

Mahamudra

My Story



by Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and other topics. And the price is right.

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Cover image of a rupa of the Mahasiddha Tilopa

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Mahamudra: My Story

[What follows is the story of my own introduction to and experience with learning mahamudra meditation. Accounts of mahamudra training will differ, but I find it helpful to hear from other practitioners how it is for them. If anything is tailor-made individually for the practitioner, it is mahamudra practice. Anyhow, this is how it went for me. This will take several blogs, and questions are welcome.]

Here 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 saw 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 Philosophy

Growing up in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, meant that I was exposed to a cosmopolitan atmosphere most of my life. As early as the late 1950s, I had read a smattering of Buddhist literature, mostly Zen, although my take on the dharma back then was that it was intellectual, something that, like Existentialism, we would stay up late at night talking about while drinking instant coffee and smoking cigarettes. In the 1960s, I toyed with some more advanced dharma concepts and certainly played a bit at meditation, particularly Zen Buddhism

(where I sat Zazen), but it was not until the 1970s that I actually did what I would call any real practice, starting February 12th of 1974, to be exact.

This was the date that the Ven. Chögyam 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, when I called the number that was posted on the announcement, I ended up as his chauffeur for the weekend, also designing the poster for his public talk. He was still that unknown.

After meeting Trungpa at the airport in my beat-up Ford station wagon, one of the first things that Trungpa did after I drove him to where he was to stay in Ann Arbor (after everyone left him to tour the university), was to beckon me into a small office room, sit me down in a chair, and spend an hour or so personally teaching me to meditate, although he never mentioned the word “meditation” and I had no idea what he was showing me. I was just very glad to be with him, to be in his presence. Years later, I understood that he was teaching me his version of tranquility meditation (shamata), with its emphasis on the out breath and resting in that.

It was Trungpa who first pointed out to me (and to everyone I knew interested in Buddhism) that the Buddha always intended the dharma as a method or life path, and not as something just to think and talk about. Back in 1974, that was real news to all of us. 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, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD), which is located in the mountains above 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, some 34 years now.

And, of all the Buddhist teachings I have attended over the years since then, the yearly ten-day 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 30th year in 2018. 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, but simply a recounting of my encounter with this profound technique and its effects on me personally. Mahamudra meditation is considered the main form of meditation practice among the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

I am not trying in this short piece 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 understand it conceptually (at least a bit) 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. As for myself, I have had a great deal of teachings on Mahamudra and have been well exposed to it analytically as well, which simply means that I understand conceptually the basic ideas and have learned the practice.

Academic or conceptual understanding of Mahamudra by itself can never qualify as “recognition” of the mind’s nature, much less realization (except perhaps over innumerable lifetimes). Mahamudra meditation, 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 and its 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. If you are not 100% certain, then you have not had it. In general, that is the case.

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 realization.

As mentioned, “Recognition” of the mind’s nature is one of those experiences (actually, a realization), and they say, that if you have any doubt whatsoever about your recognition, then you have not had it. And this is a real arrogance-stopper for most of us. If we are being honest, we know we have not had that realization, 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 and hopes about what that realization is like are ultimately perhaps the single greatest barrier to actually having the realization itself.

You can’t recognize the true nature of the mind many times, but only once, although some are said to have “glimpses.” If you have to do it repeatedly, then you are just having various ‘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. And recognition is not enlightenment!

Instead, it is simply finally recognizing or seeing for ourselves 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 we see the embedded image within the larger painting. It is a simple “recognition,” a recognizing, and not a transport to some blissful state of enlightenment.

As mentioned, “Recognition” is a not transport to a higher state, much less enlightenment. In other words, in recognizing the mind’s nature, we don’t graduate to some higher plane. In fact, it is just the opposite. Recognition is finally realizing the nature of our own mind and how it works, just as it naturally is.

And like all realizations, recognition, unlike spiritual experiences, does not fluctuate up and down. Once you have it, you always have it. It is like when we realize how to turn on and off a light switch; we never forget. Only, in the case of recognizing our own mind's nature, it is somewhat of a more dramatic realization, to say the least.

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. “Recognition” is the where dharma practice catches fire.

The 10-Day mahamudra Intensives

My teacher, the Ven. 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 pointed out, and so my experience remained largely conceptual. I read about it. 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 once 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, in particular the “The Analytical Meditation of a Pandita,” 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 is not red or blue. What was this all 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 (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's not red. The mind is not red! And so I not-so-patiently waited until particular section of the teaching was over and we could hopefully get to some of the good stuff, something juicier 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.

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 it is no secret teaching; the same analytical approach has been taught all over India for centuries. Anyway, I finally 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 (conceptually) 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 approach 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 or that I already knew the answer. Yet, in this teaching I was also starting to pick up on the fact that Rinpoche was not asking us to think, but rather asking us to get off our mental duffs and actually make an effort to look at (and in) our own mind, right there on the spot.

I had of course always assumed that 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 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. In truth, I knew something about using the mind, but had never really looked into or at the mind itself.

And so, very slowly at first (and not without some struggle), I actually began to make efforts to stop just looking outward at what was going on around me, and instead turned and tried to look inward at the mind itself. I mean, I looked! 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 whomever (or whatever) 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 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 kind of 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'.

Meanwhile, 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 me 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 at least was going through the motions – getting some mental 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 myself, doing what Rinpoche was requesting us to do. And that little bit of exercise began to open up doors for me.

The teaching went on like this for days, as rinpoche very carefully led us into actually looking at our minds. And I was finally following along. These simple exercises help, this plus 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. It was not what I had expected. There was no lightning bolt from on high, but more like an exclamation point! Needless to say, 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 and expectations 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 and the mind all along, like: I had no idea what the mind was about, and that is embarrassing.

And, having finally had some recognition, I then saw that the nature of the mind is not something beyond my current reach (as I had always implicitly assumed), not a place to get to, but rather more like very simply seeing how the mind actually worked for the first time, seeing that the mind (my mind) was in fact quite ‘workable,’ as in: “Hey, I can do that!” And I finally could see a little into how I might work it. And

being a somewhat clever guy, this was a very practical revelation. So, 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 onto 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. With this event, I realized that it doesn’t come from outside! It never could.

As obvious as it seems, I could 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 to me, and my somehow 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 some 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 that was all these years.

Expectations are seldom ever our 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, yet 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 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 (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 energy to make it work that I had been missing all along. No more boredom and laziness when it came to dharma practice. Finally, I wanted to do it! No forced effort required.

And while the fact was perhaps less exotic than what I had mistakenly expected, it was (if my opinion counts) the first tangible result of many years (decades) 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 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 32 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 little heat and 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

After I had a glimpse of “Recognition,” the mind was suddenly workable for me; 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 actual meditation could begin and not just practice. Nevertheless, as minimal as perhaps my realization was, it brought about a profound change in my approach to meditation (and to my life!).

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 for an hour. 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 (over time) I had nickel and dimed to death as it was. It seemed that everything else 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 finally 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 even consider the consequences of just stopping practice altogether, although I was very tired of it. Quitting was just too scary to consider. The dharma was too much a part of my ego, my identity, to just stop practicing. 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 best, 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 a full time dharma practice and I was a part-time player.

One thing I did realize from Rinpoche's 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. As a computer programmer, 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. And here it was!

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, in what is called post-meditation.

Putting the Technique to Work

I slowly began to apply the techniques of mind training I was learning to 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 zone and just looking around, I would attempt to practice Mahamudra meditation and then dedicate the merit – hundreds of times a day. 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 in the moment. Those gaps in my concentration were the only instants 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 in those moments 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 that true nature as much as I could. In this process, 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 realized something about how the mind actually worked or was, and even that tiny look 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 those times might be.

Those moments of resting were short, at first 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 eventually going to get a much-needed rest, but at that point this was still some time in the future.

This new process of post-meditation practice was not something I could measure in days or even months. It took about three 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 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 always feared, 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 over the edge into totally new territory. Next is that 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 – 50 some 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), the All-Movie Guide (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. Now, if I could only transfer my new love of dharma practice to sitting on the cushion!

Suddenly 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.

After the shock of hearing I would soon have no job (which ruined the conference for me), it turned out that I had to leave the astrology conference a few days early when I found out that His Holiness the 17th 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. This was our monastery! I could not miss that event and, as it turned out, I could be useful as part of a video team to film the event, and as it turned out, personally, I was able to film some events where they didn't really want anyone present. I had been around KTD so long that I was pretty much some kind of fixture there anyway, so they asked me to do it..

I would love to tell readers about the visit of His Holiness, but that would be a whole other 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. You can download it here, if interested and see by their faces how happy folks were.

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/KarmapaKTD_2008.pdf

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 had 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 some perspective, but to suddenly be without a paycheck was 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 loss of a job to support my family was a really huge and shocking gap, and I popped out big time. 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-six years straight. When you work for yourself, you don't have weekends and holidays off, 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 Monastery with the Karmapa) began to come out, and photography plays an important role in my 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 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 my dad ever felt that way about anything I had done. The long and the short of it is that I came away from that time as a kid with the sense (perhaps only in my own 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 concert posters, I had purchased a Nikon D1x system and carefully photographed some 33,000+ 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 some stability from my chaotic life at the time. And then there was my

interest in nature. Even though this breakthrough (for me) mahamudra event happened only some years 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 was even 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 had 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 book again. Why is that?

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 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. I have caught them, held them, and loved them.

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 the same compassion 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.

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

Back to Nature

But in 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, one I had avoided for so many years, and immersed myself once again in nature, the way things actually are. I already was completely vulnerable, reminded personally to the

quick how things can be when we have no control. I was in the mood to lose myself in actuality of nature, to immerse myself in its reality. And the camera was probably my ticket to ride, my excuse to get lost (yet found) in nature once again. It was like finding my roots, like going home. And it was somehow consoling.

I became absolutely fascinated with photos and camera work, what is called close-up or macro photography. 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. I vacated.

Each morning would find me out in the meadows and woods at sunrise, just as the sun came up, 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, soaking wet, 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.

And I am not talking about just weekends. I watched almost every sunrise from around late May through

November, 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. Think when is the last time you saw the sun rise. 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 tell you about here.

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 many 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, plus rock posters, etc. You get the idea. I can be obsessive. My personal collection of CDs (which I no longer own) now sits in a warehouse in Ann Arbor, numbering well over 700,000 CDs and counting.

My point, as mentioned, 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 great clarity at a tiny diorama, at a world that was obviously ever-so-much more perfect than the one I was used to (or experiencing at the time) somehow was freeing to me. Every tiny fly and insect appeared so incredibly complete, so bright and perfect in every respect at the micro level.

The outer (and business) world that 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 dioramas, miniature scenes - the tiniest of landscapes. I was transported by what I was seeing.

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.

And Lenses...

Before long I was spending up to several of the best hours of the day (at 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 still just

couldn't see clearly enough, so I just needed even 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) absolutely resting my mind and life in the tiny scenes I was peering through lenses to see.

I was finding deep rest in those miniature scenes. 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 was holding a precise position with camera and tripod, frozen to a stance, so that a tiny insect does not fly away, and at the same time waiting for the incessant Michigan wind to die down long enough to take a photograph. 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 or thinking. I didn't care about the resulting photograph; I was in love with the sheer process of "Seeing."

For some reason, through the looking 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 at that! It would take a book to explain what resting the mind is really 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 don't see myself as a teacher, but as a sharer of dharma.

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, go outside in the fields, and launch myself into this particular state of mind. I vaguely knew this was connected to my practice, but that knowledge was not important at the time, which tells you something by itself. In fact, it was the furthest 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. It was totally addictive.

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 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 Mother 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 or want to know of.

For that spring, summer, and fall, I was really away from the madding 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 all that clarity -- deeply seeing.

Where before in my daily life I was perhaps engrossed in figuring out why so-and-so did this or that or how I managed to embarrass myself in some situation, now thoughts like that could be seen, not for their content, but in their actual nature and I watched them just dissolve like dew on the grass or clouds in the sky. 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. The Beatles phrase "I'm looking through you" comes to mind. That's what I did with thoughts, looked through them like windows into the mind itself.

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. And I didn't even bother to think much about it. I was too involved in doing it, just being there.

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 fine 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 had to offer (and that is many) and on into lenses that are even better than anything Nikon has commonly produced.

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. The stacked photos mimicked the mind in being perfect.

I am just giving you a taste of what was a real obsession on my part, and 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 about now, if only I practiced Zen.

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 and the wet grass 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, building companies, 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 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 thrilling!

So, it was just natural to move off the cushion for a while after so many years of sitting there. I had done two ngondros (traditional extended sadhanas), not to mention other more complex practices, like the Karma Pakshi Sadhana, etc. 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. I was ready for it!

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 (decades), was out-and-out playing hooky. The cushion just sat there on the floor.

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.

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 them. 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 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 (adjoining Canada) 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.

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 to shore 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 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 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. It's like the old image of a finger point out the moon. The photography was the finger, not the moon.

Here I was upscaling 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 up 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 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 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 21st year that Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche has offered a ten-day Mahamudra intensive at KTD Monastery and I had never missed a one. If fact, seeing and studying with Rinpoche for those ten days was the highlight of any year. 2009 was no different.

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 macro-photography, 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 Rinpoche, 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 from out there in the world, out in that monastery in New York, here and into 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

Lama Karma, 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 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! [Note: I still do plenty of photography as of 2017.]

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 in an increased way, I wanted to do what I could to help others get started in the dharma. I am doing that now.

So, there you have at least a brief 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 Price of Effort – A Summary

As the great poet Robert Frost wrote “Something there is that doesn't love a wall” in his poem “Mending Wall.” Only, as regards meditation, I would rephrase to, “something there is that doesn't love making an effort.” We make efforts, for sure, and we probably

wouldn't get far without them, but like pushing a sled over the top of the hill, we also are looking for the point where we can just hop on and ride.

The upshot or moral of this little analogy, at least as it relates to meditation training, is that making effort requires a price to be paid somewhere down the line, later if not sooner. Yet, to do anything, even change our life course ever so slightly (but deliberately), requires some effort. And learning new techniques, especially if it requires great effort, flies in the face of what meditation is all about. So let's discuss.

If we are starting out in the dharma, we somehow have to make an effort to learn the techniques necessary for meditation, yet we would be better off if we already just somehow knew these techniques and did not have to make the effort of learning them. So, there is a kind of Catch-22 here that, practically speaking, becomes a speedbump or obstacle for most of us in learning to meditate. In other words, we have to go out of our way (i.e. change) to learn it, i.e. make efforts.

And, if we do go out of our way, that effort to learn or change has to, (somewhere down the road) be resolved so that we can get back in-line once again with a more "effortless" way of living or being. We make an effort so that we can accomplish something, but in resting in meditation, "spiritual-effort" is an oxymoron.

We can't eat our cake and still have it too, so we can't make effort and have it be effortless. What goes up must, come down; going out of our way through effort has to eventually end up absorbing the effort it took to cut a new track, path in life, or develop the muscle-

memory for tranquility meditation. Just about every meditator has to solve this little inertia equation.

So, forcing ourselves to meditate (making ourselves do it), however gently we do that, by the sheer laws of physics, requires a price to be paid. It's like driving a car; it requires a driver. And in meditation, the driver is effortless-action or what might be called "love" for what we are doing, but how is that achieved if we don't know if we love meditation or not until we do, until we try it out? And "trying" doesn't do it with meditation, only just doing does it, etc.

If we make an initial effort, then the resulting effects of that effort has to be re-absorbed (or otherwise reduced) until it vanishes back into non-effort. We can't take love by force and still call it love and we can't learn to meditate by force alone. At some point in learning sitting meditation, our effort to meditate has to succumb to the joy of actually meditating. So, if we try real hard, if we discipline ourselves and force ourselves to meditate, that very effort often becomes a direct obstacle to actually meditating. That's what "non-mediation" in the more advanced practices is all about, not "trying" to meditate. So, what's the way around this, if there is one?

Well, the usual or most common approach to meditation is to make an initial effort (or efforts) and, once we get the hang of meditation (and learn how), then it will no longer take effort and we can begin to remove whatever traces or stains were made by our initial effort. The danger with this approach, IMO, is that since effort obscures meditation, we may not be able to get past the stains of our own effort to practice and experience the beauty of meditation, which by definition, is effortless. In other words, our very effort

obscures or prevents our realizing the results of meditation.

There must be a reason why learning meditation by effort is so popular; it must work, but perhaps it does not work (or work well) for everyone. The “noise” of making effort may drown out the more subtle rewards of meditation until we fail to experience those rewards at all, but only feel the effort. And we can’t make efforts forever, because advanced meditation (Vipassana) is “effortless.” And, we all look for the grooves.

Obviously, if we could learn meditation technique so that it is more effortless, then perhaps the practitioner could hear and feel the music (so to speak) of meditation and be more self-inspired to keep practicing. Like fusion, meditation has to become recursive enough to be self-inspiring. We can’t just make efforts forever and still end up resting our mind. “Resting the mind” naturally requires the removal of effort, and this by definition.

So, this round-robin circular argument doesn’t go anywhere except around and around. What’s the solution? In my opinion, the solution is to not use force or effort in learning meditation, especially if you are already having trouble learning to meditate. Instead, because tranquility meditation (Shamata) is about concentration, cast about in your life to see if you have ALREADY learned to concentrate doing something you really care about or love.

For example, a fisherman may love to tie flies, which is very exacting and involves real concentration, and they have already learned this, with effort or not. The point is that they are beyond learning the technique

and already love to do it. “Loving to do” something that requires concentration is what we are after here. Then, simply learn to mix your tranquility meditation technique with tie flying and see if that works for you. It worked for me when I used close-up nature photography.

Tranquility meditation (Shamata) has no particular object to focus on. It can be the breath, a twig, a stone, or whatever. Tie flying or photography is as legitimate as any other focus for tranquility meditation. So, if you have already mastered something that requires concentration AND love doing it, then feel free to use it for learning meditation. In the case of fly tying, you would focus (mindfully) on the process of tying flies, without being distracted, etc. Your meditation practice would be the same as “on the cushion,” only you would do it while mindfully tying flies and not by minding your breath or focusing on a twig, etc.

In my case, I had a kind of perfect storm happen and just fell into using photography for learning meditation. The personal factors involved in my case, simply put, were among the following:

First, I had the shock of losing my livelihood (job), which created a huge gap of time that lasted about six months, during which I was not in my normal state of mind. That set the stage.

Aside from the above gap of “time,” I was under a LOT of pressure to provide for my family. I had the even more important gap of having to deal with the

loss of livelihood and the ability to support my family, which gap was a greater factor than the time gap.

During these gaps, I took myself away from my daily routine of forty years, at least for a good part of each day, and did this for a solid six months. I was out in nature watching the sun come up, isolated and alone, and ignoring everything else. I shed all my worries as much as I could for that time each day.

I was focused on observing nature, something I was already an expert in since my early childhood.

And in that “time out” each day, I learned close-up photography, something I already was partially trained in, but I completed and surpassed anything I had done before.

Without any obvious effort other than loving to do it, I applied myself to the discipline of taking photos and the discipline of setting up and waiting to take very difficult camera shots. Again, the “love” in doing it was key.

And this went on for many months, like half a year.

Yet, the most important factor, along with the shock and pressures of having no livelihood, was that (perhaps only to avoid looking at the upset to my career), I threw myself into this close-up photography 101%, with all of me... and I was loving it. “Love” is always the answer, and it was true here.

Anyway, that is what it took for me get the hang of meditation, a lot of factors that all came together, as I said, like the perfect storm. You will have to examine your own life to see what it would take for you to come up with your kind of a “perfect storm.” I did not

plan it out; it just happened to me and I found myself in the middle of it. And what a storm it was.

I probably would not have chosen this set of factors, because some of them were just too painful to request, but that's what it took to get my attention so that I was able to actually learn meditation. This fact gives me pause. I write all of this because I am amazed at the strength or force of circumstances that it took to pop me out of my life-long bubble of just "keeping on to keep on" and I worry that you or others reading this will not take strong-enough measures in learning meditation. Before this took place, I had no idea how serious we have to get in our practice of dharma. It's nothing like sitting for an hour a day. It could be helpful for you to know how difficult it is to get grave (serious) about actually learning the dharma and meditation.

And last, but not least, just because I tell this story and it is out in the public, I want to say that what happened with me and meditation need not be considered unusual. Please don't make me an exception! I spent decades trying to meditate, with a perfectly ordinary state of mind. I simply did not know how to do it correctly or what "correctly" was. Please take what you can from this account as a "flag" for your attention and find your own way into meditating properly. It is worth the effort (or the lack thereof) to achieve this.

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PART TWO: The Lama of Appearances

Zen and the Art of Nature Photography

This blog (and story) 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 enlightenment, 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 (hopes and fears) can make it almost impossible to have any realization. We think we already 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 this story might be useful.

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

The word “dharma” is slowly working its way into the English language, but 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 and eventually realize enlightenment.

Our personal dharma (for each of us) is the specific way or method that will work for us to gain realization, the particular signs and path in the world around us that we can pick up on and through which (by following) we can eventually reach realization. It is written that there are 84,000 dharmas or pathways to enlightenment, and it is up to each of us to discover for ourselves the personal way to realization, our particular dharma path. After all, it is the only path that will work for us, so we have no choice. We can't reach realization except by a 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. In other words, our personal dharma path is just as present in the 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. We don't see it! According to Buddhists, each of us has been wandering for innumerable lifetimes trying to find the particular path or dharma that will work for us, the precise method that will lead to full realization. Yet, up to this point we have somehow managed not to see it, and have been distracted by all the other things we are doing instead. It's a busy world!

There are thousands of Buddhist 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 in our case. And 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, so that we get it. And then we have it.

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 the main point of this particular series, 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, usually 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 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. Lineage lamas are the dharma teachers that are available in our times.

(2) The Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugatas

However, there is also another "lama," the Lama of the Scriptures." The extant teachings and Buddhist 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

There is another lama, call the Lama of Dharmadhatu, and this refers to the final goal or state of realization, where the teacher or guide is pointing out the Dharmadhatu and true nature of the mind itself. I can't say much about that in this blog, because it is more advanced than we are considering here.

(4) The Lama of Appearances

And there is a fourth kind of lama, which is what I am pointing out here in this series 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 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.

Mother 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.

Tough Love

The message of the natural world, Mother Nature, and the message of the root lama (main dharma teacher) 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 they can turn our minds away from the endless distractions of everyday life and toward a dharma practice that is more

liberating that what we have going for us at the moment.

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. For example, the first thought about the preciousness of having a human 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 my life to have a purpose.

And the second thought "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 every once in a while?

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 we take will have a corresponding effect depending on our intention and effort. I tend to be a slow learner and it takes me a long time to examine the bad results of my actions (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 we try, we will never get all our ducks in a row, so to speak. I keep thinking that I am clever enough to somehow game the system and have 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 mass and classes, 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. Thirty or forty years of practice went by and I gradually moved along to more and more advanced dharma 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 again really encountered the Four Thoughts and head-on at that.

Of course, I never forgot about the Four Thoughts, any more 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 once again, but not just as preliminaries, but as essential to keep constantly in mind when approaching Mahamudra meditation. In fact, I spent some three years thinking and practicing with just the Four Thoughts.

In other words, the Four Thoughts are 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 else going on around us in life.

So, I discovered that in advanced meditation (as 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. 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 33 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 always in mind, and that is the Lama of Appearances, particularly apparent in the world of nature. And nature is as near as our own backyard where we 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 obvious and consistently pointed out to us than in Mother Nature. Nature is beautiful and that beauty is real beyond our imagination. But the reality of impermanence, the 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 we 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 and unforgiving 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!

No Being Wants to Suffer

One of the first sentences 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 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 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 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 tough love, 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 also 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. Careful observation of nature can provide that.

Immersion in Nature

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. However, 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 by standing up. For best results, I have to get right down in the middle of it, like, find a sunny field or meadow or a shady brook or woods, and sit down, preferable one without ticks.

When I first relax, 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 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 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 actually 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 and being born – the whole thing. And the analogies to my own life do 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 me of how the world actually works and puncture some of the imaginary balloons I 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 that mortality.

It can be hard to find a perfect teacher (perfect of us) 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 a human teacher comes along.

