influential. The first ten-day Mahamudra teaching was in 1989 and this yearly event (I have not missed a one) is now going into its 22<sup>nd</sup> year in 2010. In addition, sandwiched somewhere during that time were two years of intensive Mahamudra teachings and practice with His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, one of the regents of the Karma Kagyu lineage.

This article is not an introduction to Mahamudra meditation, which I am not qualified to offer, but simply



## The Lama of Appearances



a recounting of my encounter with this profound technique and its effects on me personally. Mahamudra meditation is considered the main form of meditation and practice among the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

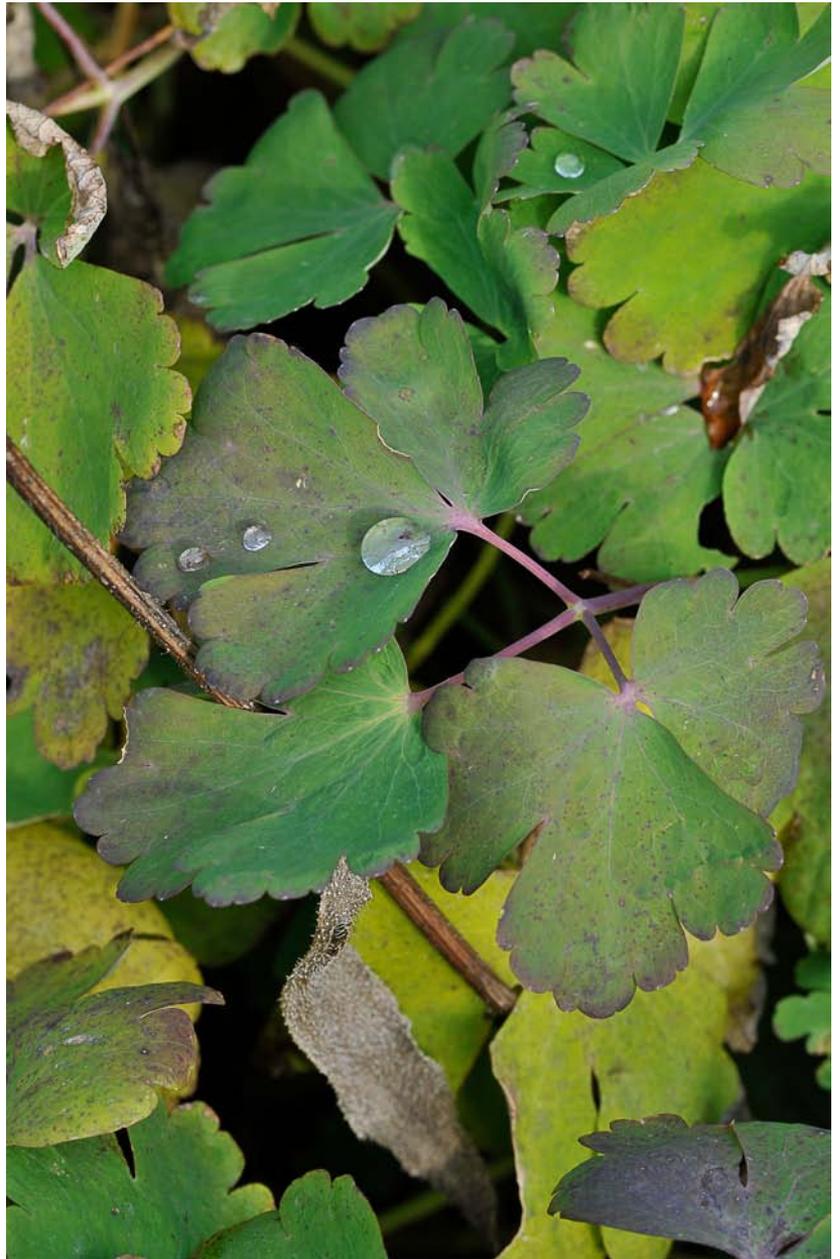
As mentioned, I am not qualified to teach or even introduce readers to the more advanced techniques of Mahamudra meditation. Here it will have to be enough to simply say that to learn Mahamudra meditation, one has to first study it academically and then work with a qualified teacher who can actually point out to you (help you recognize) the true nature of the mind, after which (if you grasp the pointing out instructions), you must diligently practice the Mahamudra techniques. This much information is readily available all over the Internet. For myself, I have had a great deal of teachings on Mahamudra and have been well exposed to it academically, which simply means I understand conceptually the basic concepts.

Academic or conceptual understanding of Mahamudra by itself can never qualify as recognition, much less realization, which by definition is beyond the reasoning mind. In a similar vein, the many experiences that I have had that might be related to Mahamudra, bits of

illumination for a day or part of a day, also are not what Mahamudra is about either. While many or most Tibetan Buddhist practices are designed for gradual progress toward illumination (a smooth incline), Mahamudra practice has at least one very clear speed bump right at the beginning, and that is: recognizing the true nature of the mind. You either have or you have not had that recognition; there is no “Well, maybe I have and maybe I haven’t.” If you have it, you know it.

### **Recognition**

Because it IS a threshold event, recognizing the nature of the mind has become a huge topic of speculation among those who read about and are learning to practice Mahamudra, replete with wild expectations and preconceptions based on the imaginations of those who have never had the experience. Recognition of the mind is one of those experiences, as they say, that if you have any doubt whatsoever about your recognition, then you have not had it. This is a real arrogance stopper for most of us. If we are being honest, we know we have not had that experience, no matter how much we wish we had. In the Zen tradition, this recognition is called “Kensho,” and they make just as much fuss about it as the Tibetans. And most important, our expectations



## The Lama of Appearances



and hopes about what that experience is like are perhaps the greatest barrier to having the experience itself.

You can't recognize the true nature of the mind many times, but only once. If you have to do it repeatedly, then you are just having 'experiences' of the mind, but have not yet recognized anything. This is because 'Recognition' is not some kind of temporary experience, spiritual high, or lofty state of mind, like many imagine. Recognition is not enlightenment!

Instead, it is simply finally recognizing or seeing how the mind actually works for the first time, just as we might recognize an old friend in a crowd or it is like one of those figure-ground paintings where suddenly you see the embedded image. It is "recognition," not a transport to some blissful state of enlightenment.

Enlightenment and the path toward it is what we begin to work toward AFTER recognition of the mind's true nature. Of course, there is no way for me to communicate this properly with words. However, I wish I had understood this distinction early on. It would have been a huge help.

As mentioned, 'recognition' is like gazing at those figure-ground paintings; you can't fake it. You can give up looking, but either you see

the embedded image or you do not. You can memorize what you are told you should see, but finally you either recognize the mind's true nature or you do not. And recognition is just the beginning of real practice, not the end or any kind of final result or stage. This is key. Recognition is your ante in, only the doorway to Mahamudra practice. You literally cannot do Mahamudra practice without that initial recognition, so it is like the ring-pass-not or guardian on the threshold that the western occultists often write about.

Practitioners like me can study and undertake most dharma practices and work up a pretty good semblance of a successful practice. We can certainly talk ourselves into believing we are going somewhere and perhaps others are impressed too. But this is why they call it “practice” and term the practices we do “Preliminaries,” because they are just that: prelims, qualifying exams, and a getting ready for the actual work which has yet to begin.

## **The Ten-Day Mahamudra Intensives**

My teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche had given what are called the “pointing out instructions” once before at the yearly ten-day Mahamudra teachings, but try as I might, I had failed to grasp what it was that actually was being



# The Lama of Appearances



pointed out, and so my experience remained largely conceptual. I was not able to actually practice Mahamudra because I had not yet had a glimpse of the true nature of my own mind, which, as mentioned, is a prerequisite (by definition) for Mahamudra practice.

Then at the ten-day Mahamudra teachings at KTD monastery in 2005, while studying a text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche called “The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen,” Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche again gave the pith instructions, what are called the “pointing-out” instructions, the instructions by and through which a receptive student may be able to recognize the true nature of the mind. These instructions were part of the actual text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche, which my teacher was presenting and commenting on.

## **Analytical Meditation**

Of course, I had heard all the words before. I had been repeatedly exposed to what is called the Analytical Tradition, the “Middle Way” school, which is often introduced by asking the student to actually look at his or her own mind and answer simple questions like “Is the mind the color red?” or “Is the mind the color blue?” This kind of talk had always been a super yawn for me, for it was obvious

to me that the mind was not red or blue. What was this all I about? I could never understand why something as profound as Buddhism could resort to such simple questions.

So I had heard this kind of presentation for years and in many formats, and I always told myself privately that 'this' particular kind of teaching was probably not for me. Either I didn't get it at all or it was too easy. I couldn't tell, but I knew the mind was not the color blue. Perhaps some academic pundit delighted in answering such questions, but it was the best I could do to politely ignore the temptation to be condescending of this approach. Is the mind red? Of course it is not red. The mind is not red! I not-so-patiently waited until this section was over and we could hopefully get to some of the good stuff, something that would actually grab me.

But in Rinpoche's presentation I WAS intrigued to learn that in Tibet, when this approach was presented, monks would be given a question such as "Is the mind red?" and then asked to go off and think about it for three entire days and nights, then come back and give their answers, after which they would be given a similar question, but perhaps with the color 'green', and this would go on for something like three months. Hmmm.



# The Lama of Appearances



Hearing this troubled me, for monks (not to mention rinpoches) are not foolish people. What on earth was this all about I wondered, this asking; what color is the mind? And this is no secret teaching; this same Middle Way approach has been taught all over India for centuries. Anyway, I stopped trying to wait this section out, and began to pay more attention to what Rinpoche was presenting. It took a while, but my take-away from all of this questioning stuff was that rinpoche was asking us to actually stop thinking academically about this and simply go and look at our mind and see for ourselves if it was red or green or whatever the question was. And that very slowly began to sink in.

## **Look At the Mind**

I meant no disrespect, but I had never before followed Rinpoche's request to look at the mind to see if it was red or blue because I felt the question made no sense to me. Yet I was also starting to pick up on the fact that Rinpoche was asking us to get off our mental duffs and actually make an effort to look at our own mind, right there on the spot. I had of course always assumed I already knew my own mind. After all, I was a dharma practitioner and it was 'my' mind, but now I was hearing something just a little different. Perhaps my habitual familiarity with

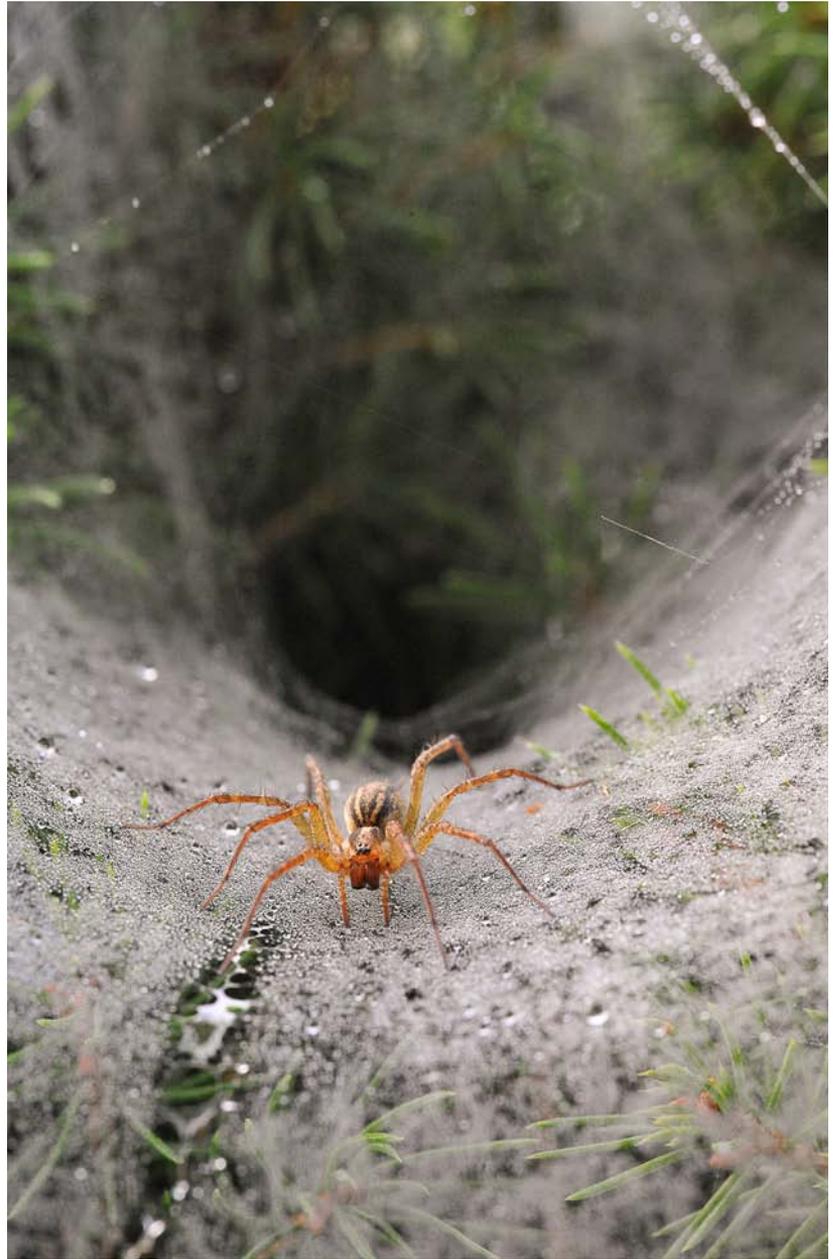
## The Dharma in Nature

my mind had not included actually looking at the mind itself, although I automatically assumed I had already done that long ago, back when I learned to meditate.

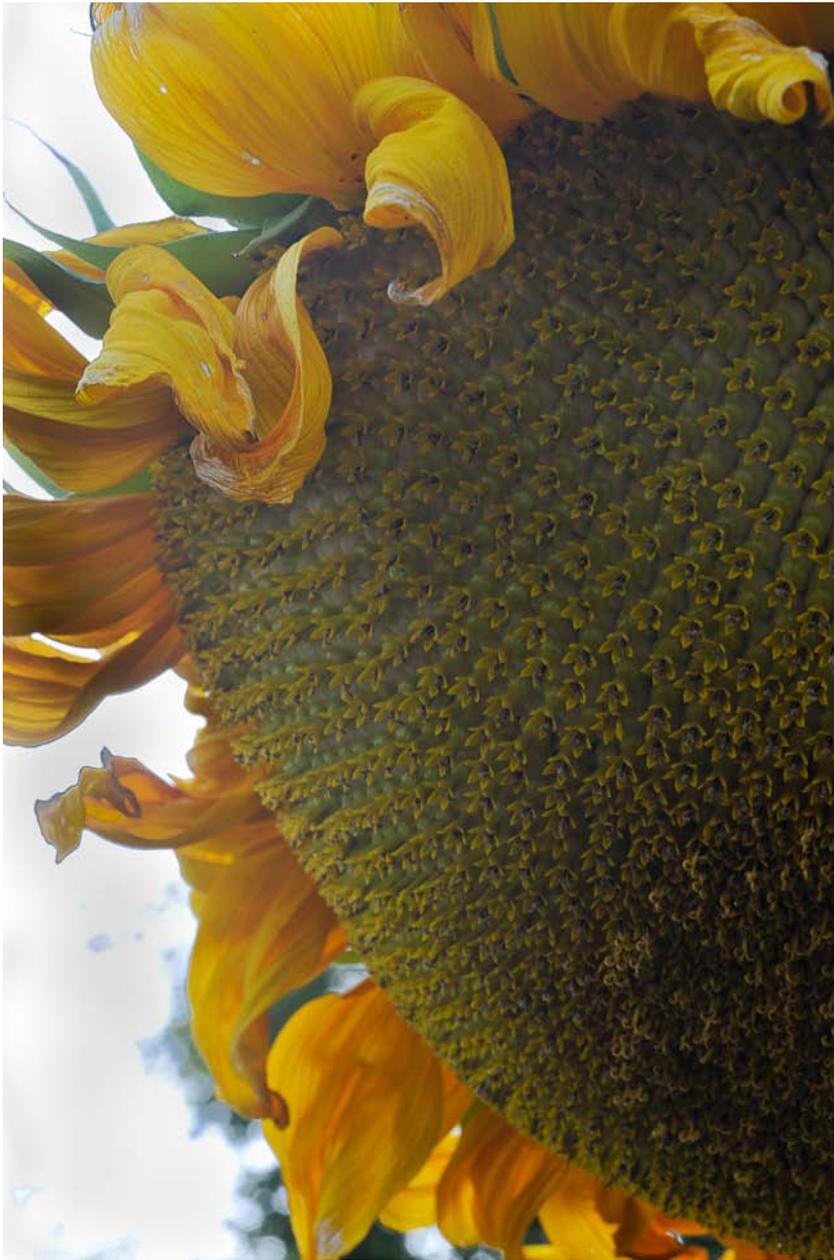
And so, very slowly at first (and not without some struggle), I actually began to make efforts to stop looking outward at what was going on around me, and turned and tried to look inward at the mind itself. This was not easy.

Of course I was already familiar with the little chatter-box inside my head, whoever it is that plans out my day for me, saying things to me like, “It is almost time for lunch” or “You have a dentist appointment tomorrow,” and so on. Whoever that inner person is, it is not really me, and I didn’t like him or ‘it’ very much. It is annoying and way too much of a nag. And it yammers on ceaselessly. So I began to at least differentiate myself from that uptight narrator in my head. That talking voice was no friend of mine, just not my kind of people.

And Rinpoche was asking that we look at whoever it is inside of us that is looking at all the stuff happening outside in the world. I guess that would be “me.” Now, this was a whole lot more difficult than just putting some distance between me and my internal narrator. When I tried to



## The Lama of Appearances



look at “who” in there was doing the looking at the outside, it or “I” just would not hold still. It was like those magnets that repel one another. Every time I would try to look at the ‘looker’, the whole thing would flip around. It was very tiring to even try. You can try it now for yourselves: just look at who is reading this page. Try and find the ‘who’.

What was happening through all of this was that I was very gradually beginning to exercise ‘mind muscles’ that (to my knowledge) had never been exercised before in my life. And they were soon the equivalent of very sore or very stiff muscles - hard to move around. I had never done this kind of thing before and it amounted to giving myself a mental Charlie Horse. It cramped up my mind, and was very awkward, but it ‘was’ a new experience.

The whole thing was a little like trying to erect a large circus tent in the middle of my mind, struggling to push up massive tent poles to stretch and raise the canvas until I had some mental room to just look around in there. And it was hard work, for these mental muscles had perhaps never been exercised before.

And as silly as it seemed to me, I even began looking to see if my mind was red or some other color, whether my

mind was located in my head, my heart, or my belly, and so on. Of course, the answers were all negatives, just as I had always thought, but in the process I was up and walking around in there, getting to know the place a bit. And so it went. Was that what Rinpoche wanted us to do?

Where before I had kind of mentally slept through this kind of questioning, now I was at least going through the motions – getting some exercise. I was also following the instructions from my teacher, which I had so conveniently ignored up to that point because I thought these questions went without asking. Instead, I was asking them again, doing what Rinpoche was requesting us to do. And that little bit of exercise began to open up doors for me.

It went on like this for days, as Rinpoche very carefully led us into actually looking at our minds. I was finally following along. These simple exercises, along with the fact that apparently by this time I had done enough practice over the years or somehow managed to accumulate enough merit or whatever it was that I had needed, so that I actually was able to recognize or glimpse the true nature of my mind - not what I had expected. There was no lightning bolt, more like an exclamation point! Needless to say,



# The Lama of Appearances



it was nothing like I had led myself to believe all these years.

Of course my expectations were whatever I had managed to distill from books and the teachings, mixed with the tales of other practitioners and then sealed with my personal take on things, in other words: a jumble. Like most of us learning this, my preconceptions had managed to thoroughly cloud and obscure an otherwise cloudless sky. Here it is worthwhile to backtrack and take a closer look at what I had expected.

## **The Pointing Out Instructions**

It is said in the Mahamudra teachings that the main and perhaps only function of the guru is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind. After that it is up to the student. “The Nature of the Mind,” this phrase immediately raises expectations reminiscent of the realm of Zen koan dramas. One thing I never had managed to understand is that recognizing the nature of the mind is not the same as enlightenment (whatever that is), so let’s start there, and this is important:

What is meant by the phrase “recognizing the nature of the mind” as I understand it is more like being able to finally see the actual problem I was having with meditation all along,

## The Dharma in Nature

like: I had no idea what it was, and that is embarrassing.

And, having some recognition, I then saw that the nature of the mind is not something beyond my current reach (as I had always implicitly assumed), but rather more like very simply seeing how the mind actually worked, seeing that the mind (my mind) was in fact quite ‘workable,’ as in: “Hey, I can do it!” I finally could see a little into how I might work it. And being a clever guy, this was a very practical revelation. This is what seeing the true nature of the mind is all about, a new take on practice, not some euphoric rush of bliss.

Perhaps the most important result of recognition is that the responsibility for getting enlightened immediately switched from books, texts, and my teacher to me. What I saw or recognized made “me” responsible, and only me. That had never happened before. I was always looking for someone or something on the outside strong enough to affect me and somehow enlighten me. It doesn’t come from outside!

As obvious as it sounds now, I could now see that was not about to ever happen, and I could now see why. Only I could enlighten myself. It was my job, not someone else’s. In pointing out the nature of the mind



## The Lama of Appearances



to me, and my getting the gist of it, Rinpoche had completed his responsibility to me and succeeded in making me fully responsible for the first time. I responded! But with that responsibility also came the insight on how this mind training business could be done.

When I originally read in the classic texts about “seeing the nature of the mind,” I assumed and expected some grand fireworks-like display and that I would be immediately transported into some transcendental state of illumination. You know: “enlightenment” or something like it, whatever I had imagined all these years.

Expectations are seldom ever your friend and almost always obscure the actual path and the reality. It might be better to say the teacher points out the nature of ‘how’ the mind works rather than simply say the teacher points out “the nature of the mind.” The ‘nature of the mind’ seems so mysterious, and the actuality is anything but that. In my case, the less that is left to the imagination, the better. My imagination has filled me with preconceptions and impossible expectations all my life.

In other words, at least in my recognition, the ‘Aha!’ experience was not “Aha!, this is finally some

## The Dharma in Nature

enlightenment,” but rather a simple:

“Aha! I get it now. So this is how the mind works; even a beginner like me can do that! This is actually workable, something I could actually do.”

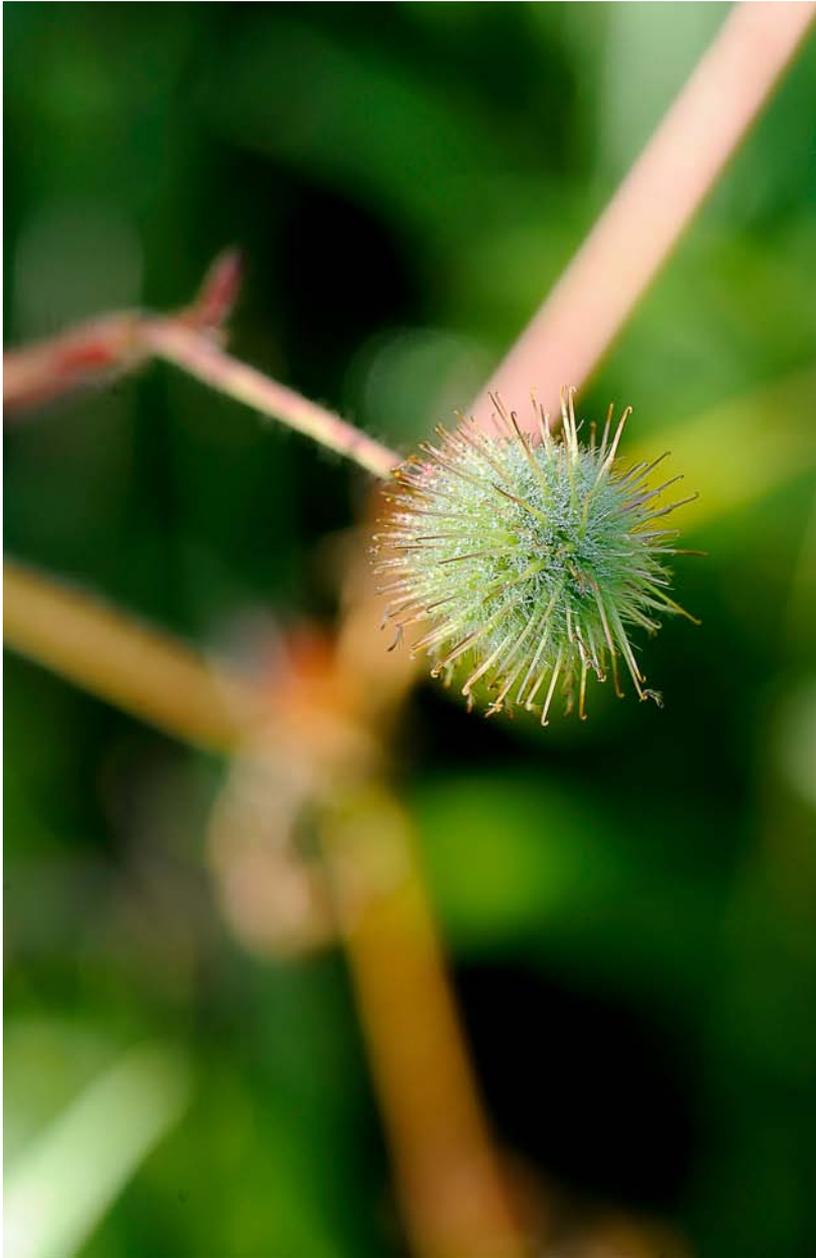
It is remarkable how in an instant my years of expectations vanished and were replaced by something simply practical that finally made real sense to me. How absolutely encouraging!

The “pointing out” instructions didn’t in any way mark the end of my practice and my graduation to some higher “bodhisattva-like” level (like I had always wondered or imagined), but rather the end of my imitating what it is I thought practice was supposed to be, and the very beginning of actual useful practice. Finally I got the general idea of how to work with my mind, and understood in a flash that I had been mistaken about this all of my dharma life, like perhaps 30 years!!!

For the first time I saw simply how the mind works and that there was no reason that I (just as I am, warts and all) could not just do it. And that WAS a new experience, to somehow be at the same level with reality – to see it clearly. It was up to me to figure out just how to work, with this new information and to put the time in. Perhaps most important of all, I suddenly had the enthusiasm and



# The Lama of Appearances



energy to make it work that I had been missing. No more boredom and laziness when it came to practice.

And while the fact was less exotic than what I had mistakenly expected, it was perhaps (if my opinion counts) the first tangible result of many years of practice, and it was not just a passing experience, but a simple realization as to what had to happen next, like: when you realize how something works, you just get it. You don't forget, because it is not a simple experience, but a recognition. That quite ordinary insight was a form of recognition, and it was permanent.

In reality, for me this was a huge result after about 31 years of meditation of the “sounds-like-this” variety, years during which I sincerely went through the motions, but with little result that I could see. I had been rubbing the sticks and getting some heat but no fire. Suddenly, there was some heat and also fire. While not what I had expected, this was what I had always dreamed about having happen: visible progress.

## **The Workable Mind**

The mind was suddenly workable and all I had to do was to work it, and I could now see that even I could do it! After perhaps thirty years, I actually understood something about

meditation. Not the enlightenment-revelation I had in my expectations, not the thunderbolt from above, not something beyond this world of Samsara, but something much more down to earth and already very close to me – the nature of ‘my’ mind, that is: how to work with it. After all my years of theoretical practice, things finally got practical and therefore real practice could begin. Nevertheless, as minimal as my realization was, it brought about a profound change in my approach to meditation.

I left that year’s ten-day teaching with a very different idea as to what my practice was going to be about. For one, it was now crystal clear to me that the amount of daily practice I was able to squeeze out up to that time would never be enough to get me to any kind of enlightened state. It was like going to church only on Sunday. Being the devious, lazy, bad boy that I am, I would never get to heaven at that rate. I had never been that much of an angel anyway, more like the black sheep of my family, and that too was a problem.

I could now see that mind practice required way more effort than the small amount of practice I had been doing each day, which practice itself I had nickel and dimed to death as it was. It seemed that everything else



## The Lama of Appearances



in my life managed to come first and distract from my dharma practice and, on top of that, my whole approach to practice was cloaked in expectations, disappointment, and frugality of effort. At that point in my life, I was doing as little actual practice as I could get away with and still look at myself in the mirror. I was worn out.

Worst of all, practice was not a joyful affair for me. It was something I just did and continued to do, sometimes only because to not do it at all would be more horrible than the pain of actually doing it. I could not consider the consequences of just stopping practice altogether, although I was very tired of it. Quitting was just too scary to even consider. The dharma was too much a part of my ego, my identity to just stop my practice. If I wasn't a dharma practitioner, what the heck was I doing with my life?

But what I now realized was that, like it or not, my daily practice even in the best of times had been simply way too small an effort to ever get very far along my personal dharma path. At the best of times, the most practice I had ever done was around two hours a day, and even that much practice would probably not be enough to clear the various obscurations I had managed to collect. I needed some full time dharma practice and I was a part-

time player.

One thing I did realize from the pointing out instructions was that all of my years chained to the computer as a programmer had given me a real ability to concentrate and for long hours at a time. That was not all bad. I often would work 12 or even 14 hours a day glued to the tube, as they say. And, although the computer work might not be particularly dharmic in nature, the concentration I had acquired was quite real, lacking perhaps only a more pure motive than making money, although that is not fair to me. In my life, I have always turned my hobbies into ways of making money, so mostly I loved what I did for a living and did it with a pure heart. If only I could tackle dharma with the concentration and enthusiasm that I put into my various computer and entrepreneurial projects. I had been thinking and dreaming about this for years.

The pointing out instructions I had received from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and the resulting technique it inspired and made possible was something that actually stood up very well off the cushion, that is: in everyday life, what is called post-meditation.

### **Putting the Technique to Work**

I slowly began to apply the techniques of mind training I was learning to



## The Lama of Appearances



what I was doing on the computer all day long. During my computer work, whenever I would catch myself in a distraction, when I popped out of whatever I was deeply involved in and found myself once again outside my concentration and looking around, I would attempt to practice Mahamudra meditation. It could be as simple as a dog bark, a phone call, the doorbell, an unwelcome thought, etc., whatever it took to startle me out of what I was concentrating on. The result was that I was suddenly forced out of whatever I had been focused on and just instantly there - awake. Those gaps in my concentration were the only moments I had to insert dharma into my work, but there were a lot of them.

It was in those gaps or moments that I would remember to look at the nature of my mind or the nature of the thought that I was having. In the beginning it was only momentary glimpses, brief glances at the nature of a thought, at the nature of the mind, but I persevered. After all, I had virtually nothing better to do with my time anyway, so whenever I found myself startled or popping out of whatever I was engrossed in, I took that opportunity to at least try and look at the nature of my mind, and to then rest in the true nature of my mind as much as I could. I was

gradually exercising the mind.

I had seen the nature of my own mind, how it works, which as I mentioned does not mean I was enlightened in any way, only that I had seen something about how the mind actually worked or was, and even that tiny hook was enough to begin unraveling some of the obscurations I had labored under all my life. And I liked what I saw and was beginning to learn to rest in the nature of the mind, however brief that might be.

Those moments of resting were short, perhaps more like nanoseconds than something more enduring, but the total amount of actual practice time I was doing off the cushion added up to more than I had been able to practice at any other times in my day, including time spent on the cushion, which at that time was a kind of a joke. Every time I headed for the cushion it seemed like I put on the robes of expectation, arrogance, embarrassment, past failures, and irritation. The cushion was getting a much-needed rest.

This new process of post-meditation practice was not something I could measure in days or even months. It took about two years of this kind of exploration before I really had it down to any useful degree, but it WAS useful and it actually worked, which translates to: perhaps for the first time



# The Lama of Appearances



in my many years of mind practice, I really liked practice, something I had devoutly wished for all those years. If there was one thing I was ashamed of and feared all those years, it was that I could not find much joy in practicing. I knew that this was not the way it should be, but I was powerless to bring joy to something I could not find the joy in. And it took the shock of an outside event to really push me into yet totally new territory. Here is my story:

## **On My Own Again**

I had been working for the preceding four years or so as a senior consultant to a subsidiary of NBC, one specializing in astrology, something I know quite a lot about – 45 years of experience. I was putting in long hours for them (and for myself), because I was building content, something I am well-known for in my career as an archivist of popular culture, creator of the All-Music Guides ([allmusic.com](http://allmusic.com)), the All-Movie Guide ([allmovie.com](http://allmovie.com)) and other entertainment sites. It is not unusual for me to put in 12 or 14 hours, seven days a week. I was getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning most days, concentrating on programming, on creating thousands of tarot-like cards for astrology in Adobe Illustrator, writing courses, and other text-related projects. And I took plenty of joy in

that.

All of these tasks were perfect to test out my Mahamudra practice, which was coming along really well. All it lacked was the motivation that comes with a worthy object. In other words, I was practicing Mahamudra while working on essentially mundane tasks, instead of the 'dharma' itself, although my intent and motivation for astrology were very pure and heartfelt.

### **Free**

In late May of 2008, while attending an astrology conference in Denver, Colorado (along with 1,500 other astrologers), the head of the NBC outfit I was working for, who was also at the conference, told me that I no longer would have a job with them after June. In an attempt to pare down expenses, NBC laid off a lot of folks, and I happened to be one of them. Of course, this was a real shock to me, since I had been working so hard at it, and the financial ramifications simply meant that I would soon have no income whatsoever. At almost 67 years of age at the time, finding a job was probably not too easy, even though I had a lot of skills and experience, plus a good reputation. But it went beyond that for me. It was one of those corners life offers us that we somehow just have to get around.



## The Lama of Appearances



It turned out that I had to leave the astrology conference a few days early when I found out that His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa was suddenly making his first visit to the United States and to his main seat in this country, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. I could not miss that event and, as it turned out, I could be useful as part of a three-man video team to film the event, and personally was able to film some events where they didn't really want much of anyone present. I had been around KTD so long that I was pretty much some kind of fixture there anyway.

I would love to tell readers about the visit of His Holiness, but that would be a whole 'nother story, but the gist of it was that seeing His Holiness was a big shot in the arm for me. I also took hundreds of still photos of the event and after I got home, within a few weeks, I had made a 200-page coffee-table sized book of the visit of His Holiness which I made available for the close sangha. The book was inspired, not so much by me as a photographer, as by the fact that all of the people I was photographing had just been with His Holiness and were shining with happiness and a light that was clearly obvious in the photographs.

The time with His Holiness certainly helped to put the fact that I no longer had a job into perspective, but to suddenly be without a paycheck is a shock, and it sure went through my system like a lightning. Where before I was working long hours at my job, suddenly I had all kinds of time on my hands – a really big gap of time in my life. Talking about popping out of what you were focused in (the so-called gap in Mahamudra practice), well, this was a really shocking gap, and I popped out big time and here is how I was able to actually look at that gap:

## **The Photographer**

I had been working as an entrepreneur without a break (or a gap) for over thirty years straight. When you work for yourself, you don't have weekends and holidays, or at least you don't live for them. When you love your work, time off and vacations are meaningless or, worse, boring. That is how I always experience them. And now with all this time on my hands, my past interest in photography (and recent photo work at KTD) began to come out, and this hobby plays an important role in this story.

I had been deemed a photographer by my father (a really good photographer himself) ever since he had given me a little Kodak Retina 2a camera back in



## The Lama of Appearances



1954, when I was something like 13 and sent me on about a 3,000 mile trip across the U.S. and Canada (with a dip into Mexico) on a bus with a bunch of kids my age. He had explained to me before I left how to take good pictures, and I listened. Apparently I had taken some great pictures because he couldn't say enough about them when I returned, perhaps the only time he ever felt that way about anything I have done. The long and the short of it is that I came away from that time with the sense that (perhaps only in my mind) that I had a really good eye for photography.

And I had been toying with photography for a number of years. Like many of us, I had of course taken the requisite shots of my family, our dogs, and what not. And, as part of a large archival database that I created for documenting rock and roll posters, I had purchased a Nikon D1x system and carefully photographed some 23,000+ posters. For this, I had built my own vacuum table, had an exact light setup, and so on. So, I knew at least something about photography.

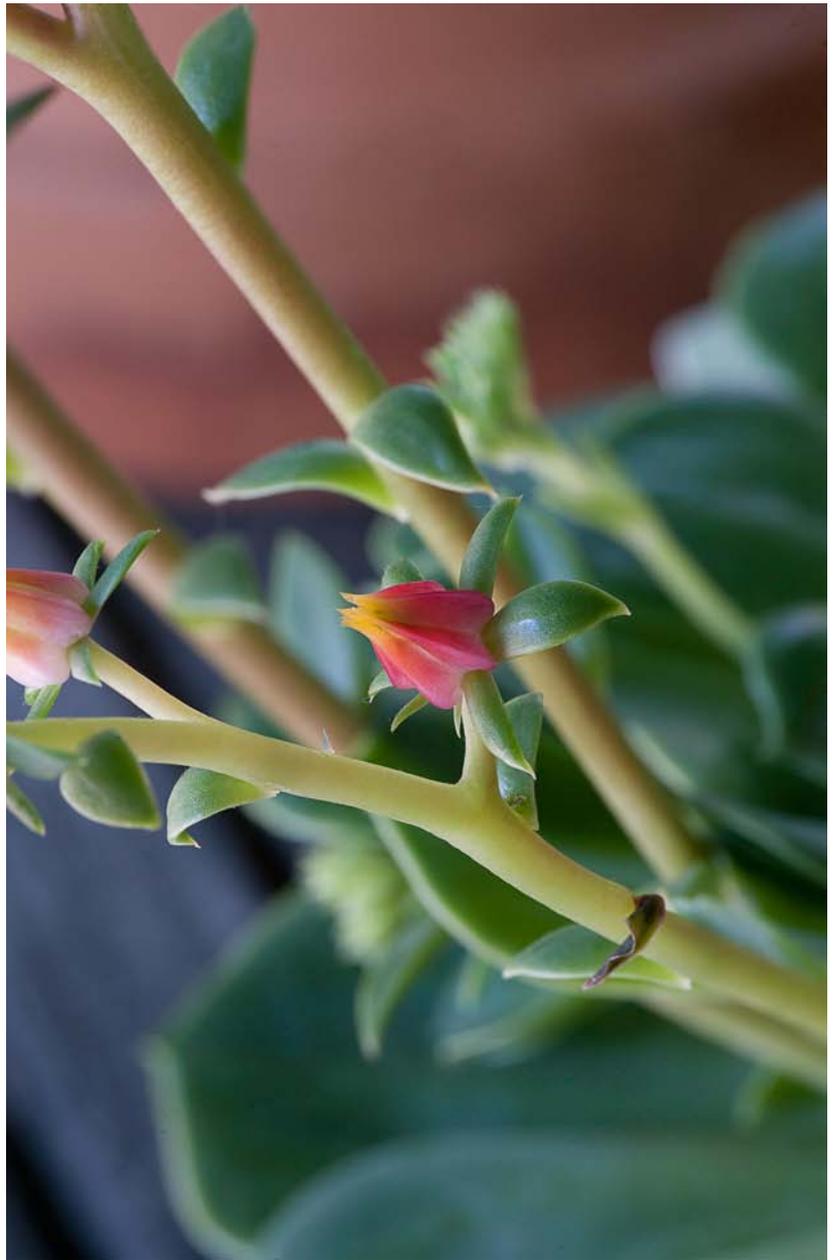
But in the late spring of 2008, after falling out of a job, I found myself embracing photography more deeply, perhaps just as a way to find stability from my somewhat chaotic life at the time. And then there was my interest

## The Dharma in Nature

in nature. Even though this happened only a year or so ago, I have trouble pinpointing just how I happened to start going out into nature again. I was a trained naturalist and had intensely studied nature from the time I was about 6 years old until in my late teens, and I mean intensely. In my early teens I even was given a tiny office at the University of Michigan Museums building, just because I was somewhat precocious. I was into it.

My wife loves nature and for the last many years had done all she could to get me out in the woods, streams, and fields again, but I pretty much declined the invitation. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps it was because I felt that nature had been early-on my real teacher and I had learned my lessons. Certainly school had taught me almost nothing. Whatever life lessons I carried came from observing how nature behaved, and once learned, I was unwilling to open up that avenue again. Why?

Now that I think about it, here is probably the reason: My favorite female vocalist of all time is Billie Holliday. No other voice has moved me so utterly than she has. That being said, the fact is that I don't listen to Billie Holliday very often, hardly ever. Why? Because I have to really prepare myself or work up to hearing her



# The Lama of Appearances



sing, because she puts me through so very much emotionally that I am not always ready to let that happen. I tell you this because it is the same with nature and her lessons.

## **The Naturalist**

I studied natural history for so many years and with such diligence that there was not much I missed as to what goes on out there in the woods and meadows. I know every frog, salamander, and snake, not to mention insects, and you-name-it. I not only know them, I know all about their lives and deaths.

Nature is so absolutely candid and direct that she leaves almost nothing to the imagination. Nature does not know mercy. It is all laid out for anyone to see, and it is not a story without emotional affects. I did not need to become a Buddhist to love the life in every living creature. I always felt that way. When I was confirmed in my early teens as part of Catholic ritual, my chosen confirmation name was Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi, the saint who loved and protected animals. That was me. I have often joked that I like animals better than people, and I wasn't being all that funny. It is kind of true. The Buddhists tell us that animals are bewildered. I feel great compassion for their bewildered state. I am working on feeling that same way

toward human beings.

So nature, like listening to Billie Holiday, was probably something that I really had to work up to as far as re-immersion is concerned. It is just way too sensitive for words. Nature is beautiful, but nature is raw. Every last animal out there lives in constant fear. They are always looking over their shoulder for something bigger than they are that wants to eat them. And they are always looking for some smaller animal to eat. They have almost no rest their entire lives.

The whole concept of impermanence and the fragility of life are everywhere present in nature. The countless tiny tadpoles that don't mature before the spring pond dries out, the mass of worms and slugs that get caught on the tarmac as the fierce sun comes over the horizon and dries them to a crisp, the huge Luna Moth that is so heavy it can hardly fly, flutters in the still morning light, trying to find a tree to hide in for the day, and is snapped up by the bird just as it tries to land, etc. You get the idea. It is endless and merciless.

And this is not an isolated story, not the exception that proves the rule, but just the opposite: this is the rule, with almost no exceptions, ever! Life is brief, fear-filled, and accident prone for almost all sentient life.



# The Lama of Appearances



And humankind is not an exception, although we choose to ignore how Samsara (our confused state) actually is. We are one of the very few beings that have any real control over destiny, and we never have as much control as we imagine. The rest of the animal world are simply bewildered, too stunned by their lack of real intelligence to protect themselves.

I trust you get the idea here I am painting; it is one of a nature that has no mercy, and death that is inexorable in its presence and swiftness. Is it any wonder that I have to cross over some kind of threshold to really want to take a closer look at nature again? I already knew what nature is about. You get the point.

## **Back to Nature**

But that year of 2008 I was not in an ordinary frame of mind. I had just been shaken out of every sense of safe I knew, at least financially. I had been put out, turned loose, and set free from any path or trajectory I thought I was on. So it is no surprise that I easily crossed over that threshold that I had avoided for so many years and immersed myself in the way things were - nature. I already was completely vulnerable, reminded personally how things can be when we have no control. I was in the mood. And the camera was probably my ticket to ride,

my excuse to get lost in nature once again. It was like finding my roots, like going home. It was consoling.

I became absolutely fascinated with close-up camera work, what is called macro or micro photography. And for me, this meant close-up photography of nature and all the living things surrounding us. And in what was perhaps also a symbolic gesture, I got out of my office. For years, I had been afraid to leave my office lest I miss an important phone call or whatever next thing I was waiting for. As mentioned, my wife had tried just about everything to get me out of my stick-in-the-mud office, but to no avail. But now I just walked out into the fields. It was dramatic.

Each morning would find me out in the meadows and woods at sunrise, lugging my camera equipment around. There in the mist and dew-covered fields I would be photographing all that was beautiful or, many times, just sitting there in the grass as the first sun rays peeked over the trees, and simply doing nothing. Here is a poem I wrote about that.

### **Time for Nothing**

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



# The Lama of Appearances



And I am not talking about weekends. I watched almost every sunrise from around late May through October, until it became just too cold to take my camera or myself outside for extended periods of time. Think about that for a moment: I watched EVERY sunrise for half a year and this after seldom ever leaving my office for 30 or so years. My family must have been puzzled.

As I look back on it now, it was of course a very remarkable time. Here I am remarking on it! But what was most remarkable about this time was not at first apparent to me, and this is what I want to present here.

## **Macro Photography and Mahamudra**

The experience I had accumulated over the preceding three years or so doing Mahamudra practice on my computer had kind of extended itself to anytime I did close concentrated work. I am at home with drudgery, at home in very concentrated and tedious work. I need only point to that fact that I single-handedly (and later with a staff of hundreds) recorded, reviewed, and documented every piece of recorded music from 10-inch records on up to the present. Similarly, we documented every single film and movie, complete with its entire cast, and video games,

## The Dharma in Nature

and rock posters, etc. You get the idea. I am obsessive. My personal collection of CDs (which I no longer own) now sits in a warehouse in Ann Arbor, numbering well over 500,000 CDs and counting.

My point is that I have a high tolerance for tedium. And nothing is more time consuming and demanding of concentration than computer programming and video editing, that was: before I encountered macro photography.

And I don't know for sure why I got into macro (close-up) photography, as opposed to landscape photography or just walking in the woods and meadows, but I have a guess. It could have been that looking through an open lens with real magnification at a tiny diorama, at a world that was ever so much obviously more perfect than the one I was used to, somehow was freeing to me. Every tiny fly and insect appeared so incredibly complete, so perfect in every respect at the micro level.

The outer world I knew had beautiful patches and rotten ones too, areas that were stained beyond appreciation. But here, in the micro world, you could always find some little bit of perfection, perhaps a newly hatched dragonfly that was absolutely fresh in every way. And I particularly like



# The Lama of Appearances



dioramas, miniature scenes - the tiniest of landscapes. I was transported by what I saw.

I can tell you that nothing I have ever done requires as much patience and concentration as doing macro photography. It can take half an hour of excruciating pain to hold a physical position with a tripod and camera until the wind manages to die down, just to take a single photograph of a flower or insect. And I am NOT known for my patience, but in photographing nature I had found a worthy teacher.

## **Lenses**

Before long I was spending up to several of the best hours of the day (dawn) immersed in peering through various special lenses at the lives of tiny critters and plants. I soon found myself searching for finer and finer lenses, so I could see ever more clearly into these very perfect micro worlds. Yet, I just couldn't see clearly enough, so I just needed better and better lenses. The outside day-to-day world I lived in might seem dingy and worn much of the time, but these micro worlds were as fresh as a new flower or just-hatched butterfly. And: I was soaking it up.

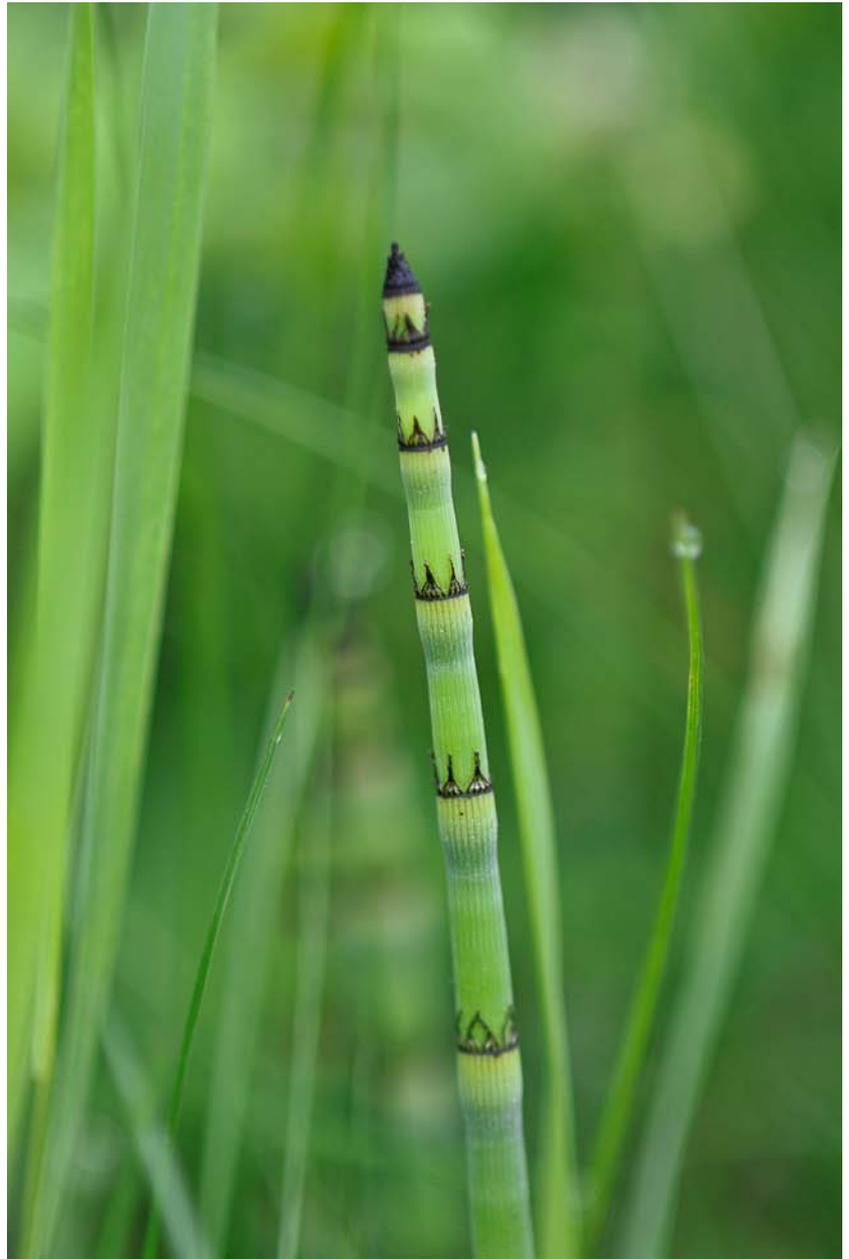
Without really thinking about it, I was using all of my Mahamudra experience and techniques here in these micro

worlds. And I literally mean: without thinking! As I concentrated on this photographing, looking deep into and through the lens, I began having extended periods of resting my mind, but I was not at first fully aware of this. I mean: it was true rest. As I look back now, I can see that I was (me, Michael) resting my mind and life in the tiny scenes I was peering through lenses to see.

I was finding true rest in those miniature scenes I could see. And I so much needed the rest that I was not at first aware that I was (I believe) also resting my mind in a dharmic way, and in a profound sense. When I point out that I was not fully aware of what was happening, this is an important point.

Please keep in mind that I am holding a precise position, camera and tripod in hand, frozen to a stance, so that a tiny insect does not fly away, and waiting for the incessant Michigan wind to die down long enough to take a photograph. And all the while I am peering through this very special light-gathering lens into a micro world at a tiny critter. And clarity! The world I could see in there was awesome, beautiful, and so very, very clear. I was resting in that clarity, resting my mind. And I loved what it did for me. It was beyond thought.

For some reason, through the looking



# The Lama of Appearances



glass (so to speak), I was able to rest my mind like I had not been able to do it on the cushion or even in my work, and for a long time! It would take a book to explain what resting the mind really is all about. No, a book could not communicate what I am referring to here. It would take being personally shown how to rest the mind, but I can't do that here and I am not a teacher.

Before I knew it, I was looking forward to these forays into the dawn as if my life depended on it. I could not wait to get up every morning, get outside in the fields, and launch myself into this particular state of mind. I knew this was connected to my practice, but that knowledge was not important at the time, which tells you something by itself. It was the farthest thing from my mind. I just liked getting my 'mind right' out there in nature. I was fascinated by what I saw through those lenses. In the end, of course, what I was seeing was related to my own mind.

## **Turning the Mind**

As I look back today, what was really taking place is all too clear, and nature held just the reminders I needed to keep my attitude adjusted. The four Common Preliminaries of Buddhist practice, what are often called the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma" are ever present

## The Dharma in Nature

in the natural world, things like the preciousness of life, impermanence, the laws of karma, etc. All of these are literally magnified and obvious in nature, where kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, and things like a flower that blooms for one night, a huge moth that lives but 24-hours, etc. continually reminded me of those precious four thoughts. I didn't have to remind myself. Life in nature reminded me instant by instant, day by day. It can be heartbreaking. I had not looked at impermanence this closely for many years, but I was looking at it now. Raw Nature is the best reminder of the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind" that I know of.

For that spring, summer, and fall, I was really away from the maddening crowd, off by myself, observing my own mind in the midst of purely natural phenomena. But what I did not at first see was how much I was changing, perhaps 'stabilizing' is a better word. It was my mind and my practice that were stabilizing. When I was out in the field and flowers, I could rest my mind, I could see the nature of thoughts as they arose, look at their nature, watch them dissolve, and not drag around some sad thought all day long. I was thrilled at the crystal clarity of the mind. But most of all I was finding rest, resting my mind in



# The Lama of Appearances



all that clarity, deeply resting.

Where before I was probably engrossed in figuring out why so-and-so did this or that or how I managed to embarrass myself in this or that situation, now thoughts like that could be seen not for their content, but in their actual nature and just dissolve like dew on the grass. In an instant they were gone, back where they came from, away, and I was not etching yet another karma track deep in my mind.

Each morning I was up way before dawn, gathering my equipment and heading out the door. It seemed I could not get enough of what I was finding out there in nature peering through my camera lenses, but in reality I was learning to rest in the true nature of my mind. I was practicing Mahamudra, but in a more direct manner than ever before.

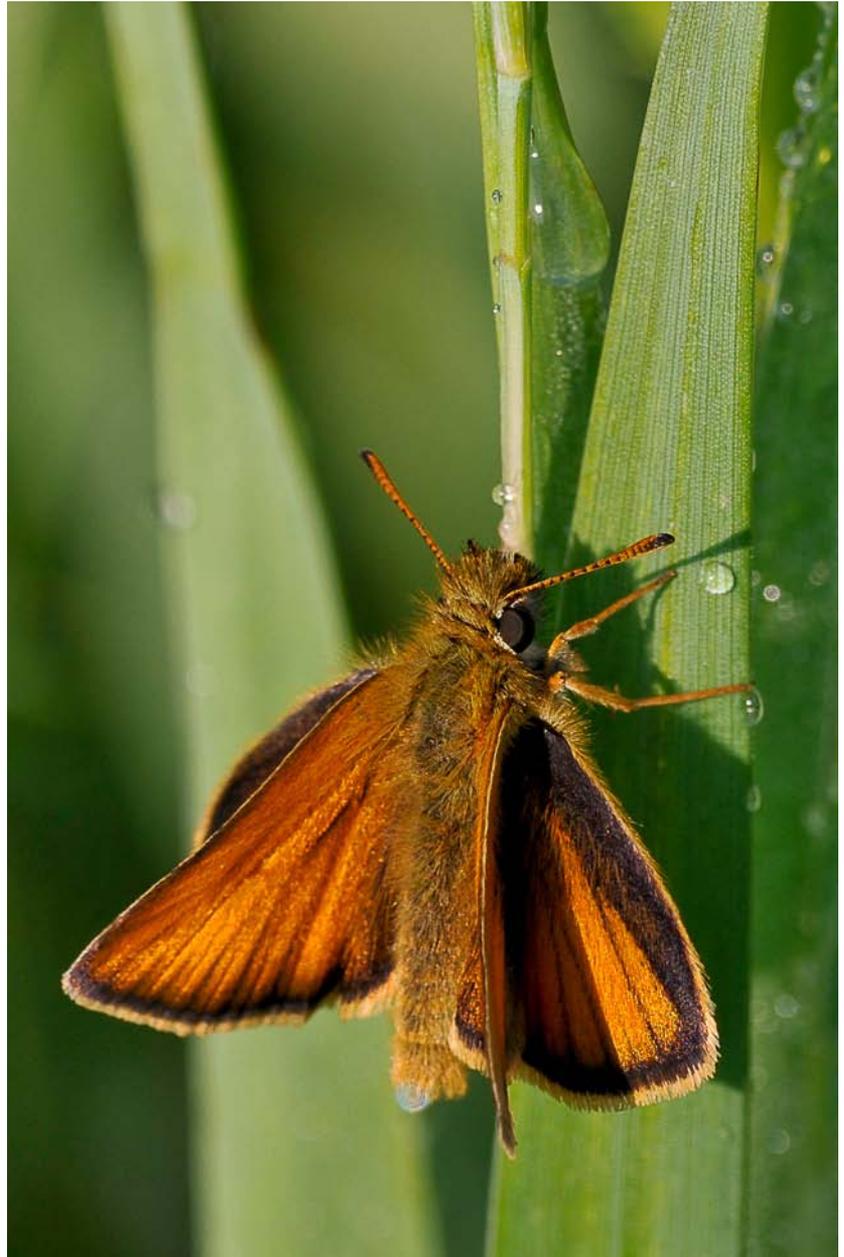
I knew I was using Mahamudra techniques, but I was not initially aware of how deeply I was changing internally. That awareness only came much later. And I studied camera equipment like there was no tomorrow, in particular fine lenses. I just somehow could not get lenses that would gather enough light and open up my vision as far as I needed. Every spare dollar I could scrounge went into sharper and sharper lenses. I scavenged up and sold my older equipment for this or that

more accurate lens, tele-converter, close-up diopter, or whatever would bring more light and acuity to what I was doing. And the lenses helped.

I studied lenses. I went to optometrists and discussed with them the sharpness of lenses and what was needed for the human eye to see at its very best. I got new glasses and special magnifiers for the eyepiece in my camera. I tracked down lenses that are almost never found, lenses that are legendary for their ability to gather light and to focus with extreme accuracy. I burned through the finest lenses that Nikon has to offer (and that is many) and on into lenses that are even better than anything Nikon can produce.

I worked with special architectural lenses, lenses that tilt and shift, allowing you to bring a whole flat field of flowers into focus, the nearest and the farthest flower, all perfectly clear. I stacked lenses one on another to get even closer in. I used tele-converters, diopters, and extension tubes to reach beyond what I otherwise could. I began to stack photos, which means to take a series of photos, each at a particular focal point, from near to far, and then merge the stack to make a single image where all parts, from front to back are in perfect focus.

I am just giving you a taste of what was a real obsession on my part, and



## The Lama of Appearances



a learning curve. I took more than 50,000 photos during that period and gradually became a better and better photographer. That is not such a lot of photos, until you take into consideration how long it can take for one macro photo to be taken.

And through all of this, it was not the resulting thousands of photographs that concerned me. I hardly looked at them. Instead, it was the process that had me spellbound, the clear looking at the subjects and the seeing. It was the seeing! And it was the resting. Ostensibly I was looking through finer and finer lenses at nature. In reality, I was learning to look at my own mind through the process of photography, and I had managed to confuse the two. Yeah, “Zen and the Art of Photography” is a book I could probably write now.

I was learning to rest my mind in the moment and allow whatever natural beauty there was to present itself to me, to show itself, to appear. Everything was clear, luminous. And the sheer exhilaration involved is hard to describe. Everything was lucid. I was lucid - clear as a bell!

And although I continued to practice Mahamudra during my ordinary workday, as I found this or that project to do, it was mostly in those rarified mornings out in the dawn that

my mind could fully rest and appear lucid. I was addicted to it right off and could not wait each day to get out there among the bugs and flowers to get my mind right.

And, as mentioned above, this went on from late May until late November of 2008, almost every day when it did not rain. I don't know what my family thought, other than I had become a camera nut and that I didn't have a job. I don't know what I thought about it myself. I never thought about it. I was spending an inordinate amount of time doing it. My extended family and friends would drive by me where I was setting up one shot or another along the roadside and give me strange looks, like "Oops, there he is again. Doesn't he work anymore?"

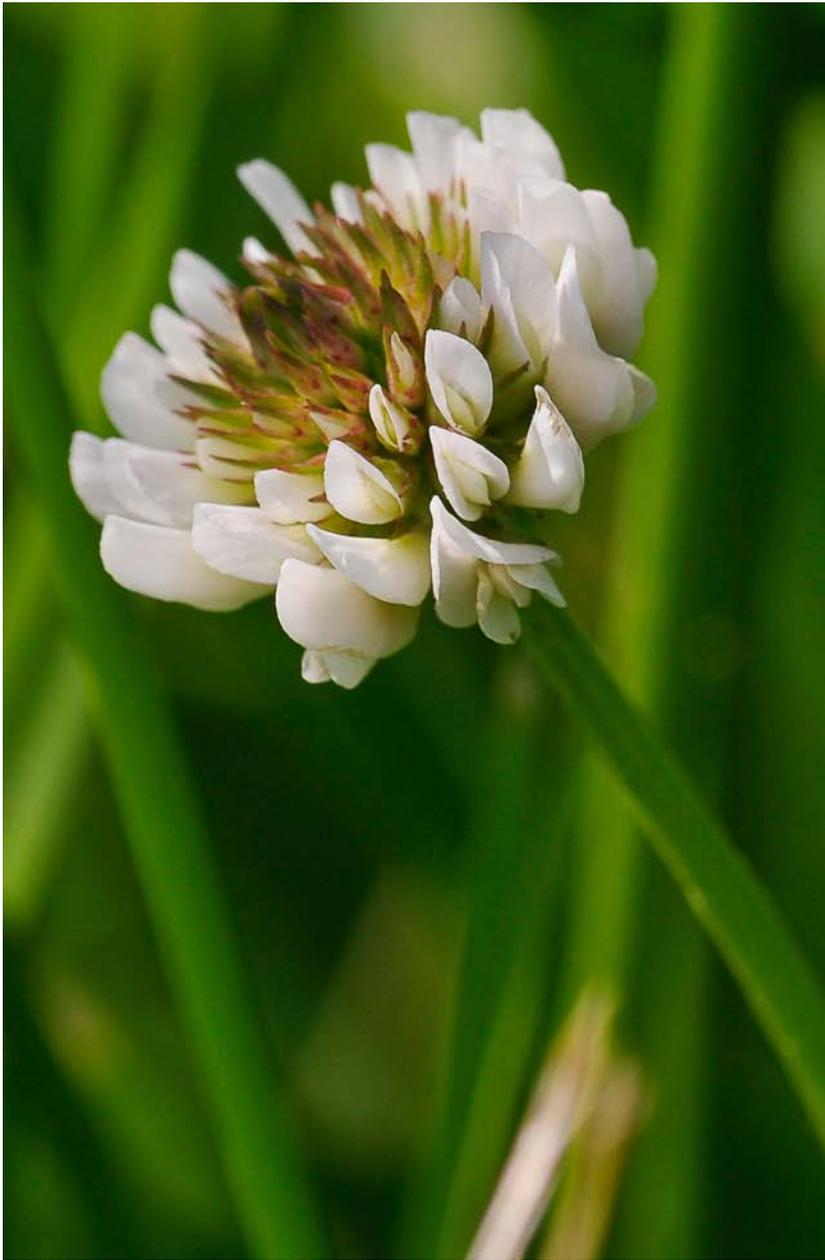
I didn't have a job (I was looking for one), so I had the time and, after a lifetime of working jobs, this was the first real break I had ever given myself and I put it to good use. It was wonderful. It was transformative.

### **Stabilization**

All of this time what was really happening (as I look back now) is that my Mahamudra meditation was stabilizing. After all, I was doing it not only on those early morning shoots, but all the rest of the day as well as much as I could happen to remember



# The Lama of Appearances



or wake up into moments to do it, which was more and more often.

My initial fear and guilt that I was no longer interested in sitting practice, in doing sadhanas and other practices, began to fall away. I just did not care anymore what it looked like to those around me or even to my old self. Whatever it was that I was doing with Mahamudra was enough for me. I was full up and I was in love with and happy with my practice for the first time in my life.

It was just natural to move off the cushion for a while after so many years sitting there. I had done two ngondros (traditional extended sadhanas), not to mention other more complex practices, and I imagine I had accumulated what I was able to accumulate. I was tired for the moment of on-the-cushion practice and inhaled Mahamudra practice like a breath of fresh air.

It was clear to my family that I was no longer spending much time on the cushion and their looks and glances told me that they probably didn't approve and certainly didn't understand. After all, I didn't really understand myself what was happening. Michael, who had been more or less diligent as a practitioner for so many years, was out-and-out playing hooky.

There was no excusing it.

And I did not care. I just knew I had found my way and was progressing somewhere after all the years of anticipation. I was my own counsel in this regard. Outside approval or disapproval (my own or others) could not change my mind or my behavior. And so it went.

When summer ended and winter came on, I had to curtail my early morning explorations and gradually move back inside. I looked forward to the following spring with unusual longing, but I also found that I was able to carry on my mental training at my desk and around the house with no problem. Something had changed within me and permanently, but I was not really able to get a handle on it until the following spring when I was once again headed back out into the fields and woods.

### **Spring Surprise**

And out I did go, as early as January and February, a bunch in March, and constantly by April. And I had been gathering my equipment and upgrading what I could afford. But things had changed for me and in a quite unexpected way, but it would take me some months to figure this out. At the time, I was hell bent to immerse myself ever more deeply in nature, and my outings were now ranging ever farther from home.



## The Lama of Appearances



Instead of spending my early mornings at the back of the local cemetery, at the fringe where the wild vegetation meets the well-groomed lawn, as I had done the year before, I was now actively planning trips to nature spots all over. I was studying maps. I became fascinated with Michigan bogs and the life possible in those very special environments.

It turns out that bogs only really thrive at latitudes higher than 45 degrees. Big Rapids, Michigan (where I live) is almost 44 degrees of latitude, so we have bogs in this area and just an hour or so north of here are really vast bogs.

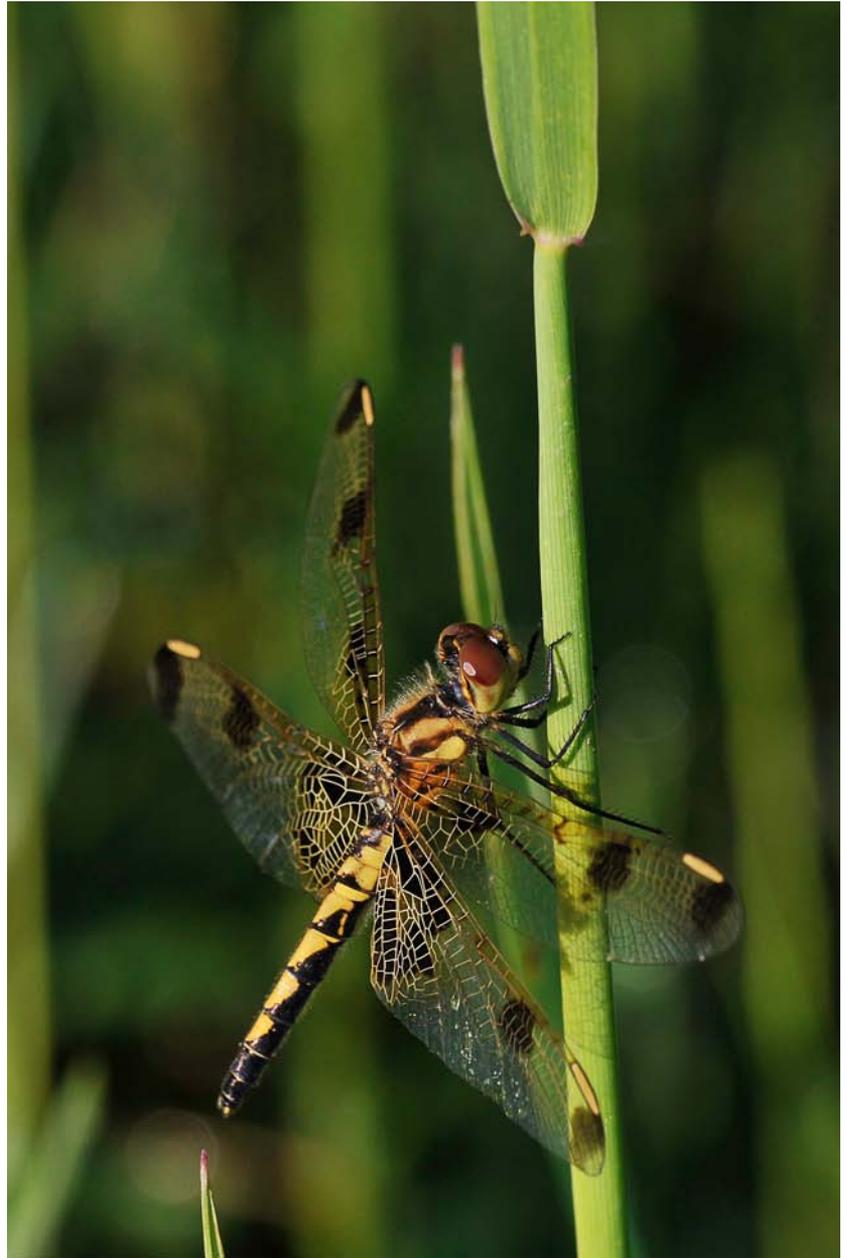
Why bogs? I have no idea. I am an enthusiast, and there is always something that fascinates me. Perhaps it was that bogs are so very, very fragile, tiny microenvironments that hardly anyone has ever seen, much less spent time in. Out there, isolated from nutrients, since the plant life on them can't get nutrients from below (the peat is anaerobic and won't let anything through), many bog plants have become carnivorous, depending on insects and what-not for food. Bog plants include the Pitcher Plant, the Sundew, and the Venus Flytrap, among others. Whatever the reason, I was fascinated by bogs and found myself traveling many hours to visit them and carefully document what I

saw there.

The point here is that I had taken my photography yet another step, not only shooting whatever was available each morning near my home, but now traveling long distances to sample this or that special environment, this particular plant or that one. Without realizing it, my enthusiasm had caused me to overstep the boundary between Mahamudra practice and that of becoming more of a naturalist than I already was.

From the time I was about six years old until I was in my late teens I had studied nature with a fierce passion, so I already knew all about nature. I already knew all the little woodland critters, and I knew them well, their habitat, behavior, and life and death struggles. And here I was further upping the ante as far as being a naturalist was concerned.

In my enthusiasm I could vaguely sense something was slightly off, but for the life of me I could not place the problem. It took time for this to gradually surface in my consciousness, but eventually it did become clear to me that I did not really want to become a full-scale naturalist once more. I was (as I do so often) confusing the baby with the bathwater again, a bad habit I have. It was like a 'Mara', an illusion that confused me. And this all came



## The Lama of Appearances



to a head during a trip up to the top of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. It is a good story.

I had been invited to join a very select group of naturalists who were given permission to enter a rare bog preserve at the very top of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to take a survey of wildlife there. Bogs are very fragile environments and even walking on them is destructive. But this conservation society allowed special teams to enter these closed reserves once or twice a year and I was to be the team's herpetologist. I had been trained in reptiles and amphibians since I was a child, and so knew all about them. I was geeked.

I could not wait to get to Michigan's wild Upper Peninsula and out on those bogs with my camera. My trip was to last a number of days, and I was up before dawn of that first day and in my car heading north. It must have been around 4:30 AM when I hit the road. The only hiccup was the fact that I had just had some fairly protracted oral surgery (several days of root canal work), and the tooth in question had developed a really nasty abscess beneath it. I was already on my second dose of antibiotics, this time really heavy antibiotics, the first round having not touched the problem. I was not about to be stopped by a wayward

tooth.

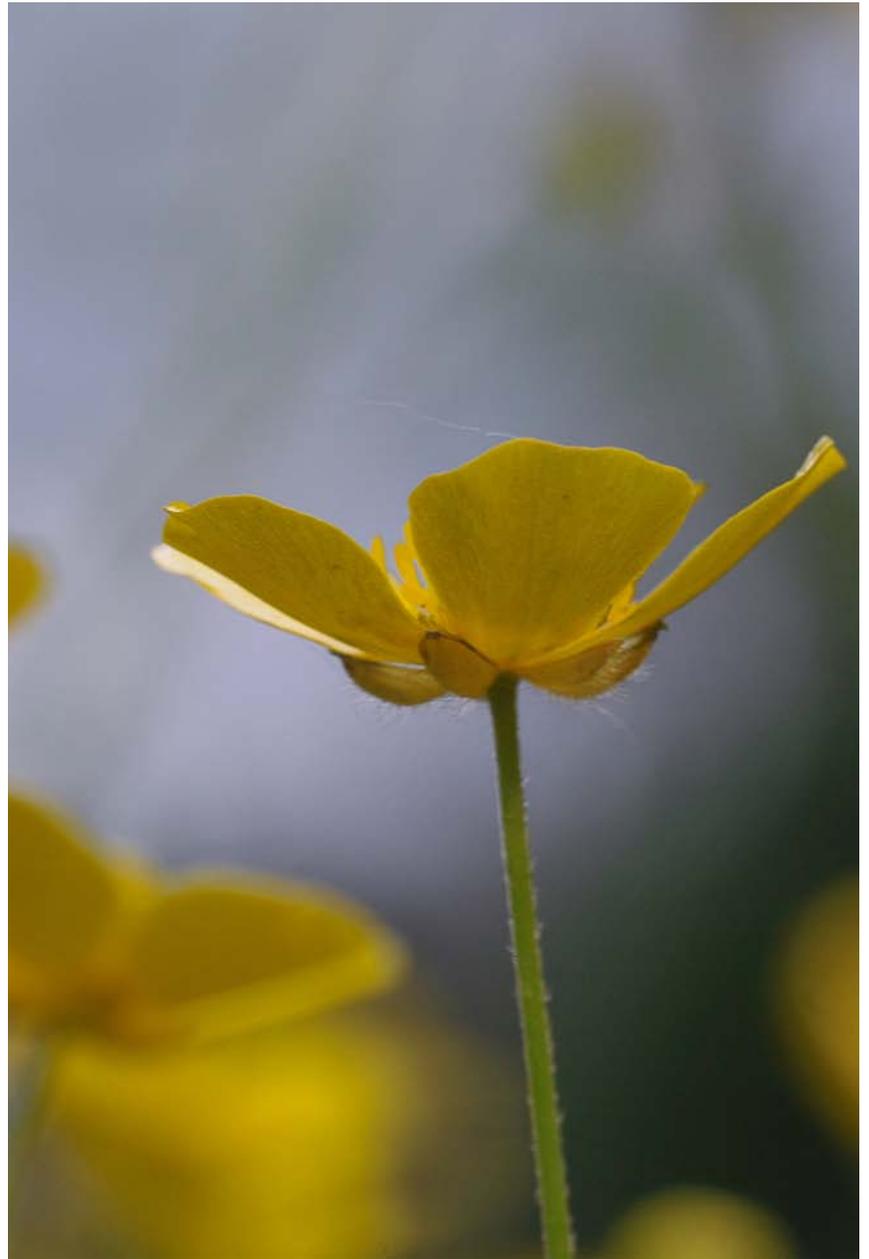
So I was in some pain and my lower jaw was swollen. I assumed that as time passed the swelling would just go down. Anyway, hell or high water would not have kept me off those bogs, and on I went.

### **The Turning Point**

My first stop was at a small bog at the top of the Lower Peninsula, just beneath the Mackinac Bridge. I was out on the bog in the morning sun by 8 A.M., already hours from my home. It was a magnificent morning. Yet already I was having trouble with that dumb tooth, a certain amount of throbbing and little sharp shoots of pain. I did my best to ignore it and told myself it would die down.

There I was in my hip boots way out on the surface of the bog, surrounded by moss and small bushes, and carefully stepping my way along in the ooze. I was maybe halfway around the small lake when I first saw them, two large Sandhill Cranes picking their way through the bog on the opposite side. I was thrilled to see them and they were incredible.

As I threaded my way along I must have somehow began to encroach on the area where they perhaps had their nest, for they became increasingly animated. Now these are large birds.



## The Lama of Appearances



They can stand five feet high and have wingspans of six to seven feet across. And their eye was on me, and they were not just looking at me. They were moving in circles around me.

Many of the bushes on the bog were several feet high, so I could not always see the cranes, but I could hear their frightening calls. I didn't say 'frightened' calls; I said frightening calls, which they were – eerie. And the cranes began running through the bushes, circling me, working together, and they moved fast. Much of the time all I could see through gaps in the bushes was a sideways profile of one of their heads as it circled me. I could see one bird as it ran through the bushes on my right, and then suddenly on my left was the other bird circling in the other direction. I was constantly off balance, and I had to watch my every step lest I step into muck so deep that I would begin to sink down in it. And I was carrying over \$12,000 worth of camera equipment, not to mention my life.

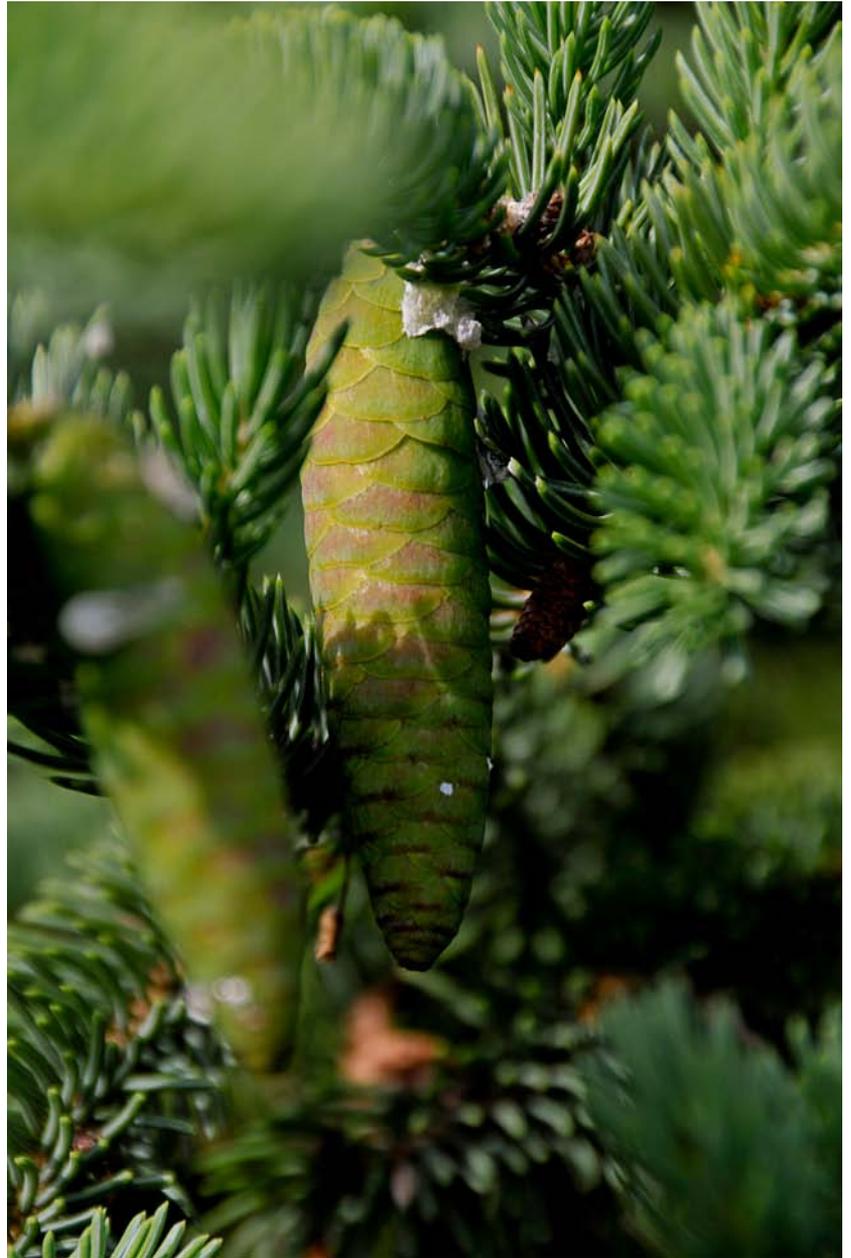
Or one of the birds would rise in the air and cut directly across my path (only a few feet in front of me) only to disappear into the bushes and take up running around me again. And the cries were now getting really scary. At some point I began to feel like I was being stalked, and visions of the movie

Jurassic Park and velociraptors came to mind. These were large birds and they didn't like ME. It is easy to see how birds were once reptile-like creatures.

Well, that is as far as it went. I finally managed to plot a course through the bog that apparently took me away from their nest area, all the time I was moving one gooey step at a time very slowly through the muck. I finally got out of there, found my way back to the car, and drove to the nearest town.

By this time it was beginning to be clear that my tooth was not going to just calm down, but instead was only going to get worse. I had super strength Ibuprofen and even some Vicodin that they had given me, so I had to dip into those a bit. And this was just the first morning of the first day of a five day journey. I had to decide what I would do.

I went to visit some friends at their home near where I was at. Here I was safe in a nice home in a town only a few hours from my home. But I had the strange experience of feeling that I was somehow embedded in a scene at which I was no longer fully present. It was like a dream or the set for a movie in which I was an actor. I was kind of leaning out of it, like you might lean out the back door to get a breath of fresh air. Something had stirred or moved inside of me that day



# The Lama of Appearances



and I was damned if I could figure out what it was. Somewhere back there I had lost my incentive or my direction. Something had changed at the core.

Yet, by tomorrow I was supposed to be at the tip of the top of the Upper Peninsula, hours from where I was now, and miles from any town (much less a hospital) on a remote bog, and the temperatures there were predicted to be very cold, even for a spring day. After all, way up there it was still hardly spring. Hmmmm.

In the end, the throbbing of my tooth and those little sharp spasms of shooting pain told me that marching through a bog miles from anywhere might not be the time to try and push this 67-year old physical envelope. As it turned out, this was the right decision, because the second round of antibiotics with its very large dose also failed to do the trick. My abscess overcame all attempts to control it and spread much farther into the bone of my lower jaw. In the end, the tooth had to be extracted and the jaw treated. And I only tell this longish story because this became a real turning point for me. Let me explain.

## **The Outside is Inside**

Like so many times in my past, once again I had managed to confuse the inside with the outside, the important

## The Dharma in Nature

with the unessential. What was going on over the last year was that I was using the outside (nature) to look at the inside (my mind) AND I had fallen into the mistake of confusing the two. Since it was through the nature that I was realizing my mind, I began to elevate natural history as the goal or object of my passion, when it was only the means through which I was experiencing my mind's nature, which is my real passion. I hope that makes sense.

Here I was upscale-ing my nature trips when all they were to me in the end were the lens or means through which I was viewing the mind. And here I was buying more equipment, planning longer and more extensive trips, and ordering every kind of field guide I did not already have, and I had a lot. Well, this all changed, and that early morning faceoff with the Sandhill Cranes was perhaps the turning point. That experience was thrilling and not really that scary, so I was not scared off by what happened there. But something else did snap there or around that time.

After that I began to realize I was unnecessarily further complicating my life with all these lenses and nature trips, when what I wanted to do was simplify it. I was extruding the naturalist in me at the expense of



## The Lama of Appearances



the simple clarity of resting my mind, and it was the clarity of the mind that I was in love with, as seen through the lens of nature. It is the old baby and the bathwater thing. I had once again confused the two, but I am getting a little ahead of myself. Let me summarize.

Quite early on in the spring of 2009 I began to notice that the very special lucidity that came when I patiently peered through the camera lens waiting for the wind to die down was now present without any camera at all. What before was made possible by my concentration and a really tack-sharp lens had now overflowed into the rest of my life. Then one day I realized that I did not even have to bring a camera along with me at all. This clarity that I had very carefully nourished the entire preceding year through my photography had become the rule rather than the exception. It was not about cameras; it was not about lenses, but about clarity of mind. That was it. I began to get it.

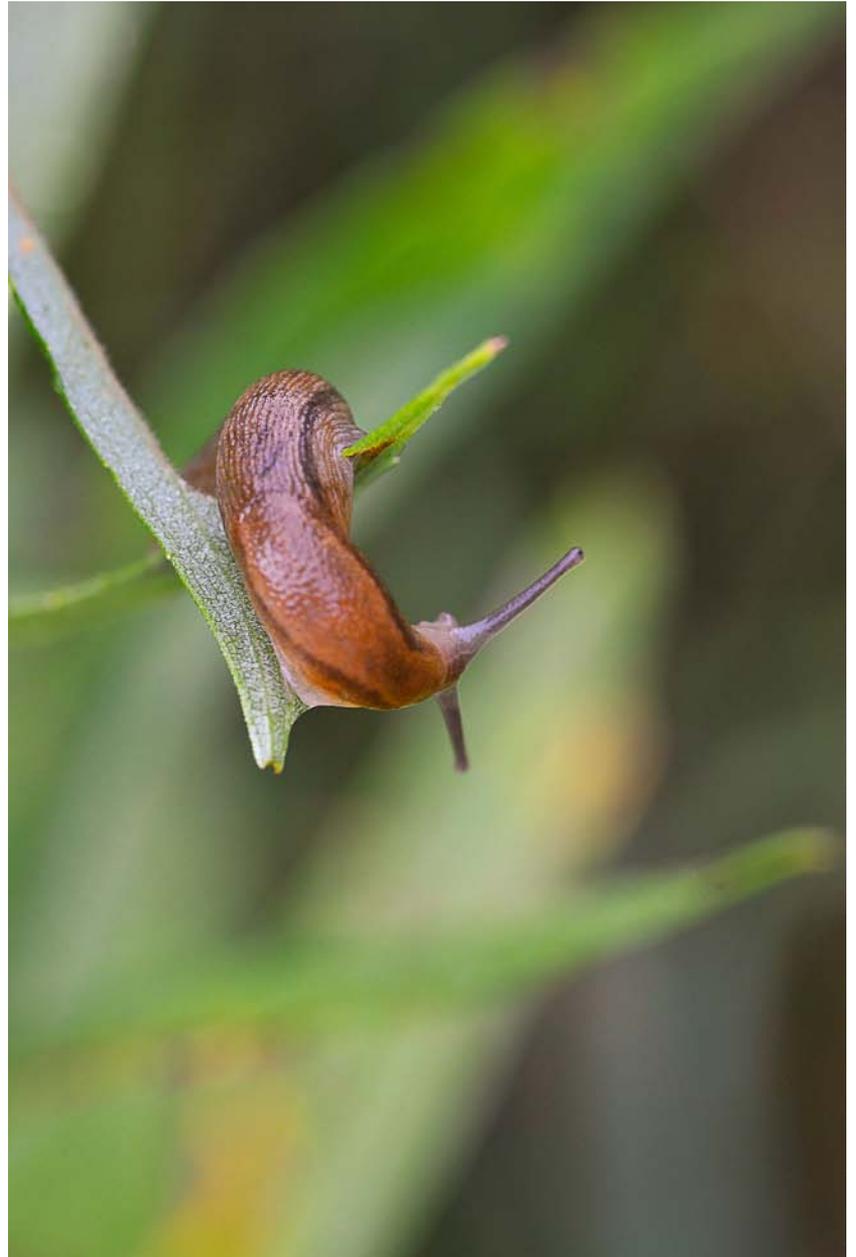
Now I found that just walking along a road, looking at the vegetation or whatever, produced the same result as hours of painstakingly peering through the lens. My mind was already somewhat lucid and I could more and more just rest in the beauty of the nature around me, which would

just present and reveal itself to me... and without the need of a camera. It became clear that I really didn't need a camera at all anymore, and this at first really puzzled me. Whoa, I thought. Now I have these great cameras and all these fine lenses, and whatever technique I had managed... and I don't need them?

That's right. That's what happened. It took time, but I increasingly became aware that what I had loved all this time through the photography was what was happening within my own mind. All that gear was just a scaffold to build a stable practice and, once built, the camera equipment (as wonderful as it is) was just an empty cocoon as far as I was concerned, for I was now already gone. This was at first disorienting, to say the least.

## **Mixing the Mind**

It is easy for me to write all this now, but it took a while for all of these thoughts to really sink in, and it was not until I made my yearly trip to see my dharma teacher in late June that it all came together. 2009 was the 21<sup>st</sup> year that Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche has offered a ten-day Mahamudra intensive at KTD Monastery and I had never missed a one. In fact, seeing and studying with Rinpoche for those ten days was the highlight of any year. 2009 was no different.



# The Lama of Appearances



Being with Rinpoche for ten days each summer means so much to me. For one, I found that I was always the best kind of me when I was with him, when I was present and within the embrace of his mandala. And going back home after the ten days was always something of a mixed bag, driving the 800 miles back to our town filled with Rinpoche's blessings, much of that grace which I would soon manage to fritter away as I settled into my more ordinary life.

But this year was to be different. Part of the Mahamudra practice I had been doing during those early morning camera practices included a very special form of guru yoga, which I can't detail here, but the idea is simple. Guru yoga is nothing more than connecting with your teacher, taking that connection to heart, and mixing your mind with the mind of your teacher. That's it. There are many forms of guru yoga, so it is not a secret.

I had been practicing that along with my Mahamudra training. And I had done guru yoga before, during the two ngondros I had completed, so I was familiar with this kind of practice. However, where before I had painstakingly marched through the practice, keeping count of how many this or that I had done and how many more I needed to complete the

practice, my recent guru yoga practice experience had been different.

In the last year, as I was doing the microphotography, I was very much taking to heart this guru yoga practice, doing it as often as I could remember to do it, and actually somehow mixing my mind with that of my teacher. I really enjoyed doing it and I did it joyfully, but I had little awareness of the effect of this practice on me until I travelled to our monastery for our yearly visit with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

As mentioned, it is always a joy to see Rinpoche again and to be in his presence. I am instantly at my best and I like that. This year was different. When I arrived, of course I was thrilled to see him, as always. It is great just to be in the same room with Khenpo Rinpoche. But this year there was a change.

I soon realized that I did not feel any better in his presence than I did before I left home to see him. Keep in mind that I had been feeling pretty good at home. In fact, the rinpoche that I had been mixing my mind with through guru yoga and the rinpoche I experienced at the monastery were exactly the same this time. I didn't get it at first, but over time, while I was with him, I understood that somehow my practice had brought Rinpoche



# The Lama of Appearances



from out there in the world, out in that monastery in New York, into here in my heart. Now they were in most respects (at least as far as I know) one and the same. Rinpoche had been mixed to some degree with my own mind.

This is not to say that I was like Rinpoche, but rather to say that whatever I was back home on my own (with my relation to Rinpoche at a distance), that now when I was with him again in person, they were the same. He was with me as much at home as when I was with him at the teachings. Wow!

A fear I had always had was: what would happen to me when Rinpoche someday passed on and I was left alone in the world without him to be with – a terrifying thought! Sure, there are many fine rinpoches out there that I could work with, but there is no replacement for your root lama, the one who cared enough to accept you just as you were and put up with you until you could learn a little dharma.

Somehow, in this last year, I had (at least to some degree) internalized Rinpoche and made him a part of me forever. It was clear to me that it was the heartfelt guru yoga that I had been doing as part of my Mahamudra practice that had made this possible. How incredible!

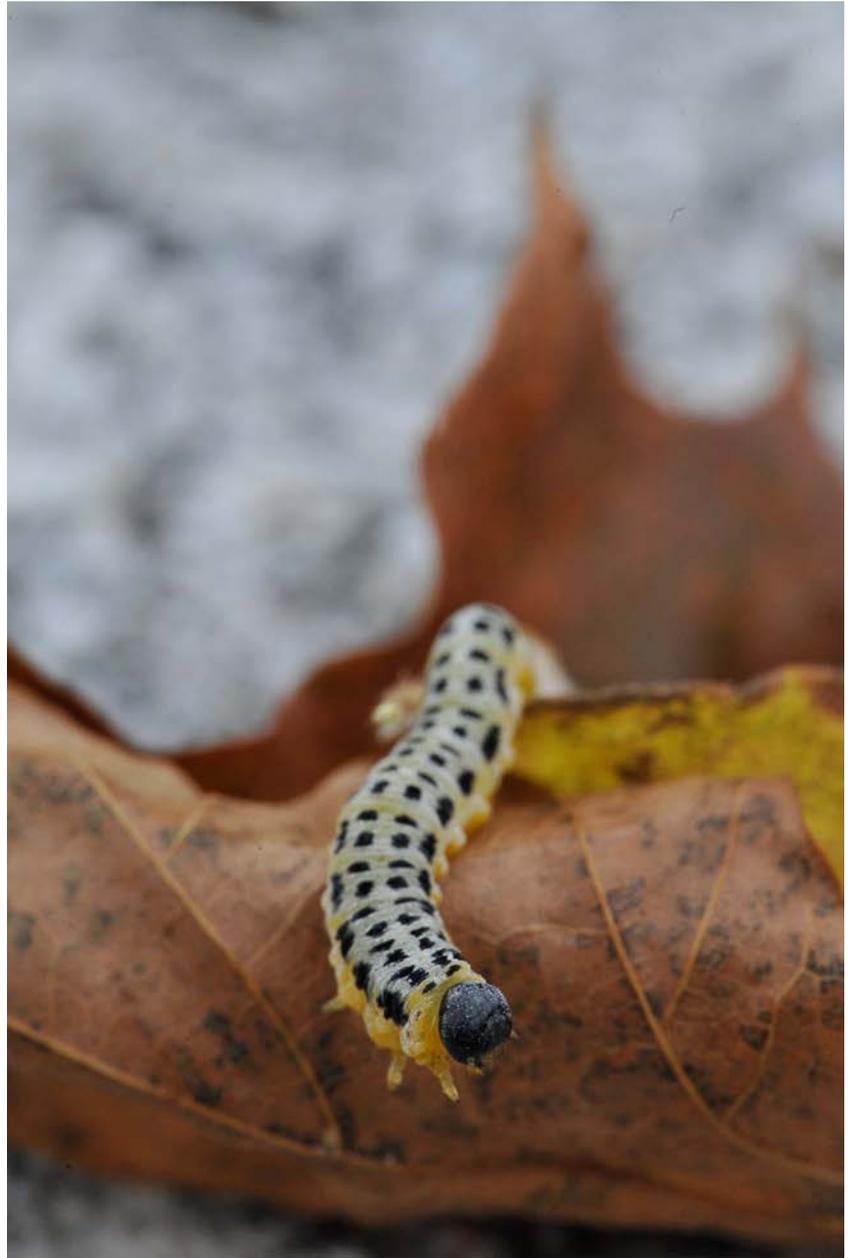
I had brought my camera and several important lenses along with me to KTD and had planned to use them in the early morning, you know, shots of mountains, clouds, rising mists and fog – all of that. But once there, I seemed to have lost all interest in photographing anything. And I wondered what that was all about.

### **The Return of the Hermit**

One of the 3-year year retreat lamas at KTD (whom I consider a close friend) was kind enough to listen to my recent practice experiences, what I have been relaying here to you and his comment hit me like a freight train.

What he said is that my experience with the photography and all that it entailed was right out of a dharma handbook – pure tradition. Mahamudra practitioners are encouraged at a certain point in their practice to go out in the wild, to caves and faraway places to meditate when they have received the pointing out instructions, and while in those places begin to actually practice and train in Mahamudra. And I had just done a modern equivalent. I had not left town, but I had spent my most important time away from people, out in the fields and woods, watching the sun rise again and again – by myself.

It was this solitary time during which



## The Lama of Appearances



my practice was able to settle in and stabilize. And my friend pointed out that once stabilized, my need for some solitary time had evaporated. That was perhaps why the camera and photography thing just naturally dissolved. In fact, once Mahamudra has stabilized, it is customary for practitioners to re-enter society and test their mental stability in the midst of crowds, day-to-day business, and all other challenges. And along with that need to be alone that went away, so did my need for cameras and interest in photography. Just gone!

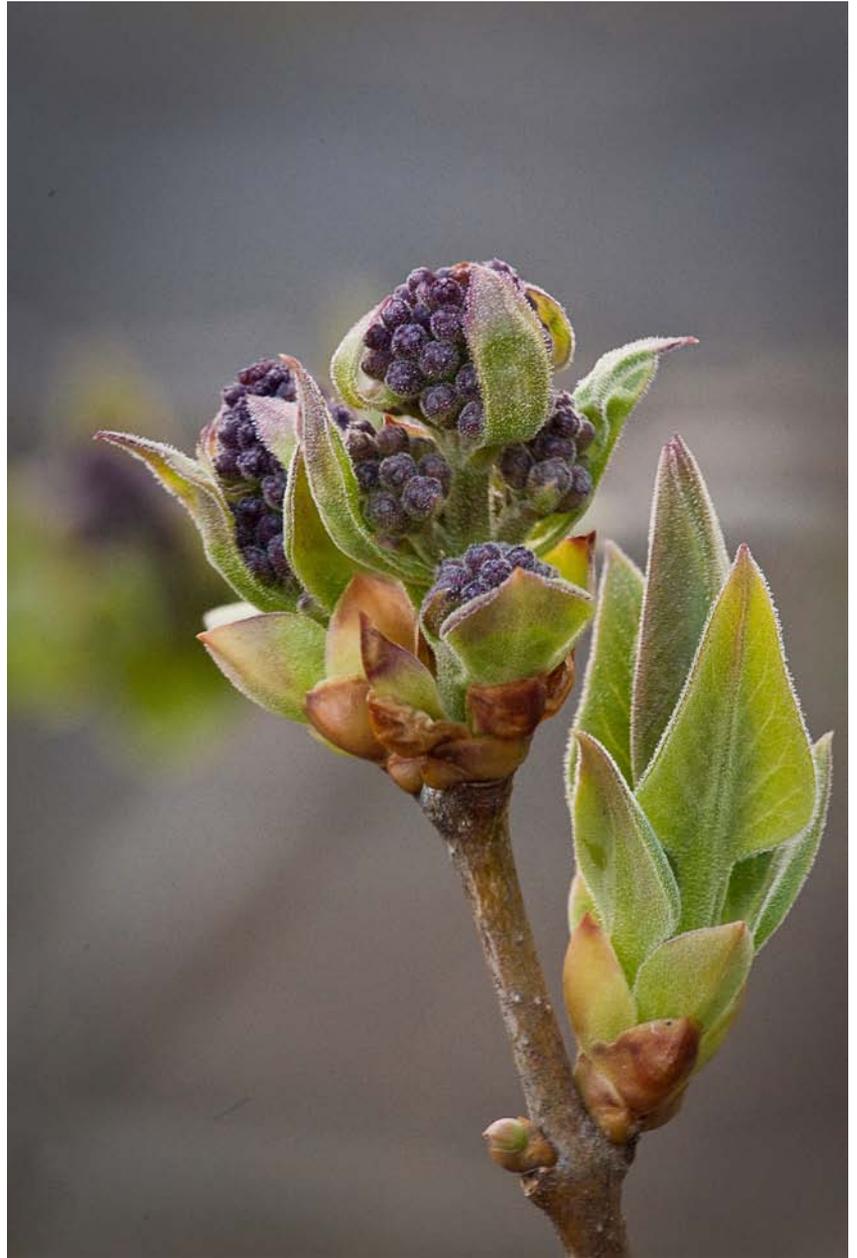
And this is exactly what was happening to me. I didn't need to be alone any longer and I was in the process of separating the baby from the bathwater. The baby was my Mahamudra practice and the bathwater was all my camera gear and my need to practice through it. I didn't need the support of the camera any longer. I also did not need to be out in nature all the time, either. It is not that I did not appreciate natural beauty any longer; it just made no difference to me where I was anymore.

And for the first time in many years, I want to reopen our meditation center here in Big Rapids and do what I can to help others get started in the dharma. I am doing that now.

So there you have at least a brief

## The Dharma in Nature

account of my experience so far with Mahamudra. Of course, now I am just on the first step of a long journey to learn and someday master Mahamudra. And, although I am not yet enlightened in any way, I at least understand something about what I have to accomplish and something about how to go about doing that.



# The Lama of Appearances



## **The Seven Points of Mind Training**

There you have my story, but I still have more photos to present, so this is a good opportunity to list perhaps the single most-studied and quoted dharma text in Tibetan Buddhism, being the slogans from the dharma text entitled “The Seven Points of Mind Training,” written by the legendary Kadampa master Chekawa, but often attributed to Atisha, the great eleventh-century Indian Buddhist saint who came into Tibet and taught dharma.

These 59 slogans, which contain the pith instructions for skillful dharma practice, are commonly used by all of the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, and known to just about every practitioner I have ever met. I will let the slogans speak for themselves (as they have for centuries), but will add a few brief comments where it may not be clear what they mean.

It is important to understand that these slogans are not being presented as rules or laws that you have to follow. Instead, they are intended for the student of dharma who already is practicing and seeks to become more skillful in that practice. In other words, the slogans are not admonitions or imperatives you must follow, but hints or suggestions on how to hone your practice and avoid deepening your obscurations. When approached like this, the slogans are very helpful.

Although I can read Tibetan script, my Tibetan is not good enough to translate these slogans. What I have done is to study seven translations, understand the ideas involved, and then put them into my own words. May they be useful to you.

## **The Seven Points of Mind Training**

# The Lama of Appearances



**Point One:**  
**Preliminaries: A Basis For Dharma Practice.**



**1. First, train in the Preliminaries.**  
*i.e. The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind*

## The Lama of Appearances



**Point Two:**  
**Main Practice: Training in Bodhicitta.**



**2. Consider all phenomena to be like a dream.**

# The Lama of Appearances



### **3. Examine the nature of the unborn mind itself.**

*This would refer to the practice of Mahamudra meditation.*



**4. Let go of even the antidotes.**  
*Even the remedies must be abandoned.*

## The Lama of Appearances



### **5. Rest in the nature, your essential nature.**

*The key here is 'rest.' It really is rest.*



**6. When not meditating, consider all as an illusion.**

*The practice of considering all daily activities as you would a dream.*

## The Lama of Appearances



### **7. Exchange yourself for others through riding the breath.**

*The practice known as “Tong Len,” exchanging yourself for others.*



**8. Three objects, three poisons, three bases of virtue.**

*i.e. (1) Objects: pleasing, unpleasant, neutral, (2) Poisons: desire, anger, ignorance, (3) Virtues.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**9. In all activities, remember these slogans.**



**10. You be the first to give.**

*Like the Christian saying: “Do onto others as you would have them do onto you,” but here you be the first to give.... as in give way.*

## The Lama of Appearances



### **Point Three: Using Whatever Occurs as the Path.**

*Whatever you have on your plate is your path; whatever happens, use it.*



**11. When your world is filled with negative conditions, transform these conditions into the path of awakening.**

*Similar to the previous slogan: take all conditions as an opportunity for transformation.*

## The Lama of Appearances



### **12. Drive all blames into yourself.**

*It is good practice to take full responsibility on yourself, rather than look for it outside.*



**13. Be grateful to everyone, for everything.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**14. To regard confusion as the four kayas is the perfect protection emptiness provides. *i.e.* (1) Dharmakaya, (2) Samboghakaya, (3) Nirmanakaya, (4) All Three.**



**15. The four activities are the best method.**

*i.e. The four practices are: 1. The accumulation of virtue, 2. Confessing negative actions, 3. Offering tormas to the demons, 4. Offering tormas to the protectors and the dakinis.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**16. Whatever arises, instantly join it with meditation.**  
*Look at the true nature of what arises, not the content.*



**Point Four: Practice Bodhicitta in Life and Death.**

# The Lama of Appearances



## **17. The heart instructions: practice the five strengths**

*The strenght of intent, familiarization, virtuous action, abandoning what is not good, aspiration.*



**18. The Mahayana instructions for transferring consciousness at death comprise the “five strengths.”**

# The Lama of Appearances



**Point Five: Evaluating Mind Training.**



**19. All the dharma has a single intention.**

*All dharma practice is aimed at realizing the true nature of the mind.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**20. Of the two witnesses, hold to the principle one.**

*i.e. (1) Yourself, (2) Other people. If you can be happy with your own witness, that is best.*



**21. Always rely on a joyful mind.**  
*Be mindful to undertake all efforts joyfully.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**22. If you can practice, even when distractions occur, this is a sign of the proper training.**



**Point Six: Mind Training Commitments.**

## The Lama of Appearances



### **23. Always practice the three basic principles.**

*i.e. (1) Don't break promises one has made in mind training, (2) Do not behave outrageously. (3) Do not be one sided.*



**24. Change your attitude and rest as it is.**

*Like sailing a ship, adjust the sails of your attitude to achieve the ability to let the mind rest.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**25. Don't discuss the weak points of others.**



**26. Don't judge the affairs of others.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**27. Work with your strongest obstacles first.**

*Work on your greatest problems first.*



**28. Abandon all hope of results.**

*Hope and fear are said to be the great killers of the mind.*

## The Lama of Appearances



### **29. Avoid poisonous food.**

*Avoid what you know is not good for you.*



**30. Don't be predictable and just go along.**

*Get out of the box enough to have experience of your own.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**31. Do not disparage others.**



**32. Don't wait in ambush.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**33. Don't strike at the weak points.**



**34. Don't put a bull's load on a cow.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**35. Don't compete to be the best.**



**36. Don't act with an angle.**

*Don't be looking to get something in everything you do.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**37. Don't demonize what is sacred.**



**38. Don't be happy at other's misfortune.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**Point Seven: Mind Training Guidelines.**



**39. All activities should have a single intention.**

*That would be Bodhicitta, the intent to know the true nature of the mind.*

# The Lama of Appearances



**40. One method corrects all wrongs.**

*Right intent and aspiration to know the true nature of the mind.*



**41. At the beginning and the end, there are two things to do.**

*i.e. (1) Bodhicitta when you get up, (2) Confession and dedication when you go to bed.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**42. Whether good or bad arises, be patient.**



**43. Maintain these two, even at the risk of your life.**  
*Observe the above precepts, no matter what.*

## The Lama of Appearances



### **44. Train in the three difficulties.**

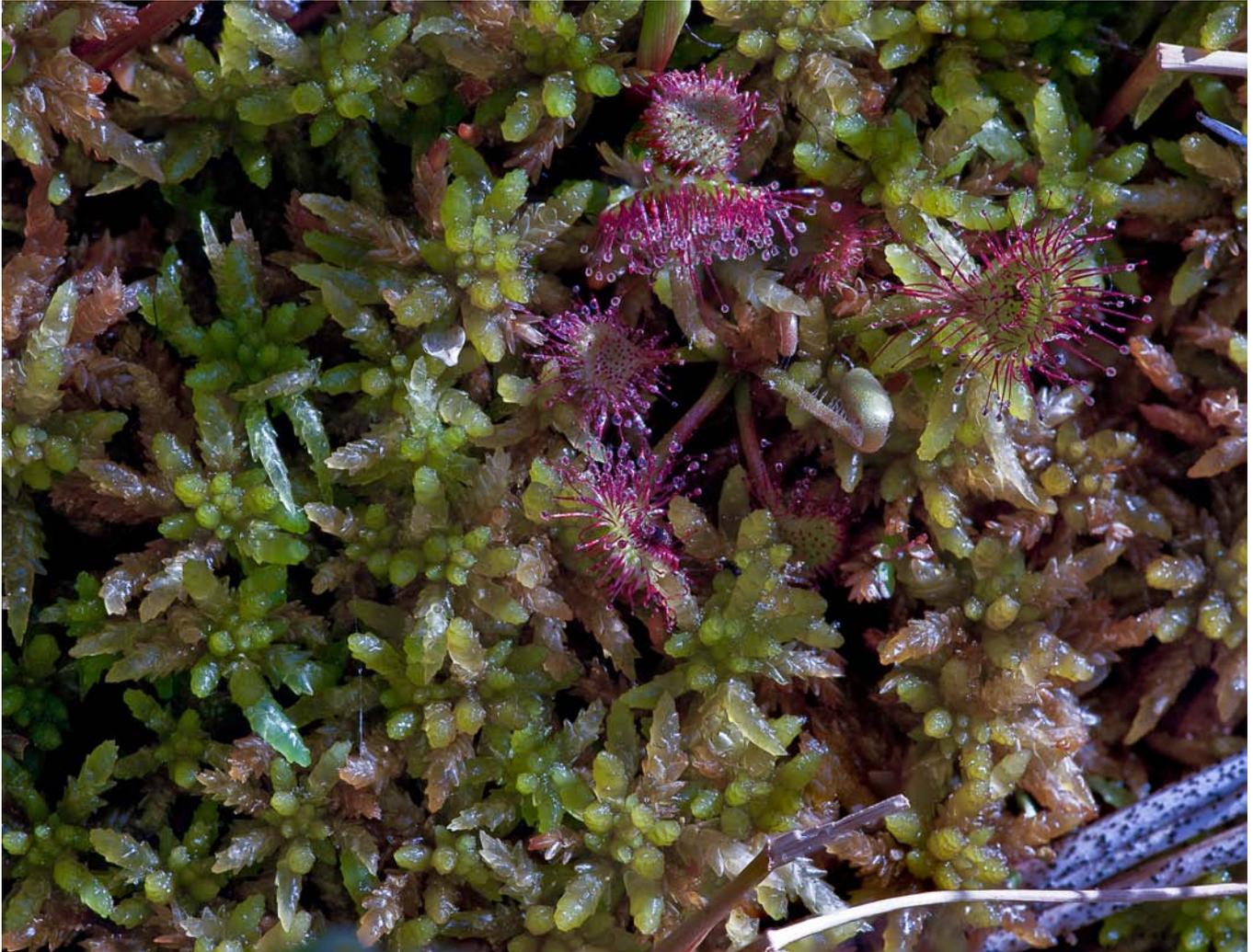
*i.e. (1) Recognize the mind defilements, (2) Reject defilements, (3) Cut off the cause entirely.*



**45. Take up the three principle causes.**

*i.e. (1) Have an excellent lama or teacher, (2) Must have the wish to practice dharma, (3) Need a place to practice, food, etc.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**46. Make sure that the three things never weaken.**

*See the previous slogan .*



**47. Keep to the three inseparables.**

*i.e. Not being separated from the virtuous activities of body, speech, and mind.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**48. Train with impartiality in all areas, pervasively and with a good heart.**



**49. Always meditate on what irritates you.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**50. Don't be swayed by external conditions.**



**51. This time, practice the main point.**

*The main point being maintaining Bodhicitta, pure intent.*

## The Lama of Appearances



**52. Don't misinterpret.**



**53. Don't vacillate.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**54. Train wholeheartedly.**



**55. Free yourself through examination and analysis.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**56. Don't look for appreciation.**



**57. Don't be jealous.**

## The Lama of Appearances



**58. Don't be fickle.**



**59. And don't expect thanks!**

## The Lama of Appearances



**The End of the Seven Points of Mind Training Slogans.**



# The Lama of Appearances



## PHOTOGRAPHY

All photographs were taken with Nikon systems, specifically the Nikon D300, D700, D3x, and D3s cameras. I use Gitzo carbon-fiber tripods and Markins ball heads with Swiss-Arca style quick-release clamps.

As for lenses, this collection (in order of use) involved the Voigtlander 125mm f/2.5 APO Lanthar, Nikkor 85mm PC-E /2.8, Nikkor 105mm f/2.8, and Nikkor 17-35mm f/2.8.

Post shooting work was done in Adobe Lightroom 2.6 and Photoshop CS3. I tend to use ISO values as close to 200 as I can get them, slow shutter speeds, and apertures usually ranging from 8 to 11.



## The Lama of Appearances



## The Dharma in Nature



# The Lama of Appearances



The End