

Dharma Blogs

2017 Fall, Pt. 2



by Michael Erlewine

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2017 FALL (part 2)

By Michael Erlewine

INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Fall of 2017, part 2, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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Table of Contents

REALIZING SAMBARA.....	7
IS “RELAXATION THERAPY” MEDITATION?	11
BEYOND ELABORATION.....	14
INSIGHT AS GROOVE	18
ROADS TO ROME.....	23
DEVOTION	26
“WAITING FOR GODOT”	32
LIGHTING THE FUSE.....	35
FOOD, FOOD, AND NO FOOD	39
FLAGGING DOWN THE DHARMA.....	43
DHARMA MURMURATION	46
“SLOW DOWN AND LIVE”	48
THE MATTER OF REALIZATION	51
START WITH WHAT WE HAVE	61
THE SMALL COMFORT IN SAMBARA	66
ACTIVITY CREATES SPACE	70
“HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE”	73
SAMBARA IS TOO MUCH.....	79
MISSING ATTACHMENT.....	83
DETECTING DHARMA AUTHENTICITY	86
SAMBARA: THE DEEP END OF THE POOL	90

PRACTICING THE DHARMA	94
FINDING A DHARMA TEACHER	100
RUNNING THE TIME GAUNTLET	106
MIND AS A BLACK BOX.....	109
SOME WORDS ABOUT DHARMA	112
ON FIRST MEETING THE 17TH KARMAPA.....	116
YOU CAN'T SALT THE SALT	129
THE STAIN OF THE FUTURE	133
IS DHARMA PRACTICE TEDIOUS?	136
“HOW CAN I BEGIN TO PRACTICE DHARMA?” ..	139
PROSELYTIZING DHARMA	144
WHY WE PRACTICE	147
DOING WHAT I DON'T FEEL LIKE DOING.....	149
PHOTOGRAPHY: SNEAKING UP ON A MIRROR	152
THE VALUE OF SAMSARA.....	159
THE FEAR OF FALLING BEHIND	163
THE DHARMA OF RESISTANCE	165
MISCOMMUNICATION.....	168
THE PROCESS OF THE RESULT	171
PRACTICAL DHARMA.....	174
REALIZING THE TRAIN TO NOWHERE	177
TAILORING DHARMA FOR AMERICA.....	179
THE JOY OF TEDIUM	182
TAKING OUR DHARMA TEMPERATURE	186

OUTSMARTING THE DHARMA	189
THREADS OF INTUITION	192
INTUITION: WISHING WELL TO YOU	194
THE FUTURE AND PAST OF THE PRESENT	197
THE IMMERSION IN THE PRESENT	200
DHARMA AND THE SACRED PRESENT	204
MINING THE MIND TREASURES	208
INSIGHT: ACTIVE RECEIVING	212
“MAKING BEAUTIFUL THINGS IS ENOUGH; IT’S WHAT WE DO.”	215
THE DHARMA OF THE EMPTY WELL	217
THE COCOON OF AGING	221
THE DHARMA OF AGING: “NEXT EXIT ONE MILE”	223
THE DHARMA OF GETTING STUCK.....	226
DHARMA FOR WHEN WE GET STUCK.....	229
THE DHARMA OF WORKING OUT A FUNK	233
DHARMA’S ENERGY STOREHOUSES: REACTIONS AND RESISTANCE	240
UNKNOTTING THE CORD OF THE MIND.....	243
SUMMARY: REALIZING RESISTANCE	246
“THOUGHT STORMS” AND DHARMA.....	249
DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA	252
GOING FOR REFUGE IN THE DHARMA.....	256
THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF WORDS.....	262

REALIZING SAMBARA

September 20, 2017

It is clearly stated in the teachings (as regards the realization-practices) that after we have achieved recognition of the true nature of the mind, we need to continue to extend and expand our realization. The way it is stated sounds almost like it's an obligation and that if we don't want to extend our realization, we will somehow backpedal and it will fade. It sounds a bit like "do or die" on our part, "fish or cut bait," etc.

And while all that may be true, from what little I know about the reality of all this is that any expansion or extension of realization (on my part) was not motivated by duty or fear of it atrophying, but rather more like wanting more of it, crudely put: to feed my addiction to it, so to speak. Insight Meditation (and its result) is like breathing pure oxygen. Once introduced to it, our ordinary state of mind (in the sense of dullness) does not quite measure up to the clarity that Insight Meditation offers. It is natural to want to continue having that clarity; yet, at least initially, it is limited to when (and how) we are able to do Insight Meditation. And we want to do it all the time if we can figure out how. That, IMO, is what drives the realization practices once they are experienced. My precious dharma teacher put it this way in one of his teachings:

"If you recognize your mind's nature – whether you call it Mahamudra, the Great Perfection, or the Great Middle Way – you understand all Dharma. If you recognize your mind's nature directly, you will not

require any other method of practice in order to progress along the path.”

So, that's high recommendation indeed and sets the bar right up there. However, at the same time (IMO) its tone promises more than it demands and that's a good thing. As for me, I'm at the bottom rung of that ladder, but I do know that if I am not daily doing Insight Meditation, I become aware of that; I wake up to that fact. And like a blind man fumbling in the dark, I soon find myself groping around in my day-to-day for that lucid clarity. And it can only be found in that particular type of meditation, call it Insight Meditation or Mahamudra.

It appears to me that one of the blessings that accompanies “Recognition” is an insatiable need to remain in that state of meditation or at least get our daily fix of it. I almost always have that need, but still have somewhat limited ways in which it can be satisfied. I am working as best I can (fervently) to expand or extend any means that will precipitate Insight Meditation and its rain of blessings. And I am conscious enough to know that the means are all around me and that it's all in my mind, but nevertheless there it is, all in my mind. LOL. My methods are still short of my perceived needs.

And so, my meditation cushion has mostly been replaced by an Aeron chair and sitting in front of a computer screen typing this. I can practice Insight Meditation through creative writing, through pulling the threads of (for me) crystal dharma from the ether and weaving articles and blogs. And, I almost feel that I am ready to take this show-on-the-road back to my cushion (and shrine) and just sit there like I sit here now, yet I can't quite do it yet. It's either that, or be able to just do it on the hoof all the time and

everywhere. There is some angst here, but it based on wanting to extend Insight Meditation, not on losing it.

Insight Meditation, at least in my case, came to me through a particular method, but that clarity is meant to be universalized, although in my experience this has been very gradual, call it realization in slow motion. It's like a great spaceship slowly revolving (or evolving) in zero gravity. At least it feels like that to me.

I find that I must mix the ephemeral with the samsaric to thread the needle of Insight Meditation, to draw lightning from the mind. There is no realization without something to realize, just as nothing can be seen in a snowstorm, with all white and no shadow. Of course, "Realization" realizes samsara and that is transformational and not some static state; it's a process. And while it is revelatory, it is far from complete. Again: this is an ongoing (perhaps endless) process that stretches all the way to enlightenment, gradually becoming increasingly more inclusive. And I can only imagine enlightenment as a state-of-process, which is an oxymoron, but it must indicate the complete union of samasara and nirvana. As the teachings clearly point out, nirvana is the essence of samsara.

My dharma teacher of 34 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche said this:

"This is why, at the end of the verse, the Lineage Supplication says, "May I realize the inseparability of samsara and nirvana." Nirvana is inseparable from samsara in the sense that it is the nature of samsara. It is what samsara is if it is correctly realized, if it is experienced without delusion. It is simply because we

do not see things as they are that we do not realize
the nature of experiences, the nature of samsara.”

Eh Ma Ho!

IS “RELAXATION THERAPY” MEDITATION?

October 20, 2017

There is a crucial difference between the traditional form of meditation as taught by the historical Buddha and many of the modern relaxation techniques that are also today called “meditation,” yet they are not in the strict sense.

Traditional Tranquility Meditation is a process of stabilizing the mind in preparation for the more advanced practice of Insight Meditation, while many would-be surrogates (relaxation as meditation) are simply relaxing the mind to make living easier. No harm in that, but it is not helpful that meditation has come to represent in most people’s mind some form of relaxing therapy instead of the traditional process of becoming increasingly aware.

To make things even more confusing, relaxation also plays a very important part in the more advanced forms of meditation, especially in the realization-practices like Mahamudra Meditation. In the realization-practices, we let go of altering the mind in any way. And while that is not quite the same as relaxing, the difference is a subtle one for beginners. It’s the difference between allowing the mind to be just as it is and making an effort to relax to improve the quality of life.

As mentioned, “relaxation” (of a kind) is also a byproduct of traditional Buddhist meditation in the advanced or realization-practices, while it is the primary result or purpose of relaxation therapies. Advanced Buddhist meditations seek to not alter the mind, which entails leaving it “be” just as it is, and that resembles common relaxation to a degree. In

Buddhist meditation, we allow the mind to settle or stabilize so that we can see more clearly to implement Insight Meditation, while with relaxation therapy we relax to remove angst and stress, making for an easier life. In summary, with relaxation therapy, relaxation is the result. In Buddhist meditation of the more advanced type, allowing the mind to naturally settle is the basis for more advanced practices like Insight and Mahamudra Meditation.

It might be important for those doing relaxation therapy, who think they are doing what the Buddha taught, to become aware that they are not. The difference, again, is between relaxation or resting as an end result and relaxation or allowing the mind to rest as a means to exercise greater mindfulness. And exactly how do they differ?

Is not rest, rest? And will not relaxation of any kind also allow greater awareness to arise? In relaxation therapy, awareness and mindfulness is not a goal, but exactly what we are trying to avoid. We just want to let go and not be further attentive, but instead to relax. In Buddhist meditation, we want to let the mind settle naturally, so that we CAN have greater attention and mindfulness, including eventual clarity and greater awareness.

Sitting meditation (Shamata or Tranquility Meditation) requires mindfulness and alertness and, if there is any relaxation to it, that is to relax so that we can be even more mindful, if that makes sense. True relaxation in meditation comes with the realization-practices such as Insight Meditation, where the idea of not making effort, but just letting the mind rest, naturally comes into play. So, in a way, common relaxation therapies are emulating the more advanced meditation

techniques, but without the stabilization that comes from mindfulness training.

Again, the difference is that while relaxing is the goal of relaxation therapy, with the more advanced realization-practices of Buddhism, relaxing or allowing the mind to settle and become stable is required in order to eventually realize the true nature of the mind through Insight and Mahamudra Meditation.

The realization-practices include relaxation based on the stability of Tranquility Meditation, while relaxation therapy is simple relaxation for its own sake. Both are useful, but they are different. A perhaps crude way of putting this is that relaxation-therapy is samsaric (like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic), while actual meditation (Via Insight Meditation and Mahamudra) is about transforming samsara through realization of its essence.

I too use relaxation therapy, but in my case watching a good movie (or even a bad movie) is my method of choice.

BEYOND ELABORATION

October 2, 2017

Every once in a while, and this is one of those moments, I have an irresistible itch to push language beyond itself, beyond its limits and rest in that freedom. To the best of my understanding, the purpose of the traditional Buddhist forms of meditation, at least in Vajrayana Buddhism (and in the more advanced realization-practices like Insight Meditation), is to, as they say, “Relax, as it is,” warts and all, loud noise or quiet, just as it is. Rather than the word “relax,” a better word for the advanced-practices is perhaps to “Rest” in the realization of the nature of the mind as we find it, including all appearances. In other words, don’t meddle with or alter the mind at all with our thoughts, etc. Just rest in it.

I would guess that I need to relax as much as anyone, yet what (for me) do I find all that relaxing? Sure, kicking back and watching a good movie is relaxing, but that is not my first choice as to what I find relaxing. More deeply relaxing (and involving) is to be immersed in Insight Meditation, in the very process of that meditation itself. Indeed, it is beyond conceptuality, which is a needed relief (and freedom) for someone like me.

My first dharma teacher used to say to me (and many times) that we spend our first 30 years (Saturn Return) being born, the second 30 years repairing the damage we made getting out, and the third 30 years, if we should live so long, consciously participating in creating life itself as a co-creator. Of course, I had little idea as to what he meant by the third returning of

Saturn, from 60 to 90 years. Yet, now, at 76, I am in the midst of it, literally.

And yes, relaxing in whatever ways I can in samsara is, well, relaxing, but that alone is not enough. Resting in the creative process of Insight Meditation is much more totally immersive and clarifying. There is something about being “all-in” (yet totally present) that has me inverting completely to the exclusion of any thought or conceptuality, literally turning inside-out and outside-in – non-duality.

I only know this process so far, so to speak, until full immersion, and no farther, if there is a “farther.” Anyway, I could care less and am busy (as I can) extending the process of realization to be ever more inclusive. And just like turning a glove inside out, in that process of turning inside out, there is always the ever-moving line of inversion between inside and out. It’s like the fringe of fire in a burning field and being totally aware at that fringe-point of the realization of what we call the present moment. Indeed, everything turns on that. And it’s ever present, this moment.

It’s so amazing, this infinitesimal fast split-second of the present moment, with its endless ash of the past and endless promise of the future, both stretching away infinitely, yet with this pure oxygen-vent of the right-here-and-now, our only window in time. It’s like an endless phoenix, forever arising, hard to even think about, much less to put into words. Resting in time’s single window beyond itself, beyond-time, the present instant is what I’m pointing at here. As I keep repeating, the thread of realization, perhaps infinitely fine, turning inside to out, like turning water into wine.

Samsara is the fuel that realization feeds on, transforming samsaric experience through realization into its essence, nirvana. I am reminded by writing

this of one long night-into-dawn back in 1967, when all of this was so clearly promised. A journal entry from that time (which is the best that I can express it) is for me pure poetry in prose. So, pardon the poetry, but here it is:

“The morning’s brightness lights the day. And when that day is gone, the quietness of evening here approaching settles to sleep this restless world. Hard can I hear the frantic rush, as I turn away from the edge out into floating rest am I. It is not my conscious direction doing this, but as a head down-turned all life now turns up a blossom to the night, the night of time urges me open, at last a flower too, open to life. Already the dawn.”

“Still, around me, urging caution, a retinue of persons set my spirit, like a jewel is set, in time. But where before my worry, now my rest. The tide rolls on beyond me. Ever changing, it rocks me now asleep. And in my sleep, awake am I, so clear a bell is ringing.”

“The smart of persons lash and crack to drive me at time’s edge. My personal ties are slipped, as floating out, I’m gently tugged. Too long have fought to force my thought, and not, at ease, arising like some cloud to pass. My work un-done, yet done, I rise. Drifting through strains, I sieve and pass myself, open out to nothing thoughts to touch back not once more.

“A clear sleep is soft; its ever blooming sound is silence. Now to find my way among the slips of time. And slip I will, now lost to striving, and lounge in this room of emptiness. To lie back in time, behind its edge, and ever look eternally. No way to pass this on. This is: passing on.

Slamming against the walls of time, I shove off into
eternity, and spread open a flower, so wide.”

INSIGHT AS GROOVE

October 3, 2017

As you must know by now, I'm intrigued by the process of dharma realization. Originally it was with the singular dharma event called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind, and lately, most especially, the process of continued realization. I imagine this whole process, which traditionally is more or less orderly (and in some sense "normal"), must no-doubt have exceptions. As it turns out, I happen to be one of the outriders that missed the normal boat, so I'm fascinated to learn what I can about the experiences of others in these realms.

And most of all, I'm struck at what appears to be the almost randomness of how Insight Meditation is discovered by each of us. It just strikes, apparently, when it's possible. And while I understand well enough how a lineage works and all of the preparation that is involved to enable realization to take place, there is still much I don't know.

At the same time, I can't help but wonder how "realization" (which has to be at heart a natural process) occurs on its own as it can, in the "wild" so to speak. If I look around me and reflect on the many brilliant people I have met over my lifetime, how many (if any) have perhaps stumbled onto their own version of Insight Meditation? I don't know, but I have inklings that this happens.

And I have seen brilliant musicians who have obviously tapped into this present moment enabling me to hear what I otherwise could not hear. And there are all kinds of incredible talent out there, because I have experienced some of them. And while I don't

care for the term, some folks have a condition (perhaps semi-acceptable nowadays) of what might be called the idiot-savant syndrome, where one particular gift is apparent in an otherwise ordinary person. It's not the "gift" that fascinates me, but the clarity than CAN (but does not always) accompany it. And I'm reminded of our entry into Insight Meditation, which unless it is global (which is very rare), has to come to us through one door or another, a technique. Sure, I can see that dharma instructors do their best to confine this process to the cushion and this or that particular technique. But how can we put lightning in a bottle?

Certainly, I have had many decades of training, but for all of that, what direct experience of the mind I've experienced came not on the cushion, but rather it broke out quite spontaneously while I was doing other things, in my case close-up photography. I didn't see it coming and was not consciously trying to spark it. In fact, it was the last thing on my mind and was more like a perfect storm that came together through several distinct factors that just serendipitously arose. It was permitted, so it happened.

And I imagine (or even think) I see this same general formula for insight meditation acting itself out quite naturally and spontaneously in the world around me. To me, the hallmark (or earmark) of Insight Meditation is the lightning-bright clarity of insight burning by realizing a particular vein of interest. It could be almost anything, tying flies, playing chess, photography, writing, researching something, etc.

And, using research for an example, it is not so much WHAT is being researched as it is HOW it is being researched that is distinctive. With Insight Meditation, when it comes to this or that subject or topic, we

become like an idiot-savant, 100% on the money in that particular area.

And I don't mean the subject itself is that interesting (more than any other), but rather it's that the brilliance of the interest (insight) shines and reveals the subject so that it stands out. And the question (or problem) here is that, just like lightning in a bottle, why is that brilliance limited to that particular bottle or subject? And the idiot-savant quality comes from the inability to normalize or universalize that brilliance to include other or all subjects and topics.

Our insight is initially stuck or limited to perhaps one technique or interest, and by the particular way it first appeared in our life. In my case it was originally through the process of macro photography. By why be limited to that, since light is light and realization as a process can realize, well, anything it encounters. Yet, it WAS limited (and contained) to this particular subject, to use the analogy again, like lightning restricted to a bottle. Why does it not flame outward and illuminate just everything.

And the answer to that question is what prompts this article and indicates a puzzle I have yet to solve, and I'm working on it, albeit slowly. Insight breaks out like the sun coming from behind a cloud and sends a ray of sunlight (photographers call them "god rays," LOL) that appears to us through a particular technique or interest.

This brilliant clarity is totally welcome and it is totally addictive. We want it to continue and, in my case, to do that meant that I had to grab my camera and head out into the fields to take close-up photographs. Otherwise, my mind remained perfectly normal, aside from the memory of the insights that arose through photography. However, they were stellar!

It took me a year to a year and a half to separate the Insight Meditation from the photography and to begin to universalize it enough so that same clarity appeared in other things I did, in my case creative writing. The clarity, naturally, is universal, but my mind is so habit-bound that I had (and have) trouble separating the baby from the bathwater. It's all in my mind, of course, but so is everything else. LOL.

I'm still working at extending my realization to other parts of my life, but while I work at that, I can't help but look around to see if others out there have the same problem, but without any dharma instructions. They may have hit on one area of their life where Insight Meditation (or its equivalent) naturally arose for them. And what is the difference between natural passionate insight and the kind of insight that comes with Insight Meditation. And the sidebar issue to all this is the getting "stuck" in one subject or technique and not knowing how to extend or expand it to other areas of interest. To me, this is important.

I have not found much to read about transferring Insight Meditation from one subject (where it works for us) to another subject that is similar in technique, but different in subject. Or, do most successful Insight Meditators of the Kagyu Mahamudra variety naturally apply the clarity of insight to whatever they investigate? The textbooks universally speak of extending (expanding) insight meditation, so it must not all be equal at the get-go. And they also say that we have to work to expand it or it will not grow. Those are meaningful messages, right there.

If any of you are experienced in this extending our realization, in particular the special Kagyu form of Insight Meditation that goes with Mahamudra

Meditation, share some ideas with me about how this works, either here or by private message.

ROADS TO ROME

October 3, 2017

No matter what the technique(s) we use to achieve it, the results of realization-practices (like Insight Meditation) are identical, the same. It's like the old adage "All roads lead to Rome." Some may start near, others farther, and some at an unfathomable distance, but the destination remains the same. It is similar with the realization-practices. There is no accounting for method, only whether it gets us there or not. And "there" is there for all of us; no difference, no marks from the history of our personal journey.

If we can manage it all on our own, how wonderful. If some of us need guidance, a method, or a path, what's the problem? As the macrobiotic folks say, "The bigger the front, the bigger the back." I have seen probably scores of folks who have told me that they don't need any dharma teacher or any method and that they have enough of their "own" to get there. I can't think of any who ended up with more than their words to show for it, unless their goal was just samsaric, to make themselves more comfortable or, as they say, to re-arrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. And I've been there and done that.

The great Siddhas, Mahasiddhas, Rinpoches, and lamas (at least in my lineage) all say that without an authentic teacher to point out to us the actual nature of our own mind, our chances of a chance encounter with realizing the nature of our own mind are slim to none. Actually, they say it would take innumerable kalpas, which is effectively saying it won't happen. A kalpa is said to be 4.32 billion years as stated in the Hindu puranas.

I don't see the existence of a dharma curriculum as a sign of weakness, but rather of strength and basic intelligence. And that is what a lineage is, an organized attempt to keep the teachings alive, not by rote instruction, but rather by insuring that each member of the lineage has realized the teachings and is an authentic teacher, capable of sharing the teachings in his or her own right. Nothing less will do or we don't have a lineage. It is that simple. And there are plenty of examples of lineages that have been broken because the link has not been maintained. I am told that the Native American traditions have many broken lineages, but I have not studied them.

There is no doubt that insight can pop up in the world (here and there) spontaneously, but singularities do not a continuum or lineage make. I can well remember in my own life, spontaneous visions and insights that punctuated my otherwise normal consciousness and from a fairly early age. Yet, in the long run, they did not add up to anything comprehensive. They were sparklers in the dark. When push came to shove, too often your guess was as good as mine.

The thing about an actual unbroken lineage is that we have a series of authentic masters capable of passing on to capable students the living essence of the lineage. That essence, however, is not some secret words or concepts, but is the actual realization that has defined the lineage for as long as that lineage has existed. It's like passing the torch at the Olympics. Without realization reaching the next generation, there is no lineage.

I am very grateful that most of the Tibetan lineages have been so carefully maintained and that I can share in them.

DEVOTION

October 4, 2017

The concept of devotion troubles Americans. It's OK to be devoted to our mother, father, and of course to our children, perhaps even to our pets, but that's about it. OK, maybe close relatives too. And what about friends? Your choice.

Yet, there is something about having devotion to even a cleric, minister, or priest that gives us pause, but certainly it is suspect to have devotion for a spiritual guide, especially a foreigner, and if we slip and refer to our teacher as a "guru," all bets are off.

So, it could be important to understand what a guru is and why we might feel devotion toward them. It seems devotion is restricted to our children, parents, and, of course, to God (whatever that means to each of us). Yet, why would I be devoted to a "guru," and what could they do to deserve something as precious as my devotion? I'm sure the answer to this question is as various as there are devotees. I only know my own story and it, of course, has a particular time and place. I will tell you about two gurus I have had in this life, one in this blog and one for another day.

The time was the later 1950s through the 1980s. The place was mostly Ann Arbor, Michigan. And there was no perceived need on my part for direction until then. And what was it like for a young adult, entering his twenties, in a world that was almost as chaotic (or so it seemed) as we have today? Almost.

And my generation emerged toward our majority right in the middle of all that was going on. As basically youngsters, we were used to looking up to adults, paying-it-forward, so to speak. Yet what did we see?

Of course, there was the establishment, which mostly was run on (and about) money, if you drilled down a bit. We had dreams and promise of our own back then. For many of us, money was not enough to guarantee our attention and compliance. In my case, even the promise of eventual position and security didn't cut it. I just dropped out of high school and conventions. My own life was far more interesting than anyone else's plans for me.

And my own generation, as amorphous as it still was then, was not a guiding force, although we (my peers) more or less trusted one another to be in the same boat. So, what stood out as free from what we obviously did not want to emulate or become like? For many of us, it was those lone outriders like Jack Kerouac, Baba Ram Das, Allen Ginsberg, and others that seemed to defy compromise and refused to go willingly or "gently into that goodnight." Those mavericks seemed to defy convention, and convention was clearly what we did not want to follow.

And don't forget The Sixties, the Hippies, and the whole counter-culture that sprung up in the middle of the 1960s, around 1965. That was definitely some push-back on our part against the crew-cut mentality and straight-laced conventions of the 1950s. We did not want to end up as we saw them. No way we would go back there.

So, there we all were, milling around en-masse with one another, not trusting too much the established authority and looking for leaders amongst ourselves, our own kind. Being of a kind of mystic orientation by nature, I looked for spiritual leaders. Never having a grandfather on either side, I was hungry to find elders I could respect. And toward the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, spiritual groups and would-be leaders

seemed to be everywhere. After all, the 1970s were all about New Age sensitivities.

We were looking for guidance wherever we could find it and had no idea what it should look like. There was Yogi This and Yogi That, Hari Krishna, Theosophy, Zen, Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and on down the line. It was like a spiritual carnival and the New-Age teachers were the carnies. Many of them turned out to be more about sex, drugs, money, and power than spiritual guidance. It was like the side-show at a spiritual circus. So, I hope that sets the stage for a discussion of devotion. Back in the 1970s, devotion was not yet even on the table for most of us. We hadn't even been introduced!

As for me, personally, I was very suspicious of almost everyone I met. Like biting a coin to see if it was gold, I felt I had to vet every person I met, young or old, to see if they passed the smell test. And, at that point, no one ever had! LOL.

Anyway, I was busy having my own visions and inner alchemy, and who could touch that (or would)? But this changed quickly when I met my first true dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, who had been a traveling Rosicrucian initiator, but was now retired, and living simply and quietly in a room in Ann Arbor. He was approaching 80 years of age.

I have written quite a lot about my time with Andrew, so I won't go over it too much here. I will quote from a journal entry back then, somewhere in the mid-1960s concerning our first meeting. I warn you, it's over the top, so discount appropriately. But it does mark the event.

“The old man's eyes (like crystalline stalks) burned bright, staring straight inside himself. Then both their

eyes, intensive, meeting no resistance in the transparency, shot out and into the other. The old man let his secret start between them and he was understood - known. The impulse from within each shot out and into the other at the same moment. Eyes eyed other's eyeing.

"Their words resounded in that great silence and then wore off, consonants crackling, as their voices sputtered out in the silence. Silently speaking, this conversation crackled on endlessly like static on a radio. There was no reason. Sight itself was seen seeing.

Over the next few years, until Andrew's death, we spent a lot of time together. I am a veteran talker, but with Andrew he did the talking and I the listening. That was not a problem for me, because everything Andrew said struck me deeply. In fact, he would actually say that he was tuning me like an instrument and that someday (in the future) I would respond to what he was placing in my mind, not unlike mind terma. And I did.

I would love to tell you more of the story of Andrew and myself, but the point of this article is devotion, and I want to explain how that came about. Clearly every work he spoke resonated with me and, to those who know the term, Andrew had no "Shadow." He was as bright as the sun on a clear day. It was almost like he never was there at all, if that communicates anything. It would be an underestimation to say that we did connect. There was nothing other than connection and it fused into that state. If there are beings from the pure realms that emanate for our welfare, Andrew was one.

What he said and told me rang clear, like a bell. There never was the sense that what he said was true

because “He” said it, but always the sense that he said it because it was true. There is a difference. I learned to trust not only what he said, but his entire presence in my life like the Pole Star is to sailors. In the hurricane world that I was swimming in, his was the only direction that did not move, and it was not long before I was orbiting around Andrew McIver.

In my entire lifetime up to that point, I had never trusted anyone outside of my family to point out direction, but I naturally did with Andrew, with not even a second thought. And this was because it was obvious to me that Andrew cared more about me than I knew to care about myself. Of course I became devoted to him like we each are devoted to oxygen if we want to breathe.

I won't go on, but our close teacher/student friendship came to an end when Andrew died on April 9th, 1969. I was perhaps closest to him and saw to his burial, the disposition of the few things that he had, and even designed his tombstone, a granite stone with the symbol of the Sun on it – a circle with a dot in its center.

Andrew's influence and pristine clarity continued on without him being present, and in some way, whatever lineage he represented lives in me today. So, as for devotion, it was very natural, just as we (if we think about it) are devoted to the sun in the heavens, the air around the earth, and all things good. In the Tibetan scheme of things, perhaps Kuntuzangpo (Samantabhadra) represents this.

Andrew McIver appeared in the midst of the chaos of my young life and, like a natural compass, immediately gave me an orientation and sense of direction that continues to this day. Am I devoted to him? Well sure. He brought all the direction I knew

into my life, so for me, what else is there? In the next blog or soon, I will tell of my devotion to my other main dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

“WAITING FOR GODOT”

October 5, 2017

Trying to learn Insight Meditation on our own, at least of the Mahamudra variety, is like waiting for lightning to strike; we can wait a very long time and it still strikes when it wants to. In a very real sense, most practice situations, like practicing music, have an element of practicing, practicing, and practicing until by chance serendipity strikes and we find ourselves suddenly playing music. Waiting for insight to strike is the same kind of thing, but it doesn't have to be.

When I was a kid, we used to have these little wooden Chinese box puzzles, where everything had to be shifted and slide just right, up and down, this way and that, and the box would finally open. It was like following instructions for rubbing your tummy and patting your forehead. Simon says!

Now, let's zoom out to an image of everyone on earth standing outside and waiting for someone to discover and appreciate them. As most of us know, that might take a very long time. Sooner or later, we have to stop waiting to be discovered and begin to discover (and appreciate) ourselves. And it's the same with discovering or recognizing the nature of our own mind. There exists a Vajrayana Buddhist method that has worked for centuries.

Buddhists speak of turning the wheel of the dharma. Who did you think has to turn it? The Buddha did it himself, but in our case that would be me or you (and us). We each have to do it ourselves. In fact, Buddhism is almost unique in not having anyone “up above” who will do for us what only we can do for ourselves. The lamas can show us how to turn the

wheel of our own dharma, but we have to actually turn it. If we are waiting for that to happen from outside, we will be waiting for a long, long time. It's the old "Lazarus, pick up your bed and walk" syndrome.

There are a lot of people out there waiting to be discovered, and relatively few discoverers. It reminds me of those few people who have had a brush with fame that I know, most of them have lost their receivers and only have transmitters. They like (and expect) to hold forth, but have forgotten (or are not interested in) how to listen. They are just a stuck record. And I'm not sure what can be done for that.

It has been helpful for me to view dharma as a do-it-yourself project, rather than some kind of handout. Learning the dharma teaches me to be receptive, to not only receive the teachings, but also to act on them. Pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps is not an option, but a requirement.

Yet (and here is the point of this article), confidence is a tricky thing. It's a bit like royal jelly in beekeeping. If it's fed to us by our teachers, we can become a queen bee. But we can't find it, much less feed it to ourselves. This is why in the "Mahamudra Lineage Prayer" that I recite each day is the line:

"As it is taught, devotion is the head of meditation. The lama opens the door to the profound oral teachings.

To the meditator who always turns to him,
Grant your blessings that uncontrived devotion be born within."

As we flail around, trying out different life-directions, the teacher is the one who confirms this choice (as opposed to that one), and so on. This kind of direction is what builds confidence. Yet, it would be incorrect to

assume that an authentic dharma teacher micromanages us. They don't, but when we come to a fork in the road, they CAN confirm this way works (and why) and not that, because they have already traveled the road. And even more important, an authentic teacher, like a brain surgeon, can delicately point out to us how we might recognize the actual nature of our mind, so that we do.

That is why the authentic teacher who does this for us is termed, in our lineage, the "Root Guru," because they alone have made it possible for us to recognize the true nature of the mind and thus enter the non-dual realization-practices. This is why, IMO, we should spend whatever time (and energy) it takes to find an authentic dharma teacher, one with whom we connect at a gut level, who is willing to work with us just as we are, and who can successfully point out to us the true nature of the mind and we get it.

Such a teacher deserves our sincere devotion, not on belief or blind faith, but because their every exchange with us proves, over and over to us, their ability to care and work with us. In fact, they care more for us than we know how to care for ourselves. This has been my experience.

LIGHTING THE FUSE

October 5, 2017

It is interesting to note that from now until we reach full enlightenment, we each will be doing purification practices of one kind or another. And by “purification” it means that something is being purified (or transformed) every step of the way. What would that be? What will be purified, of course, is our mistaken view or take on things which, as all the teachings point out, is currently obscured.

In the various Preliminary Practices (like the Four Thoughts, Lojong, and Ngondro), the most obvious obscurations are worked through, and then later, in the realization-practices, using Mahamudra Meditation (Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation combined), the finer and more subtle stains are gradually removed. In fact, the teachings clearly state that each of us will do Insight Meditation all the way from “Recognition,” recognizing the true nature of the mind until we reach Full Enlightenment. That’s how important it is (for each of us) that Insight Realization be pointed out and properly learned.

And, to repeat, it’s all purification. The import (and impact) of that statement is that all of these practices (and their results) are not simply some pure static state of bliss, devoid of impurity. It’s just the opposite. All of these techniques, the Preliminaries and the Realization practices, are part of the process of purification that we go through, so something will be being purified at all times. So, if we are looking for (or imagining) some quick state of bliss, with no shadow, best look again.

As I understand it, this process highlights samsara as the principal fuel that drives practice and our actual eventual meditation. Something in samsara is always being transformed (and savored) in the very long process of purification. And perhaps this is why so much attention is given in the teachings to the fact that, at some point, all of our distractions, thoughts, faults, obscurations, etc. themselves become the fuel that enables our enlightenment. Our imperfections become the path itself. It makes perfect sense.

What are called the Five Poisons (anger, desire, ignorance, pride, and jealousy) are gradually transformed or purified into the corresponding Five Wisdoms, as listed here.

Anger (Mirror-like Wisdom) – Buddha Akshobhya

Desire (Wisdom of Discernment) – Buddha Amitabha

Ignorance (Wisdom of Dharmata) – Buddha Vairocana

Pride (Wisdom of Equality) – Buddha Ratnasambhava

Jealousy (All-Accomplishing Wisdom) – Buddha Amogasiddhi

The Buddhist teachings contain all kinds of lists (and correspondences) which are totally correct and helpful, but because of their conciseness have to be unpacked to be understood, much less taken to heart. I find that it is easy to be overwhelmed with the sheer quantity of written Buddhist teachings.

And I can't claim to understand the five "wisdoms" listed above, so the take-away for me from the above list is to better understand that what are called our five main poisons (which we all are aware of) themselves become the fuel to transform and provide us with the "wisdoms" of enlightenment. Again, I am pointing here

at the ongoing “process” of transformation and the fact that the very obscurations we have become the means (and fuel) for enlightenment. It gives a new meaning to the concept of the phoenix arising from its own ashes. That’s Vajrayana Buddhism.

To me this makes sense because what prevents us from being enlightened now are our own obscurations, and so the purification process by definition is the removing of these obscurations so that we can see clearly. And the Buddhist teachings are very clear in pointing out that the “essence” of samsara (this cyclic world of ups and downs we wander in) is itself nirvana. Nirvana is realizing the nature of samsara. That has to be understood.

And that statement points to there being no other pie-in-the-sky, no heaven out there rather than to clean up and work with the mess that we have here and now. As my first dharma teacher would often repeat to me. “This is hell, and we have to make our heaven out of one corner of it.”

And he meant that we each have to transform the samsara we struggle with into nirvana, here and now, bit by bit. My first dharma teacher would disagree with those who believe that heaven is (or has to be) somewhere else other than right here with us now, at least in its potential. In other words, there is no escape from where we find ourselves right now – no other place to which we can go (or will get to) than purifying the here and the now. That makes the transformation and process of resolving samsara into nirvana all the more important for us.

In fact, I have to remind myself to stop imagining any pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, other than one I myself create. To me, that’s food for thought

FOOD, FOOD, AND NO FOOD

October 6, 2017

“There’s not FU like a TOFU.” That’s just a joke I made up. We seldom eat tofu anymore, although back in the early 1970s we used to have to make it at home because there wasn’t any natural tofu. Its hard work and very time consuming. The image here is the logo I designed for Eden Foods many decades ago and, as an astrologer, I picked the date (at their request) for them to open.

I’m no gourmet and I’m not even the gourmand I once imagined I was. However, like a gourmet I find myself searching for something that will really satisfy my tastes and appetite, but then again, I don’t really enjoy cooking. And, of course, there is my very restricted diet due to health considerations that is more vegan than vegan. That limits my options. When the vegans I meet “crow,” I can put them in the shade.

I probably have to reach a point where that food I feel I need right now, something that will scratch my hunger-itch, is to not eat anything at all. Hunger becomes what will satisfy. After all, every revolution revolves. When it comes to me and food, each passing day becomes a challenge. I’m sure I don’t know what I will eat today that will satisfy the craving or emptiness I have. Yet, there must be something out there to find, because I do feel the need for a little something. LOL. Now, this has to be humorous.

Sure, every once in a while I have a fling at cooking, but it seldom turns out well enough to want to do it again anytime soon. I can just get by on whatever I can scramble together. However, too often (in fact, usually) what I imagined would satisfy me does not

quite. I don't remain hungry, but I'm still not satisfied. And so I often have regrets about what I just ate. And so on and ad finitum. Sometimes I skip dinner altogether, just make popcorn and eat that!

I don't like long or elaborate recipes; I guess I feel I'm wasting my time preparing them, especially when they seldom work out very well. Margaret and I each have our fling in the kitchen. I can hear her out there busily creating food, or she me. And we sincerely believe we are whipping something up that will please our self and hopefully each other. However, all too often, what results is maybe OK (maybe), but we won't be doing that again anytime soon, not that particular recipe anyway. And so it goes.

In truth, my mind is seldom in the kitchen; it's usually in whatever else I'm doing, like writing this. Perhaps, if I could cook better, it would be worth it, but I can't seem to make that grade. We don't eat processed food, so eating tends to be very simple. When all other ideas fail, I do find myself reaching for one of those frozen organic dinners from "Amy's Kitchen." It's not processed food, per se, but rather prepared non-processed food, if that make sense. And there are only a few of the Amy's dinners that I CAN eat, and even fewer of those that I like to eat, like maybe three or so. And therefore, I just bump along.

So, if you are kind of vegan and have really simple recipes or food ideas, tell me about them or send them along by personal message. Don't bother with long recipes or ones with many ingredients. I won't make them. Years ago, Margaret and I were trained in Macrobiotics by the folks who eventually created Eden Foods.

Mostly we eat brown rice, whole-grain pastas, ancient wheats like Spelt and Kamut, cooked fresh

vegetables, some salad, fruit, various beans, and so on. With us it's "Whole grains or no grains."

Unfortunately, I don't like spicy foods or cooking with oriental spices. Too often for me that's like "perfuming" food. And we try to use little salt, but we do use Tamari, Tahini, a small amount of miso, tempeh (but no tofu anymore), seaweeds, and mostly olive or sesame oil.

As perhaps you can tell, I am eating for health by doctor's orders, but have not found a solution as to totally enjoy eating anymore. I'm working on it. Yet I do like to eat. I just don't enjoy cooking or finding new foods to eat. The same old things are fine with me. I kind of used to live to eat, but now I am more or less forced to eat to live, but that is punctuated with anything that I imagine will give me the sense of living-to-eat once again. But it seldom does. Don't get me wrong; I am not unhappy with my food, just not that thrilled with it.

I don't know; perhaps that's best.

[Logo for Eden Foods designed by me either in 1960 or in the early 1970s.]



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FLAGGING DOWN THE DHARMA

October 7, 2017

It is my belief that the dharma is something that everyone deserves to at least know about, if I could get their attention. Of course, it would be best to sit down (one-to-one) and share dharma with those interested, but trying to flag down different folk's attention is like hailing a cab in New York City. The rush and confusion of today's world of samsara is just like a big freight train, hurtling through time on its way to nowhere in particular. With all that, who has time for dharma in this crazy world?

As I get older and I happen to be in public situations once in a while, here and there, it looks like a beehive. Everyone is busy as bees doing whatever they think they have to do. And often it seems like I'm almost a ghost (hardly even there) in the din of it all. And the funny thing is how the natural emptiness of reality arises in its deep silence even in the noisiest of places. And no matter how noisy the chaos becomes, the sound of emptiness only speaks louder.

And it's funny to me that the dharma does not even appear as a path to most people, not until we are personally shown how to walk it. Until then, it's just seems like just one more thing or interest among many that life offers yet, of all things, the dharma is the single hidden inset jewel that can be found in all of the time there is.

And the dharma is not even labeled or obvious as the exit-sign from samsara that it is. What for me is sad is that we are not aware of the dharma only because we just aren't aware, not because we would not love it. Yet it is right here and within reach all the time. So that's a big Catch-22 right there.

And as mentioned, the dharma as a path is not all that conspicuous, not unless it is repeatedly pointed out until we become aware and finally get it. Rather, like breathing, the path of dharma only unfolds and appears to us when we begin to walk it. For that matter, most spiritual paths are also self-secret; they are way too close for us to even see, much less to be able to consider.

So, if those of us who are already dharma fans, wave our arms and jump up and down trying to get your attention, I'm afraid that we must just look like that... someone jumping up and down, waving their arms. You know what I mean, like a crazy person at the side of the road. As for me, I'm not interested in putting on robes, turbans, or whatever it might take to get your attention and flag you down, although I'm sure I come close enough as it is. LOL.

My point here is that I'm amazed at how invisible the dharma is to those who have not yet discovered it. It's like door-number-three, when in reality it is the only door that opens to the freedom of realizing the actual nature of samsara. For some reason, the tree of

dharma ripens as it will and the fruit detaches from the tree when it is ready to fall.

If I trace back and look through the maze of this samsaric life for the single thread that I believe (if followed) would IMO change the way things are today in this messed-up world, for me, every time, it comes down to the dharma. Of course, that's what the lamas have told us since forever, i.e. that unless we first transform ourselves dharmically, we will only add to the world's confusion.

I want to do my best not to add to the world's confusion, especially in these times.

DHARMA MURMURATION

October 8, 2017

The enclosed video is beautiful, well worth seeing. Check it out. It's worth several thousand words.

When I was a kid, I used to like to spin quarters on a tabletop and see how long they could go. It is the same with tops, and there are some special tops out there that spin for a long time. Even more interesting are gyroscopes that spin to keep their balance. A gyroscope uses Earth's gravity to assist in determining its orientation. It shows us not only which way is up, but helps to keep us that way.

The Dharma is like an internal gyroscope in that it orients us to samsara and keeps us in the correct position (and stable) in relation to the external chaos that samsara enjoys. In fact, of all the various analogies I have found for what the dharma is, my favorite (the one I consider most apt) is that of aerodynamics. And by that I mean reducing our exposure to the wind tunnel of samsara by cutting down whatever resists the wind, call it our impurities. The Buddhist purification practices are the key to that.

Like a kite takes to the skies, so do we assume a dharmic position that offers the least resistance to the winds of time. And the dharma teaches us how to do this. The image of samsara as a wind tunnel and the dharma our aerodynamic skill (as to how we sail it) makes a lot of sense to me.

Another compelling image is that of a murmuration of starlings. A lineage is something like a murmuration of realized dharma students, each individually in contact with the essence of the mind (and thus one another),

alone, but also together, in a grand ballet in response to the changes in the winds of time and samsara.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4f_1_r80RY&feature=share

“SLOW DOWN AND LIVE”

October 9, 2017

The above title was a common road sign as I grew up. Recently, a small note was forwarded to me from KTD, the monastery I belong to, because it was addressed to me. It was from someone that I had met some years ago at a dharma teaching in Toronto. It had no email address, but there was a phone number in very small writing along the bottom of the card. So I called that number, connected, and had a brief, but direct, discussion on dharma with a very nice person. I later received an email with the following line:

“Certainly it’s time to take stock, buckle down, and make the most of things.”

Of course, I agree, and I tell myself the same thing frequently. Admirable, but in my case it’s too often like the broken clock; it’s always that time twice a day. And it reminds me of my New Year resolutions, which are earnest enough, but soon forgotten in the whirl of life. In a similar way, I believe that we can’t take the dharma by storm or by resolutions alone. Heaven knows, I’ve tried. For me, resolutions are a desperate act, too often a sign that I’ve already missed the boat.

I can see that I have to ratchet down my sense of urgency a notch in order to connect. It’s “hurry up and wait,” or something like that. We not only can go too

slowly and never get where we think we want to go; we can also go too fast to ever arrive there, especially if our goal is to take our time, to take life as it comes. It reminds me of the three bears and their porridge. Only baby bear had it right.

In my life, most things can be finagled or tweaked, but not the dharma. Just as we can't sneak up on a mirror, we can't get a pass on dharma practice. Like the New Testament, "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." The dharma is like that; we either do it properly or it just doesn't work. It's like science and the force of gravity. We don't break Nature's laws, they break us.

For most folks, it takes some time to figure out that we can't game this samsaric system we all live in. Then, what do we do? Well, we do it right, that's what we do, if only because nothing else will work. And that's where it gets difficult. But what is "right?"

Well, "right" is like threading the needle, that's what. And, as mentioned, many of us are used to getting by on our wits or claiming an exemption and that we are an exception. With dharma, like with Mother Nature, there are no exceptions, because dharma is tailored to us like it's our own skin. Perhaps, an older way of saying this is that we will never get out of this world alive. No matter what we say and do, we each will have to show up and be there when we die.

And so, the only answer (as we all know) involves care, kindness, compassion, and love (those good things), first of all for our own self and then in everything we do and extended to everyone we meet. And that's a tall order. What is needed to realize dharma (as they say) is finer than frog's hair and no one can do it for us. Only we can walk in our own shoes. The great dharma teachers can point it out or guide us, but it finally comes down to ourselves becoming aware enough to recognize the actual nature of our own mind. And, according to my dharma teacher, in all the time (and lives) each of us have had up to now, we have been unable to do that.

So, as they say, take a deep breath and keep on breathing. We have to carefully feel our own way in each moment. With dharma, there is no automatic transmission. This present moment is always fresh, not yet stained by the past or by the fog of the future. And we might as well learn to take our time with the process, because with dharma the process IS the result and the present is moving fast enough as it is.

THE MATTER OF REALIZATION

October 10, 2017

IMO, the following long and involved blog is not for everyone; it could interest those who are actually trying to learn basic Tranquility Meditation or would perhaps like to; the same goes for those of you who are preparing for Insight Meditation. Otherwise, see you tomorrow.

We all have been told that the true nature of the mind is already inherently a part of us, within us all the time and only waiting on us to be able to recognize it. In that sense, this is an equal-opportunity realization.

But the fact is, as my dharma teacher has carefully pointed out, that: in all of the time there has been up to now, including innumerable lifetimes, we have been unable to do this, unable to simply recognize the actual nature of our own mind. Without a doubt we are ignorant of it. And some would even say that we actively ignore it, yet I find that hard to believe. Either way, this is a hard truth that we each have to come to on our own. What on Earth have we been doing all this time?

Yet, just through the process of living we are engaged in some level of mundane realization. In some respects, realization is synonymous with change

itself. Nothing ever holds still; everything changes. So, it's all about realization to one degree or another. As my first dharma teacher used to say to me: "Michael, we are all initiates, but it is a question of to what degree." In fact, he would parse the word "initiate" and point out that the word itself says "In It I Ate." We've all taken a bite of the apple. LOL.

Now, it's hard to describe to someone who does not know the difference between common mundane realization (like realizing that we have to go to the bathroom) and the kind of "spiritual" realization that occurs after Insight Meditation has been sparked or introduced. Yet, the difference is great enough that apparently we don't wander across the line between the mundane and spiritual realization just by accident.

In fact, the most sacred texts say we must be guided by an authentic guru and, even then, we must train for years on top of that. That line or threshold point is called "Recognition" and what is recognized is nothing less than the true nature of the mind, the same mind we each have with us right now, but cannot manage to recognize on our own.

A favorite theme for me involves examining the effect of rote dharma training in meditation. Without a natural love for rote practice, IMO, it can be very difficult to produce much in the way of meditation results. Even though we may have not been successfully introduced to Insight Meditation yet, by conceptually examining the factors involved in successful Insight Meditation (even in theory), we can

begin to get the idea of not only what is involved, but perhaps also better understand why rote practice in learning Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) does not in some cases give timely results. It's tedious.

Looking forward to the realization-practices, it is taught that Mahamudra Meditation is made up of a mixture of Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and a special type of Vipassana (Insight Meditation). The Shamata part of the equation has to do with our ability to be mindful and concentrate properly. In meditation training, this usually finds us focusing on the breath, a pebble, a stick, or some object. If we separate that ability to concentrate out from the rest of the overall process of Mahamudra practice and take a good look, we discover that not all of us are comfortable concentrating on some random object, like a stick or a pebble; nevertheless, some object is considered essential to learn beginning Tranquility Practice.

Instead, it can be worthwhile to look around in our life for some technique or ability that involves focus and concentration that we ALREADY have accomplished, preferably one that we actually enjoy or love doing. If we can find such a technique that we are already familiar with, one of the main obstacles to learning Insight Meditation, which is good Tranquility Meditation, may be already (or more easily) accomplished, i.e. when it comes to concentration and being mindful. Such concentration is the foundation of Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), the particular stabilizing base that is required in order to properly (more easily) learn Insight Meditation.

Especially important (and almost never mentioned) is the ability to love or take joy in the mindfulness technique (Tranquility Meditation) that we are learning. An example might be the fisherman who takes joy in the process of tying flies. They just love to do it, although it is a very careful and tedious process. Contrast this with the beginning meditator trying to learn concentration and mindfulness by focusing on a pebble or on breathing. For example, with our focus on a pebble, we are trying to learn to concentrate, but the whole process may be on something that we have no particular affinity with. It's just there as a focus, and we just do it by rote, because those are our instructions. And it's that which I'm questioning and wondering about.

With the fisherman tying flies, there may be joy, love, and at least continued interest that keeps them going through the long learning process of how to tie flies at an expert level. This can take months and years of mindfulness and focus during which they learn the complex process, perhaps by trial and error, i.e. the ups and downs (so to speak) of fly tying. Contrast that with that which we have to go through to learn to be mindful by staring at a pebble or following the breath. We may not have the drive or continued interest with the pebble that the love of the fisherman has with learning to tie flies. I believe (or at least question) whether "love" is a crucial rather than a secondary requirement.

It's true that in basic mindfulness training, like using a pebble for training focus, we are instructed NOT to explore the qualities of the pebble we focus on, but rather to just use the pebble as a point of focus in order to train our mindfulness. However, the fisherman tying flies is also learning mindfulness, but he is also very interested in what he is focused on, the finished fly resulting from his practice. These are two similar, but different, approaches.

As mentioned, I understand that in traditional Tranquility Meditation technique, we are not supposed to focus on the various qualities of the object of our meditation, the twig or stone in front of us. Instead, we are to become aware of the instability of our mind (its ability to focus and concentrate) and work on that. My question has to do with the possible pitfalls to the traditional method for some practitioners and how to perhaps work around that.

This is not to say that the fisherman tying flies does not learn mindfulness while focusing on the resulting fly. Certainly he or she does. The long learning curve and process of fly-tying itself will gradually teach that. And the process of tying flies very much affects the resulting fly, so it's a bit of a Catch-22

In learning Tranquility Meditation, the "process" of concentrating and being mindful is the result we are going for and it is similar to the resulting tied-fly of the fisherman. Yet, if we do not yet love the process of mindfulness training, we may be missing a crucial ingredient (IMO) that I feel is required in learning

Insight Meditation, if not Tranquility Meditation. So, the process and the result are very intimately related and mutually depend on one another. Many would say they are one and the same, that the process is the goal.

The whole idea of meditation, as the Tibetan word for meditation (“Gom”) points out, is to “become familiar with” the mind. And that takes time and learning to cope and deal with all the distractions that are natural to us, thoughts, worries, etc., so that we can include them and no longer be distracted by them. This is what basic Shamata training is all about, becoming familiar (and thus stabilizing) the mind, allowing it to come to rest. And, as the traditional meditation instructions point out, any object of focus is acceptable, a pebble, twig, the breath, or tying flies, playing music, cooking food or what-have-you? And that includes any “mundane” technique that we may already love and know how to do, which is my point here.

All this skirts the issue of whether anyone has been able to point out to us what the true nature of the mind is so that we can recognize it. It’s eventually absolutely essential, but these other preliminary factors are also important that are prior to “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind. Even if we have not had the pointing-out instructions from an authentic teacher, we still can learn Shamata (Tranquility Meditation); and what I have written above pertains to this and can be followed, mainly how to hitch a ride on a “non-spiritual” technique (like fly tying), if we have one.

I understand that this presentation is already pretty long and that few of you reading this will probably be able to make use of it. I just can't say it any more simply and still have any hope of being understood. If you are like me, you may have to feel your way along, sentence by sentences and word by word; I did.

Regardless, learning Tranquility Meditation ("Shamata" in Sanskrit and "Shiné" in Tibetan) is required before we can successfully enter the more advanced practices, such as Insight Meditation and Mahamudra. If, due to rote practice (and its tedium), we fail to grasp Tranquility Meditation and stabilize the mind, it is very difficult to proceed without stability. Although sometimes, by learning Insight Meditation, we simultaneously realize how to do Tranquility Meditation. But, for most of us, that is putting the cart before the horse.

You may have, through various hobbies (fly tying, chess, cooking, etc.), already learned concentration and mindfulness in your life. And just like we can't salt the salt, there is no need to re-learn to concentrate and stabilize the mind if we have already done so. If we don't recognize that we already can concentrate, we can spend a long time trying to learn to concentrate and not realize that we already can do that and that we are trying to salt the salt (without realizing it), which is hopeless. It can never be done.

This was the case for me. Having had extensive training as a system programmer doing very detailed work and also being very comfortable doing the most tedious kind of work (like cataloguing all recorded music and all recorded film, etc.), I did not recognize from the instructions for Tranquility Meditation that I already knew all of this (concentration and mindfulness) based on subjects I naturally loved and was devoted to.

And, like the fisherman tying flies, what I knew about concentrating and mindfulness was quite unlike the pebble and stick or Tranquility Meditation instruction, which were, to me, not very compelling. I practiced them by rote, but perhaps with not the same kind of interest or any real heart. Of course, that was a mistake, but one easy to make.

In closing, an analogy would be like a fine ballet dancer trying to learn what appeared to them as a new kind of dance, but not being able to draw on their long expertise in dancing. In other words, if we have mastered concentration and mindfulness elsewhere in life, it should be easier to draw on that than to reinvent the wheel while already rolling along.

Another analogy that may help is when we try to find our glasses (or hat) and are already wearing them. In that case, it is a question of realizing that we already have them on. That is an example of mundane realization and advanced meditation too depends on realization.

The purpose of traditional Tranquility Meditation practice is to focus and concentrate on our mindfulness process rather than on the object we physically focus on (pebble, stick, etc.) Yet, the enjoyment (much less love) for the mindfulness process may not yet have arisen. There is a Catch-22 there to get lost in, if we are not careful.

And here is my point in all this. If we are already trained in focus, mindfulness, and concentration in our life, we don't need to learn the Tranquility Meditation basics because, like the fisherman and tying flies, we are trained in concentration through the love and interest in tying flies, yet we may not recognize this fact. So, we don't need concentration training; we have that.

Instead, what we need is an authentic teacher who can train us in Insight Meditation (and Mahamudra) right off. And instead of mistakenly trying to learn what we already know (focus, concentration, etc.), what is needed is that we put as much time (as it takes) to search and find an authentic dharma teacher, one who has themselves realized Recognition and find out from them how we can receive the traditional pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind.

And no offense, but don't be lazy when it comes to finding an authentic dharma teacher. We may be willing to do endless years of futile practicing and yet

refuse to get off our butts and find someone who can guide us. There is no substitute for an authentic teacher, at least in Vajrayana Buddhist training, meaning just that: there is no substitute.

I can well remember when my current dharma teacher (of 32 years now) suddenly told Margaret and me to go to Tibet. And my answer was to explain to Rinpoche that I aspired to go to Tibet and hoped someday to go there. And his response to me was “Go to Tibet this summer” and it was almost autumn!

We went to Tibet that summer, within a month, and spent (among other things) three days with His Holiness the 17th Karmapa. And, of course, it changed my life to meet the Karmapa! The great Siddha Marpa made three very long and painful trips to India to get the teachings. We may have to do something similar.

So, my friends, as the great poet Gerard Manley Hopkins penned:

“Suck any sense you from that who can.”

And ask questions!

START WITH WHAT WE HAVE

October 10, 2017

I keep imagining that there are all kinds of folks out there who have mastered focused concentration by way of this or that personal hobby, something they cared so much to do that they persisted until they were good or expert at it. And, along the way, by a focused resting of their mind in what they loved (taking joy in their interests), they have already painlessly learned the basics of Tranquility Meditation. In these cases, the problem is the reverse of that with a hobby, to separate the baby from the bathwater, with the baby here as the “resting in concentration” and the bathwater (no offense) being whatever the hobby was. Or it could as well be a technique that we learned on a job, but enjoyed. Some people do enjoy their profession; I for one.

And the tricky part of this is to realize (first) that we have mastered focused-concentration and (second) to have confidence that what concentration we have gained is mobile and (given some work) we should be able to transfer that concentration to other areas of interest, either hobbies or actual meditation techniques. And, as I have written elsewhere, it’s a little like pulling taffy or stretching pizza dough, extending our learned mental-focus to other areas, including even ones that we are perhaps not so “in love” with.

And to do that is all up to us. It’s all in our mind, this need (or lack thereof) to extend or expand our ability to use focused concentration, call it mindful concentration – whatever. It’s already there, bought and paid for by our focused interest, but extracting

and universalizing the clarity of it will probably take time and some work. At least, that has been my experience.

Let's review. Whatever our hobby or personal interest was, it kept us fascinated and dedicated long enough to learn it. That alone is something. And, in the process, along the way so to speak, we built a discipline that allowed us to ignore (and accept) whatever outside disturbances there were around us for the sake of focusing on our hobby. Try doing that without the love and interest! Unfortunately, that is what many would-be mediators are up against: learning Tranquility Meditation by rote, rather than through interest and love.

So, here we might sit, looking through our life for areas of intense interest through which we have accumulated real concentration and the ability to focus. And we may have several such areas of interest. It's up to us to realize that although these areas may be very different in terms of content or subject matter, they all share our ability to concentrate and focus. So, that is our first takeaway.

By connecting the dots between these interest areas or that one area (if that is the case), we have to very gradually (and with some delicacy) separate our ability to focus and concentrate (which is by now universal for us, even if we don't know it) from the various content or subject matter of our interest. Once we have learned to really focus and concentrate, it is only in our mind if we cannot transfer that ability to other areas of interest or non-interest. However, we will have to cope with the fact that we may not have the same love for subsequent topics of transfer that we had when originally developing our ability to

concentrate based on our hobby – something we love.

Yet, that ability to concentrate now is something that we have and like a flashlight we should be able to shine it wherever we care to. In other words, it is up to us to separate the baby from the bathwater, even though the baby used to be our hobby, but for this practice, it is now our ability to focus and concentrate on, well, whatever we choose.

But, let's not get ahead of ourselves because I know from bitter experience that this recognizing, expanding, and then the transferring of this concentration ability is not a piece of cake. I have been there and done this myself. I'm still working on it too. It's like peeking through a keyhole and then actually extruding or extending ourselves through that keyhole. We expand what was at first limited to one focus, our hobby, and extend it to other areas of our life. We globalize or universalize. And this is real work and, like turning the wheel of the dharma, it only turns when we turn it, so please note that.

The goal of all of this is the same as the goal for any dharma training, to whittle our obscurations down to a fighting-weight where we can thread the needle of clarity in our own mind.

We may not have yet been introduced to the true nature of our mind. We need an authentic dharma to enable that. However, the love, concentration, and focus that it takes to be an amateur (“a lover of”) as to whatever interests we have, perhaps our partner, child, or dog is, IMO, the closest any of us get to the results of Insight Meditation and the advanced realization practices. I can feel that kind of interest now in my grandkids, for example.

When we are in the focused, concentrated zone of what we love to do, this very much resembles (to the best of my knowledge) the results of Insight Meditation, with its clarity and lucidity. In other words, we are “right there” in the moment, totally dedicated, concentrated, passionately interested, etc. Without some serious dharma training, in my opinion, that’s as close as we can get. Yet, almost any one of us can get there, if we work at it.

My interest (and goal) here is how to take that amateur love, focus, and concentration, whether it is our dedication to a child, hobby, or dog, etc. and separate out that ability to focus-with-love and extend it elsewhere in our life. I know for a fact that it is possible. However, doing it is a little more difficult. LOL. Yet, not as difficult as starting from scratch.

I have been an archivist of popular culture by avocation and profession for many decades; my innate wish has always been to preserve and put to use whatever has value and this leads me down this path I am describing here. Since some of us are older (younger folks can use it as well), how do we salvage from our life lived so far what could be turned to good use as dharma training? And by doing that, not waste what we have learned, and also give us a leg-up toward dharma. This wish to be of service in this manner is what motivates me to write most of these blogs.

The ideas here are mostly my own and not particularly based on dharma teachings, so take note. I know I’m not wrong, but can I communicate and find an easy-enough way for interested readers to capitalize on what they each have already learned and mastered in life through hobbies or family, etc. Can we turn our learned-ability for concentrated focus

and love for what interests us into an asset for learning meditation? The results are not all in, but I am very hopeful that we can.

THE SMALL COMFORT IN SAMSARA

October 11, 2017

I'd like to wrap up this series of blogs on alternate ways to learn basic sitting-meditation, the practice that is called Tranquility Meditation, and how it relates to the more advanced realization practice of Insight Meditation.

Those who have learned Insight Meditation (as taught as part of Mahamudra training) are few compared to the many who have never even heard of the term. What do all those folks do who have no meditation training? This has intrigued me for years. What do "regular" people do that emulates or even comes close to what takes place with Insight Meditation?

To figure that out, all I had to do was look around me and in particular review what I did as a younger person, since to some degree, as a phenomenologist, I'm my own laboratory. And what I found is that I have a long history of compulsively following my current thread of interest, what I loved. This would be what I termed "hobby-interest" in the last couple of blogs, "hobby" being what we most love to do in life, if given the opportunity.

It helps to consider what we do when we have a chance to just be alone with our hobby, something that we just totally love to do. In my case, I literally made a profession of being an amateur, taking what I

loved personally and making a business out of it, thus insuring my continue interest in the topic. I did this on many topics. Yet, even as a schoolkid, I pretty-much never paid attention in school, but instead spent my time thinking about (and noodling) on what I was interested in and would do after I got out of school that day. I did this for over eleven years, diligently. So I should know something about the process of being an amateur, a “lover of” this or that interest. In addition, as mentioned, I turned almost all my hobbies into business that I loved to operate. I initially paid quite a price for that luxury.

And I make a point of comparing the love of the amateur (and what can be learned there) with the more advanced meditation practices such as Insight Meditation and Mahamudra. And what I come up with is this: the intensity, focus, and concentration that occurs when we are passionate about a hobby, if there is enough technique involved, teaches us the basics of Tranquility Meditation in a rather painless fashion. No doubt.

But hobbies have more to them then just concentration and focus; there is the love of doing them, the sheer clarity and joy we experience, and this reminds me more of Insight Meditation. Yet, there is a great difference between the clarity that arises from a hobby and traditional Insight Meditation of the type used in Mahamudra Meditation. Readers need to be clear on this.

While the Tranquility Meditation that comes out of an intense hobby is the same Tranquility Meditation that occurs on the dharma cushion, at least in beginning meditation, the clarity and joy that goes along with a hobby (which is why we do it) is NOT similar or at least not in the same league as the Insight Meditation that arises after a dharma student has achieved Recognition.

Perhaps this difference is as simple as the fact that “Recognition” changes everything; we could leave it at that. With Insight Meditation, we are basically, debriefing the universe, unravelling Samsara, while with the similar component with hobbies, we are not.

Hobbies are part of samsara, as harsh as that fact sounds, but I would agree that hobbies are the very best part of samsara and similar in function (a placebo perhaps) to the more advanced Insight Meditation of Mahamudra, which is revelatory. Hobbies are not primarily revelatory.

Insight Meditation reveals Samsara or perhaps better worded, Insight Meditation realizes Samsara or is the realization of Samsara. The similarity to Insight Meditation in our hobby interests is just not there. Hobby interests are comforting at best, perhaps the most comfortable part of Samsara, but they are not liberating. To use that tired phrase, hobbies are a case of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic or whistling in the dark, while waiting for the other shoe to fall.

True Insight Meditation, however, is liberating, constant realization.

To sum this up, the bottom-line here is that we can learn Tranquility Meditation on the cushion or through very intense personal hobbies. On the other hand, although our hobbies can be very comforting, the Vajrayana style of Insight Meditation is not something we can learn on our own. It requires that we are introduced to it by an authentic teacher through what is called “Recognition,” the pointing out to us (so that we get it) of the true nature of the mind. After that we can learn Insight Meditation as part of Mahamudra Meditation.

Hobbies are comforting, sort of the consolation prize for being in Samsara. However, Insight Meditation, as mentioned, is the gradual liberation of ourselves from Samsara. I hope I have made this difference clear.

ACTIVITY CREATES SPACE

October 15, 2017

As I look back over my life, I can see that I did my very best to create space, to expand time (through my activity) into more room to live in – living room. Astrologically speaking, it is activity (Mars) that creates space and the KIND of our activity is reflected in the kind of space created, call it our aura. It has always been interesting to me that my natal Mars (geocentric) is in Aries (where it is strongest), but in Aquarius (group oriented) on my Dharma Chart (heliocentric). We could say my strong Aries activity results in sharing with others (Aquarius), if we want to think that way.

There are so many possible interpretations and they are not mutually exclusive. As for our activity signature, it reminds me of one of my favorite quotes from the poet W.B. Yeats:

“The grass cannot but keep the form,
Where the mountain hair has lain.”

It is through our individual activity that we expand time until it is more spacious or “special.” In quite a real sense, we literally go between the clock-ticking seconds and find some time-out, our bit of eternity. For me, the correct term is “mandala” and to create in life (like flowers) various mandalas, each one of which, complete in itself, blooms, and like all things of

this world, then fades and passes away. We live in and for those mandalas, at least I do. However, expansive mandalas can leave their mark on time itself and are signatures (or seals) of the spirit, signs of the times we live in and post-it-notes that certify THAT we lived.

I've been making mandalas, creating elaborate spaces and environments, all of my life, just for the beauty of it. What else are we to do? Sometimes it takes money, but for me it has never been just about money. It has always been about wanting these special spaces to exist in the world. It's about transforming the Samsara I find myself in, just as the dharma is all about realizing Samsara.

Our every act and activity creates a space that reflects that activity, which is perhaps why we are encouraged (as the Zen Buddhists suggest) to act with care, with love, and compassion, not only for others, but for our own sake. Of the five Buddha families in the Vajrayana tradition, I resonate with Amoghasiddhi, the Buddha of the North (the color dark-green) and "fearless energy" or, as they say, "The one whose accomplishment is not in vain."

We alone through our activity can create the appropriate space in our life that we require and dream of. And, as they say, we all want to be in that number, when the saints come marching in. And they are marching now!

Speaking of creating space:

I have always been singularly impressed with how the honey bee survives the winter. As it has been explained to me, the bees within the hive cluster together to form a living ball. At the very center of the ball, a small number of bees dance and move; the movement creates heat, which radiates outward and keeps the ball of bees from freezing.

As individual bees tire, they are gradually pushed out of the center and toward the periphery of the sphere. Other bees toward the center then move in and take their turn at dancing. When the sleeping bees reach the outer edge of the ball, they get cold, wake up, and burrow back toward the center to dance again. And this endless convection process is what evenly heats the bees and ensures the colony's survival. How amazing is that?

We each have a certain activity and a dance to do; this ensures our spiritual (and collective) survival, whether it's a bit like ballet or something more like The Twist.

So, it's best to be dancing while we have time!

“HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE”

October 16, 2017

The above quote, in Old-French, was used as a slogan by the English in the time of Edward III. It translates to something like “Shamed be he who thinks ill of this.” I heard it from friends who came from a prep school and bandied it about in the early 1960s. There are all kinds of stories and impressions as to what it means or originally meant. I don’t claim to follow any of them, but the phrase and its meaning have kind of percolated in my mind over the years. For me, the phrase represents a simple reminder that we are only too human and are at heart no different from those around us.

Oddly enough, this quote has come (in my mind) to nicely represent a major problem for serious dharma students, any tendency on our part to feel separate or superior to any other being, in particular as to whatever understanding or knowledge that we may have that we feel puts us above identifying with fellow beings. In my view, this is a gentle warning not to lose compassion (or to find it) even for our own past or for those who are going through now what we once went through. Realization is a process, not a state and, if we find ourselves treating it as a state (as something we have “attained” rather than the ongoing process it is), we have already slipped our moorings.

I tend to connect this concept to that “Fourth Thought” in what are called the Common Preliminaries of

Tibetan Buddhism. The “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma” (also called the Four Reversals) are, after all, where I began; their discovery is the point at which I started identifying myself more as a Buddhist than anything else. For those who don’t know the Four Thoughts, very briefly, here they are and in the form that I first encountered them:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

(1) PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH

"First,
This precious human birth,
So favorable for the practice of dharma,
Is difficult to obtain and easily lost.
At this time I must make it meaningful."

(2) IMPERMANENCE

"Second,
This world and all its inhabitants are impermanent,
In particular,
The life of each being is like a water bubble.
It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.
As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time,
I must practice now with diligence.

(3) KARMA

“Third,
At death there is no freedom,
Karma takes its course.
As I create my own karma,
I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action.
With this in mind,
I must observe my mindstream each day.

(4) THE SHORTCOMINGS OF SAMBARA

“Fourth,
Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to
my death,
The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of
samsara cause me continual torment by means of the
three sufferings.
I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain
enlightenment.

It's that Fourth Thought that I have always had trouble
with, which is also translated as the “Revulsion at
Samsara.” The point of my even mentioning it here is,
as pointed out above, a tendency I may have to look
down upon (or feel nauseous and repulsed) even by
my own past history, by what I personally have gone
through, done myself, or been put through.
Sometimes it seems that everything is just too much.

I get it, that arrogance simply is fear, the result of
which is a lack of compassion that results from our

inability (or refusal) to identify with other beings as like ourselves (or even with our own past), the shyness or reluctance to embrace the obvious. The teachings point out that deep within each of us is a well of compassion that we will, sooner or later, discover. However, it may take some special event in our life to see us there.

After all, I should be in the perfect position to understand other people, since they are now where I once was. I should already have some compassion for their state. In fact, I know that deep inside I have compassion, but at times just don't want to go there, perhaps because I don't want to open those floodgates.

Another way to put this is that we are ultimately responsible to clean up our own mess, and this includes my own jaundiced views of my personal history and its residual effect on me. A phrase that is popular these days says "It is what it is." That puts it nicely on-point. Along with that phrase comes the ability or suggestion to just drop it right there. It is what it is and nothing more.

In many Buddhist texts, we are encouraged to be repulsed by Samsara or at least are put on notice that we may react this way to Samsara, yet we ultimately must (according to the pith dharma teachings) personally transform or realize Samsara.

I find that being repulsed by our own samsaric nature is not always all that that helpful, except perhaps as a sign or flag of change. At some point we must accept Samsara for what it is, work with it, and eventually transform it through realization.

And, if we read that “Fourth Thought” carefully, it is not this world that we should be repulsed by, but OUR attachment to this world that is the problem, our graspingness or death-grip on appearances.

The pith dharma teachings point out clearly that Samsara and Nirvana are connate, two sides of the same coin, so we would be cutting off our nose to spite our face by shunning Samsara. As mentioned, it’s not this world that is the problem, but our ATTACHMENT to this world. And the takeaway here is that the term “Samsara” refers to our attachment and NOT what we are attached to, i.e. this physical world we live in. The world is fine, just as it is, aside from our samsaric attachment to it..

By default, Samsara (our attachment) is the single means we have to realize Nirvana. Without it, we would already be in Nirvana – realized. So, “Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense,” as I think-it, perhaps best suggests that we each find our humility before it is presented to us like on a plate.

P.S. I have told, many times, the story of when the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa explained to me about the “Four Thoughts,” while pointing at a Tibetan

woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds with each of its four paws clutching a precious pearl or gem. I had used the print for a poster I designed about a talk that Trungpa Rinpoche was to give in Ann Arbor.

His comment to me was that as long as the dragon can keep all four pearls in his paws, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he will fall to the earth. That was about as clear a statement as we will find that entertaining one or two of the thoughts will not be enough. We need to have all four thoughts in mind like all the time, thus my suggestion that no time spent on them is ever too much or wasted.

SAMSARA IS TOO MUCH

October 17, 2017

Some folks commented or have written to me about their confusion concerning this physical world we live in as opposed to our attachment to it – two very different things.

When Buddhists mention that “Revulsion of Samsara” is required to attain realization, it would be a mistake to think that we cannot or should not enjoy or love the beauty of this world and the life in and around us. That would be just another kind of fundamentalist view and Buddhism is anything but fundamentalist.

If we get sick or obese from eating too much ice cream, it is not the fault of the ice cream, but of our eating it too often. It’s the same idea with this world we all live in. It is not the world that we should give up or temper our enjoyment of, but rather our undue attachment to it.

We don’t have trouble understanding why we want to get over this or that fear that we have. We can see that fear does not help us, aside from perhaps as a “caution,” when it prevents us from falling off a cliff or whatever. Yet, we trip-up on this relation of undue attachment and what it is that we are attached to. The mistake is to think that Samsara refers to this world

we find ourselves in, when in fact Samsara IS itself our “attachment” to this physical world and not the world itself. It is the undue attachment we might best give up, not the world around us.

So, when Samsara is mentioned in the Buddhist literature and texts, they are not talking about giving up the warm summer breezes, shimmering waves at twilight, the setting sun, or anything we naturally love about life. Instead, they are pointing out that if we become unnaturally “attached” to this world (or anything in it), that attachment ITSELF will prevent or obscure us from enjoying the natural beauty of nature, friendships, and what-have-you? I hope you see the difference.

What has to be given up and let go of is any death-grip on life (or what life offers us) that we can fall into. Another example is the difference between eating to live and living to eat. That seems to be something we all can identify with. If we become too attached to eating to the degree that we only live to eat and become obese and ill, that kind of attachment best be given up (scaled back), unless we want to suffer the price of eating to excess. In other words, we can learn to eat reasonably.

If we will examine our various attachments, there is nothing moral, fundamentalist, or rule-ridden about them. The undue attachment itself simply prevents us from living life enjoyably. It’s like tunnel vision. We don’t give up eating and enjoying food; we give up eating to excess, because it ultimately demands the

price of sickness and ill health, etc. And we don't give up eating entirely; we just scale it back to the point, as mentioned, where we eat to live (and enjoy that) rather than live to eat and still not be satisfied.

If you understand the above examples, you can understand any attachment. "Enough or Too Much" as the poet William Blake pointed out. So, please, we should not brand Buddhism with our own mistake of mistaking the bathwater for the baby. The bathwater is our undue attachment to this world and this natural world (without attachment) is the baby that can be cherished. Throw out or tone back the attachment. It is being overly attached (or having undue attachment) in life that diminishes life, not life itself.

And, there is confusion about the how to use the word "attachment." Here I am using the word attachment to mean something unwanted that is not good for us. But some might argue that there is something like proper attachment, in which case, like the three bears and their porridge, we can have too little attachment or too much or just the right amount. In Buddhism, both definitions are sometimes used indiscriminately, so be aware of that.

Can we be overly attached to anything that is worthy, like being attached to our own children or to a moral virtue? Of course, we can, which is not to say that caring and loving our child is unnatural. It's not, but we have all seen spoiled children that suffer from the undue attachment to them by their parents, rather

than from not enough love and care. Either excess should be avoided, too much or too little.

You will find that the Buddhist path is always reasonable, always taking the middle way or seeking a balance between too much and too little. My point is that when we read about Samsara (and its sufferings), we are talking about doing something about our over-attachment to life itself (or whatever in life we become overly attached to), not about that life itself. The Buddha himself rejected undue asceticism in his journey to enlightenment.

So, the term “Samsara” points at too much ATTACHMENT on our part to life itself or to this world we live in, but there is nothing wrong with the world itself. However, the result of attachment itself (by almost everyone in this world) does shape the world into something it is naturally not. We also have to sort that out and remove greed and attachment at the political and world level. The natural dharma, like Mother Nature, is pure, but the results of attachment and greed have obscured that purity.

MISSING ATTACHMENT

October 18, 2017

I have been contemplating the “Four Reversals,” the “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward the Dharma,” for many years. All four thoughts made intuitive sense to me, except that last one, the Fourth Thought, which in my text was expressed as follows:

“Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death,
The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings.
I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment.”

As I see it now, my original mistake was concentrating on the first two lines, and kind of ignoring that third line, the part about cutting through all attachment. I thought that was just an add-on comment, when really it was the MAIN point.

Instead, I concentrated on the line “The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings.” And my takeaway, much to my sorrow, was that my home, friends, pleasures, and possessions were perhaps the cause of my suffering, which is to some degree true, but after another fashion.

As an astrologer with his Sun Sign in Cancer, the home is very important to me, so trying to find ways not to like my life and the world was, well, very difficult. What I missed (failed to understand) was that they were not saying that these things (home, friends, etc.) were themselves causing me suffering, but rather that my attachment to them was where the suffering was coming from, which is quite a different thing.

Of course, I am attached to all of the above, and to some inordinately I will admit, but toning back my attachment is a far cry from trying to remove what they are attached to in my life. It would be like cutting off an arm or a leg, IMO. Like so many other aspiring Buddhists, I fell into thinking that loving the beauty of nature and life was perhaps somehow wrong (and should be given up), when what the sage Buddhists were pointing out is that being unduly attached to these things was the cause of suffering, and not the things themselves. The things themselves were just things.

I must point out that it is easy in these times to confuse the world in its natural purity from the world of today, as coated with all of the attachment and greed or billions of people. Like bad veneer, we have to somehow separate the coating from the coated, so to speak.

Now, that interpretation was something I could accept and Buddhist teachers always encourage their students to test everything out themselves and not to take the teachings just on faith. Understanding this point gave me a different take, and like the last tumbler in a lock clicking into place, I was able to finally embrace all four of the thoughts, and deeply at that.

In my recent story about Trungpa Rinpoche, where the image of the flying dragon who holds a pearl in each of his four claws, the dragon could only fly if he could hold all four thoughts at once. Otherwise he fell to earth. To the best of my ability, I was finally able to do just that.

So, Samsara is not about keeping life and beauty at arm's length, but about examining our attachments. Therefore, Samsara is a film of obscurations covering reality. Because of that, it's like we can't breathe the pure oxygen of reality, but are suffocating under the cloying skin of our own attachments that enclose us like a mummy. That I can well understand. I live it!

All this time, that fourth thought was not difficult to understand; I just got it wrong from the get-go and never reexamined the original teaching closely enough. Instead, I anguished over losing the beauty of the world, struggling with approach/avoidance all the while. Big mistake!

LOL.

DETECTING DHARMA AUTHENTICITY

October 18, 2017

Like the theory of correspondences that runs through astrology and many of the occult and metaphysical disciplines, with “this corresponds to this, corresponds to that,” and on and on. They all add up or are linked. I liken it to a group of fish that, poised randomly in mid-movement, all suddenly “school” or point in the same direction. Not only do correspondences do that, but to those trained in awareness, everything seems to follow that lead. To authentic teachers, patterns appear in the answers of their students.

When talking about the more advanced realization practices, it is not too difficult to determine who has and who does not have authentic realization. This is why an authentic teacher can tell from any comments or written messages by students (as least roughly) where they are at, i.e. from their use of language alone.

It’s a lot like the movie “Blade Runner,” where Rick Deckard (the detective played by Harrison Ford) would test subjects to detect “replicants” – androids. In a similar way, by asking a series of related questions, authentic lamas can pretty-much determine who is really “realizing” and who just conceptualizing it, albeit perhaps innocently. Sometimes we don’t even know that we do not know.

In the traditional pointing-out instructions of Vajrayana Buddhism, over time, the lama asks the student a series of direct questions and from those answers is

determined who has grasped the teachings and who has yet to do so. The Zen Buddhists (of the Rinzai School) do the same thing with their koans, etc. -- testing for authentic realization.

A good friend of mine, Jeffrey D. Mitchell, whose friendship dates back to the very early 1960s, is an expert on the English language, devoted to that as I feel I am to sharing dharma. He recently sent me a page or so of the writing of Ulysses S. Grant as an example of exemplary English. It was very direct writing, which I enjoyed a lot.

Yet, I did not come away thinking so much that Grant was a good writer (which of course he is) as that Grant's experience (and state of mind) was so determined that anything he wrote could not help but be an expression of who he was and what he had gone through. In other words, I did not find myself focusing on his style of writing, but rather on the unique experiences that General Grant must have had in order to write the way he did. It showed. This was evident to me by the way his sentences were formed, seemingly more by necessity than conscious intent on writing technique.

Years ago, I read in the journals or diaries of Franz Kafka, and I quote, "Everything I write, it already has perfection," with the connotation being that he had already perfected his mind so that anything he did, including writing, expressed where he was at in his mind. That was my take on Grant. There would be no imitating Grant without gaining the experience(s) he had in order to arrive where he was at the time. In other words, it was where he was coming from that

determined his “style” and not only something that he had learned about writing good English.

Of course, this set me to contemplating. I’m no Grant, but my writing is an expression of a certain kind of mind training that also can’t be imitated, other than by a similar type of training and, even then, it would unfold and be driven by that writer’s particular personality and experiences.

The only analogy I can think of involves what are called crypto-savants, many of which are autistic. These are savants that can see patterns in what might appear to us as just random groups of letters and numbers. An authentic dharma teacher, in my understanding, can do something similar by monitoring the answers of questions asked of students. Like iron filings arranging themselves on a magnet, authentic answers from dharma students globally display (and directionally point) to a particular realization or lack thereof. The lama can see the overall pattern in the answers and that pattern adds up to a yes or a no. “Yes” the student has the realization or “no” they have not had it, yet.

I believe we all experience something like this, each in our own fashion. I know I do. I have read or heard many approaches to the dharma, but my mind only seizes on those that speak directly to me, which does not mean the rest are not true dharma. They may be, but they don’t spark me to realize what they are saying and talking about.

When I find a dharma writer or teacher who is “authentic” for me, realization is sparked and I find myself spontaneously learning without effort. That’s

what “Realization” is all about. It’s the same phenomenon as I described above, where the teacher can scan the remarks of the student for authenticity, for the signs of an authentic imprint.

P.S. A possible takeaway (and sidebar) from the above discussion is that (perhaps) someone who wanted to be a writer, instead of only learning how to write (grammar and styles, etc.) might be better served to develop his or her mind and awareness, as most Buddhists suggest. That way, as Kafka pointed out, anything we do (including writing) will carry our signature. Does that mean that we still put our pants on one leg at a time? I imagine so, but good question. As my first dharma teacher Andrew McIver said to then Governor of Michigan George Romney, who thinking that he was shaking hands with an old man, condescendingly said “And how are you?,” to which Andrew responded “It’s not HOW are you, but WHO are you that’s important.” That was one surprised governor.

When I look back on my own life, trying to be writer of poetry or prose never produced much of any value IMO. LOL. However, the time spent on clarifying and realizing my mind has produced (again, IMO) great dividends. I would not hesitate to suggest to any of my friends that increasing our overall awareness (and especially any realization we can manage), allows us to do everything in a more meaningful way, including writing. And that’s an understatement.

SAMSARA: THE DEEP END OF THE POOL

October 19, 2017

In several recent blogs, I have pointed out that what the Buddhists call Samsara (and its sufferings) is not connected to Earth, this physical world of Mother Nature that we all live in, but rather Samsara is exclusively our “attachment” to Earth and the physical world that is the problem. It is solely by our attachments that we are obscured and suffer and not the fault of what we are attached to. This point has to be understood before suffering can be toned-back or removed.

And there are different levels of attachment. We can start with those things closest to us (of which we are already aware) that we are inordinately attached to, whatever they are, and work downward. Please know that attachment goes much deeper than the surface. The things we are attached to around the house and in this life (via our personality) are just the tip of the iceberg.

In fact, the whole idea of a permanently existing Self (or lack thereof) is an example of what is meant by still-deeper-attachment. We are attached to our Self. I didn't want to mention this right off, at least not until I (hopefully) got the basic idea of Samsara-as-attachment across.

And, in my own case, I'm already beyond any grasp of this concept that I have from experience and can only merely conceptualize about it. To play on a phrase, round and round Samsara goes and where it stops, nobody knows; at least I don't. But somewhere down in there, I'm stuck, firmly attached; of that you

can be sure. Apparently, according to the teachings we all are.

It's taken me years (decades) to accept the idea that, come what may, I won't be taking "me, myself, and I" with me when I die and pass on. That alone is a mind-bender. According to the teachings, like a caboose, at death our Self will simply be unhooked and left behind, while the train of our karma and desires continues on, driving us onward from lifetime to lifetime. This degree or level of detachment (one without a self) can't even be envisioned by us, much less kept in mind, since most of that which we could remember with is exactly what will be abandoned. That's a loss indeed.

The inner-dharma or pith-teachings on death and the bardo all state that after death we each come to a point in the bardo where we stop referencing who we are now (and have been in this life) and, instead, begin referencing our coming rebirth, a new life, complete with its own Self (and personality), one that has yet to even be assembled from our ongoing karma and desire for attachment. How do we go about imagining something that does not even exist yet? I'm sure I don't know.

When we have a rebirth, a whole new chance on life, why is it not pristine, pure and unattached, you know, like we used to believe each newborn baby represented? If we have left our Self behind, with all that we have been attached to, why can't we just have a fresh start, so to speak? And the answer has to be the mother of all Catch-22s, that while we leave behind us all that we were attached to, everything we loved, the only thing we take with us is our tendency to be attached in the first place, call it our attachment-potential. That potential is alive, well, and still very

much with us, just without the “us,” without any steering wheel that we have control of! It’s like a headless horseman or something like that. Our desires and karma are the horse.

The Buddhist Yogacara teachings point out that our graspingness (and karmic traces) is what moves on from life to life but, as mentioned, without “us” as we know ourselves now. That Self is left behind when we die, like the skin shed by a snake, but the snake-with-no-name goes on. And what is more to the point (and this has to be funny) is that without our propensity for attachments, we would have no rebirth at all. We would be enlightened! And, IMO, that has to be irony or something, right?

While all forms of Buddhism deny the existence of a permanent Self (or what here in The West we call our “Soul”) and that Self is left behind, as mentioned, like a cast-off skin, and we create a new Self with each rebirth, something has to move on through time from life to life to fuel our rebirths. And, if I understand it right, that “something” (while it is not a “soul” or permanent Self, but rather our raw desires) is nevertheless permanent enough to last through innumerable lives all the way up to the moment of our complete enlightenment. Indeed, it may not be permanent, but it is perhaps permanent enough to get us all the way to enlightenment. That’s not nothing.

So, something persists beyond our Self, even if it is only our karmic traces and the desire (and recipe) to create a new Self with each subsequent rebirth. To use a swimming analogy, our chain of rebirths is like the butterfly stroke, where each stroke brings a fresh breath and some daylight, but is immediately followed by complete re-immersion in the bardo and the loss of whatever self we have we have been attached to from

any given lifetime, but NOT the loss of our desire for attachment. That desire, born of our own karma, does persist and lives on without “us,” so to speak. And while, even that desire does not last forever, it apparently lasts until our enlightenment, which may be after innumerable lives, which in my book seems long enough. After all, even the Sun does not last forever. So, in some sense we are (at least with our desires) relatively-permanent, which is an oxymoron.

So, those of you reading this who have more knowledge and realization on this topic than I have, be kind enough to share your knowledge here with us about death and rebirth, but do it from your realization, not just from books and study; and PLEASE don't bother to blather on conceptually or from what you have read. As you can see, I can do that well enough myself.

PRACTICING THE DHARMA

October 20, 2017

This is just a brief look at some facets of dharma practice and is not intended as anything definitive. I'm just thinking out loud about how I went about practicing.

Back in the late 1950s, when I first rubbed shoulders with Buddhism, the concept of practice never came up, meaning the concept of my practicing dharma. I would read about great Tibetan saints like Milarepa and all of the severities they suffered to gain realization, but for some reason the idea of me practicing never occurred to me. For one, I probably thought I was not worthy or that I was not Buddhist material. And I wouldn't know how to practice anyway. That would come later.

It was not until the early 1970s, with the advent of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa to the scene that I had confidence enough to really practice. It was Trungpa who first pointed out to us (at least to me) that Buddhism is a path that we can walk and that it would take some actual practice on our part to walk it. And to my Tibetan teacher, who spoke no English, everything should be read in Tibetan, and so we did. And Tibetan is, indeed, a foreign language to American eyes and ears.

When I was a little kid, the oldest of five boys, our father once teased us by having us repeat after him, in two-syllable increments, what sounded like an oriental language; he would say:

“OH-WA TA-GOO SI-AM.”

And we dutifully repeated after him, ever faster, without realizing it was, “Oh what a goose I am” over

and over again. And he would laugh and then realizing what we had said, we laughed too.

When I was first learning to do my dharma practice in Tibetan, it felt not unlike what my dad had us repeating. I had no idea what the Tibetan I was reading aloud meant, but I would recite it religiously as best I could. There was always some English translation, but which Tibetan syllable went with which English word I did not (at first) know. For me, this was just a part of practice.

And I have never been a great fan of practice of any kind. I hated the piano practice my mother made me do and never learned to play the piano because of it. So, rote practice of any kind never sat too well with me. Instead, I tried to find more natural ways to learn things, and usually did. Yet, practice seems to be an integral part of Vajrayana Buddhism; we “practice” Buddhism. What is dharma practice and how do we do it?

Practice is defined in the dictionary (among other things) as the repeated exercise or performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it. Another definition is to carry out or perform a particular activity habitually or regularly. So, a Buddhist does his or her practice regularly, but by either definition, the practice itself is not the result of that practice.

There is the old saying “Practice makes perfect,” which suggests that the result of practice is perfection in one form or another. Any way you spell it, IMO, the whole concept of practice needs to be examined and understood by would-be students.

Is practice a means to an end or is the means (the process of the practice itself) the end or result? If we

consider our lungs and breathing, breathing is a process that we practice that keeps us alive. The process of realization is practiced until enlightenment is reached, but who knows how many practices it involves along the way? I don't.

So, it is helpful to be clear about practices. Most dharma practices are a means to the eventual realization by us of the actual nature of the mind. They are not, like breathing, something we do just to tread water or remain the same, but rather dharma practice looks for its result in greater awareness and eventual realization and enlightenment.

Does it matter which practices we do or the order we do them in? It does, if only because some practices tend to depend on other practices to be first mastered. A good example is Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). Generally (but not always) Tranquility Meditation has to be mastered to a significant degree before Insight Meditation (Vipassana) can be undertaken. This is the order that these practices are done in the Karma Kagyu Lineage to which I belong. Yet, in some traditions, both Shamata and Vipassana are taught together.

In our tradition, generally, dharma practices are clearly marked and ordered. For example, in the beginning what are called the Common Preliminaries are practiced, then the Extraordinary Preliminaries, and these are sometimes followed by the Special Preliminaries. And there are others (like Lojong) which are not labeled as preliminary practices, but are in fact relative-truth or preliminary practices. All of these practices are for the purification of obscurations and familiarization with the mind.

How are we to approach dharma practice? IMO, the answer to that question is with care and love, if

possible. I cannot emphasize that last point enough. Most practices are techniques designed to produce a particular result. Any spiritual technique is like freeze-dried dharma that has to be assimilated and expanded through repeatedly articulating the practice until the desired results appear. Without passionate (with love) concentration and focus, in my experience, nothing much happens. This is why rote practice (without love and interest) is a scary thought as to results. There are little to none.

Most techniques are the codified result of someone's (or a group's) previous realization. Techniques (of any kind) are extremely condensed instructions and have to be unpacked, assimilated, and expanded by our repetitive articulation of them. We could say, "just add awareness," but that is also what we may be attempting to generate.

As kids, someone can explain to us how to practice riding a two-wheel bicycle, but actually practicing riding a bike (if you remember) is another thing entirely, which is why there are training wheels and dads and moms to steady us. It's not all that different with dharma practice. Often, there are so many things to keep in mind at once that it's like the old joke about rubbing our tummy and patting our forehead at the same time. Try it.

Literally, we have to go through the motions by rote, articulate and exercise the practice, and begin to become familiar with it, while waiting for muscle memory to kick in. Doing all this with care and love is very difficult, IMO.

And it would be premature to look for results just off the bat. Learning to meditate takes time, usually quite a long time. The Tibetan word for meditate ("Gom") means "to become familiar with" our mind. How do we

do that, having for our entire lives up until now been unfamiliar with the mind? The answer would be slowly and with some fumbling.

Learning Tranquility Meditation is like starting a conversation with what to us is a stranger, our own mind. Becoming familiar with our mind, much less being able to BE familiar, is a slow process, one that depends on each of us individually. We can, by temperament, hold the required mindfulness too loose or too tight. If we are already able to focus and concentrate “just right,” we may be familiar enough with our mind to have no (or little) need for Tranquility Meditation practice. However, for most of us, we have yet to be formally introduced to our mind.

And there are different routes we can take to learning the concentration and mindfulness that result from learning Tranquility Meditation, and I have written about this often before. One alternate approach to rote practice is to search through our life for areas where we have already developed mindful concentration and piggyback on those in order to confirm that we have our Tranquility Meditation essentials. That is why it is helpful to understand WHY we are learning a particular practice and what we hope to get out of it. We may already have done our homework and can take advantage of that fact.

Tranquility Meditation is not some mysterious mystical state we are trying to generate, but rather standard mindfulness and concentration that can be applied to calm the mind by allowing it to stabilize and come to rest. Just because meditation is labeled “spiritual” does not mean that learning it does not require quite ordinary techniques, some of which we may already know and have.

On the other hand, at least in my opinion, having a spiritual friend or teacher who already knows what we are trying to learn is a great advantage. There still are far too few qualified dharma teachers available in this country and the need for such guidance only increases. I will close with a quote on the results of dharma practice from my dharma teacher of going on 35 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche:

“It is this state of simple awareness of the present moment that must be pointed out and recognized in the beginning. Without it being properly presented, it can’t be recognized. Without it being recognized, you can’t cultivate it in meditation. Once recognized, it is just this that needs to be cultivated ceaselessly at all times and in all activities. In the end, it will be just this that becomes fully manifest. Through cultivation, this recognition gains perfect stability, independence from all conditions, and so on, what we call the “result or the fruition.”

“This is the only way that holy beings have ever become holy beings. In any Buddhist tradition, those who have achieved realization, those who have achieved buddhahood in one lifetime, those who have become siddhas such as the renowned siddhas of India and the lineage masters of Tibet, and all the others have practiced this. Therefore, it is just this great primordial perfection, this completeness of the trikaya within one’s own mind that needs to be cultivated throughout all of one’s activities as unceasingly as the current of a great river. It is through this that the renowned masters of various traditions have achieved the state of buddhahood in one lifetime. If you recognize this, and can practice this, then this is all-sufficient. Therefore, it is called the great panacea.”

FINDING A DHARMA TEACHER

October 21, 2017

This is the most frequent question I hear, although usually not as a Facebook comment, but more often through personal messages, email, and even by phone. “How (and where) can I find an authentic dharma teacher?”

I totally get that this is a most legitimate question, so let’s address it in this blog, not in any particular order, but as thoughts come to me that I feel are worth considering. And please feel free to ask other questions through comments to this blog.

First, there is no easy answer about where to find a dharma teacher and I will try to explain why. One-size for dharma teachers does not fit all. In my experience, a dharma teacher is a custom-fit that only has to happen once. This is not to say that we can’t learn from everyone we meet or from many dharma teachers. I certainly have. Yet, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (and lineage) that I practice in, for each of us, there is one and only one dharma teacher who first successfully points out to us the true nature of the mind. It only happens once because it is a realization and not just another spiritual experience. That teacher is called the “Tsawi Lama,” our Root Teacher. IMO, how to find (or deserve) that teacher for each of us is the real question.

I grew up in the 1950s, when dharma teachers were rare, so I am old now; back then, there were mostly only Zen Buddhists. And of course, the 1960s turned into the 1970s and that was when New-Age everything broke out. Suddenly, there were all kinds of spiritual teachers, “Yogi This” and “Baba That.” It

was like an open bazaar that was more than strange enough for me. One could sit at the feet of gurus all over town, if you had a mind to, and you know we did or at least tried to.

I can remember one particular young teacher, even younger than I was. He was a Midwesterner like me and his name was Michael Shoemaker. Michael had found his root guru in Swami Rudrananda (another westerner) and was letting all the world know that he was going for it – to achieve realization. He made no bones about it and gave me confidence to do the same in my own way.

Michael Shoemaker was a wonderful being and you could not help but love him; we respected and liked him so very much. When Michael's root guru died unexpectedly, he went through the very rigorous process of becoming a swami in the lineage of Bhagavan Nityananda of Ganeshpuri, finally taking sannyas with Swami Muktananda in 1978. Today he is Swami Chetanananda and we are still good friends. Anyway, back then, things like that were happening.

However, in these current times, while the freshness has all but gone out of that New-Age front, there are even more professed gurus available to us. How do we pick through all of them?

Back then, my answer to that question was “very carefully,” like you would step through a cow pasture. And there was no absolute right or wrong teacher, only right or wrong for me. Well, I guess there WERE some that were outright frauds. Anyway, here's the problem as I see it:

As they say, “Different strokes for different folks” or as the British say “Horses for courses.” The Tibetan teachings suggest that there are 84,000 dharmas,

which suggests 84,000 types of students and 84,000 kinds of teachers to fit them. And that's also more or less how I see it. I'm not saying that dharma cannot be learned in a group setting; my dharma teacher has a great many students all over the world.

But what IS necessary is to have a unique connection (at least in our own mind) with one particular teacher, and that is the teacher who first introduces us to the true nature of the mind so that we get it. I know, it's not cool to want to be special, but in dharma, the connection to our main teacher is very, very special indeed—inviolable. One cannot help but be grateful and devoted for the kindness of our root guru.

It seems that so many are waiting for a scenario where a teacher picks them out of a crowd and says, "You are my student and I am your teacher," period. End of story. And oddly enough, I agree with that view. But where are we going to get that kind of attention? We are all said to have within us "Buddha Nature," so how hard is it for a teacher to recognize that Buddha Nature in us? There is no sentient being without that nature.

Still, most of us wait and we wait and we wait, but no one appears to find us; no one recognizes us in the crowd, much less picks us out. We don't get the royal jelly. There are many waiting to be found and known, but apparently mighty few that care enough to know us. They are the teachers. By definition, our root dharma-teacher cares enough and it does happen, but we have to first find him or her and connect. And why are we being so passive in all of this?

If I read in the spiritual biographies (called Nam-Tars) in the Karma Kagyu Lineage (that I belong to) that extends from Vajradhara to Tilopa, to Naropa, to Marpa, to Milarepa, to Lord Gampopa, and to the 17

Karmapas, there are many, many stories of the effort the students (and the teachers) put forth to uniquely connect.

For example, Lord Marpa asked his student Milarepa to build (and demolish) three tall multi-level towers of stone before he built a final tower that apparently still stands today. All that in order to be worthy of receiving the teachings! Marpa himself made three long and dangerous trips to India to bring back the teachings to Tibet. And Naropa endured what are called the 12 hardships under the tutelage of his guru Tilopa, and so on. It's like that.

The student not only has to be ready, the student has to get ready and what that takes is different for each one of us. My point is that if you are waiting to be rescued by a teacher, good luck! It might take a very, very long time. My philosophy has always been that we must "go to meet our maker," so to speak, go at least half-way toward finding a teacher and spare no expense or energy in the process. But I would temper that with the thought that the teacher you are looking for is also looking for you. I love the poem "Waiting" by John Burroughs, where he writes "And what is mine shall know my face." IMO that says it just right.

I believe we have to be proactive in our search for a dharma teacher by preparing ourselves for that event. We must put-out to the extent of who we are. Even in my own case, where everyone who knows me knows I hate to travel, I was told by my teacher to go to Tibet right away (within a month!) and so I did. I also travelled to India (Sikkim) to take a single empowerment that I felt was important and have driven to our yearly 10-day Mahamudra intensive each year for going on 30 years, a 1600 mile road

trip, enough to circle Earth's equator twice. And I'm not bragging; I'm just saying. And I'm the lazy one.

So, if finding a teacher is THAT important to us, what excuses are good enough so that we make no effort? We don't even look to the limit of our ability. They say that the teacher appears when the student is ready, but we have to get ready and what that entails differs for each one of us. We can't compare efforts, but if we have made little to no effort, there's no comparison anyway. In my own case, what small efforts I have made to learn the dharma were at least made effortlessly. I wanted to please and honor my teacher because of his kindness and willingness (and ability!) to work with me. So, hopefully you get the idea: we have to seek in order to find.

I come from a musical background and can't help but think of things in terms of music and song. This reminds me of the song "Seek, Seek and Ye Shall Fine" by that quintessential gospel group, the Swan Silvertones. I include it for those that have the time for such things:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1MtXU7jNH8>

Now, let's talk a little about how we pick out our teacher from the crowd. You can't pick a teacher just by their fame, although that may be a good fallback-position. For example, back in the 1970s I met the Dalai Lama, up close and personal. He was not all that famous yet. There were just a few of us in the room and I got to personally offer him a white scarf and all that. And meeting the Dalai Lama (and everything) was wonderful, perhaps even unforgettable. Yet, when all was said and done, while conceptually it was satisfying, nothing clicked inside. Just because a teacher is renowned does not mean they are cut out for us specifically. If we don't connect,

we don't. Look for the connection and judge a teacher by that alone. That is my advice.

An authentic teacher has to grab us by the short hairs, as they say. Their teachings have to cause us to begin realizing the dharma on the spot. That's the all of it. It does not matter if they are famous or unknown, whether they are good looking or ugly, kind or rough with us, and so on. That's incidental. All that matters is whether we viscerally connect so that what they teach grabs us and we begin to actually realize the dharma for ourselves. That is the long and the short of it. Independently "Realizing" the dharma is always (and only) what it's all about.

We can read books about dharma and certainly I did plenty of that. And, if we are lucky, conceptualization can lead to actual experiences. Yet, beyond experience, we have to realize the dharma personally and to do that (at least in our lineage) requires a living, breathing, authentic dharma teacher. There is no real substitute. Period.

And while dharma teachers are always looking for students that can learn, it's up to us to each find our personal dharma teacher and reach out. If we cannot move ourselves to do that, well, then we won't. It's that simple. If we are waiting to be found and rescued by a Lama on a white horse, that might actually happen, but it could take endless eons to accomplish. And so, I write this to be helpful, since having an authentic dharma teacher in my opinion is imperative.

I have also heard from many would-be dharma students that they don't need a living teacher and that they will teach themselves. IMO, that and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

RUNNING THE TIME GAUNTLET

October 24, 2017

I am sure there are some people who are good at having their expectations turn out as they imagined; I'm just not one of them. As for me, I get "got" just about every time. Often my looking forward to an event (and thinking how fun it will be) is better than the actual event; I'm of that persuasion. In fact, for me that's the case most of the time. Reality is harder to take than what I'd imagined.

I believe there are two tendencies for most of us, either learning forward into the future or hanging back with the past. I am mostly, as mentioned, of the forward-looking variety. The future usually looks better to me than the past. I could never be an historian, but I might have been a good science-fiction writer. And the irony is that I have always been a great protector of popular culture, witness my efforts to preserve popular music and film. So, go figure. Perhaps I am forward-looking enough to preserve the present until it becomes the past. LOL.

And certainly I know (as we all do) that appreciating (living) the present moment is the only way to accumulate any satisfactory memories. Yet, we do love to fondly remember what "was" as well as enjoy imagining what "will be." One of my major mantras has always been "For dreams must be made to matter." We each have to make our dreams real. I am all about that. Yet, what about learning to be more aware of the present moment? How do we do that?

That's what meditation techniques are all about and I am not talking about the popular relaxation therapies (along with most "guided meditations") that pass for

“meditation” these days. My interest is in techniques that promote greater awareness and realization.

The only long-term satisfaction I have been able to find involves actual “realization” of one kind or another. Sure, just resting quietly in repose is excellent (I like some of that too), but as a long-term strategy that is basically relaxation masquerading as meditation. Actual meditation, in my experience, involves concentrating and realization. What is that?

And I’m not talking about realizing how to turn a light-switch on and off. Indeed, that is a part of mundane realization, but here I am talking about what can only be called “spiritual” realization or to put it another way “awareness training,” realization (of one kind or another) as to the nature of our own mind.

For me, spiritual awareness or “Realization” is not static, but rather a process of transformation. Something is exchanged, even if it is only ignorance for clarity. And the key to the more advanced forms of meditation is the ability to be aware of that living fringe of realization more and more of the time. This is what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

Just as in automobiles, the carburetor is where the fuel is mixed (very carefully) with air before it is fed to the firing of the pistons, that kind of unwavering balanced-awareness is what the more advanced forms of meditation (realization-practices) are all about.

We have to keep in mind that all of this training (these meditation techniques) are not just separate components like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Instead, they are part of a unified process that is not static at all, but rather one indissoluble continuing realization of dharma -- life. Even discrete elements of meditation

like Tranquility and Insight meditation, themselves separated by the threshold event called “Recognition of the True Nature of the Mind,” are lost within one another in Mahamudra Meditation.

As I have pointed out in other blogs, the Tibetan word for meditation means “to become familiar with,” so do each of us have to become familiar with our own mind, however that is possible. These formal meditation techniques exist to guide us to that familiarization, but are themselves like scaffolding on a building. When we get the hang of meditation, like training wheels on a kid’s bike, the formality in learning these techniques is to be gently removed as the process of realization is more totally embraced.

MIND AS A BLACK BOX

October 25, 2017

I grew up (and in this country we all grew up) learning how to use the mind, much like we might learn to use a tool or drive a car. The accent has always been on USING the mind as opposed to knowing our mind. The mind as a tool to use is ubiquitous in America. For all practical purposes, in this country the mind is seen as a black box and we are not familiar with (or have any idea) what makes it work on the inside. We have never even looked!

And most amazing of all to me is that I assumed that the mind, just as it comes out of the box, was good to go. The ingrained idea that we each automatically have a clear mind at birth turned out not to be viable. The Buddhists point this out again and again. It is our karma (and its traces) that determines our state of mind at birth; it's not a blank slate at birth as we Americans like to imagine.

If you follow the above argument, sooner or later you will get around to realizing not only that the mind is not a clean slate at birth, but that our mind is not even as clear as we have always assumed. At that point, we might want to know how we can remove whatever obscurations we have accumulated and most of us don't even know the extent that we are obscured. Actually, we have no idea.

In my case, since I had always assumed that my mind was perfect, it came as a shock to find that it was not. And how did I realize this? It was as easy as sitting down on a cushion to learn Tranquility Meditation. It did not take me long to experience that my mind was not tranquil or clear, but subject to an endless swarm

of mosquito-like thoughts, fears, worries, and imaginings. And I was powerless to do anything about it. The harder I tried, the worse it got.

However, it took me considerably longer to realize that I could (and would have to) do something about these obscuring factors, this cloudy mind that I discovered I had. For me, there was a real transition time from when I first sat down to learn meditation (assuming my mind was clear as a bell) and my discovering that in fact it was a lot more cloudy than clear. Hmmm. That surprise was food for even more thought. LOL.

And it took even greater time before I did anything about it. I just sat there on the cushion for the longest while and didn't know what to do. Here I was, just sitting down and following the instructions for Tranquility Meditation and, lo and behold, nothing happened. And nothing happened and happened and happened. There was no perceptible progress in meditation.

It was only then (after years) that I began to pay at least a little attention to what are called by the Tibetan Buddhists the Preliminary Practices which, oddly enough, I finally began to realize were designed for exactly the problem I was having, removing enough of our obscurations so that we could successfully learn to meditate. As they say "Who woulda' thunk it?"

In fact, what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro) are practiced for this very reason. And before then, I had just ignored such practices and marched right on by, assuming that I didn't need something as onerous as these exercises seemed to be. Suddenly, I found myself backtracking and getting in line to do these same preliminaries. That is, if I wanted to move forward with meditation I had to be

less obscured. And it took time for me to decide that, as well. When I'm confused, I can sit there for a very long time just trying to take it all in.

The funny thing (or what I found astonishing) was that all that time I thought I was crystal clear. And it is understandable. If the only pair of glasses we have ever had are dirty, we have never known what clear and clean is. I didn't and did not know I did not know. That's a hard nut to crack, mainly because it was only when (almost by accident) I managed to remove an obscuration or two that I saw my inner vision clearing up. I didn't even know how to clear it up, much less would I make a point of doing so.

And so, what turned out to take the longest was rounding the curve of not only realizing my mind was obscured, but that I could (and only I) actually do something about it. It seemed like I just sat there pondering it all for years. It reminds me of those wonderful images of Winnie the Pooh sitting on the ground under a tree. There I was, still just taking it all in.

So, the point of all this is that before we can remove our obscurations, we have to first discover, realize, and admit we have them and THAT can take almost forever. We can't change what we don't know and admit is there.

SOME WORDS ABOUT DHARMA

October 26, 2017

They say that the apple never falls far from the tree and with dharma that is true for me. Unless I feel that I am becoming increasingly more aware and clear, I am uncomfortable and have this feeling of “loss” or of losing touch.

However, I come from way back in time (many decades ago), from a kind of tortured state during my teens on up to my mid-twenties, a time through which I was trying to find myself. I am sure many of you have too. As an oldest child, I had no one to look up to other than my parents, which were a help, but still I found myself alone and always walking point.

Each of us is somewhere in the family queue and suffer accordingly. There is no good or bad position to be born in, just different. First child, middle, youngest, or only child. Each has its pros and cons. As a first child, it seemed that I was always alone even when surrounded by my four younger brothers.

It is significant that I was trained as a naturalist since I was very young, about six-years old. I got used to nature’s laws early-on, so when the religion I was raised in began to seem (even to my young mind) mostly nonsensical, I turned to Mother Nature as to a Pole Star, for guidance. And when I felt around for a substitute, a replacement for my Catholic upbringing, after many years of searching, I found the Dharma and like a baby I just latched on.

For me, the dharma is the truth of nature that I already knew and worshipped at. In fact, even in dharma, there is what is called the “Lama of Appearances,” where natural appearances

themselves display the dharma for all to see, loud and clear. And the dharma is the heart of the many kinds and styles of Buddhism; I tend to stick with the dharma itself and less and less with its cultural wrappings.

In recent years I increasingly see that the particular spiritual path I came up through is not for everyone. For me, it was very, very difficult; still, the dharma is far easier than trying to figure it all out on my own. I tried that for many years and ended up with a patchwork quilt of half-true ideas.

So, when I look around at the world and with all of the folks living in it, I wonder how many could manage the path I had to walk and I worry about those who might have trouble doing what I did, what I had to go through. And this, mainly because some of what helped me was accidental – fate – and that is hard to mimic or teach. Is there anything I can do to make the journey to using dharma easier for others than it was for me? That's what I wrestle with.

The simple truth that cannot be changed is that to the degree our mind is obscured by our own bad habits and miss-takes, these have to eventually be rectified and remedied. What obscures our mind has to be cleared away. And the Tibetan Buddhists have a rigorous method to do this, but it is not for the faint of heart, but for the dedicated student.

And removing mental stains is not a cakewalk, but a discipline in itself. I don't know (and have never heard) of any magic pill that we can take to clear-up our mind other than patient practice. And, like polishing silverware, it takes plain old elbow grease on our part and is just one more thing we have to do in an already busy life. No matter, that if we could see straight, we would realize that removing our

obscurations is priority number one and all else is just secondary. But most folks are not there yet. And so, I cast around for methods that are easier to do than hard.

I have already done these preliminaries myself, so I at least understand how they work and what is required to make them work. My wish is that you could avoid what I had to do in terms of effort and practice. And I look for ways to save you time and give you info that may be useful or easier to understand. But when all is said and done, each of us still will have to do something that we are not already doing. It will take work on our part.

Like rolling a boulder up a hill, the hardest part may be getting ourselves out of the hole we already find ourselves in. Getting motivated (and the confidence) to act is often the most difficult, especially if we don't know the first thing about what we are doing or perhaps why we are doing it.

If you and I lived closer (and I could work with you one-to-one) it might help to have a guide, someone who themselves has already done what you are about to do. However, when it comes right down to where the rubber meets the road, like all dharma, we each have to do it ourselves. Even the Buddha himself could not do it for us.

And turning ourselves loose on ourselves is a little like letting the fox into the henhouse, but what are we going to do? If we have very little confidence in the process (because it is so new to us), we can easily find ourselves trying this or trying that, but half-heartedly. We are just going through the motions because we may feel ridiculous or for any number of other reasons. We don't know how to properly commit ourselves.

It may help for you to know that the practice-path until we reach what is called “Recognition” (being the recognition as to the true nature of the mind) is tedious and mostly difficult. It’s not unlike the blind leading the blind, because we don’t know what we are doing and have probably had few to no results up to this point, at least not many. So, if you are kind of fumbling along practicing the preliminaries, don’t feel like the Lone Ranger. Everyone feels that way to some degree. And hurrying through the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro) will only get you the opportunity to do it again. That’s what happened to me.

We each have to learn patience (and concentration) somewhere and sometime. We can’t get around it and we can’t keep it in our future forever. Sooner or later we just have to do it, like it or not. And, if we don’t like it, it won’t do much good, will it? This is the guardian on the threshold of dharma we all have to cross. So, the good advice IMO is to take our time and find a way to enjoy as we articulate the practice, one step at a time. It can help to begin to mix our dharma practice with some mundane hobby that we already love to do.

ON FIRST MEETING THE 17TH KARMAPA

October 27, 2017

In 1997, with about zero notice, our dharma teacher (the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche) asked us to go to Tibet and to do it within weeks. Since we don't say no to our dharma teacher, that's how I came to take my family on a pilgrimage to Tibet in order to see the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, the young Tibetan lama that the Eddie Murphy movie "The Golden Child" is said to be based on; the idea for the movie is the tradition that, essentially, the Karmapa is a living Buddha.

Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the head of one of the four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. At the time of this trip, the Karmapa was 12-years old, but his incarnation goes back seventeen generations. In fact the Karmapa Lineage was the first of Tibet's reincarnated lamas. The current Karmapa is the 17th, while the current Dalai Lama is the 14th.

I had no real idea how this trip would affect me. Since we were told to make the trip by our guru, we did. I will pick up the story from the point where we actually arrived at the Karmapa's ancestral home, Tsurphu Monastery, in the Tolung Valley, deep in the mountains of Tibet at some 15,000 feet in altitude. And there I sat, with my wife, two of my daughters, and my son in a little room, waiting to see the Karmapa. We were about to spend three days there as the Karmapa's guests.

Each day at 1 p.m. the Karmapa has a public reception, where a procession of visitors file up, offer a white scarf, and receive his blessing. We wanted to

do that too, but were told to wait and that His Holiness would see us privately. We had come with letters of introduction from a number of high lamas, including H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, who had been to our meditation center here in Big Rapids, Michigan twice.

It seemed that, from the moment we arrived, all the monks there knew that we were Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's students. We could see them whispering about us. In their eyes, we belonged to Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and they seemed to know exactly who that was, even way out in the high plains of Tibet. That impressed me.

The time ticked away on the slow track as we waited with anticipation to see the Karmapa. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, but in his previous incarnation as the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, yet I felt like I had been in endless touch with him through the lineage all this time. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the spiritual leader of an entire lineage of Tibetan monks, one most famous for its yogis and meditators.

And this trip happened so fast. Up to a month ago, we had little hope of ever seeing the Karmapa in person, since it was very uncertain when the Chinese would ever let him leave Tibet. He was essentially a prisoner in his own monastery. The Chinese watched him all the time. And now, here we were at his ancestral home and about to meet him in person.

[Note: The young Karmapa, pretending to be in solitary retreat, slipped away from the monastery and escaped to India from Tibet in December of 1999.]

At last, the summons came. The Karmapa would see us now. So, off we went in single file toward his interview room, some two stories up from where we

were. And I was right in the middle of the worst of my altitude sickness, still sick and getting sicker. I don't do well at high altitudes, slipping into bronchitis, having to go on antibiotics, and all of that. It happens every time I go to Tibet.

As I climbed the steep stairs toward His Holiness I had to stop and do heavy breathing, just to keep enough oxygen in my lungs. Every few steps, I would find myself gasping for breath as I climbed upward toward the interview room. And please understand that the average Tibetan stairway is more of a ladder (like you see on a boat) than the kind of stairs we are used to, and steep. You literally hang on as you climb.

We eventually came to a small courtyard in the open sun outside His Holiness' interview room, where we took off our shoes. I actually had to sit down on the roof and pant. How embarrassing. And then up another short ladder to the interview room itself, where I arrived, still trying to catch my breath.

I plopped down at the back of the room, while everyone else went on up front and prostrated to the Karmapa. I was so bushed that I did not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama. All I could see was this young man kind of inset into a wall of golden brocade at the far end of the room. As I caught my breath, I got up and slowly moved forward.

Through the 1960s and onward, in my quest for spiritual teachers, I had seen many gurus, yogis, and teachers in person, and so I was preparing myself to actually be in the presence of the Karmapa. In the past, when I met great spiritual presences, most were imposing, some almost regal. I was getting ready for a similar experience here, you know, me seeing his powerful presence.

But the Karmapa was different. In the end, in his presence, it was myself that I saw, not him. And here is how that happened. As I reached the front of the room, there was the Karmapa, looking better than I could even imagine, and I had imagined he would be great. All of 12 years old (by our calendar) and five feet tall, but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, he filled the room with his presence. All I remember is how happy I was to see him; He was not scary or distant. He was happy to see us too. I remember kind of getting through my prostrations and fumbling around trying to offer him a white scarf, while kneeling down before him.

He looked at me like I had never been looked at before. His eyes looking straight into my eyes and then he upped the ante by focusing intently within me. I was being seen. His dark eyes, almost like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, were actually moving in and out, trying to get the right focus. I had never seen eyes do that, be able to lock gaze with you and then, with the gaze locked, still move in and out, getting a fix. But that was just how it was.

The Karmapa examined me for a few seconds and, in the grip of his eyes, it seemed as though time stopped, and then it all relaxed and time moved on again. He placed the white scarf over my head, gave me a welcoming, kind look, and I sat down in front of him with the rest of our group.

It was then that I became aware that there was chanting going on and I gradually realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later we found out that we were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders, complete

with Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us.

It was very intense, with His Holiness leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know, one invoking the fierce deities that protect the dharma. And this one was complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja before, but never one quite like this, certainly not one with the Karmapa himself leading it! And I don't quite know how to describe what happened next.

I begin to identify with this puja as not much different from my own practice in many ways, and I found myself examining just where I was with my daily practice and what it was all about for me. I had done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/evening for many years. I was to do it until my death or until I completed it by realizing the essential nature of my own mind, whichever came first.

Now, here, in the midst of Karmapa's mandala, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of that practice. What was that practice and what was the essence of it? I thought how in my own idea of myself, to my mind, I was somewhat of a tough character and I carried that strength or toughness into my practice.

In fact, I loved the fierce wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, there in that room with Karmapa, that same strength, toughness, or we might even say fierceness came up in the mind and began to be examined inwardly, but in a new light. And this was no thought or idea that I was playing with. Instead, I was examining myself or, to be more exact, I was realizing part of my self, in this case, that part

that had been practicing all these years, the one who did the practice.

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but just a shell or shield covering up this extremely sensitive inside. I was tough, because I was so... so sensitive and, at heart, even kind. In that moment I was flooded with a state of compassion or rather the realization that I was (and always had been), at my deepest part, compassionate, concerned, and caring, and that this was my natural state.

It was not something for me to strive for, but already in fact already always the case – the state of my very being, something that only had to be uncovered and opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for that was already my nature, my natural state. All I had to do was to let go of all the attachments that obscured this insight, relax, and just let it shine through.

Again, I should point out that this was not a concept or idea, but an intense realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my sometimes fierce presence, was none other than compassion. It was as if, like taking off a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed as I was overcome with this, now so obvious, realization that I was, in essence, very simple – just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world.

And all of my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all the suffering I saw around me. In that moment, I understood myself and my practice, right there in midst of that Mahakala puja with Karmapa. My mind was at rest.

And later, when we left the Karmapa and very slowly drove back down the 40-miles of road of rocks that was not really much of a road at all, we saw rainbow after rainbow after rainbow.

So, that is what Karmapa was about to me, not just some powerful being sitting on a throne. Rather, there was enough space and expanded time within the embrace of the Karmapa's mental mandala and presence for me to realize myself. It was not the Karmapa I saw when I was with him, but myself. That is my definition of a spiritual being, one who helps us realize ourselves, not who they are.

After the puja, we spent some time together with the Karmapa during which he gave the answers to the questions that we had brought to him. He did not skirt the tough questions, but was clear and unequivocal in his answers. I was deeply relieved, both from the experience I just described and to hear the various particular answers. And later, he came out in the courtyard and just kind of hung out with us. After all, my son Michael Andrew (who was there) was about the same age. I doubt that very many western families with kids had ever made it to Tsurphu Monastery.

I had heard many stories about His Holiness, both this incarnation and the previous incarnations, stories of amazing actions, all pointing to this extraordinary being. Somehow these stories help to inspire faith and confidence in the Karmapa, that he is who he is — that sort of thing. Yet these stories were nothing compared to the sheer largeness of his presence. "Seeing is believing," and this kind of experience defies words. How do I explain that, when you are in the presence of His Holiness, you have a different idea of yourself, of who you are, why you are here in this world, etc.? I learned things about myself when I

was in his presence that I never knew before, important things. The word is “realization.” I realized things about myself that I had never realized before.

And I understood why my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, wanted us to go to Tibet and meet the Karmapa in person. It occurred to me that for any person with a connection to His Holiness, before continuing your life, drop everything and do whatever it takes to go and meet the Karmapa in person. And only after that pick up your life again. I didn’t understand who I was or how best to make use of my life until I met His Holiness. They say that the Karmapa, along with the Dalai Lama, are emanations of pure compassion. I always understood that, but what I did not realize is that my own nature was the same. And that is worth knowing.

Years ago, phrases like “His Holiness” and “guru” were literally foreign to me and smacked of exotic cults and all of that stuff, a hangover perhaps from the New-Age spiritual fads of the 1970s. Yet, meeting the Karmapa, eyeball-to-eyeball, was not foreign at all. It was only too familiar, like finally knowing myself for who I am, confirming who it is I always hoped I was.

The entire book of our extended journey is here. I am told that it is a fun read:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/.../e-bo.../Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

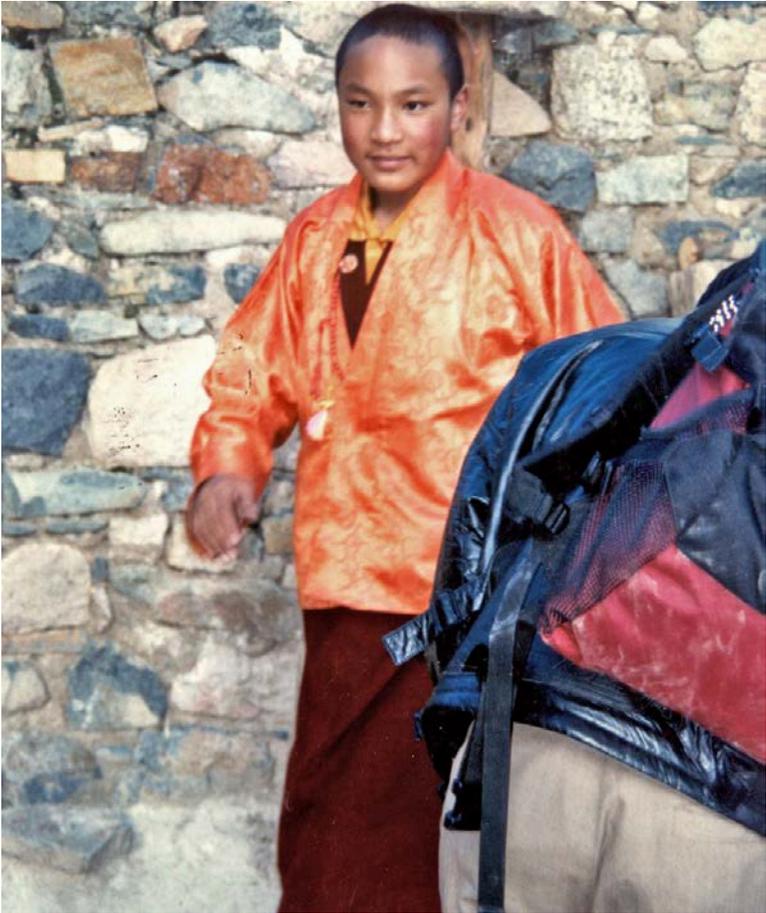
Here are two picture albums of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa that may interest some folks:

“Karmapa at KTD: 2008”: His first visit to American and KTD.

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

The Karmapa's second visit to America in 2011:

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/KarmapaKTD_2011.pdf



“IF YOU’RE TELLING THE TRUTH,
THEN THERE’S ROOM IN MY HEART TO RECEIVE
IT.”

October 28, 2017

The following are some thoughts that have been running through my mind these days. Recently I had to opportunity to take in a couple of my daughter May’s shows on her tour for the release of a new album, “Mother Lion.” This album has been almost two years in the making and I am told that it sums up (in what is like a suite of songs) a rather difficult time in her life. These are primarily not dancing tunes, but rather deeply emotional expressions. The show was sold out and I doubt there was a dry eye in the house. It’s moving to be one of many hundreds of people feeling something together.

Anyway, in the midst of what was for me a powerful musical experience, one particular song caught my ear and my wife says that I have been humming it around the house. I didn’t even realize I was doing that. The name of the song was “Shake the World,” and in the amazingly-striking lyrics was one particular verse that went like this:

“I want to let love in,
I want to believe it.
If you’re telling the truth,
Then there’s room in my heart to receive it.”
.... “I want to shake the world.”

The words are powerful and I wish you could hear the music that goes with it. The album is not being released until November 1st and those interested can then get it at this link:

<https://earthworkmusic.com/store-ind?i=246&s=Mother%20Lion>

My reason for quoting May's song here are these particular lines:

"If you're telling the truth,
Then there's room in my heart to receive it."

It struck me that dharma is like that; somehow, deep beneath whatever obscurations we labor under, perhaps we can hear the ring of truth from the dharma. There is the old saying "The truth will set you free." Hearing the dharma, at least for me, is often like that. In general, "Realization" is like that.

In the dharma teachings, a great deal is made about the difference between understanding the dharma intellectually, experiencing and living it emotionally, and actually realizing it. Most of us are intellectually able to conceptualize the words of dharma, either spoken or written. That is "understanding."

A smaller subset of readers will spiritually experience the dharma, although like all experiences, they may come and go. One day we are up and the next day, perhaps, we are down. That is "experience," which is the hallmark of the samsaric world we live in.

And perhaps an even yet smaller subset will "Realize" the experience. As it is written in the pith dharma teachings, "In the midst of experience, realization may arise." Realization," unlike experience, does not go up and down, but is permanent. Many people wonder just what realization is and the closest I can explain it is that just as a child we at some point realized how to turn a light switch on and off; that is realization. We don't forget it. It does not come and go like experience. It remains with us. We realize! The

difference between experience and spiritual realization needs to be understood.

Of course, spiritual realization, the realization of the dharma is more difficult (a little more total or broad in scope) than a light switch, unless you mean turning on the light of the mind. LOL.

“Recognition” (realization) as to the true nature of the mind, once attained, is considered permanent. And there are innumerable Buddhist texts about recognition of the nature of the mind, our first real taste of realization. In truth, much of dharma revolves around it, either preparing for it or, after what is termed “Recognition,” learning to expand that realization and extend it. Recognition is a pivotal event in the realization of dharma.

What my daughter May’s verse brought to my mind is that, even if we have not yet achieved recognition as to the true nature of the mind, we must be able to at least sense the truth when we hear it. The truth of dharma must sound different to us than, to quote the Bible, just “Tinkling cymbals and sounding brass.” Hearing the sound of or sensing the dharma must register somewhere within us. That is resonance. And, if so, perhaps can serve to guide or lead us toward realization. That is my thought.

“If you’re telling the truth,
Then there’s room in my heart to receive it.”

YOU CAN'T SALT THE SALT

October 28,2017

This is meant as a kind of a fun blog based on some experiences that I have had, although it sounds as if I am complaining, so it may not interest many. Does the following ever happen to anyone but me?

Since I'm considered somewhat of an expert on a few subjects, many people that I meet in person (and especially my online friends) like to tell me everything that THEY know about the various subjects in which I am considered expert, rather than ask me questions so we can discuss things. And this amazes me!

I first learned about this phenomenon years ago through the subject of astrology. It is pretty much axiomatic by now that even if I am considered an expert on astrology, friends (or strangers) would rather tell me everything they know about astrology (even though it is minimal or just quoted from books), rather than have a conversations or listen to something I might have to say on the topic. They have no questions! This has to be funny; otherwise it does not even make sense.

Years ago, I had a couple of friends who would visit me now and again and do just that: repeat everything they had read (and not even understood properly), but never ask to know anything I might have to say or have a dialog about astrology. A life without questions, to me, is a desert. I was too polite to cut them off. And I didn't really care other than it was boring and took up time. FYI, those days are gone. I now have the natural right to be a cranky old man, so please talk WITH me and not at me.

Over the years, I have known thousands of astrologers, if only as customers, and many hundreds have made the trek to our home and center here in western Michigan. Perhaps my funniest story of this kind (funny to me) as regards astrology is when a well-known astrologer (not to be named here) came to visit me and stayed at our center which is right next door to our house. During his several-day stay with me, he dutifully sat next door reading books I had written on astrology and never (not even once) did he think to talk with me and have a discussion, even though I was the living astrologer and author of the books he was reading. In other words, here I was, alive (and still on the planet), only some thirty feet away. Now that has to be funny; otherwise, what would you call it?

It is the same with Buddhism, but a little different. Because my friends or acquaintances know that I am interested in the dharma, I am constantly bombarded by links and references to dharma books they think I should read and this from every side. Seldom does a day go by but that I get a personal FB message or email of this kind.

And they all are pointing out books I should read on dharma, as if I have not read enough books. IMO, with respect, it is they who should read them if books is what they like! I have an entire room full of dharma books, plus enough writings of my own on the subject to take years for anyone to read. But this kind of event happens to me as regularly as rain.

Another interesting event that I can now pretty-much foretell is: because I am astrologer and a friend of mine may know another astrologer, they are hell bent on getting the two of us together. Sometimes (and I mean sometimes, like in poker), two of a kind works

out, but just as often (or more often) it does not. I would rather meet someone who is different than me rather than the same. The last thing I want to hear more about is the astrology of Adolf Hitler or another undiscovered chart of the U.S.A. You get the idea.

This kind of blog is difficult to write because it sounds like I am complaining, but that's not my intention here, although there may be a touch of it. I'm laughing. It is more that I find it amazing and remarkable (I am remarking) and something that confounds me. And most of all I am curious if I am the only one or are others out there suffering the same fate? Do tell.

LOL. So much for my whining!

On a more meaningful note, what is it that I do like to read on the dharma? That's easy. It's not books about Buddhism, but rather concise Buddhist texts that are called "upadesha," which in English translates to something like "pith teachings." These I love to read and try to understand properly. Here is an example of what I consider to be a pith teaching. It is an excerpt from the text "Ocean of Certainty" by the Ninth Karmapa (Wangchuk Dorje):

"These are the methods for discovering the wisdom of Vipassana right within Shamata. They are called "looking at the essence of meditation." What is known as "reflexive awareness" is seeing the essence of mind by looking. This reflexive awareness is reflexively-aware wisdom, great bliss – it is mahamudra.

"If the essence of meditation is not looked at, the essence of mind is not seen. If that is not seen, reflexively-aware wisdom will not be recognized. If that is not recognized, there can be no realization of

great bliss, the wisdom of vipassana. Therefore it is important to look at the mind.”

I would certainly like to discuss this teaching with anyone who is interested, not that I can claim to understand it completely! The more I read it and then practice, the better I understand it.

THE STAIN OF THE FUTURE

October 29, 2017

The Tibetan lamas are very clear about their admonition as to hope and fear, which basically is to not spend our time in needless speculation and expectations.

The future will arrive and if we are alright now, we can be alright then too. In fact, we can ride in the present until we reach the future that we may now fear. After all, we bring the present with us or we with it.

The lamas say this, this is not because of some fundamentalist wish to deprive us of something we enjoy doing, like a little “blue sky-imagining,” but rather because more often than not, by doing so we are adding still more obscurations to our already crowded plate. The same goes with dwelling overmuch on the past.

As an example, take my recent doctor appointment, where I had to have yet another CAT-Scan. If I think about how much I don't like these hospital visits, they become not only sometimes difficult in themselves, but also a specter staining the present moment from now until the actual appointment. It's like adding insult to injury. It's bad enough that I have to go through these endless procedures, but they are much worse (and prolonged) if I add days of worry about them into the mix, etc.

However, if I just remain in the freshness of the present moment, where I am now, I'm actually just fine, and I will be fine until I arrive at the hospital for the various tests. Is this not like “The Fool” in the tarot deck? And even at the hospital, I am usually fine once I get there. It's the dread, fear, and worry of these

visits that are a waste of time. And that's just one example of how my own hopes and fears prey upon me.

This is what the great Mahasiddha Tilopa pointed out when he said "Don't invite the future" and "Don't prolong the past." He was talking about the remarkable immediacy, value, and solvability of the present moment. Everything happens in the here and now. There is no reason to stain the present with our fears of the future or the past. In fact, the present is not stained except in our own confused mind.

The old saying that "coming events cast their shadow" is more likely a case of another common saying, "what you fear shall come upon you." Pop that balloon is my suggestion. Let's not get ahead of ourselves or particularly dwell in the past is what the pith dharma teachers point out. And they also state to not be attached to the present; instead, just relax in it as we are. Let ourselves be here because that's where we are.

"Ask and you shall receive" has got to be an important maxim. As an example, I no sooner asked my mind about extending the clarity and lucidity of Insight Meditation to more mundane tasks than I had a sudden flash-realization, where (as mentioned above) I found myself (without thinking) putting on the hat of worrying about something in the future (in this case, hospital tests), caught myself, and immediately reverted back to the clarity of this present moment, where I was fine.

And so, I just didn't go there, not because I'm scared to face reality, but because hope and fear of the future seldom add anything but more obscurations to the moment. It's already hard enough to see is my

view. And when I dropped my worry, that future-dread just vanished. Poof! It was all in my head. LOL.

And when I flashed on that hospital worry, it was not simply a thought, but the whole kit and caboodle -- the worry, the frame of mind, the future, the fears, and on and on. And then came the realization that this was just "expectation" doing its thing again and it was worse than the actual hospital visit. Seeing these two experiences, side by side (within a second or two of one another) made it clear to me (I realized) that the my worry-pose was something completely made up by me and that I could drop it and just be fine, at least until there was proof that I actually had something to worry about. Dealing with experiences like these IS also dharma practice.

And it was much better for me to just take the clarity of this moment-now with me all the way to the hospital than to stop feeling normal and good, put on my worry hat, and feel bad from now until perhaps after the hospital visit. And this is regardless as to whether I will have something physical to worry about or not.

I have to ask myself: how much of my time do I spend needlessly living in the future or dwelling on past events? In either case, it not only is wasted time, but also adds further obscurations to my mind. And I already have enough of those.

IS DHARMA PRACTICE TEDIOUS?

October 30, 2017

I committed to doing my daily dharma practice many decades ago and so I still do it. It starts and ends my day. If nothing else, sometimes that practice is almost like the single stop sign in my daily routine. There are no cars coming either way, but still I have to come to a complete stop, open my shrine, and practice. Whatever else I think I'm doing has to wait.

And I don't always feel like stopping to do this practice because I'm usually quite busy doing nothing important. LOL.

However you spell it, my formal dharma practice does punctuate my existence, providing me (like it or not) with a self-imposed pause, something like a mile marker in the day that I can take note of while I am in the midst of all this busy life and the living of it. Formal practice on the cushion for me is very much like taking my mental temperature.

Often, I like doing dharma practice, but sometimes I see it as an interruption, which of course it is, something like my mom used to say: "Michael, you just have to do it". I am most often up in the wee hours of the morning and sometimes earlier than that, like even before midnight; and this because I went to bed too early in the evening.

And sometimes I feel like doing my formal dharma practice just to get it done and out of the way. Well, that's not a good sign, but it is a sign that lets me know that I am drifting. When in that mood, I don't allow myself to do the next day's practice before midnight. That's how disciplined I am. LOL.

Anyway, that's the worst case. Usually I am good with doing my formal practice, but, like the weather, I do vary. For me, formal dharma practice is an avocation, but if I don't feel like it, a discipline.

I should add that I do off-the-cushion dharma practices of various kinds throughout day now, but (as mentioned) I sometimes have this approach/avoidance affair with my formal on-the-cushion dharma practice. Yet, like the stop sign, it always provides a pause and a chance to look around at myself and at least take my mental temperature; or as the kids around here say, "and that's a good thing," sensing where I am with my mind each day.

Since I have also been doing off-the-cushion dharma practice (Insight Meditation, Mahamudra) for many years, all through the day, why do I still do the formal dharma practice on the cushion, things like opening the shrine, filling the water bowls, reciting sadhanas, saying prayers, mantras, and all of that? That's a good question and the answer I believe is very important and should be noted.

As mentioned, formal meditation is a very good way to take my current mental temperature as to clear headedness and to measure my attachment to whatever else I am doing, even though that too may be dharma related, like writing this blog. I keep a shrine and do formal sitting dharma practice for several reasons.

First, I do it to honor my root dharma teacher (and other teachers) and to say special aspirations and prayers for their long life and for others. And I also do it to more formally mix my mind with the lineage and request their continued blessing. And I always include the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer, which I consider sublime.

And so, the bottom line here is that although I am doing various kinds of realization practices as I go about my day (and more and more of the time), I make a point of doing formal meditation practice twice a day, and this includes opening the shrine in the morning, filling the bowls, sitting on the cushion, saying prayers, sadhanas, and mantras, and then closing it (and saying prayers) in the evening. .

“HOW CAN I BEGIN TO PRACTICE DHARMA?”

October 31, 2017

How do we find our way into starting dharma practice when we have none? I'm sure the answer varies as much as individuals vary, but the general guidelines are the same for all. In my own experience, that desire to begin practicing dharma came from within me and also from the outside. I will try to explain.

Basically, I was more or less a phenomenologist from an early age, meaning I make a point of watching my own internal mindstream. And even now, I am forever monitoring my stream of experience from day to day, if not moment by moment. If, you are like me, we are not trained through the education process in psychology and philosophy (I was not), then we tend to develop our own hackneyed concept of our own mind, a psychology/philosophy related to ourselves and the world we live in. We can't help but come up with our own view.

I can't say that everyone does this, but even as a young child I was busy constructing a philosophical world view, what the Germans call “Weltanschauung.” No one had to tell me to do this; it was just my way to cope with all of the information pouring into my young mind, that is: I was trying to make some sense of my life.

So, how did I get from there into actually taking up a dharma practice, other than gradually? As mentioned, for me it came both from the inside and the outside. As for inside, my affinity with the dharma came from identifying within myself exactly what the dharma teachings were describing. They were mostly a match. I never converted to Buddhism; rather, I simply

discovered that I already was, in large, already (and always) following the dharma. That's one I didn't see coming and what I mean by getting it from the inside. I was in basic agreement with the basic tenets of Buddhism.

As for the outside, the dharma came to me through living dharma teachers that I personally met like the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje), the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (my root teacher), the 17th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje), and many other great dharma teachers I could name. Of course, the teachings of these great rinpoches affected me, but most of all it was their manner, their presence, and their sheer intelligence that commanded my instant respect. If they accepted the dharma as truth, how could I not? I already was thinking much that same thing from my study of nature.

Yet, that impression of dharma, inside and out, led to my eventually actually taking action by learning to practice dharma. Of course, as mentioned, some of this came from wanting to join with or be part of what these great spiritual lamas were all about. And, as mentioned about the inside, by identifying with the dharma as already my own experience; it was like recognizing that I already was a card-carrying member of the tribe of dharma practitioners. I just moved the dharma from outside my circle of identification to within that circle. I didn't have to lift a finger. That's a minor form of the "realization" we are always talking about. I realized that I was already familiar with dharma on my own, at least to some degree.

In fact, that is not too far away from having someone point at me and say "I know you; you belong with us."

Only, mostly I did the pointing myself, realizing that I already held most of the tenets that the dharma teachings were espousing. I was already part of it all and always had been. That's a hard one to deny, I would expect. So, when did I first lift a finger to practice?

It was like starting anything that we know nothing about, especially when it comes to our own mind, which for most Americans is something we may know how to use as a tool (using our mind), but have never looked inward directly at it. Because of that, for a considerable time, I was confused, that is, more confused than my normal confusion, me trying (essentially) to pretend to practice dharma, something (the practice) at the time I knew nothing about. For a while, I was at sea.

Suddenly, I was officially (at least in name) a dharma practitioner. Color me dharma. I was proud to be in the tribe of dharma practitioners and at the same time knew I did not know the first thing about how to practice dharma. Literally, I was going through the motions of trying to practice, much like in the style of traditional monkey-see, monkey-do.

And at first, I had no dharma collaterals, not even an image of the Buddha. Of course, I rectified that (and in spades) by eventually running a dharma-goods store for our monastery, exposing myself to a wide variety of very fine Tibetan Buddhists practice materials. If you read this blog, you must know that I would gather some supports for my practice. And I did.

Actually, the first practice support that I used was a small statue of the Buddha given to me by the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (my root lama), who filled and blessed it himself. I had no shrine, so I placed it

on a bookshelf and sat down on some kind of pillow in front of it. I was then (in my own mind) a dharma practitioner. And I am NOT a religious person. I don't consider the dharma as a religion but, like Mother Nature, just the truth or the way life is. Christians, Jews, Muslims, etc. all could use the dharma without violating their religion, at least as regards the meditation techniques.

So there I was, in a corner of my tiny office, sitting on a cushion on the floor, with a small statue above me sitting on a bookshelf that I had commandeered. It reminds me of the Lyle Lovett song "If I Had a Boat," and the line "I said me upon my pony on my boat." That was me sitting there. As to what I did on that cushion, at least at first (and in retrospect), has to be funny, because I had no idea what I was doing except trying to follow what instructions I was given as to learning Tranquility Meditation.

My point here is that we can expect to at first appear to ourselves as a little foolish; at least I did. If we keep in mind that the Tibetan word for meditation (Gom) translates as "to become familiar with," and this means to become familiar with the mind, something we have been unfamiliar with (except as a tool to study something) up to now in our life. So, there I sat, trying to become familiar with my mind and didn't even grasp that was what I was doing. And I didn't really know how to do it properly.

All I knew was that this Tranquility Meditation stuff was not a piece of cake, certainly not relaxing, and anything but tranquil. In fact, the harder I tried to practice meditation, the more of a hornet's nest my mind seemed to be. So, not only did I not know what I was doing (or if I was doing it properly), neither did it give me simply "no result" at all. Instead, it was the

exact reverse of any peace of mind or tranquil state and more like I had unleashed a host of mosquitoes and they were buzzing around my head. The more I tried to quiet my mind, the louder my internal noise appeared. Of course I was just seeing for myself what had always been there. That was my introduction to dharma practice and this is NOT unusual. It is usual. Most beginning meditators encounter this.

Little did I know at the time that I was not ready to learn sitting meditation. My root teacher never had suggested it; rather he pointed out another practice entirely. I felt I had to practice Tranquility Meditation because everyone around me was doing that and the local instructor gave those instructions. For me, this was a big mistake. And I am embarrassed to point out that I spent about 32 years (32 YEARS!) trying to learn Tranquility Meditation and still did not manage it. Luckily, I was doing other practices that did (finally!) accumulate so that I could remove some few obscurations.

And this is why it is helpful to have an authentic dharma instructor, someone that you can trust to keep you on track. I tried to learn skiing over the years, with no instructor, and I never got good at that; I would not attempt brain surgery on myself, either.

Realizing the true nature of our mind is a little like brain surgery; we can't do that by ourselves. It takes an authentic teacher, someone who has themselves mastered recognition of the true nature of the mind, to guide us. We can't guide ourselves; that is what the highest level pith-teachings repeatedly point out.

So, if we are serious about dharma practice, it is best to find an authentic teacher to guide us, even if it takes a great effort on our part.

PROSELYTIZING DHARMA

November 1, 2017

“Proselytizing dharma” is an oxymoron, because the dharma is something we each already have, but just don’t know how to use. In my experience, Buddhists do not proselytize, although, to my shock, I have seen it done once in India. I disliked it as much there as I am tired of the various Christian sects that come knocking on my door asking me if I have been saved. I used to say back to them “Saved for what?” but that got tiresome too.

And just for fun, I once invited these door-to-door solicitors of religion into my home on the condition that they give me equal time to talk about the virtues of Buddhism or astrology, both of which to them were the devil’s tools.

Anyway, they came in, said their piece, pretended to listen to me, but soon tired of sharing equal time. They obviously were frightened by what I said because they ran right out and brought back (that same day) their “Big Boss” to deal with me; they must have imagined he had an answer for everything.

Of course, I also made him give equal time and that is the last I saw of them. They did not like the shoe being on the other foot and just wanted to convert someone, anyone. However, I have tired of even doing that and now I just politely wave them away. They don’t like that either, but what can you do? IMO, fundamentalists, in general, are confused.

I’m sure, to some readers of this blog, it must sound like I’m selling soap or encyclopedias, but I’m not; at least that’s not my intention. I aim these blogs at those who are interested in or already doing dharma

practice. And I do it to help streamline their own practice so they don't make the same mistakes I did. I do my best to share what I have learned over many decades through the dharma. I'm not trying to convert anyone; Buddhism is not about conversion, but rather is transmitted through a process of confirmation, finding that at our deepest roots we are already following the dharma or something like it.

So, Buddhists don't proselytize, but they do share and point out information, which is what I am doing here. I don't consider what I do trolling for converts, but rather a process of helping folks to identify with what they already are discovering on their own or have perhaps always known intuitively. As mentioned, I see what I write here as more a process of confirmation than anything else.

Nor do I consider myself a dharma teacher; I'm more like a dharma "sharer." After all, I came to my majority in the 1960s; my generation created the Internet and we believe in sharing and are proving it with our actions. I share here my experience with the dharma and do my very best to present it to readers of this blog. I don't tend to have students or feel any need to collect them; I do have a few Facebook friends that I work with to provide some support (and perhaps guidance) in their practice, if they have questions. And I share (as you know) what I have here on Facebook to anyone interested and have made many free articles, videos, and e-books available.

I admit that I am very enthusiastic about the dharma and what it has meant in my life. And I am not ashamed to share that enthusiasm here on this blog. That's what blogs are for. I also share my doubts and the problems I have had with dharma practice. So, please don't read my blog as a solicitation, because

it's not. If you don't like to discuss anything "spiritual," this is probably not the blog for you. LOL. The Internet is vast, so we all have plenty of other options.

If you read this blog, but are not doing (and have never done) any dharma practice, then obviously that is a sign that you have not realized the need to do so. No blame; nothing to be ashamed of; you are just not ready.

In other words, practicing dharma is not a requirement, but always an option. It is up to each of us become aware of it in our own time. I did. And it's not unfair to say that the need for dharma (like the need for exercise or to lose weight) dawns on us, gradually. And it's not enough to read and understand something about the dharma conceptually (intellectually); practicing dharma requires an interest and commitment, like actually stepping onto the path and walking.

And the dharma is not a train or a taxi that will come and pick us up when we think we are ready, but more like something that we decide to move toward and include in our life. It is something we have to want to do. Just like my mom could not make me practice piano; no one will force the dharma on us. We each have to discover the need for it for ourselves in our own time and chose to implement it. It's we who have to get on board.

As mentioned, I delight in sharing dharma because I know what it has meant to my life and am glad to try and point it out to others.

WHY WE PRACTICE

November 2, 2017

It's called "dharma practice" because it's just that, practice. We practice it as opposed to being able to just do it, like simply meditate. It's not like those European instant hot-water heaters where you press a button and get hot water. You can sit down on the cushion and relax and call it meditation, but you can't just sit down and meditate as the Buddha taught it without learning how to do it. Meditation doesn't work that way, not because it does not work quickly, but because most of us are not yet ready to learn meditation. We have too many obscurations and our mind is too foggy, which is why there are the Preliminary Practices to remove enough of our obscurations so that we CAN meditate.

And removing or purifying obscurations is old-fashioned enough that it takes practice, practice, practice. No "instant" anything. The purification practices (The Preliminaries) are a desert that most aspiring dharma students have to cross and for most of us it takes some time and with few obvious results. I spent 32 years in that desert and I'm not proud of it. I didn't know any better! You can hopefully avoid that fate.

If the preliminary dharma practices involve endless remedial work (systematically going out of our way to change and correct our deviation from reality), then practicing in that way reminds me of Pavlovian response, like training a dog; where and when is the payoff? If we do not understand HOW to perform the preliminary purification practices and don't do them properly, the only result in an ever-receding mirage.

It's true that the Preliminary Practices, by definition, are remedial or corrective by nature. As mentioned, these are "purification" practices! And they are a bit like the legendary phoenix, where eventually we rise from the ashes of our obscurations. At best, they are like focusing a pair of binoculars, gradually pulling everything into an unwavering focus.

And while our vision (clarity) may not vastly improve through the process of doing the dharma preliminaries, there are stages or critical points that are reached along the way, the major one of which is called "Recognition," meaning (with the help of an authentic teacher) recognizing the true nature of our own mind. It's like when the mother helps the baby to latch on to the nipple. That event is not just another milestone in our practice; it marks a turning point in our practice from what are called the relative dharma practices to the absolute practices, from the dharma-preliminaries (purification) to the realization-practices (finally actually meditating).

Preparing for "Recognition" is what the Preliminaries are all about, the process of whittling down our obscurations until we can thread the needle of Insight Meditation. It is not an easy task, but IMO the results of purification make the sometimes tedious process of the preliminaries all worthwhile. The purification process is like when prize fighters exercise to get themselves down to their fighting weight. We all have to do the preliminaries and if we don't do them successfully, we never reach a state where we are unobscured enough to actually learn to meditate.

We can learn to relax, but to meditate? Probably not.

DOING WHAT I DON'T FEEL LIKE DOING

November 2, 2107

Much of my life these days is pretty mundane. I've been struggling within myself about what I have to do each day, which may not look like much to readers. It is what it is. I have written about this here a little while back, but little did I know it would come to a head, and for all I know it could get worse.

I am coming to terms with those repetitive things I, more or less, have to do each day even though I am retired. You would think I can do whatever the hell I want, but I'm making no deals with anyone but myself, and I don't always agree with my own self. The collective "we" that is me struggles against one another; however, we may be coming to an agreement. How is that?

The theory is that what I HAVE to do each day, like it or not, is best done liking it than not. If I'm always behind the 8-ball and begrudging the parts of the day that I don't like, where does that get me. Like: nowhere I want to be. This folks, is what realization is all about, realizing there is no future in a bad attitude on my part to things that I can't change.

I won't give you chapter and verse, but you will recognize what I'm pointing at with just a few examples. Exercise is one of them. The doctors tell me that if I want to continue living, I have to exercise and exercise quite a lot. I have been exercising, but not a "whole" lot and, most of all, my attitude has not been the best. It is OK, but OK right now is not OK. I need to do my exercise with heart!

And just another example and then I will not go on and on. I have to eat a VERY restricted diet, a super

vegan diet that would make even a vegan go pale. Well, I have been (as Larry David says in “Curb Your Enthusiasm” says) “Pretty good. Pretty, pretty good.” Yet I have not been what we would call a happy camper with what I can eat.

There are a lot of things I HAVE TO DO that I don't like or don't really feel like doing. And they have been piling up like ice on the edge of the Great Lakes in deep winter. I did my best to ignore it all, but it has become increasingly obvious enough that it now intrudes into my consciousness. I can't close my eyes and ignore this anymore; I seem to have no alternative but to realize that this attitude is not only a problem, it is MY problem. It has reached a point where it is easier for me to do something about the problem than to have it nag me all the time. This too is all part of the “realization process:” taking care of the business of living.

So, one thing I am going to do is learn how to cook better and I am starting out with making my own veggie pot-pies, complete with 100% whole-grain crust, vegan gravy and all of that. I will make a bunch and freeze them, thus having my own TV dinners. I am looking at lots of other food things like that.

And, on the exercise front, instead of going to the local college and walking two miles every day, which is kind of a hassle, I'm going to stay right here and work out on our elliptical machine and also lift weights (smallish ones). I have tried it for a couple of days now and it is way better than just walking a bunch. With the machine, I actually work up a sweat, which is the kind of exercise I need.

There are a number of other things like these two examples, but they all share the same fate, the lack of my support for them. Well, I realize this is not good for

me to keep protesting against things I don't want to do or feel like doing, so the easiest (an most obvious) solution is to put more heart into them and find ways to enjoy what I have to do each day. That's the realization I'm having, mundane as it is.

And no, this realization is not cosmic, but its right where the rubber meets road for me, exactly what stands in my way each and every day. As long as these things have to be done daily, I see no other way out rather than to do them happily and with heart. I should have done that a long time ago!

It's like the old advice from Sun Tzu in the "Art of War" to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I can't find a back door or away around what I HAVE to do, folks, so the easiest way to solve these problems is for me to directly embrace what I like least. That too is realization.

Anyone else in the same fix?

PHOTOGRAPHY: SNEAKING UP ON A MIRROR

November 4, 2017

[Note: I have been working on photography a lot lately and so I wrote this blog on photography, originally for photographers on other forums, but they are a funny bunch and I decided to post it here instead. Anyway, with the advent of smart phones (ones with a decent camera in them), professional photographers seem to have been in the doldrums for the last 8 or 9 years. IMO, they are not happy campers and show it. I post this here for those few Facebook readers who love the more technical side of photography. The rest of you I will (hopefully) see tomorrow.]

If I want a photograph, I take a snapshot with my iPhone. If instead, I want to communicate a visual impression through photography, I craft or shape an image with lenses, light, and patience. For me, it's like an itch that I have been trying to scratch, but it seems that I can only move toward scratching that itch by approximation and even then through trial and error. Satisfaction is slow to come and perhaps ultimately (because this is samsara), impossible. I won't know until I actually have scratched it, which I am still trying to do.

I have tried to discuss my itch with other photographers online, but they have their own itch which they are busy scratching and it's not like mine. I believe when we get right down to where the rubber meets the road, we dedicated photographers are each perhaps a little bit crazy or obsessive about our particular itches. At least, I am. You don't have my itch and thus can only imagine it; and it's probably the

same for me with your itch. One scratch does not fit all.

I often find myself comparing my photography (privately, in my mind) to fine art, looking for painters who are expressing in oils or other media what I'm attempting to do with photographic images. It would have to be an art that is somewhat abstract, somewhat surreal, but always with a bit of absolutely pure realism for contrast. That's what pleases me, when I can do that or even approach it. And the process of photography is a zone I like to be in.

Sometimes I wish I could see a time-lapse video-history of my photography equipment and its journey. When I group the many lenses I have by their similarity, doing that perhaps best describes the image style I am seeking or at least maps the history of my itch, and thus my story. In an almost convection-like manner, I periodically cull my lens collection, removing what I don't want and adding new lenses that I do want. It is a vortex, a constantly changing equation.

For one, I see that I have gradually removed almost all the zoom lenses from my collection in favor of prime lenses. I have no use for zooms except perhaps for family situations. Next, I have removed most, but not all, telephotos, which I use for shooting music concerts.

What I like to (and usually) do is to shoot nature close-up, but not often at macro distances. And I have no interest in microphotography (microscopes); I feel pretty much the same about macro photography and lenses, at least those that are not highly corrected. This does not mean I don't still have a lot of macro lenses around; I do indeed.

For me, macro photography is getting too close (like to 1:1 macro distance); there is not enough context available. Like a diamond is set in a ring, for me, with macro, there is no ring. I am too close. I have grown to appreciate context... a lot. In other words, I like the context available in close-up (but not too close) photography.

If I sift through my lens collection even a little finer, I also find that I have virtually no (like a few) lenses that have autofocus. I do everything with manual lenses and (as mentioned) on primes. And, among those primes, my most used (and valued) lenses tend to be ultra-fast primes, preferably lenses that are sharp wide-open or nearly so. And I like them sharp, sharp, sharp, whatever that is. Sharpness, to me, is determined as much by color correction (APO) and by resolution or acutance.

Yet, at the tip of the top of this pyramid I am describing here are apochromatic (APO) lenses, lenses that have been highly corrected for the various aberrations, etc. That feature is the sine qua non of what I most value in a lens. And I have gone to a lot of trouble (and expense) to find and (in many cases) adapt APO lenses to the Nikon F-mount.

Well, that's about it for lenses, although I have not even touched here on industrial lenses, the so-called "exotic lenses," of which I have a bunch and a special affinity for.

As for cameras, the history is simpler. I have been more than satisfied with the Nikon system and while I had some very early film cameras, my sustained interest and use began when Nikon digital cameras appeared.

My first real DSLR was the Nikon D1X and that was followed by a chain of cameras stretching all the way to my latest Nikon, the Nikon D850. I have tended toward those cameras that are best for nature and landscapes, so the D3s and D3X were my route rather than the D3, and although I had a D4, that was the last sports-able Nikon I purchased. I did not keep the D4 long. I needed more megapixels.

And while I experimented with medium-format cameras (the Mamiya RZ67 with 11 lenses), and with the two recent mirrorless Medium-format cameras, the Hasselblad X1D and the Fujifilm GFX 50s, I was not happy with those cameras. I have also had the Pentax K3 and K1 and a bunch of Sony cameras, mostly video, but including still cameras like the Sony A7S, A7R, A7RII, and I have the new Sony A7R3 on order.

One other variable, because of the many very fine lenses available for Large Format and technical cameras, is that I have been into rails, bellows, and a series of technical cameras, which I won't bother to list here, but I will mention two of them.

I have the Novoflex Balpro System, complete with various fittings, but these days I mostly use the Cambo Actus system with my Nikons and have a special version of the Actus that is outfitted for the Nikon F-mount and Sony E-mount, interchangeably.

Plus, I have (probably) too many very fine industrial lenses for these bellows units by Nikon, Rodenstock, Schneider, Zeiss, and other companies. Financially speaking, IMO, right now the best lenses for the least money are available for bellows systems, if you like tilt/shift photography like I do.

And while I had the three major PC-E (tilt/shift) lenses from Nikon, I moved away from those (for lack of lens correction) into the various technical bellows systems, where IMO a better tilt is available.

All of the above having been said, I come back to where I started, that itch that I am trying to scratch with photography. I fell into focus-stacking images not intentionally, but in an attempt to get enough depth of field and still have everything in focus. Ever since photography began, photographers have been caught between the devil and the deep-blue sea, trying to get enough depth-of-field, without being eaten by the physical law of diffraction. With too wide (and fast) a lens opening, there is not much DOF and with too narrow a lens opening, diffraction always looms.

So, it was natural that I found focus stacking. And I stacked and I stacked and I stacked... many hundreds of thousands of images. Yet, within focus stacking, there is room to maneuver and I found myself moving toward ultra-fast, sharp wide-open, highly corrected (APO) lenses, not because I'm particularly technical, but because that, for me, was the sweet spot in stacking focus. To understand why I gravitated there requires some explaining.

I didn't just want everything in focus, like focus-stacking might suggest. Instead, I want almost the opposite direction, everything out-of-focus except for an area(s) that I want in extreme focus. This is not exactly that easy to do. For the out-of-focus "bokeh" areas in the photo, I need the shallow DOF we get with fast lenses wide-open. So, where then does the in-focus sharpness in my photos come from?

The sharpness comes from having well-corrected lenses that are sharp wide-open. Even though the DOF of sharp wide-open lenses is razor thin,

nevertheless we can paint focus by careful stacking, thus creating areas of the photo in perfect focus that are as wide and broad as we desire. And that's what I tend to do.

In that way, I can have areas of the image bathed in soft blurry bokeh, but punctuated by areas of sharp focus. Since much of my life-philosophy is based on the nature of the mind (and how it works), with all of its various constructs, I like to juxtapose dreamy areas against the reality that is possible with sharp focus and depth of field. There is no doubt that I am an impressionist, but IMO so are all dedicated photographers.

I consider APO lenses as a means to calibrate light so that better color and sharpness are obtained. There are many types of photography. What I like to do is just one small area. The tools I need for my work will probably not be as useful to other kinds of photographers. I have had to put up with jeers for many years now from photographers who originally sneered (some still do) at focus stacking. However, stacking focus is no mere flash in the pan, but will ingratiate itself into modern photography, sooner or later. Focus stacking is not only here to stay; it is just the tip of the iceberg as to what will be technically possible in years to come.

Close-up photography, like any true avocation (photography or otherwise), amounts to a mirror in which we can see ourselves. The more carefully we monitor (and be aware of) the process of taking images, the clearer is that mirror. If we want to know who we are and what motivates us, for each photographer, his or her photo images mirror the "soul" just like the bathroom mirror does our face.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,” shows who we are, either in prints or through digital images on a screen. In fact, photography is a discipline that like any avocation pays big dividends. Examining our own photographs is like looking in a rear-view mirror and using that to back our way into the future.

In fact, everything we do is that same mirror, if we will look at ourselves in it. The whole point of dharma practice (in addition to looking outward, as we all now do) is to also learn to look inward, directly at our original face as reflected in the mirror of the mind.

Photography helps me to do that and has become an integral part of my dharma practice. Even I can't sneak up on a mirror, but I can learn to look directly at my reflection in appearances.

THE VALUE OF SAMBARA

November 5, 2017

When I think of it (or people ask me), what is the secret of doing the realization practices like Insight Meditation, the answer is almost embarrassingly simple. It is “love.” And that is not the first word we might think to describe what is needed for successful meditation practice.

Here I’m talking about the “loving-to-do-it” factor, the missing ingredient in my dharma practice that WAS present when I finally realized how to do Insight Meditation. It was driven by my basic love of Mother Nature, its critters, and looking at living things close-up through fine camera lenses. A good question that I have had to answer is whether I could separate out the loving-to-do-it ingredient when it comes to something that at this point I don’t “love” to do, like take the trash out. As for me, I’m glad when it’s done and the trash and recycle is out by the alley, but I don’t exactly love to contemplate doing it or actually do it. And I agree that I have to do something about this kind of thing. The great Zen masters suggest that we enjoy it all, our every action, but for me that’s apparently easier said than done.

I know for a fact that Insight Meditation can be extended (from where it first appears in life to us) to other things, because I have done it, moving Insight Meditation from photography-only to eventually including writing, and the list only grows. This feat, however, was like pulling teeth and took at least a year of effort on my to separate the Insight Meditation from the photography and be able point it at writing. And all the effort involved, although apparently

necessary for me, I'm sure did not help. There must be better techniques than what I know as to extending realization; I'm just not skillful enough to do such a thing effortlessly. It took work.

At this point in my practice, creative writing is more the chosen medium for Insight Meditation with me than photography. This tells me that it's not the medium, per se, that is important (photography, writing, etc.), but rather the availability or access (and ease of use) of a medium that is key, i.e. just doing it. It is more difficult to perform the process of photography than to write essays. It may be that simple.

And with Insight Meditation, it seems I am more of a gourmand than a gourmet. For me, the wider the pipe through which clarity pours in, the better. And it is clear, that rather than writing, just sitting and thinking would work too, but I lack confidence in that at this point. It's like using the Tibetan rosary or mala (think "worry beads") to help keep the mind focused); right now it seems I still need some repetitive physical technique like writing, photography, etc. to trigger Insight Meditation, to turn on the clarity faucet. So, I still find it easier to write things out than just sit.

Perhaps a (or "the") goal will eventually be pointing insight meditation at awareness itself and initiating some form of fusion, at which point I will be happy to sit on the cushion and allow that to run its course. Main-lining the pure oxygen of clarity that the process of Insight Meditation brings, as a highway or "means" (rather than a sidebar), makes sense. It is the Insight Meditation that is key, not the subject matter (writing, photography, etc.) through which it arises.

Like being blinded by the white of a snowstorm (and seeing nothing), I have pointed out to myself that the

light of realization requires shadow in order to see, which suggests that realization is the gradual (or for some, sudden) transformation of darkness to light (lighting up the darkness), much as a running stream (or continuum), the fuel line in a carburetor, or the fringe of a grass fire moving across a dry field.

There is a point where, just as in a carburetor, fuel mixes with air in exact proportions, and is fired to create a perfect combustion, so is clarity realized from darkness (our obscurations), transforming that darkness into light or (to put it properly) shedding light on what was previously obscure. Anyway, our view lights up and we see clearly! This is called in the dharma, “realization.”

As students of dharma, there comes a point when we realize that realization itself is not a static state, not some place we are trying to get to where we will be safe (or finished), but itself rather an endless process. “Heaven” is not a state, but a continuing process. To put it in other words, the goal or place we are trying to get to is the way (or means) we use to get there – how we get there.

Does this fringe of fire racing across a field eventually consume itself and are we finished (and is that enlightenment?) or like hydrogen fusion, is there is an almost endless supply of the fuel of obscurations? Right now, there seems to be a lot of fuel available in this world. LOL.

We are more intrinsically bound to samsara than we might think. Samsara itself is the means (and the only means) to realize Nirvana or enlightenment. Samsara is not something that can be just discarded or pushed out to make way for realization to arise. Samsara is the single essential ingredient necessary to realize

Nirvana -- the very fuel itself that we need. And, as it turns out, we have plenty of it!

As the advanced teachings point out, enlightenment is the ultimate consumption or transformation of Samsara, a simple inversion, revealing the reciprocity of samsara and nirvana. Samsara and Nirvana are said to be connate, two sides of the same coin, just as are light and shadow. It takes both light and shadow for us to see. The Tibetans have a great saying:

“One single match can dispel the accumulated darkness of a thousand eons. Likewise, one single instant of clear light in the mind eliminates the ignorance and obscurations accumulated over a thousand eons.”

THE FEAR OF FALLING BEHIND

November 6, 2017

This is about the fear of failure or falling behind, the subtle foggy veneer of delinquency that starts to take over when our schedule begins to slip away from us. It's like a form of being suffocated by all that we haven't done (or been able to do) that we think we have to do or should have done. It immediately takes the edge off happiness and leaves us feeling anxious and that we are losing control, which we are.

Letting the events of our life run us, the sense of being out of control (or to use psychological terms) is a form of masochism. What I'm talking about here is anytime we fear that we are behind the bell curve (instead of leading our life), that we are being dragged through life by what we have allowed to get ahead of us or think we have.

We are forced to do what we think we have to do, when we might better relax until we naturally feel like doing it. Yet, our own imposed schedule pushes us to perform or, worse, an external schedule that we have to meet demands that we do so. This is a problem for many of us. We've become our own boss and victim all wrapped into one and fallen behind the curve instead of surfing it.

This problem is solved, as mentioned, by letting go, by waiting for the next wave, and catching that, whatever it takes to feel we are again riding the present; and not be caught up in the shroud of delinquency, this sense of always being behind the curve, held under by our own (or life's) demands.

There is a need to somehow reset the system, to let go of the rules long enough for them to reform or

stretch themselves enough that we find ourselves in the present once again, on top of things, and not held down by the circumstances we have (for whatever reason) been unable to manage.

Realizing that we are once again under the gun and wrapping ourselves in increasing anxiousness is a good place to begin. We are behind the curve or wave of the present and no longer riding it, held underwater by our own schedule that has slipped. At the very least, we can be aware that this has happened and happening to us. That awareness is key. At least, by being aware, we stop our “deer in the headlights” confusion and can be clearly aware of what we have been unaware of. We can look right at the problem.

Then, as mentioned, we can loosen up, relax, let go, and just let the present moment catch up to us until we can manage to surf it again. It’s a matter of trial and error, but we have to be aware that we have to try until we synch and get with it again. Then, like focusing binoculars, the two images (the true present and wherever we have managed to get stuck) come together and we are one... feeling normal, and hopefully happy again.

If we can allow ourselves to relax, our natural intuition will start to work again, and what we need (info, etc.) will be at hand and guiding us as it should be. That intuition is KEY and without it we lose our steering wheel to life. If we lose that, as pointed out, we have to let go long enough (whatever it takes) for our capsized boat to right itself. And it will, if we let it.

THE DHARMA OF RESISTANCE

November 7, 2017

Just as working with our involuntary reactions, what I call Reaction Toning, is an easy and efficient way to practice dharma and remove obscurations, so on a somewhat larger-scale is our stubborn resistance to doing what we have to do in life, but don't feel like doing. This resistance to taking care of business also are simple reactions, but a little harder to cure. Like almost all dharma practices, the first step is to clearly be aware that we have the problem and to own it. Without that, not much can be done. We can only solve our own problems, so we have to stop pretending it does not apply to us. My first dharma teacher used to say to me "Better our own job poorly, than someone else's well."

Resisting or not-liking what we have to do is like being confined by a wetsuit that is too small for us, not that I have any wetsuits. Every time we come up against something that we have to do (but resist doing it), we are further confined. In fact, we are confining ourselves. If we add all these various resistances we have up, they are like a self-made little prison in which we find ourselves struggling to be free of.

And our resistance is just like the tar baby in the old Uncle Remus tales, the more we struggle, the more we are stuck. So, if there are a lot things in our life that we don't feel like doing (yet still have to do) and we resist, we are literally bound (and binding ourselves) by that resistance, that is: if we are unable to fully accept and embrace what it is that we have to do.

And so, once again, we are our own worst enemy, busy confining ourselves by spinning a cocoon of resistance that we will never emerge from without learning to love that which we resist. i.e. what we have to do anyway.

How amazing!

I used to think it kind of cute that I resisted; I liked being the “bad boy” in the crowd. I usually did what I had to do anyway, but I didn’t like it. And I did not see it as whining (and still don’t), but more like when people wink at one another; it was like a wink in the direction of rebelling at what I HAD to do. I would do it, but it was no favorite part of my day or life.

And yet, as dharma led me down its path of clarity, I came to my resistance (as I do anything else), increasingly aware that it was an obscuration and not something cool to do, as I had previously rationalized. And by the same irreversible dharma that I have learned to love, my resistance to things I “have to do,” also began to reverse itself. I had protected myself from the outside, so that no one could tell me what I had to do, but I never thought to protect myself from the inside. And that is where the dharma overtook me, from the inside out.

And the dharma is inexorable in what it points out to us and to go against the dharma is to go against our self, and even I don’t do that. And, once I became aware that my resistance to things that I don’t feel like doing was actually holding me back, that was it. My resistance had to go and not with a wink and a nod. I have to learn to love what I don’t feel like doing. It just makes sense.

I am still working on removing my resistance to doing what life demands of me and I have previously

carefully pointed out on this blog how to successfully deal with our day-to-day and moment-to-moment reactions, so that might help those interested in more understanding. There are a number of articles here on Reaction Toning if you happen to get this message:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

MISCOMMUNICATION

November 8, 2017

I am increasingly aware of how easy it is to miscommunicate. No matter how careful I am with my words, as often as not what I am trying to say miscommunicates or under-communicates. It is almost like a rule. And I am not talking about asking questions. Questions are good; it's the answers that can be misunderstood.

It is not as bad on my blog here on Facebook, but miscommunication appears rampant on some of the photography forums I hang out at. It's almost as if photographers just prefer not to understand each other or perhaps they (as most of us do) like to hear themselves talk. And it is possible they just do not understand, but I doubt it. And "trying" to communicate is by definition futile. Like herding cats or ducks, "attempting" to communicate instead of actually communicating is just a bridge too far.

I'm sure I don't understand how it all works. It could be as simple as that it takes two to tango if a connection is to be made, not only someone who speaks, but also someone who listens (and of course both). As the old blues lyric states "A whole lotta' people talkin', but mighty few people know." So, in some sense, perhaps true communication is "fated." As they say in dharma, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."

Aside from dharma, on a more mundane level, this also may be true. I am reminded of the line in a recent song that my daughter May wrote, "If you're telling the truth, there is room in my heart to receive it." Meaningful communication seems to be like that. If it

is true, there is something exchanged or transmitted. Otherwise it's just talk and sometimes IMO nothing more than white noise, like "Sounding brass and tinkling cymbal."

When we examine and become familiar with something like a dharma lineage, it increasingly becomes clear that the transmission of the wisdom of techniques and insight is crucial. The pipeline of dharma transmission goes back many centuries and is essential for the lineage to endure. It's all about transmission and transmission means the nothing less than the same is certain. It is passed intact and in full, not just in terms of books or teachings, but in realization.

Perhaps our more mundane communication is not that important, but for anyone of us learning the dharma (or just growing up and discovering ourselves), transmission and its confirmation can be crucial. And I am not a fundamentalist about all of this either. A little gossip can be fun, but after a while I believe that we yearn to communicate and to communicate about things that are important to us or that interest us. At least I do. Yet, for me communication is growth in realization, not just talking for comfort or to pass the time.

Personally, I work very hard at communication, both spoken and written. Yet, even then it is fifty/fifty as to if it communicates. I try to shape my sentences so that they cannot be misunderstood and am reminded of what the farmers and 4H members do around here at the county fair each year with pigs. They all have what are called "pig boards," large pieces of plywood (like shields), most with handles or cut out holes for handles. These pig boards are used to herd pigs when they are running from here to there. They are

used to create a kind of raceway by shunting the pigs with the boards as they run this way or that. Writing is a little like that, not that I'm writing for pigs, but rather that I do my best to prevent readers from going down the wrong path while reading my words. They often do so anyway. LOL.

Writing has to make sense. And sense is always an experience we have. So, unless writing evokes experience (moves us to action), it doesn't make sense.

THE PROCESS OF THE RESULT

November 8, 2017

Lately, I've been bumping my head again with photographers in the photo forums. There is just one little thing that separates us, and most photographers don't seem to recognize what that is, and thus the problem. And it's simply the difference between "process" and "result." It's like the old-time photographer that used to hold up a little stuffed bird and call out "Watch the birdie" and take our picture. While we were watching the birdie, our photo got taken.

IMO, it's that way with process and result; everyone is looking at the result and not so much at the process. In fact, their view is that the process is just something that we have to get through to get the result as opposed to the process being as important as the result and the result dependent on the process. This view is common among photographers, but just as true in other areas of our life, as I have found out.

Anyway, many photographers (not all!) do their best to shorten and simplify their process and concentrate on the resulting photo they are taking. That is totally understandable to me, but I differ. For me (and this may just be me!) attention to the process is not something to ignore to (as much as possible) quickly to do and get it out of the way). That's putting the cart before the horse. However, taking a page from the Zen folks, the process is what determines the result or outcome... every outcome, photography or anything else.

I am repeatedly told by photographers that the process I use of stacking photos, for example, is to

them onerous to the degree that they won't even try it. Yet, I know that the care and love we give to handling the process always shows up in the finished photo. And they hate it when I tell them that for years I hardly finished a photo after taking it or that I have yet to print out a single photo on paper (or hang even one on the wall), although I have taken hundreds of thousands of them.

And so, I am not trying to disparage photographers, because the same truth holds for any process in life that we do and I am myself still working on the process of things like daily exercise and all of that. So, I am not casting stones or aspersions here, just commenting.

In fact, lately I have been devoting a lot of energy to examining my own life-processes and realizing how many of them I don't enjoy doing and that I avoid them if I can. They too have a result that depends on how the process of doing them is done. And, in this case, I'm the doer!

So.... I'm trying to slow down and smell the roses, but also to make friends with the daily tasks that I have always hurried through to get them out of the way so that I could do what I want. And there are all kinds of processes each day. At this point I'm "trying" to want to do them. I'm still on this side of "trying," but the awareness (which is always the key to any realization) is now there that my avoidance of processes that I just don't feel like doing is just more obscuration piling on.

The purification practices are always like dropping a pebble into a still pond. The ever expanding wave of rings in the water encompasses more (and more finer) areas of avoidance and obscuration as I become more aware of them. That's the way it works.

The point of this blog is the key to purification, which is “awareness,” and attention to the processes in our life, especially the ones we resist and do not feel like doing. Whatever they are, each process can be articulated with care instead of grudge and resistance. I have not yet accomplished this, but I am working on it. At this point I am aware what has to be done and just how it has to be done, with my love and care.

All I have to do is to feel like it and that’s up to me.

PRACTICAL DHARMA

November 9, 2017

We may not always have time for dharma practice, but we always have time for practical dharma. I learned quite early on (and at great personal cost to me) that the advanced stages of meditation I thought I might like to practice were closed to me, not because they were some kind of secret, but because I was too dense to learn them. Huh? LOL, but it was true.

And it makes sense that, if I was not clear enough to realize these more advanced forms of meditation, that I had no choice but to sink or swim. I could sink back to where I have always been due to my obscurations or I could learn to swim by removing my obscuration one by one until I could meditate. I chose the later.

Removing obscurations is like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, but it is no walk in the park. It's hard repetitive work and it takes a long time (as the old soap commercials said) "to get out those deep-down stubborn stains." This is why what are called the Dharma-Preliminaries exist, to get us down to our "fighting weight" where we are clear-minded enough to actually meditate. Or, you can do like I did and just sit there for 32 years trying to meditate and nothing happens. I don't recommend that. LOL.

However, the tricky or most difficult part is to first become aware enough to know we have this problem of accumulating obscurations, laying it on thick. We can't change what we don't know is there. It's hard enough when we do know we are obscured, but almost impossible if we don't. IMO, Ignorance is just whistling in the dark, which we all know only too well.

It is fortunate that when we finally get a whiff that we may ourselves in fact be obscured and that these rose-colored spectacles we thought we were wearing are just dirty glasses that we can't see through, then the dharma teachings offer a solution. After all, just look at all the things coming out of the closet in these times we live in. Is it too difficult to imagine that we could consciously (that is: publically as a nation) stop assuming that every child that is born is a blank slate, and understand that each of us carry with us a certain amount of karmic baggage when we are born into this world? Sure, we all have to learn our "A, B, C's" and the like, but aside from that, each of us brings to the table our bit of karma. That's what the teachings point out.

And, as I found out to my chagrin, just working through the dharma preliminaries (which are purification practices) by rote is not enough. That was just wishful thinking on my part. More than anything else I have ever encountered in this world, the dharma not only demands some attention, it also demands (as folks used to say) our "soul." However, Buddhists don't believe in a permanent soul, so let's just say we not only have to do the purification practices, we also have to put our heart into them. Otherwise, these practices are not likely to work. And you certainly don't want to do them twice as I did. Trust me. Or do you?

So, if we attempt to learn sitting meditation practice, just sitting on a cushion and waiting for something to happen (or half-heartedly going through the technique), that is not going to cut the mustard, IMO. At least it did not work for me. Much more is required of us, like everything we have, all of our intention and effort.

So, we have to slow down, take our time, and learn how to put into a practice all that we have in us. Dharma is not for the faint of heart or the heartless. It takes everything we've got. How could it be any other way? The dharma, like natural science, is the truth. How much of our BS do you think we can continue to get away with? Not much (and not forever) is my answer. At least I have found that to be the case.

So, I tell myself to take a deep breath, relax, and prepare for the long haul. It may not take that long, but it certainly will unless we give everything we can to it. It's like taking a peek at a mirror. You are not going to see anything but what is there, nothing more and nothing less. And none of us have enough saving stamps or a "get out of jail free" card to be grandfathered into realizing our own dharma. As they say, naked we come into this world and naked we shall leave it. It is exactly the same with dharma realization. We can only realize what is true, warts and all.

Anyway, that is how I find the dharma. I am considering an occasional series on practical dharma, things we can do that will benefit us (dharma-wise) as we go about our day. Anyone up for that?

REALIZING THE TRAIN TO NOWHERE

November 10, 2017

Realization always overtakes one in the middle of life experience. That's what the teachings say, and so it is in my own experience. And it sounds right too. What is hard to express and even harder to hear correctly is that realization is the dawning on us that realization is a process and not a state of mind.

And "realization" changes or transforms everything. Like the old Neil Young album "Rust Never Sleeps," once initiated, realization never stops. It is a continuum, a stream, and the process of transformation itself is all-consuming, and for many overwhelming. The realization of our own stream of realization may be intermittent, much like earthquake fault lines build up until they can't help but release. We have a minor epiphany for a day or part of a day and then we go into a quiet time when again nothing seems to be happening that we can sense. But the pressures continue to build up inside nevertheless. Realization never rests. As mentioned, it is a process and not some place to get to.

And when I say that realization changes everything, I do mean everything. Or, to put another way, everything arounds us may not change, but we see everything differently. It is we who change; it is we who are realizing. And it is also we who are changed BY the process of realization. Literally, we are the fruit or result of realization. We are the resolution.

Getting analogical for a moment, just as a fountain, a pillar of water shooting straight up into the air reaches as high as it can go and then, like an umbrella (or torus), it opens out equally in all directions and begins

to enclose (like a hemi-sphere) within itself the pillar of water out of which it came. And, above that, at the tip of the top of the column, where the column spreads out, in the very center, we could place a beach ball and it would stay there. Realization is like that and we would be the beach ball. Sorry folks, that's the best analogy I could come up with.

Or another: it's like suddenly finding out that we are onboard a train that we never knew existed, a train going nowhere in particular, a train that is endlessly going, but never gone. As you can see, realization is ineffable; words fail.

Anyway, the bottom line here is to realize that it is within our power, right now, to change, to shift into awareness -- today. One of the earmarks of "Realization" is that it always empowers us, ever puts the ball more in our hands, so to speak. It never takes away, but always adds on; realization is an ever-increasing embrace of reality just as it is. Through realization, we are the inheritors of ourselves -- lock, stock, and barrel. That's how it should be and always should have been.

Realization of samsara is liberation.

TAILORING DHARMA FOR AMERICA

November 11, 2017

It's clear from some forty-some years in and around the dharma (and practicing it) that for most Americans the traditional dharma training from Tibet is an acquired taste, something unfamiliar and, who would have guessed it, "foreign." It's like the little kids who cry out at those they don't know "You're a stranger." Given the various inequalities in America, I understand why things are like that in this country.

Yet, we know from history that there are many kinds of Buddhism, but only one dharma, just as in Mother Nature there is only one set of natural laws. We don't break nature's laws; they break us. The dharma is the same.

So, trying to spoon-feed Americans Tibetan Buddhism may have limited appeal in this country. I was raised Catholic, with its ornate vestments and masses intoned in a language I did not understand (Church Latin); I even was an altar boy and had to learn that Latin, although I didn't know much of what I was saying. So, for me Tibetan Buddhism with its ornate shrines and practices in Tibetan never seemed very foreign. I was already used to something like that at Catholic mass, school, and catechism. Yet, I can see that most Americans see the dharma when it is clothed in Tibetan culture as perhaps strange and unfamiliar – foreign. So, it's no wonder.

I have been doing my best to share Tibetan Buddhism here on Facebook as it has been taught to me and as I have come to know it. What Americans need is not the Tibetan in Tibetan Buddhism, but rather the dharma that is in any form of Buddhism. As my

Tibetan dharma teacher told me years ago, when we asked him when we can start doing our practice in English, rather than in Tibetan. And his answer was never. Instead, he pointed out that we Americans will produce our own realized teachers, who will write enlightened sadhanas, instructions, and prayers in English for us, and not in Tibetan. That was a surprise answer for us, but of course it makes perfect sense. LOL.

So, I can't share with you the Tibetan form of dharma practice in Tibetan as I learned it, because although I learned to read Tibetan script, I don't speak Tibetan and translation for me is just way too difficult. What I can do is present introductory practices, as I have been doing here on Facebook for quite some time, in English, and in a form that perhaps we Americans can hopefully grasp and put to use.

Even so, I'm shifting gears a little here and will try to make available more dharma techniques and ideas that we can put to work in our busy days. But we should note that, although dharma can appear in many languages, what it points out will never change. Putting it more in our own idiom and language will help, of course, but learning to meditate is learning to meditate. That will never change, no matter what language we speak. However, hopefully I can make it easier to learn the basics.

I have studied Tibetan Buddhism for decades and am quite comfortable in that culture and its people. However, my exposure was a little bit unique, partially because of the diaspora, with many great dharma teachers fleeing Tibet and showing up here in America in quantity back in the 1980s. That's not going to repeat itself. So, I can't pass on the Tibetan in the dharma to my readers here. However, what I

can do in this blog is to better scale back the Tibetan culture and bring out the dharma and hopefully in a more familiar form.

Bottom line: I'm thinking on this and will do my best to make learning dharma easier by sharing practices that we can mix in with whatever we are already doing each day.

THE JOY OF TEDIUM

November 12, 2017

This blog requires some introduction, so here goes. Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were no home computers. We didn't even have the little 4-function calculator that consumers could buy until somewhere around 1972, and so on. As an astrologer often doing many charts a day, I was forced to do what all astrologers did back then, calculate charts with log tables and look-up ephemerides. This took time and lots of it.

Then, in the early to mid-1970s I programmed astrology (to a degree) on the new programmable calculators. I even had one small program published by Hewlett-Packard. However, in 1977 I had one of the first home computers, the first really integrated system (with built in keyboard, tape transport, numeric keypad, internal language, and graphics), the Commodore Pet 2001. Before the end of 1977, I had programmed a complete astrological system, including planets, houses systems, and a variety of other calculations, all in less than 8K of RAM. Today we couldn't even press a single key on a keyboard for less than that amount of RAM!

Literally overnight for many folks, all the laborious calculations and tables went out the window, saving an enormous amount of time and tedium. Most astrologers welcomed the advent of computers, but there were many log-table fundamentalists who decried the loss of time in calculations. These folks had become attached to that calculation time and process to, as the psychics say, "get on their contacts," employ their muse. Without that little

reverie, some of their connection to the “meaning” in astrology was lost. I never thought of that!

They were at a loss and told me about it. It was like I was doing the devil’s work in depriving them of their meditation time. However their hue and cry was soon lost in the steamroller of home computers, followed by the Internet. Indeed, those two innovations alone amounted to a tidal wave.

Time-saving progress never rests, particularly when developers are rewarded for every second they can save, not to mention for finding new and crueller ways to invade our privacy, like those robot calls that plague our private phones these days. So, there is always a showdown taking place between the process and the result. The bean-counters believe that every step in the process that can be economized, the better, witness the movies we pay to see being overprinted with coming attractions underneath, etc. How rude!

I see the same syndrome popping up in photography, between process and results. Photographers struggle to eliminate as much of the process of getting their resulting images as they can. It’s as if the process and the results are not connected, and that the result is not the result of (wait for it) the process. But it is.

I don’t want to go on and on about this; I just wanted to get us all on the same page for a moment. There are processes that can be shortcut to good effect and there are processes that if we shortcut them affect the result. And it gets a little more subtle than that, so bear with me.

We are in an age of automated and we can definitely expect that one of the victims of this age we live in will be processes and perhaps the whole idea of process.

The shorter and more economical the process, the better say the bean-counters, except when it comes to our life. We like our lives to be longer and more detailed, more meaningful. LOL.

Now, let's jump back to my first example, that of the astrologer who had to give up their tedious log tables when computers appeared. It was not that they loved the tedium so much as it was that they had invested (like foreplay) in the arduous calculation methods, their little bit of reverie, their meditation such as it was – musing over the chart. Now do you see my point?

In a time like this age, when we see processes telescoping into almost nothing or even nothing, we might want to look around to see which of those processes we have invested in for some reverie, “Stopping by a woods on a snowy evening,” so to speak.

Of course, in my own case I have experienced investing meditation in a process and then having a heck of a time extracting it and making it portable, but I persevere. As for processes, we need to understand that there are processes that if shortcut would affect the final result and there are process that if shortcut would not affect the final result. AND... there are processes that if shortcut would not affect the final result, BUT in which we have invested our creativity or insight such that whittling them down will affect our “time-out” creativity. This last option is the one I feel we most need to be aware of.

Perhaps we hide our creativity or creative moments (like Easter eggs) here and there in the various processes we have in our life. Sometimes, the tedium of work or practice itself is a source of relief for us; we need that tedious-time for rest or just to allow ideas to surface. It's ironical that we can use time itself to time-

out in. Instead of flipping a coin, it's like doing the I-Ching by laboriously counting out the yarrow stalks (one of the original methods) giving us time to allow the question to percolate or ripen. Sometimes we choose the tedious consciously.

It is my belief that each of us has innumerable ways to rest our mind in our daily routine, perhaps even if only for milliseconds; we escape between the clock-ticking seconds and find relief in tiny vistas, music, art, and habitual processes like "worry beads," and the like. I know I do.

Hopefully, you get my point. There are processes that (like the Zen master) by paying ever-greater attention to will only improve the result. And there others where it will not. And, as mentioned, there are time-killing processes whose only virtue is to allow us to time-out in their tedium and have a little sense of space and freedom. Witness my old astrological friends who like the time-consuming (meaningless in themselves) use of log tables as a time to get their mind right and ready to do a reading.

In other words, sometimes we actually choose to walk slowly.

TAKING OUR DHARMA TEMPERATURE

November 12, 2017

It's a fine balance, my moods. It's not like a thermometer which is usually at 98.6°. The average range of my mental temperature is wider than that, more ups and downs. To measure my mental state each day, I always do a little sit-down dharma practice when I get up each morning. And I keep a shrine. A friend recently asked me why I bother to do that each morning when he knows that I am practicing dharma (in one way or the other) much of the day. And there are probably several reasons. Let's start with the shrine. What's that all about?

At our dharma center, we have a large shrine in a separate outside building. Many great lamas have been there and given teachings. I practiced there myself for many years. But in recent years, I tend to practice in a small shrine right here in my office. It's not so elaborate; it takes up an old closet that I took over, but it's perfect for me. It is filled with various statues and dharma items that I have acquired over the years, so it's more than just familiar.

In front of the shrine are the seven small offering bowls used by Buddhists all over the world. From left to right, these bowls represent water for drinking, water for bathing, flowers, incense, (light), perfume, food, and music. "Light" is not a bowl, but a little lamp. Anyway, each morning I fill the bowls with clean water and open the two glass doors to the shrine above them.

And I then sit down on a cushion and mat in front of the shrine; before me is a low table on which I place my dharma texts. I first pay my respects to my

teacher and to the other main teachers in my lineage, the Karma Kagyu. I then recite the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer, which is a profound practice in itself. And I go on to say some mantras and offer aspirations and prayers to the well-being of all sentient beings -- animals and humans alike. And finally, I dedicate the merit (however small it might be) from doing this practice for the benefit of all beings. I then start my day.

This all may sound very formal, but that's not the case. Opening the shrine is like a morning cup of coffee and it offers me the opportunity to become familiar with the state of my mind at the time and to see where I'm at. It's like taking my mental temperature and I can see right off whether my mind is relaxed and flowing or excited and more frenetic.

I have done this for decades. And in the old days, before I retired from the business end of things, it served to warn me whether I was in a volatile mood, in which case I would postpone any meetings I had scheduled for the day that might suffer from my being upset or irritated. I could see in a moment if I was temperamental that morning.

I can tell one story about keeping the shrine and this morning ritual. Years ago, I had what only could be called a kind of a breakthrough with my dharma practice. During that time, I actually stopped sitting entirely and I didn't fill the shrine bowls, and so on. Those closest to me must have wondered what had gotten into me.

However, it was not too long before I reached a point where my shrine was kind of beckoning to me again, but I still was not ready. Then, there came a time when one of my dharma teachers became ill and I had a very clear vision that by carefully keeping to this

ritual of the shrine each day I could help heal my teacher and prolong his life. This was not an idle or just a passing thought, but more like a gentle exclamation mark (!) if there is such a thing. Anyway, I heard it. I got the message.

Along with that insight was the understanding that a teacher-student relationship is a two way street, not just coming from the teacher to the student, but also in reverse. The bond between an authentic teacher, which is called “Samaya” goes both ways, much like a conduit.

Anyway, I immediately began doing the ritual of opening the shrine again each day; I have done so ever since. This is kind of a sensitive topic, but I share it here for those who can appreciate it.

Like a ship without a rudder or a sailor at sea, a day without some point of reference has... no point of reference. Keeping a shrine and a little formal sitting in the morning gives me a measure of my mind, just as the North Star guides a sailor to cross the uncharted sea.

OUTSMARTING THE DHARMA

November 13, 2017

One of my favorite songs in the world is an early one by Aaron Neville called “You Think you’re So Smart.” This was before the Neville Brothers formed, a series of songs on the Minit and Parlo labels; I include it here for those who have never heard it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0zgxS4cjcA>

And while we are in the neighborhood and talking about Aaron Neville, there is another song by Neville from the same period that no lover of his early music deserves not to have heard. And IMO this song is cosmic in proportions and speaks to life, incarnation, and the whole ball of wax. So, as they say, “listen up.” It’s called “She Took You for a Ride.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KIErHQ2O9c>

Anyway, I digress. What I want to talk about here is being a smart aleck, of which I certainly have been one. I learned a long time ago that there is a real difference between being “smart” and being “intelligent.” A wound “smarts,” so intelligence is what we want and it wears well with us. We all have intelligence, but it may be playing second-fiddle to the smart aleck in us. At least, that has been the case with me. I have been too smart for my own good, which is not so good.

Just because we “can” does not mean we have to. My choosing not to finish high school or go to college left me hanging on the edge of society without a safety net. Is it any wonder that I ended up sharpening my mind in an attempt to compensate? In a very real way, I have lived by my wits all my adult life. Well, it would be more correct to say that I have lived by my

“sensitivities,” my senses, the ability to discriminate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. Otherwise, where would I be?

All of that is fine and good, except my attempts to overcompensate cut both ways. They give me the edge which I thought I needed, but that edge is sharp and also cuts. It not only can hurt others; it harms me too and often. So, either I can keep my edge sheathed or start to pare back any excess “sharpness” in me that turns cynical and ends up further obscuring me. I don’t want to say I purposely “dull” my edge down, but I do try to put it in its place and reserve that edge for critical moments when it is needed, and I try to not always be so critical. Anyway, that’s my goal. However, trying doesn’t do; doing does it.

At the same time, I don’t like the idea of being simply naive, either. Yet, how do we remain innocent without being, well, actually innocent? That’s the question. It’s a fine line between being well wrought and overwrought. And we all walk it. How to remain sharp, yet not so sharp that we hurt ourselves or others? The answer reminds me of one of those old cheap carbon-steel knives. You know... the ones that kind of sharpen themselves by rust and wear alone?

In a similar way, if we have to walk a tightrope, we best mind our own business and concentrate on that. There really is no time for other thoughts and it does not work to “try” and keep them out. Anyway, that is my belief. It means that the way the world naturally is, if we mind our own business, will keep us sharp enough, with no extra effort needed (or wanted) on our part. In other words, the edginess of this world keeps us sharp. And just as we cannot salt the salt, so being critical beyond any need to be critical only

takes our natural healthy-edge off; over-sharpening of this kind dulls.

This view explains a multitude of emotional and mental problems, IMO. Like the proverbial tar baby from the old Uncle Remus tales, the harder we struggle, the more stuck we get. With most mental problems, the more we try to fix them, the more broken they get. As the Tibetan Buddhists say, "Don't Prolong the Past;" instead, just make a new and more perfect past right here in the present, like now. We soon forget what in the past we find just too hard to remember and simply move on.

And so, my cynical tendencies have no gainful employment, no place to go and, as they say, "no pot to piss in." They are just defensive and "defensiveness" is not the best defense. Moving forward with our mind in the moment is. Like an umbrella, the present moment dispels what otherwise would soon overtake us. If we are not lost in the past or daydreaming the future, we are invisible to being preyed upon by ourselves. LOL.

And, as for my habitual cynicism, the key to abandoning that is to become aware that I have it. And I do. If I then relax, like a snake tied up in knots, the knots naturally untie themselves.

THREADS OF INTUITION

November 15, 2017

Years ago, when I was single and living in Ann Arbor, there was the Deluxe Bakery at Washington & Fourth, only a few blocks from where I lived. Around ten in the morning on weekdays, fresh baked French bread was available. It was still warm. I would walk down and get a baguette and I really liked that. The next day, that same baguette was hard as a rock, so that freshness was just for the moment.

For me, it's the same with writing this blog. A blog, like that baguette, needs to be fresh. I don't like to write more than a day ahead, yet sometimes do, but if I wait too long to post, it's already stale; I don't post it.

And I don't like posting anything that I still don't feel and my feelings, like the clouds in the sky, change by the hour. So, each morning (more like the middle of the night) I am open for whatever threads my intuition wants to feed me. Some days, ideas are like salmon running upstream, too many to count and other days they are few to none. This early frosty morning, they are few to none. Nada. And so, I write about that.

I have an ongoing love affair with my intuition. Just about everything important to me comes intuitively, not just these thoughts for blogs. To me, intuition is our own personal oracle, a deep well of insight that has to be kept clean and open. I sometimes call it the oxygen vent of the present moment. Of course, the Tibetans call the mind the Wish-Fulfilling Gem, our own little wishing well. That is what it is.

These days, winter has finally been exercising its grip on life here in northern Michigan, with dips down into the low teens and below. Although the cold can't

entirely penetrate our warm house, enough gets in for us to get the message: winter is already rounding the corner. And with this cold weather, the humidity drops indoors and all the corners and floors seems to have little rivers of cold air flowing in them. I don't like it, but there it is.

And with this change of season, what we eat segues into oven-roasting vegetables and popcorn at night is discovered all over again. Oatmeal is also now king. Windows are closed and sealed, so no warm breezes, sunlight is coveted, and part of me is already pacing back and forth, waiting for Spring. LOL.

For me, the advent of winter is always a struggle -- coming inside, freezing walks outside, and searching for projects to get me through to spring. Why, I am asked, do we not just go south for the winter? Well, the simple answer is that our kids and grandkids are right here in Michigan, so do we want the Sun down south or the warmth of family here? The kids and grandkids always win out. If anyone needs me, it has to be my family. Otherwise, who am I?

Somehow the image of me standing on a Florida beach in a pair of shorts and a Hawaiian shirt doesn't sit right with me. Even worse, if I wore there what I wear everyday here. And I don't like motels. I guess I am not a snowbird. LOL.

Instead, I will freeze my butt here in Michigan and make the best of it. I just bought a heavy-duty car-battery-starter for when I don't drive it enough to keep its internal battery from running down. And I have to find my car-window scraper. Now, where did I put that last spring?

INTUITION: WISHING WELL TO YOU

November 15, 2017

Freshness is of the essence or as Shakespeare said “Ripeness is all.” I can’t (or don’t want to) do again what I just did a moment ago. Something is lost. It goes against the grain and I’m somehow repelled by repeating. Freshness is where it is at. As they say “go with the flow,” like the kayaker who follows the bends and swirls in the river. For me, the motto is more like “Wait for it,” but that too is walking on the edge, taking a chance on spontaneity. However, most often it’s a good bet.

Given the opportunity, everyone does what they want or think they want. We all know what we like in life and what we are willing to risk for it, if we can get it. And we can’t get intuition by trying, at least I can’t. It seems like I’m always waiting (and looking) for intuition to arise, for the other shoe to drop. I’m betting it all on the present moment and learning to roll with the changes as they come. And they do come and often surprise me. Yet, nothing is fresher.

It’s like mental white-water rafting, IMO, staying out of the past (and its shroud) and away from the future with its lack of tangibility. Riding the present moment (just being there) is something I am still learning to do. If nothing else, it’s totally refreshing, albeit occasionally a little terrifying in an armchair way.

However, this takes patience and then more patience; the present moment is the lifeblood of intuition and intuition is as close as we get to the fountain of youth in the mental worlds. Everything comes from where? From inside the mind, of course, every last thought, word, and impulse. Being in the present moment is

like hanging out, waiting for the newspaper to arrive or for the Magic 8-Ball to pop up a message. I call this present moment my “oxygen vent,” where all that’s fresh and pure in me arises. Once we get used to it, it’s hard not to want to be there all the time. Yet, it takes letting go... as in “letting it go on,” which it already is anyway.

I know. You can tell me that we are all in the present moment all the time, but are we? I don’t think so. I’ve checked and we spend huge amounts of life in the past and at least as much waiting on the future. And, as the philosophers point out, the present is over before it begins – instantaneous. So, what am I suggesting?

In this case, for starters, it’s not so much what TO DO as it is what NOT TO DO, which is not to spend so much of our time lost in the past or fiddling with the future. If we can do that (stay out of the past and the future), we can begin to discover more about the present, whatever it is to us. “Not Doing” is the first thing to do.

Relaxing, being still, allowing it to go on, “it” being the present moment. Anyway, as mentioned, the present moment is already going on! We couldn’t stop it if we wanted to, so what are we doing? LOL.

One of the great maxims from the pith teachings of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa is “Don’t Alter the Present.” That’s what I’m pointing at here, letting things be, not altering anything. This is easier said than done, because we are addicted to messing with everything all the time. We ourselves are creating the noise which drowns out our ability to hear or listen. How funny is that?

Surrendering to the present moment is the only obvious thing to do and of course we don't do it. In silence is born the ability to hear whatever inner voice we have. I have gotten that far, having learned to let go and listen to the oracle within myself to the degree that I can. It's a discipline, deliberately letting go, which is an oxymoron, but we each have it in us. All the news that's fit to print comes from our intuition. It's literally the fountain of all youth or news of anything.

We can learn to exit the past when we find ourselves habitually going there or, worse, already in there. We can refrain from the future when we become aware that we are ahead of ourselves and expecting again. That practice alone will quiet the mind and turn up the volume of our intuition so that perhaps we can hear it. It's an impossible position to maintain (or so it seems at first), but we're already in an impossible position as it is and always have been.

It's called "entering the Silence" in the occult sciences. As mentioned, in Tibetan Buddhism, we are instructed to not prolong the past, not invite the future, and to not alter or mess with the present. In other words, just to not be in the past or future and to simply be in the present, yet without altering it in any way. I am reminded of the old blues lyric:

"Take your fingers off it; don't you dare touch it. You know it don't belong to you."

That's not exactly right, but the sentiment is. Another way to say this is "Just give it a rest!"

THE FUTURE AND PAST OF THE PRESENT

November 15, 2017

In a very real way, the present moment is the signal and the past and future the noise surrounding the signal. And just what is the present? Is the present moment small compared to our long past and distant future? Philosophers tell us it is instantaneous, yet everything comes from it.

If we are hooked on ruminating on our past or endlessly worrying about our future, then we are already mostly full-up, i.e. a busy signal. There is little room in our awareness for the present moment if we spend the majority of our time in the future or the past. After all, we only have 100% of our attention to divide up here, so if most of it is already spoken for, there is little room for the present in our lives. Yet, it's there all the time. And if we tune this moment out with the more foggy frequencies of the past and the future, the present may no longer even register with us; it's as if it does not matter. We certainly don't know it well for what it is to us.

Like in so many other areas of life, we have to break old habits to make room for new habits, hopefully healthier ones. If there is only one main signal and that signal comes from the present moment, then our preoccupation with either the past or the future is to some extent beside the point, although it is a big waste of time. It's not that there is no meaningful nostalgia in the past or hopeful imagination about the future. It's that neither of these realms keeps the pulse of our life. The present moment is that heartbeat. That's where change comes from, every thought and idea. We all know that.

There is one caveat in all this. We can't just storm the present moment and "Be Here Now!" by sheer force of will. That won't work. To master the present moment, we don't add on more of anything, but just the reverse. We first have to take away any habits that we have that obscure the present moment and our natural intuition. So, we kind of discover (uncover) our internal intuition by removing what obscures it. It's there all the time, but ignored. That's what the dharma preliminaries are all about, remedial work on our part – purification practices. What does that mean for us?

As mentioned, it means that in the case of intuition brute force will not win the day. There is nothing that we can do to change our situation except to "undo" those habits we have that caused this obscuration in the first place. So, we learn to let go of whatever we are attached to in the past, future, or present and just relax. At the same time, it pays to monitor what we are already doing in our mind. If we find that we are spending our time worrying the past in one way or another, we just let that go and return to waiting on the present to inform us. It's the same routine about attachment to our hopes and expectations. When we become aware that we are worrying the future, let go of that attachment, and return to the present.

If you are like me, you will find that we know far less about the present than we would have ever imagined. It's been crowded out by worry and preoccupation with the past and future, but it's still in there somewhere. It's like tuning a radio; we have to dial out the past and the future and dial in the present. And then we have to rest in that present and learn to listen and let our intuition speak to us. Anyway, that's what I'm working on.

All the many purification dharma practices come down to removing enough of what obscures us so that we see through our “Self” (whatever obscures us) to the degree that we eventually recognize the true nature of the mind. We finally see through the fog and identify with how the mind actually works. Getting familiar in with present moment is the key to all of this.

As we detach from obsessing on the past or the future, we snap back to the present and begin to identify with it more and more and with the mind itself. The Tibetans call the mind the “Wish-Fulfilling Gem” and it’s like a wishing well from which everything comes. This familiarization is what meditation is all about. The Tibetan word for meditation (Gom) simply means “to become familiar with. “

THE IMMERSION IN THE PRESENT

November 16, 2017

I do my best to stay on the practical side of the conceptual and not stray overmuch into the purely intellectual when it comes to the dharma. And, in general, I have to base what I write on (or at least reference) my own experience. When it comes to the afterlife and topics like that, I have no experience that I can remember, so I depend on what my dharma teacher(s) have taught and written. And I take that in. Like many of you reading this, I have questions too.

And I get into ruts, but for me they are more like grooves that, like the luge run in the winter Olympics, I have to follow until they end, at least for the moment. These blogs are always about what I am learning and not so much about what I have learned. The inherent freshness of dharma becomes ever more important in my experience the more I practice.

And the dharma is vast; however, the fringe of fire of my burning interest is usually very specific. It's where I live, at least for the moment. And at this very moment, the present tense is what I am currently being amazed at. And so, although I hate to be repetitive and sometimes I even try to change the subject, the subject (which is me) changes only gradually. LOL.

And repetition is an essential ingredient to learning the dharma and allowing it to sink in. The dharma is like the incessant waves on a beach. It takes repetition (and lots of it) to realize, at least for me it does.

If we are enthused by the intellect's view of dharma, just imagine what it's like to experience dharma in the

flesh. And, as the pith dharma texts point out, in the midst of experience “realization” can arise, and realization is, as they say, ineffable, i.e. beyond words; so, how do we communicate that? Slowly and through repetition is the answer.

When the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer states that “unwavering attention is the body of meditation,” something important is being pointed out to us. IMO, it is that the gaps between clarity (my clear moments) will shorten through practice and realization until they are infinitely small and clarity is a perfect continuum. That’s about as much thinking about the future as I need.

And lately, I have been repeatedly impressed that this present moment we all share is a perfect refuge, closed to us only by our accumulated obscurations. So, of course I want to remove those obscurations and rest in the immediate present. Who wouldn’t? And I write these blogs not just to share my experience, but to discuss with you what I am writing about. However, often there is very little discussion happening here. If we were to sit down, one-on-one, we would have to discuss all this with one another, but here on Facebook most are willing to make me the explainer, when we could be mutually discussing the topic. Yet, I agree, everyone in the discussion would have to actually think about it first.

As it is, too often I am like a voice without an echo, much less a response. Yet, thanks to the dharma teachings, I’m certain that I’m not a singularity here. It’s just shyness that likes to maintain silence. And, IMO, shyness evaporates with familiarity, familiarity with our selves.

And any attempts on my part to compartmentalize are lost in the mix of the reality of dharma realization. Its

name may be “Mahamudra,” but it’s all one thing. Vipassana and Shamata are hopelessly intermingled and we are too busy meditating to force these distinctions on whom? No one I know or care to know. LOL. We are free birds!

Like the old image of hanging around the corporate water cooler telling stories, here we all are, gathered around this moment taking in the pure oxygen of the present. With a little encouragement (and some training), we can stop breathing the stale breath of the past and trying to live on the expectations of the future and, instead, breathe the rare oxygen of this moment. There is no going back, my friends. That’s the whole point of progress. The past is not worth worrying.

What do we do each moment? It’s not so hard to just check it out and take a look. If, like worry beads, all we do is endlessly finger the past or the future, it’s just a habit we have taken up and not a sentence we must live out. Becoming familiar with our own mind is what meditation is all about. And we have to (and can) do this on our own.

When we find ourselves lost in the past again, we can become aware of that and just leave the past as it is and instead be aware of the present right now. It’s the same with future worrying. As I used to say to my dogs when they would bring home something dead, “Just leave it!” And they (sometimes) would or I would have to pry their jaws open. LOL.

Leave it! We don’t have to do anything else but that. If we leave the past be what it is and stop inviting the future, we have time for the present. And the present will happen naturally the moment we make a habit of not spending our time with anything other than the present moment. The past and future are fascinating

obscurations that we can gently drop and leave. And what remains is this present moment, with all the mysteries of time and the dharma unobscured.

To be perfectly clear, we don't have to do anything other than stop dwelling on the past and the future. There is no other action that must be done. Letting go of the past and future, we naturally settle back on the present and, if we don't alter the present with our messing around with it, it will literally "present" to us what the Tibetans call the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel -- the mind itself.

At first, it's a bit like bobbing for apples, this turning away from the past and future, and immersing ourselves in the present moment. Concurrent with a growing awareness of the present is getting in touch with our intuition, which I liken to finding a vent of pure oxygen. There is nothing like it that I know of that is more important.

DHARMA AND THE SACRED PRESENT

November 17, 2017

We may not all be that religious; I'm not, and I don't consider dharma a religion any more than physical science is a religion. However, and this is a big "however," if we enter the "tabernacle" of the present moment, we will soon find ourselves on our knees. That's because, when we get to the living-present and "Presence," no amount of willpower or force can open that door, any more (as I like to say), than we can sneak up on a mirror without confronting ourselves. It's just not possible.

"Trying" to rest the mind in the present moment does not work; letting go and allowing the mind to come to rest in the present moment does. I hope you can see the difference. So, how do we do that?

Well, as mentioned many times in previous blogs, first we have to police our own mind enough to keep it from hanging out in the past or the future, overmuch. That has to be done gently, but deliberately, until we make a mental habit (and gain some muscle memory) so that we don't stray there automatically out of boredom or whatever.

Endlessly noodling on the past or future is mostly a waste of time, yet we do it a lot. How we monitor that is our business, but some sort of mindfulness is required. We have to become aware when we have wandered into the past or the future at the expense of the present. And, ultimately, when all that is done, the very habit of policing the mind, itself has to be removed, just as we take down scaffolding when its work is done.

Entering the present moment with awareness is as sacred an activity as I know of. It makes innocents of us all, not on our demand, but because there can be no demands made there. We are humbled by necessity, if not by design. It reminds me of the traditional Christian slogan “Straight is the gate and narrow is the way.” I am also reminded of an old translation of Dante’s “Divine Comedy,” where engraved on the gates of Hell are the words “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

That sound bad, I agree, but in the Buddhist teachings, both hope and fear are abandoned. And this is especially true when we look or go inward to the nature of the present moment. This is what the nature of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is all about, going beyond relative truth into a complete immersion in our own nature. It’s more than just a dip or a bath. It is total immersion. And it’s all about the present moment.

At first, it is difficult to just remain present. We are used to noodling about our past or thinking about our future – doing something. And we can’t be present by trying or by force of mind. We have to, as they say, relax as it is and kind of learn to float in the present moment, yet not wander off into the past or future. And, do nothing but that. Waiting for the other shoe to drop (suspension) is a feature not a liability as for remaining present.

Mostly, folks are not comfortable just being in the present; it makes us nervous and we are not used to being there, although that’s where we all have been forever. Instead, we are busy embroidering the past and/or guessing at the future. As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to say “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” is an old Christian slogan, but many of us are not used to just being present rather than constantly doing something or other. Instead of letting the present moment speak to us, we nervously insist on chattering away to ourselves or to anyone who will listen. It’s a habit, plain and simple. And there is the old chestnut “Nero fiddled while Rome burned.” Just as we can be ingenious about not being alone with ourselves, many people can always find something to busy themselves with as opposed to just being alone in the present moment. Being able to “let be” is something most of us have to learn or relearn.

Although philosophers like to slice time’s present moment very thin, it’s all we have and we seem to somehow stretch time out and extend it forever. Yet, as mentioned, being alone in the present moment makes many people nervous. We feel compelled to make some noise or otherwise fill the vacuum or emptiness of the moment. Our busyness is like those little noise machines that can help us go to sleep, distracting us from the sheer silence of being alone with ourselves. LOL.

If we can’t hear the “music of the spheres,” so to speak, it’s because of all the noise being made due to the obscurations we have accumulated. Being in the present moment is something that many avoid because they don’t know what to do with it, which, of course, is “nothing.” Avoiding listening (and being receptive to the silence of the moment) means we can’t hear what our own intuition is bringing to our attention. This is called ignorance; in this case we actively ignore “what is.”

So, anyway we want to spell it, we have obscurations that prevent us from being more intuitive; they must

be removed if we want clarity. And the question is: how do we want to remove them? Barring untold good luck, removal will be slow and gradual. It's like peeling an onion or playing the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where, when the last stick is removed, there is nothing left. It's that "nothing there" that we need in order to hear what intuition is saying in the silence of the mind. Without it, IMO, we are like a car with no steering wheel.

MINING THE MIND TREASURES

November 18, 2017

The present moment “giveth;” it does not really taketh away. It has been called the eternal cornucopia, the Endless Well of Blessings and, of course, the Wish-Fulfilling Gem. By any other name it is the mind itself. Every last thought, word, idea, and impulse through all recorded history came from the mind and from nowhere else. For me, that’s worth thinking about.

As lazy as I am, I learned decades ago that I could either dig in the past, through books, articles, and papers to study or I could instead look into the mind itself where, obviously, not only did everything come from, but everything else of future interest is stored, including, of course, what the Tibetans call “Mind Treasures” – terma. I found it easier and, of course, much fresher to precipitate ideas from the mind than to find them on paper somewhere. And, as mentioned, this is where new ideas come from and the eternal future resides.

I first discovered this through astrology, where I pulled from the mind ideas of interest to me and eventually I shared them with other astrologers as well in the form of useful techniques. It’s all right there, waiting for us in the mind, but we have to know how to mine it.

Perhaps it is because I am an oldest child that I am used to not only being on my own, but being left to my own devices as well. I guess I learned early-on to “think” and I looked inward as well as outward. No, I did not think to look at the mind itself; that came with dharma training. It was Rinpoche who pointed this out to me. But I did look in the mind for ideas and from an early age instead of out in the world. I had some

eleven years of schooling to ignore and spent that time thinking on my own.

Astrology, like dharma itself, has Mind Treasures (terma), astrological concepts buried deep within the mind. I found some of these for myself, even before dharma taught me how. And in 2004, Margaret and I accompanied my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, on a trip to Tibet and China along with a group of his dharma students.

And one place in China we went and spent most of a week was the legendary Mt. Wu-Tai Shan, five sacred mountains arranged in the form of the die #5, four mountains in a square with the fifth (and tallest) in the center. It was here, so Rinpoche explained to us, that astrology (which is important in Tibetan Buddhism) first entered our world system. As an astrologer, of course I was all ears. And Rinpoche went on to say that it was a youthful emanation of the Bodhisattva Manjushri that appeared at Mt. Wu-Tai Shan and from the top of his head poured the 84,000 teachings on astrology, which he then gave to humankind,,, and they loved them.

The only problem was that humans loved the astrology so much that they neglected the dharma, of which astrology is only one limb. Manjushri then remedied this by taking all the teachings back, so that folks would once again concentrate on realizing themselves through the dharma. People were very sad about all of this, but that's the way the story goes.

And then Guru Rinpoche (often called the Second Buddha) pleaded with Manjushri to please reconsider his removal of astrology from this planet. As a compromise, Manjushri then relented and reinstated all of the astrological teachings, but as terma (hidden teachings), hiding them in the world and especially

deep within the mind itself as Mind Treasures. It is said that this all took place at Mt. Wu-Tai Shan. And that's where we were on pilgrimage.

In our trip to Mt. Wu-Tai Shan, a number of us went to the top of each of the five mountains and did puja (prayers), reaching all five mountains in a single day. I can't prove any connection, but when I returned home from that trip, an enormous amount of astrology came out of from the mind and I wrote a great many books on various astrological techniques. IMO, the trip was connected.

I share this here to point out that learning to look into the mind itself is not only an essential part of dharma training, it is the gateway to innumerable mind treasures that are available to anyone who will take the time to look. Of course, as I keep pointing out in these blogs, our conscious mind is not a blank slate at birth, but is filled with the accumulation of whatever obscurations we have managed to collect from many previous lives. These obscurations have to be gently removed, like we would polish dirty eyeglasses, at which time we would begin to see through them into the nature of our mind.

As mentioned, quite early-on I learned to look in my mind for what I needed or was curious about. The mind speaks! Of course, this was enhanced when I was taught to look directly at the mind itself as part of dharma training, but long before that I was pulling threads of interest from the mind itself. I don't remember exactly how I learned that, but I did.

It may not be very romantic, but all of this must at least sound intriguing to readers. It's up to you whether you want to leave this as something that Michael Erlewine says he learned or, instead, go to the trouble of learning to do this yourself. I encourage

you to consider the latter, but it will take time and effort on your part to learn what finally can only be effortless. I went to that trouble but, as mentioned, I had a head start based on my upbringing and interests. You can do this too, but probably it would involve effort and change on your part, at least in your routine.

There are (for most of us) those few times in life when we rise to the occasion 100%. I can probably count my times on one hand. I too have had them, times when I was surprised at myself for stepping up. Suddenly, there I was saying "I do" or "I will" and then just doing it. No one was more amazed than me.

Meeting Margaret was one of those. We had some banter at a bar in front of a table full of friends. I had never spoken with her before and she tried to tease me. When I spoke back to her, she proclaimed to everyone there that this was the end of the conversation and I (without thinking) found myself saying (and hearing my own words as from a stranger: "This is not the end; this is just the beginning." And after 46 years, so it was.

INSIGHT: ACTIVE RECEIVING

November 19, 2017

If you're good at thinking and like to jump on a thought and ride it like a dog with a bone, I understand only too well what that's like. I have done the same for many years. IMO, it's a good way to fall asleep. LOL.

I also know that aside from perhaps honing my concentration, that kind of deliberate thinking mostly goes nowhere. It's like a pacifier. IMO, it's too methodical and intentional; like a rat in a maze that wants out, it never gets below the surface of conceptualization because it is conceptualization, pure and simple. To me it seems we all have plenty of that already.

Concentration is only there to help stabilize our mind so that we can steady our focus instead of our usual shotgun approach. Furrowing our brow in concentration is a purely conceptual sign. In general, IMO, the stability of Tranquility Meditation is a diving board from which we plunge into the pool of Insight Meditation. After that, it changes.

Insight Meditation and intuition go together and are pretty much the same thing in my experience. As much as Tranquility Meditation is concentrated and mindful, Insight Meditation is receptive and liberating.

So, in my experience, concentration practice is purely a preliminary practice UNLESS (and until) it is coupled with Insight Meditation and THEN we basically have Mahamudra Meditation. In other words, Tranquility Meditation is the jumping off platform to enter Insight Meditation, but once Insight Meditation is mastered, Tranquility Meditation is simultaneously

realized for what it is, an integral part of the two combined meditations and not just an opening act. Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation, working together, are what make up Mahamudra Meditation. At least, that is my understanding.

My point here is that, at least in the evolution of my own thought, “thinking” things through (deliberate thinking) over time gives way to just allowing thoughts to come to us, to arise on their own... and without our intentional help. We may like to think we “think,” but if instead we relax, thoughts just naturally come. Thoughts “just coming” mark the advent of intuition or insight, which is far superior to forcing thought. People who “think they can think” can’t think, except conceptually, and that is just the surface of natural or organic thought.

When that single point of thought that we made through “thinking” begins to tire and fail us (when we give that up!), thought quite naturally expands and spreads out in all directions like the top of a fountain. It is THEN that we lose (or surrender) our habitual obsessive train of thought and start to take up not just contemplation (which is still willful), but something like (and forgive my getting spiritual here) adoration. Adoration, in my view, has no “doing” component, but is pure receptivity to what is. And “what is” IS what is.

That is what I understand Insight Meditation is all about, not insight-like lightning strikes (as we might LIKE to “think”), but rather total receptivity as to what is. And THAT is what is called “insight.” Again, it’s not insight into something (i.e. deliberate on our part or invasive), but rather the ability to relax and receive fully and react naturally to what is. In that sense, it is totally passive. Or to be more correct, it is the passive

activity of receiving and embracing the nature of what is true.

If we must “think,” the above is worth thinking about IMO.

**“MAKING BEAUTIFUL THINGS IS ENOUGH;
IT’S WHAT WE DO.”**

November 20, 2017

I am fascinated by beauty and any access to it. Mudras, signs, and the signatures of beauty as found in nature and reality are the only true access to beauty that I know. And I believe that throughout each day, beauty has to be known for us to remain in good health. And that these signs and signatures exist only to catch our attention. Of course, Mahamudra Meditation, the great seal or signature is a grand and pure sign of the elegance that is, but here I’m talking about those everyday rarities that manage to catch our attention.

All around us, like miniature flowers embedded in time, are mandalas, signs, and signatures of the beauty that is available to us now and always has been. And where is the entrance to this beauty? The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called these signs and signatures “inscapes,” the slipstream where we pass from being conceptually bound into full immersion in the moment. We are going about our busyness and then suddenly we see or sense the beautiful and we are released, even for a micro-second. Access to beauty catches our eye just right, time stops, and we slip away inside for a nanosecond or so. When beauty occurs, we go there, without thought or thinking about it first. It just happens. That’s what all the signs and signatures are about. They are triggers that flag us down and help to immerse us beyond time -- a break.

It’s common knowledge that we are each marching through time like a freight train going nowhere but to the end of the line, our own demise. So, there is no

hurry to get there, especially as we grow older. As a youth, perhaps we were some hurry and rushed time a bit, but after middle-age, we begin to dally and look for any release we can from time's grip. I believe that's what beauty is for and what beauty does for us. That's why it's "beautiful."

Beauty is that release that gives way to repose. When beauty catches our eye, we react by changing gears. We somehow relax and slip time's bonds, if only for a brief moment. Gerard Manley Hopkins had it right when he called these signs or triggers "Inscapes," the way we go inside, the insight or signatures we read that somehow remind us once again of our inner nature, transporting us back to the beginning of creation itself, that time before time that even now is still always right here. Insight is just that, the sight inward, looking in.

It is my belief (I can't prove it) that inscapes are our psychological life-support system, that these micro-moments or inscapes (access to beauty) are an essential part of each of our lives and that without them life would be impossible or close to it. Just as there are 1,000 razor cuts or winces each day due to our reactivity to life, so there are a thousand inscape moments that are open to us, where we take some kind of micro-rest in the moment's beauty. A thousand tears are shed and through the beauty of inscape, a thousand tears are wiped away.

And we can share in the creation of the beautiful. As someone once said "Making beautiful things is enough; it's what we do."

THE DHARMA OF THE EMPTY WELL

November 21, 2017

When I'm in top form and feeling good, I can sometimes experience resistance to what I want to do (sometimes even to just feeling normal) as a challenge as opposed to a blockage. I overcome it, based on the old quote "Cursed is the bear who eat the man, so the man becomes a bear; Blessed is the man who eats the bear, that the bear becomes a man." On the other hand, the resistance I feel just as often defines the blind alley in which I find myself or the corner I have painted myself into.

Welcome to Samsara, the cyclic world of ups and downs.

In other words, when I'm flying high (and feeling fine), I welcome the challenge and when down in the dumps (so to speak), I cry out "Enough already!" And I fail to see or remember that I'm still fine inside, just feeling a little restricted by time and space. For example, if we go sledding, it's not all downhill; it's also walking back up. That's a cycle. As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to point out (something of course that we all know) "What goes up, must come down." We can't have one without the other or as the line in the old Lovin' Spoonful tune, "Say yes to one and let the other one ride. " We don't have that choice. We have to say yes to both options, like them or not.

And there's no water in a dry well. This I know. Some days I come up full and others I come up empty. What the dharma points out, but which I seem to always have problems with, is about feeling confined or blocked when I come up empty. I don't like it! There is

the old saying, “When you have lemons, make lemonade.” I hear that, but where’s the sugar when I’m faced with a bunch of lemons. LOL.

Whatever is put before me (whatever is “permitted”) is what I HAVE to do, what I actually have on hand facing me. And waiting out a dry spell can be a long, long time if I don’t help to pump the water. The dharma teachings point out that trying to kick the can down the road to the future in hope of finding better times (because I don’t like where I’m at) is self-defeating. It won’t work. Yes, I can try to wait out the hard times and they will eventually change or roll over, but that is literally the hard way to go.

The sage advice (of course) is to first take a deep breath and then wrap our arms around (embrace) whatever we up against, no matter how hard it is to accept. It’s the first rule of counseling, that we cannot change what we refuse to accept. And so, I tell myself to accept it, at least as the starting point, because obviously that is exactly what it is: where I am. I tell myself to dig in, which, for me, is easier said than done.

This idea of our waiting out the hard times, while hoping for the good times to come around again, is a flawed concept. As mentioned, the forces of change will indeed eventually roll us over into good times once again. However, “Wait for it” could mean a very long time.

Much better (and easier), but obviously not “easy” (at least for those with no training), is be aware of where we are at (i.e. the hard times which we are already in) and realize that they too are “workable.” And then we actually have to work them.

I face this ALL THE TIME. Because I try to live in the moment as best I can, I frequently fall into a dry hole of no inspiration and seem to have forgotten how to breathe. So, there I am at the bottom of it, looking up. LOL.

I learned something about this from my decades as a computer programmer. Sometimes I would lose a week's programming work at the touch of a button, through what is called the "dreaded user error" – a simple mistake on my part. At first I used to jump up and down screaming, so to speak, but now I just immediately start over, with no energy wasted. That is a lesson in patience.

It's a little more difficult when life visits me with a dry spell intuitively; it makes me very uncomfortable. I don't like it. But what are you going to do? There it is. I'm in it, so what are my options? Not many. Therefore, accepting my condition as the only starting place I have, I must work from there. And this is where patience steps in.

If we are stuck somewhere in our mind (or life), it's like dislodging a boulder. I must very patiently (and usually very slowly) work free of whatever resistance I have by accepting and embracing it... as it is. There is no approach other than resisting it (which I'm already doing) and that does not work because I just tried that. So, my options are limited to one, accepting where I am (and what is) and working it out from there. I need to remember that.

And I just proved this to myself with this blog. There was no water that I could find in my intuitive well. Nada. I didn't feel like writing about anything at all, and so I wrote about that I don't feel like writing. And doing that eased my blockage and Presto! here I am

again. There has to be some humor in there somewhere.

I know. If we live on the edge, we get edgy once in a while. I live a very tame life outwardly, but in the mind, it is anything but that. LOL.

THE COCOON OF AGING

November 23, 2017

Anyway, we had a nice Thanksgiving. Of course, there was too much food and (for me) I ate too much. When I was a little kid at Thanksgiving, after we ate, I used to crawl behind the couch with a pillow and sleep along the wall. I didn't do that this year, but I sure thought about it. Back to some thoughts about aging.

I come from a life of hard work, long hours, and seven days a week because I liked it. So, it's a little strange (call it "different"), for me to be venturing more and more into issues like health, exercise, food, and related things. It's not that I don't know about food; I do. I know a lot about food, but just have not been in the position of having no (or little) choice with it. LOL.

Of course, I'm not the Lone Ranger here; we all are (or will too-soon) be in the same situation – aging. And I'm not going all to pieces here, either. However, I am starting to organize myself a bit more than I used to, when it comes to taking care of myself and all of that. And if I don't, who will?

This exercise thing we all face; perhaps it's not a do or die situation like it is in my case, but we all will have some variant of it sooner than we would choose to. My post two days ago was just pointing out that, while walking each day used to be enough, now more exercise than that seems to be required. So, at some point, death too is like a progressive disease. If it's not sudden, it is incremental, which is my point.

And while my constant activities perhaps used to shake off many of my current concerns, with a little more age they too begin to creep up on me. No argument. I am amazed at how much time staying

healthy now takes up, especially if you include food and I'm not even mentioning supplements. I'm not on prescription drugs (which is amazing!), but I do have a whole string of natural supplements that I have to take each day. That gets old too, along with me!

It finally dawned on me that I have to actually set aside time each day for these health things. It's not just like brushing my teeth, combing my hair, and I'm done. No way. It now not only takes blocks of time, health concerns are pretty much in the catbird seat and calling the shots. Everything else seems to revolve around that. Now, that has to be funny!

Right now, this is exacerbated by my recently cracked rib. I feel twice as old as I did just weeks ago. I know it will get better because I broke two of them a couple years ago. I have to stop acting like I'm 25 years old, which is how old I feel inside. Years ago, I realized that I stopped aging internally when I was about 25 years of age. I feel like I am eternally 25-years old. I have asked others and it seems each of us has an age inside us when we stopped aging. It must be some kind of internal death, followed by always being at a certain age. I note that, when asked, I get different responses as to what age different folks are. Ask yourself: how old do you feel inside right now. Did you psychologically stop aging at one age or another? Forget about your aches and pains for a moment. Who are you in there and when did that happen? As mentioned, I'm feel like I'm no older than 25. And so it goes.

25-years old or not, I'm still me, but I'm wrapped in health issues and an aging body like a caterpillar spinning a cocoon. And I have to do all of this stuff all the time that I never had to do before. That's almost as bad as getting old. That is getting old! LOL.

THE DHARMA OF AGING: “NEXT EXIT ONE MILE”

November 24, 2017

One of my dearest friends lost their partner yesterday. What can I say? This is the second time this has happened in just a few weeks, both dear friends. Obviously, since I'm aging, I can expect more of this kind of thing and not less. So far, I have been kind of taking these things as they come, but like those first few drops that signal a rainstorm, it's probably time I found some kind of umbrella, whatever that might be.

What I mean is that just taking these hits as they come may not be the best approach. Those of us who are aging have to expect exactly this. We are grateful for having lived as long as we have! Perhaps we can somehow band together and be more there for each other. I know that I have to stop imagining that I can go on like I have been, whistling in the dark and waiting for the inevitable. That's just naive.

As the same time, I'm not sure I know what's best to do. It's like entering a whole new area of my life (old age?), one I have not thought that much about until now. At the same time, I don't want life to become nothing more than waiting for the other shoe to drop, either. I'm afraid I have turned-up my nose when it comes to any senior citizens organization. I still feel young, the same as I have always felt inside. That's for old people. LOL.

Society must have already worked all this out and I'm just not aware of it. Aging, dying, and death are nothing new, except, of course, for me. We are born alone and we die alone, but perhaps there are better ways for us to be alone together, support each other,

and be of some comfort, especially, as we age. Anyway, that's what I'm wondering.

All of us who are of a certain age know that we are aging together and that we are not alone in this. Everyone gets old, sooner or later, if they are lucky. Again, the thought of rain comes to mind. It's like the pitter-patter of a few raindrops on a tin roof. If it becomes a rainstorm, then the sheer sound of it drowns out so much of what has been going on in life that we are finally forced to pay attention to the rain. I am getting to that point. For sure, it's a wakeup call, and with no way to turn the alarm off.

I know it sounds funny, but this aging stuff is distracting me from living my life as I have been all these years up to now. Obviously, it's more than a mere distraction; it's an exit sign rather than just another mile-marker. And, it's changing my direction, whether I like it or not. So, as they say, there are two trains runnin' at the same time. I hate to be disturbed in this life I've been living all this time by the idea that my life is temporary, but there you have it. LOL. Is this what they mean by "transitioning," and how does that work? Or, is it like a switch in the railroad yard and I'm being sidelined (or sidetracked) by my own physical failure.

You get the idea; mortality creeps up on us. I have to start factoring it into living, into where I think I'm going other than forward. It's "how" we change that I am finding out about, not abstract change, but actual change. And it's far from trivial. And so, folks my age are dealing with this and to younger folks it's still all so conceptual, so remote that the actuality is not felt, not experienced... yet.

Anyway, the traffic around me continues full-tilt on down the highway of life, busy as ever, but my

internal GPS system is signaling me that my exit is coming up. I'm waiting for that little voice to say "Your destination is up-ahead... on the right."

Bottom line: I am thinking about all of this a lot. Perhaps those of us who are old enough to be in this club can (together here on Facebook) come up with better ways to share with, to be with, and to be helpful to one another.

I would rather celebrate each other now than remember my friends after they have passed.

THE DHARMA OF GETTING STUCK

November 25, 2017

We live on the edge of the Manistee Natural Forest, some 900,000 acres of essentially wilderness. The two-track forest roads often get impassable in heavy rains and in the spring thaw. The ruts can be a couple of feet deep. You don't want to get stuck back there.

If we do, our attention is on whatever tire is the most stuck. It's a case of the obvious, the low-hanging fruit, and that the squeaky wheel always gets the oil. Most of us are busy enough with our distractions, so it takes something pretty immediate and right in our face to get our attention; so much for deliberate planning.

What I'm saying here is that I react much better than I plan ahead, so throw me a bone and I might chew on it. Wait for me to study it out and find it on my own and you might as well forget about it. So, if we are aware that we are stuck (and where), perhaps we can do something about it. Awareness is always the key, which is what Buddhism is all about. The word Buddha simply means the one who is aware or awakened.

And so, where is the edge of awareness for us for us to grab ahold of? Well, for one, it has to be immediate, meaning in the present moment. Yes, we can be aware that we were unaware (or aware) in the past or the future, but even that has to be done in the present. So, as they say, start where you are, here and now.

I have written a great deal about becoming aware of our own reactions since they tend to naturally grab our attention, but becoming aware of where we are

mired or stuck in life is a little more difficult, especially if we don't even know that we are stuck, but just think that's the way things are or, worse, that that's the way we are. Do you see what I'm getting at?

Everything changes; everything moves; just as ideas that we will never change give way to change, so does any situation we are in, good and bad. But there's that problem again, becoming aware of where we are and even who we really are at heart. Of course, as mentioned, awareness is the whole of what Buddhism is about, the study of awareness and ourselves becoming more aware.

Many of the great Buddhist texts are about how we are not aware of ourselves in this present moment. Instead, we are lost in noodling around in our past or scheming and dreaming about our future. It reminds me of how we entertain ourselves on the Internet. So, these pith texts encourage us not to spend so much of our time in the future or the past, but rather to be more aware in the present. It's not that the past or the future are bad, but just that since everything happens in the present, it might be helpful to spend some time there, like in this moment now. Yet, no matter whether this is a good moment or bad, it is easy slide with it into the past and dwell on it.

Yet, it seems that for many of us, we are not entirely happy with (or in) the present moment. As Shakespeare said, "There's the rub." We want it to be different than it is or we feel the present is not what we hoped for or expected. We would rather be elsewhere, like where we think we want to be rather than where we actually are. We are not satisfied with who we are or perhaps where we are in life. Like the old Rolling Stones song and the line "I can't get no... satisfaction." I often feel that way about the food I eat;

no matter how I vary it, I'm still not satisfied. It's like there is some mineral that I need but that I'm not getting, an itch that I just can't scratch.

And the epitome of this problem is when we are not happy (or cannot accept) this present moment, even though all the wisdom of that past declares the "Present" as the living end, the outcome of all there is up to right now, the tip of the top, so to speak. Not accepting the present moment is like holding our breath and refusing to breathe. It's not that the present moment is where we want to pause or stop but, like breathing, unless we keep doing it, we won't even have the present moment, warts and all. It's no wonder that so much sage advice often starts with the simple admonition "Relax, and take a deep breath" and I would add, "and keep breathing."

I don't mean to be vulgar, but if we have ever been constipated, we know that we can't just stop or accept the status quo. We have to keep working with it. It's the same with a mother giving birth. We don't stop the birth process because we're stuck or it's difficult; we go through with it. Where we are in the "right now" is often just like that. We may not like where we are, but refusing to accept our situation because we are not happy with it only makes it worse. It's like the high-wire artist. In the middle of the wire is not the time to have a little protest. It's the time to keep walking.

If there is interest, I would like to pursue this subject in a future blog.

DHARMA FOR WHEN WE GET STUCK

This idea of “getting stuck” in the mud of our life that I brought up yesterday has broad implications, especially if you want to learn how to deal with it. To me, in a sense, it is the essence of what I have learned from the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists, to work in the moment with what is, whatever that may be for each of us. And that includes feeling stuck where we are and not too happy about it, either.

The cycles of life (actually a spiral), with their ups and downs, seem more elliptical than circular, meaning the cycle leans on those two turnaround ends in the ellipse more than the long linear-like stretches. I tend to get stuck in the low spots of life and can't get moving again, with seemingly less energy or will to do anything about it. And there I sit, wondering if this is just the way I am and/or the way life is. Or, is it just me?

I forget (if I ever knew) how to extricate myself from these virtual standstills and can only vaguely remember being stuck like this before, which I (of course) have been many times. I shouldn't have to mention this (but obviously I feel I need to), that if we feel stuck in our present life-situation that, spending most of our time worrying about the past or hoping on the future, is not going to make things easier. It doesn't help at all. In fact, it's the problem.

Learning to just “be” alone in the present moment is, for most of us, not immediately all that easy. We are afraid of being bored or of not knowing what to do with ourselves if we are not lost (as usual) in this busyness or that. We may also feel uncomfortable

being alone with ourselves unless we have our “worry beads,” the sense of doing this or doing that to fill up (or fend off) the space and time of being alone. The present moment, with all its instantaneity, nevertheless can appear at first as a vast empty space in time with nothing to do. Learning to get comfortable in the moment is not a trivial task. It can appear foreign to us. Some folks have vertigo or claustrophobia. In a similar way, many of us are afraid to enter the silence of the present moment.

As mentioned, to get comfortable and familiar with being alone, we first would have to stop endlessly filling up the naturally emerging gaps in time and space with our busyness and worry beads. It’s just a nervous habit, yet we wall ourselves off from ever being alone and are afraid of it.

Yet, what DO we do if there is nothing to do and we don’t fill that void with endless nervous busyness? And it’s true that there IS nothing to do because there is nothing that has to be done but be there. We have to stop “doing, doing, doing” and be done doing for the moment and let our busy fingers rest. Nothing is gained by that.

Like turning off the radio or TV because we suddenly realize that it is irritating us is what I am talking about. Yes, what we gain is the deafening sound of silence, but more important is the experience of the purity of the un-busy-moment, one without all of the white-noise we have been generating since we don’t know when. And that purity is not a vacuum or some empty feeling, per se, but rather the uncorking of the well of our intuition within us that has been obscured all this time by our own busyness and fear of true openness.

And out of this endless instantaneous moment called “Now” pours the cornucopia of insight and the purest intuition. And please don’t think or imagine that what appears are just more thoughts of the kind we are already so used to. Hardly! It takes some time for the obscurations caused by our busyness to clear but, given a little time, what starts to emerge is an insight that is more pure and original than anything we have known. It’s always been there, but drowned out by our own nervousness. To say by words that it is insightful or interesting would be to miss the reality. Words can’t go there.

The insight of purified intuition completes what has always been missing in our self and life; it scratches that itch that never has been scratched and satisfies where satisfaction has never been known. And don’t think that being in the moment is some big task we have to undertake; that’s not it.

We don’t have to do anything at all, EXCEPT to stop spending all of our time in past and future considerations. Like an elastic band, when we stop dwelling in the past and future, we automatically snap-back into the present. It’s been there all the time. And we have to make no other effort than that.

Yes, we may have to suffer withdrawal symptoms from endlessly surrounding ourselves with the white-noise of busyness and let the accumulated obscurations in our mind clear out. But after that takes place, we don’t just “do nothing” and sit there alone like a lump on a log. Instead, we begin to intake and be inspired by the naturally emerging insight that rises to consciousness. It is all the freshness that is. And, as mentioned, what is most unique about this intuition

is that it is exactly what we need to complete us. That, we have never found before.

There is nothing extraneous about discovering our emerging intuition. It is pure signal and no noise. And, as mentioned, it's about finding the missing pieces to whatever has been puzzling us in life. It main-lines a stream of insight that exactly completes us.

THE DHARMA OF WORKING OUT A FUNK

This blog is about what we can do when we find ourselves in a funk, not feeling like ourselves. What are the most practical means to get “unstuck” when our life progress seems to come to a standstill and nothing seems to be happening for us? It can be a hopeless feeling. And I apologize if what is being pointed out here is simplistic or I sound too didactic. I’m just trying to be clear.

I am amazed at how often lyrics from one of my daughter May’s songs come to mind, in this case a tune called “Rise Up Singing,” and the line “You know, trouble ain’t built to last.” This song that May wrote was chosen to be included in the best-selling popular-folk-music collection in North America, having sold over a million copies. If you have never heard this song, you just might like it. I do. Here it is for those who have enough time for a time-out.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9X_uvK5ERM8

And the point of that lyric should not be lost on us, that even trouble (and hard times) aren’t made to last forever. Trouble always gives way to better times. Yet, if we can’t afford to wait (or don’t want to), we can help trouble to pass more quickly. Let’s look at the dharma of how this can be done.

First, it is important to realize (and this is a toughie my friends) that most often much of the situation in which we find ourselves is in our own mind. Where else would it be? LOL.

I’m not saying there are no intervening circumstances that may have brought our life to a halt at what seems

like a full-stop. Certainly that happens. Yet, it is what we do about it that is important. We don't have to just sit in a slump and stop living. As the old Neil Young album said, "Rust Never Sleeps." This is also true for change; we never stop changing, no matter how empty life can at times seem. And we can take advantage of that fact.

Next, don't take "No" for an answer. Keep going. Nothing is static. Everything changes, so be part of the solution and not the problem. We become part of the problem when we fall into believing that the way we feel right now (feeling down) is the way-we-just-are as opposed to just something we are going through. It's like getting stuck in the mud out on the back roads here in Michigan. If we think we can just ride it out every time, that may or may not work. And that's the idea here too. If we can't ride, walk. And sometimes, we have to just get out and help push.

And it's not true that "every door won't open." It will, but it may take time and care on our part to achieve that. The attitude required when life comes to a standstill (instead of progressing normally) involves our working with the situation. The moment we react and take a stand against a bad-moment (as in: "I don't like it"), we are even more stuck with it. It is better (and far easier) to recognize our "bad" situation as a challenge and not a stationary fact. In other words, we are not "that." The situation does not define us.

Yes, we may have to take a few steps back and survey the problem to see just how best to work with it, but working-with-it is what is required. Let's be sure we are on the same page. Here are some illustrations as to what I'm talking about.

For example, we wake up one morning feeling not our usual self, as in a “bad” mood. And we have a big day ahead of us, important in one way or another, but for some reason we are just out of sorts. Not only do we not feel right, we are upset because of it. It’s no wonder that we somehow want to leap-frog how we feel at the moment and get back to feeling good. In other words, there is a division or separation between what we imagine we should normally feel like and how we actually feel at the time. And we don’t like it. That’s an example.

The idea here has to do with the “resistance” we feel, in particular our resistance in-the-moment to whatever we don’t like about how we feel. However, by resistance I am not talking about our resistance to conventions, the law, society, and so forth. I am referring here to our resistance within our own self to something we have to do or are feeling, like feeling down and stuck there. Here we are looking at our internal resistance (or reaction) to anything, especially a reaction that further constipates or slows us down into inaction and a slump. And I am reminded of Shakespeare and in Hamlet’s Soliloquy, the lines:

“And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprise of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.”

I know. I’m using Shakespeare here out of context, but my point is that it does not take much for us to stall-out and have trouble getting moving again. We can sit in a funk or depression for who knows how long. And a major source of depression is the

resistance we feel to accepting how it is with us in the moment. We want to feel better, but we don't, and we don't like it. So, what are we going to do about that?

Wait it out? Wait until we naturally feel better? Or, are we going to "identify" with feeling bad as just who we are, how it is, or that it's what we deserve, and sit ourselves down and pout. It is easy to become discouraged and give up for a while, when life-events have taken the cream off the top of how we feel and we accept that this is just how it is, will be, or must be for us. In other words, we identify with the depression as us. "We" are depressed.

My point is that this view is not helpful, but just one more turn of the screw and not a time to give up or sideline ourselves, much less to identify with the depression as us! This would be a big mistake and we can easily do something about it. Well, perhaps not too easily, but instead, working WITH our situation is what is suggested.

In summary, at some points in our life it does not take much to get us down and, once down, it can be hard to get going again, to get back on our feet. So, if we are talking about remedies here, the above described situation is what we are remedying. How do we keep what is just a depression on the road of life from shutting us down and disabling us? Such a state of mind can be hard to ignore or get around.

And the way to prevent that is to not-identify with the depression as anything other than what it is, a dip in the road, a setback, etc. If we insist on reifying every bad moment or every resistance that we feel, we are creating our own problems as we go along. Instead,

we can learn to consider each setback or depression as the challenge that it is. We may be feeling bad, but we are not the “feeling bad.” We are ourselves and the “feeling bad” is something that is just temporary because we are aware of it. That awareness is our edge.

And I am reminded of the Old Testament in the Bible where it says something like “This came to pass” or “That came to pass,” etc. Nothing comes to stay; everything is just passing through and will pass away. In other words, our job here is to help things pass away, especially whatever makes us feel uncomfortable or out-of-sorts. Help it out. So, the Buddhist techniques in Lojong training are designed to facilitate and help us work with whatever comes our way and not lock horns with it through resistance. We are not resistance fighters. So, how do we remedy this?

For starters, the answer is: slowly and carefully. Rejecting our current situation, even if we don't like it, seldom works. Instead, we have to accept however we feel and get familiar and comfortable in it. In this case, it is easier to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear than it is to hold our breath and wait for better days. Or to quote a method from Sun Tsu's “The Art of War, where it says to “keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” Don't reify the perceived divide.

We want to be aware that there is a division between who we are and how we feel, but not strengthen that division by the attachment of opposing it. It's just the opposite; we want to take possession of our “bad” mood and accept how we feel as the only means to change it up to feeling better. In other words, we have

to accept feeling bad, bring it closer, get into it, and transform it; cheer ourselves up, so to speak. As long as we keep our bad mood at arm's length, we only intensify the separation. That's what "stuck" is.

And to me, the interesting point is that we are just the person to do all this, i.e. transform our bad mood into a better mood and cheer ourselves up. We have handled moodiness before and come out feeling better. However, we can't do this if we refuse to accept our mood just as it is, warts and all. It's ours.

And while it's correct to not identify WITH the bad mood, it's equally true that we must own it. It's our bad mood. It's where we are at just now and only we can turn it around. In fact, we are ideally suited to do just that. If we don't, it's like trying to drive a car and not be in it. Eventually, we have to just get into the car and drive it where we want to go.

And it is the same with getting stuck in one of life's low spots. Just as we don't want to identify with it as "us," there is also no point in trying to wait it out. Instead, we get more familiar with it. Keep in mind that we are already aware enough to know that we don't want to feel like this. That is our advantage. We know how we would like to feel, so with a little love, attention, and care we can pull up out of whatever has gotten us down. It is just as easy to work with our bad mood and change it as it is to remain stuck there opposing it. By working with ourselves, as it is, we can ease on out of it.

In other words, we have to relax and accept the "bad" mood as a starting point to regain a normal sense of ourselves. If we are doing something like sitting

meditation and don't feel like it and are just waiting until it is over, it's the same story. Relax and accept where we are, like "in a bad mood," and work it like clay until we shape up into something better. That is the dharma of it, as I know.

DHARMA'S ENERGY STOREHOUSES: REACTIONS AND RESISTANCE

IMO, deeper than our day-to-day involuntary reactions to life is our stubborn resistance to things. Often we are not even aware of our own resistance because we are too busy resisting. And while it's not difficult to become aware of our knee-jerk reactions and learn to tone them back, it is much harder to become aware (much less realize) our resistances and work them out.

To keep it simple, "resistance" is when we resist something, whether it is something we don't feel like doing or something we are unaware that we are even resisting, like when we find ourselves pushing-back for no reason we know. I'm not referring to resisting "evil" or the law, etc., but rather deep-seated prejudice and bias or even sheer laziness. For example, I resisted taking the trash and recycle out each week for years, until I realized that it was far easier just to do it (and get into it) than to gripe about it to myself. Now it's a chance to get some early-morning fresh air. Overcoming our resistances is a positive pleasure that also releases large amounts of previously inert or frozen energy.

Our moment-to-moment reactions are just instantaneous (and I have written about them often), but resistance is often so ingrained or deep that we can even mistake it for a part of us, who we are or perhaps who we think we will be or turn into in the future. In other words, we can fall into thinking that a particular resistance we feel is our character, who (or what) we are, i.e. that our resistance is actually an innate part us, the way we are. To me, that is something to watch out for.

I know of only one way to handle resistance and that is to first become aware that it exists, even if we at first only can see the tiniest outline or edge of it. And once recognized, resistance is then not removed suddenly or by force, but slowly and very carefully like we would go about removing a thorn from a foot or a sliver in our hand. We work it out gradually until we can see to embrace the totality of it and free it up. But unlike a thorn or a sliver, we do not then pass the resistance from our system. Instead, we work through the resistance, which is like freeze-dried karma. Just add heart and awareness and it can become again a positive part of us rather than something we resist. There is always “something” to a resistance and ultimately when we realize its essential nature, it vanishes and ceased to be separate from us. This may be as close to removing deep karma as we can get.

And, as we do become aware of a resistance, we realize that our resistances are everywhere that we are, deeply embedded in the very fabric of our existence. So, what are we resisting? That is a question for each of us to ask. Once we tap into them, our resistances are a very rich find, an immense storehouse of energy, much like petroleum, that can fuel our path to enlightenment for a very long time indeed.

Once we are aware of them, we find that our resistances are ubiquitous; they are everywhere. In each case, our resistance to what we don't like or don't feel like doing can be savored and sucked dry of its habitual hold on us. That's the dharma of it. Our resistances are the low-hanging karmic fruit that, once discovered, are the gift that keeps on giving.

And like thoughts, whose every essence is the same, the way to unravel and free our resistance is also always the same. While our knee-jerk reactions, although numerous, are fleeting, resistance takes time to be unearthed and thus can be, as mentioned, storehouses, treasures of energy for our realization.

Although the path of dharma may seem at times to be long and arduous, much like a desert that must be crossed, our deep pools of resistance are like oases of energy, waiting to be discovered. And unlike our reactions, which are like lightning bugs in the night, resistances are a slow-burning fuel that, as they are liberated, can shed light for a very long time. They become a torch that helps to light our liberation.

However, we have to realize our resistances. And that means becoming familiar with what we resist and why. And then we revitalize our resistance, like adding water to freeze-dried food, only in this case, we just add awareness. We finally take the time to stop resisting and instead love (or at least neutralize) our resistances, eventually reincorporating and recognizing them as us.

You are reading here (and in several previous blogs) about the dharma of resistance. This is a link to some articles on the other form of reactivity we experience, our moment-to-moment reactions:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

UNKNOTTING THE CORD OF THE MIND

We each bump up against our resistances all the time. They are like a bad clutch, but most of you reading this have probably never driven a car with a clutch. At every turn, we find ourselves resisting this or resisting that. We may even translate our resistances into “I don’t like this” and “I don’t like that” or worse, “I am this way” or “I am that way,” but this may just be over-anthropomorphizing all of this.

If our myriad of resistances are what makes the wheel squeak, then each resistance, when realized, contains within it the oil to un-squeak itself, if that makes sense. That is what realization is all about. In the Tibetan tradition, they use the image of a knotted snake that, when it relaxes, just naturally unties itself. Dharma realization is the untying of our own knots.

I am reminded of the old road-sign warning “Slow Down, Curve Ahead.” When we sense ourselves resisting, that too is a sign that we should relax and take it slow, hopefully evening-out the particular knot of resistance that we feel within us. Our resistances are like shorthand. They can be relaxed and unpacked, thus extending themselves smoothly and releasing their tension. Just as in the body pain is our way of becoming aware that something needs attention, so do resistances pinpoint for us where attention on our part is needed. It is our psyche’s way of alerting us, is we can learn to be that aware.

And just as the masseuse seeks out knots in our body and solves them, so can we learn to unpack our many resistances, releasing their energy to us for other uses. And the process is simple. First, we have to be

aware of being resistant and pinpoint each resistance with that awareness. Next, we can learn to treat each discovered resistance of which we are aware as an opportunity to slow down and very carefully unpack it. And this is best done with love and a cherishing of this opportunity. When that resistance is totally released or expanded, it releases the frozen-energy in which it was bound and that energy lives again and is available to us. Consider the whole process as a kind of psychic massage that removes the knots and kinks of our resistance, resulting in a smoothly running (and fully flexible) mindstream.

Each knot of resistance is a frozen energy pool that can be unlocked and liberated. It amazes me that we carry within us the very means for our own liberation. How economical! And, it's not like we have to go far to get an energy drink. In time, we can learn to choose, unlock, and release resistance after resistance on our path to enlightenment. It's like a picnic lunch, fully portable.

And just as with a universal wrench, one realization fits all. Once we grasp the nature of realization, it's a universal solvent. So, to back up a bit and repeat, our resistances are like an oilfield, with many wells. Like a knotted cord, as each resistance is realized, another knot in the cord is unraveled and the increasingly unknotted cord becomes more and more of an open conduit through which our life-energy can naturally flow.

Unraveling our knotted cord is the path to liberation and enlightenment, one knot at a time. It is an axiom in Tibetan Buddhism that what binds us, frees us, if

we can realize how to do this. And the key to realization is awareness, awareness, awareness.

SUMMARY: REALIZING RESISTANCE

How should I put this next thought? I don't want to be overbearing, but at the same time, what's the point of communicating without actually communicating? I've been pointing out the concept of "resistance" and the fact that for most of us this is some deep-down stuff that we may not even be aware of. So, if you are reading my blogs and nodding along (or nodding out, LOL) you may have missed the point, so I will try to be clear.

Working with our involuntary reactions (since they are obvious and instantaneous), there is little problem for us to get on and stay on the same page here. However, with fully grasping the nature of resistance, it is a bit (or a lot) more difficult. Of course, we all get the general concept of resistance. We resist and do it all the time; we find ourselves resisting this, that, and the other thing. Yet, IMO, "realizing" resistance is another matter entirely. And fully realizing "resistance" means being able to turn it to our advantage and make each resistance a liberation. And for that, in my experience, more than just a conceptual grasp is required.

Dharma training is ultimately about realization and little else. We can talk and talk or read and read or listen and listen. That is no guarantee that we have experienced what we are talking about, much less realized it. Realization is two levels up from understanding in the dharma handbook, and in my life actual realization is rare enough. Yet, that could just be me, but I don't think so. LOL.

The more advanced dharma teachings are filled with what are called “upadesha,” which word translates to something like “pith teachings,” the boiled-down essence of the major dharma texts. It is similar to reading prose or poetry. We can read prose forever and perhaps never reach a fever-enough pitch for it to become incendiary in our mind. Yet often, poetry, with fewer, but just the right, words can cause our mind to burst into flames of realization. The pith dharma teachings from Tibet often are actually poems of spiritual realization called “Dohas,” and they are indeed incendiary.

Dharma realization, at least for most of us, is rare. And there is no patch-test that we can buy at the drugstore that if it turns blue we have realization and pink if we do not. That’s one of the reasons why the Rinzai Zen practitioners have all their koans. Koans are like the questions Harrison Ford had to ask in the movie “Blade Runner” to determine if a person was a human or a replicant (android). Dharma teachers have similar tests as a way to tell if a person has actually achieved the realization called “Recognition” (Kensho in Zen) or just think they have. It often is a series of questions and answers, like a lie-detector test. I too have been asked (and answered) questions in this traditional manner.

Anyway, as mentioned, “Resistance” is much deeper and more stubborn to realize than, let’s say, our knee-jerk reactions that we can all be readily aware of. Resistance is usually embedded in our habits much more deeply, well beyond what we could call superficial awareness. We may understand it conceptually, but we still don’t get it. Mastering our resistances involves being able to turn them to our

advantage and use them to enlighten ourselves. That would be an example of realization.

And, as they say, everyone wants to be in that number “when the saints coming marching in.” If you are concerned or question whether you have realized what is called “Recognition of the True Nature of the Mind,” you probably have not. It’s that simple. “Recognition” is always a “without-a-doubt” event. That, by definition, is its very nature. Imagining we have realization gets old fast and sooner than later we do “realize” that what we have (as my dharma teacher pointed out to me many times) is just another spiritual experience, and they come and they go. Realizations, however, are permanent.

So, if we find ourselves wondering, then we don’t have it and it’s better to spend our time preparing for realization rather than assuming or asserting it. And if we are defensive about this, that too is not a good sign. In that case, we probably ARE a replicant. LOL.

I can’t tell if someone has or has not recognized the true nature of the mind, so don’t ask me. I might have a guess, but as Chögyam Trungpa used to joke, “Your guess is as good as mine.” However, what I might be good for is helping those interested to work through the preliminary practices in order to get ready (properly) to recognize the actual nature of their mind. As my first dharma teacher used to say to me: “The dharma is not true because I say it; I say it because it is true.”

Hopefully, that’s what I’m doing with these blogs.

“THOUGHT STORMS” AND DHARMA

November 29, 2017

This blog is going to be a bit of a ramble; think of it as a walk in the woods with possibly some dialog, if there are any questions worth discussing.

My mind apparently has some internal weather of its own and thought storms do happen. Little dervish-like thought tornados whirl into my mind that (unless I can become aware of them quickly) more or less carry me away for a spell. It can take quite some time for me to even become aware that I'm having a thought storm, much less be able to shake it off and wake myself out of it.

As with most of us, I like it when things are going good and I feel like I'm moving along in some positive direction or at least it appears that way to me. But the reality is that just as often I somehow lose the thread and things come to a halt, dumping me right out of my thought-train and back into the present moment. And there am I, a naked mind without a thought, counting sheep or just looking around, And I have no idea how to pick up on the thread I was just following before I got carried away. That direction (and thread) just dried up and blew away. What WAS I thinking?

The more sensitive I get, the more that intuition plays a greater part in my life. I trust it. Like having the fine tuning on a Ham Radio, I'm able to very carefully tune into what must be for me distant signals, yet if I'm distracted, I can lose them a moment later. Although these intuitive signals may be weak, when they are properly dialed in, I'm 100% present in the moment with them. Then, just as quickly, their thread is gone, leaving me back in what I would call the “ordinary me” of my mind. If I want to re-find that subtle station, I

have to relax and sometimes my inner auto-tuner may bring that intuition to the surface again... or not. I'm not talking about contacting alternative worlds here, but simply accessing my own intuition.

Thoughts, like fingerprints or snowflakes, are all different. Part of the more advanced dharma-training methods include identifying the common nature of thoughts, at which time what is realized is their commonality rather than (what we usually see) their uniqueness. And that realization is the key to cancel the unique impact of those thoughts on us and instead rest in that commonality – the true nature of thoughts. This is a hallmark of Insight Meditation.

What I call thought-storms are an innate part of learning Tranquility Meditation, in that we discover the ubiquity of thoughts and their diversity, although perhaps at first more as distractions than accomplices. In the more advanced dharma practices (Insight Meditation), like a spider, we learn to use the web of our thoughts to climb our way to realization. Without thoughts to work through, realization would not be possible. I have found it important to think thoroughly about this point.

In fact, not just thoughts, but every kind of reaction and resistance that we have become essential stepping stones on our way to enlightenment. It is the process of not only not-doing, but rather also of undoing what we have already done. And many of us are already walking the path of undoing.

Our busy thoughts are potentially like little torches lighting our way to enlightenment. Otherwise, it would be too dark to see. In my case, although I entered the dharma like the proverbial bull into a china shop, at this point in my training I am tiptoeing through the garden of the dharma, trying my best not to step on

any flowers. I had no idea that this world that we find ourselves in as ephemeral as it is, literally a figment of our own collective imagination. And there is no rear exit or way to back out, either.

IMO, life is so fragile and it's more like a hologram than a punch in the nose.

DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA

Is there any other kind? With dharma, it's all do-it-yourself, so there is no escaping that; if we want to accumulate dharma practice, we have to do it. And since we each are already doing something, why not "dharma-ize" that, and learn to practice dharma as we go about our day-to-day busyness. Contrast trying to find the time (and space) to schedule and sit in a corner to meditate each day with simply adding a dimension of dharma to whatever we are already doing each day. Instead of practicing for a short time each day in a corner (so to speak), we practice all day long and with no extra effort. Don't get me wrong. I still sit in a corner and do "stationary" dharma practice each day, yet I do a lot more off-the-cushion practice. But I have been doing this off-the-cushion practice for many years and find it a great solution... and best of all, it actually works!

I familiar with most of what are called the Preliminary Practices, the basic dharma practices, and more than just a little familiar. The goal of these preliminary practices (which are purification oriented) is to remove enough of our accumulated obscurations to bring us down to a "fighting weight" where we can successfully actually learn to meditate properly. So, in dharma practice, the equivalent of going to church for an hour once a week will not get me to heaven, so to speak. I am much more of a hard case than that. I need lots of dharma practice and I get it, but most of it is not "on the cushion," so to speak. It is done while I'm walking around and doing my daily work. There are a few ingredients that you may need to accomplish this.

First, for motivation, there is no better practice that I know of the what are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” which are just what that title says, thoughts that sober us enough to hopefully get on the same page with actual dharma practice. I won’t describe those four thoughts again here, but you can read all about them at this link:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

Once we refresh ourselves with the above four reminders, not just conceptually, but “once more and with feeling,” we are ready undertake what I call “Reaction Toning” or, more formally, “Reactivity Tong-Len.” And nothing could be easier, because nothing is easier than learning to be aware of our constant involuntary reactions on a moment-by-moment basis. I won’t describe the process here, but you can study this technique at this link:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

When we have mastered our reactions to a significant degree, which will take you some time, then we are ready to go a little deeper into what could be called our “frozen reactivity,” more commonly called our “resistances.”

Here is a simple example of resistance to get us on the same page, but it gets much more complex. We resist doing what don’t feel like doing. For example, I don’t feel like going to the grocery store unless I HAVE to. In other words, I don’t usually go grocery shopping for fun. So, the accent here is on what I HAVE to do. And the point is, if we HAVE to do something (i.e. there are certain things we HAVE to do), then there is no point in encouraging resistance on our part. Let’s say that I have to clean up the kitchen, meaning: there it is waiting, having to be

done. Someone has to do it and that someone happens to be me. In that case, any resistance on my part is mostly counter-productive. I might as well stop resisting and just get into it.

Like a stuck record, anytime we feel resistance to doing something, that resistance needs to be smoothed out. The Tibetan teachings often use the image of a snake that has tied itself into a knot. The way for the snake to untie the knot is simply to relax and allow the knot to untie itself. It's the same with becoming aware of our resistances, one by one, and massaging them out until they untie themselves. If you would like to read more about this technique, here are some articles:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

Both reaction training and resistance training are easy to do because they are pay-as-you-go practices, meaning the release of energy that accompanies these practices is greater than any energy we expend doing them. And both practices help to get the kinks out of our psyche and remove, as they say, that hitch in our get-along. These practices are easy to do, take up no extra time, and have the most immediate rewards of any preliminary dharma that I know of, and I have tried a lot of them.

So, if you can successfully master these two very simple but profound practices (and realize their results), you may at that point be ready to learn actual meditation. What to do then?

What I would do is seek out someone who knows how to meditate and get instruction. However, many people think that they can meditate, but in reality what they do is some kind of relaxation therapy. Nothing wrong with that. I like to watch movies for that.

However, there is a great difference between all of the ways to relax, which call themselves “meditation” and what the Buddha taught. Actual meditation is about waking up, becoming more aware, and ultimately realizing how our mind actually works.

So... we need to find someone who is skilled at awareness meditation, which is called “Tranquility Meditation” (Shamata in Sanskrit, Shiné in Tibetan). I’d be glad to answer questions about the things that I know and have actually practiced. We have no problem finding instructors for everything else, so if you can’t make the same effort to find someone who can instruct you about the mind, then I don’t know what else to tell you.

“BEFORE THE FLOWERS OF FRIENDSHIP FADED
FRIENDSHIP FADED”

GOING FOR REFUGE IN THE DHARMA

December 1, 2017

That’s the title of a longish poem by Gertrude Stein that is frequently quoted, most often just for the title. In a similar vein, I feel I was married before I was married and that I took refuge in the dharma before I took “Refuge” in the dharma, the outward ceremony. I’m not very ceremonial, in general. I understand there are these outward ceremonials and have done some, but I guess I don’t think that much about them. For me, it is what happens inside of me that I take more seriously than any outward acknowledgement or portrayal.

Most people are not even aware that in Buddhism there is a formal Refuge Ceremony, commonly spoken of as “taking refuge,” as in “Have you gone for Refuge?” I have not only myself gone for refuge formally, I have done it scores of times because I have been at the refuge ceremony for others and have gone through the process and said the words with them.

Yet, before I could be interested in such a ceremony at all, there had to be a reason why I would consider such an outward ceremony meaningful or important in the first place. I can remember wondering about Buddhism and the dharma as early as the late 1950s, when my friends and I would say up all night drinking horrible instant coffee (with powdered creamer) and smoking strong cigarettes like Gauloises. We would talk of Buddhism, but we also talked of Existentialism and many other things. This was “about” talking about

Buddhism and not anything else, certainly not practicing it. The concept of practicing the dharma had not even occurred to us at that point. For me that came later, in the early 1970s.

And you would need to know a little something about me back then to put this in any perspective or context, so here is some bio. I was in my late teens, had never finished high school, and while I was very enthused about life, I also was very much alone. Somehow, perhaps from being enamored with European art, literature, and philosophy, I was particularly taken with the German concept of Weltschmerz, a certain melancholy, often translated simply as “world sorrow” or “World weariness.” I was still too young to really be weary of the world, but I emulated that sorrow nevertheless.

And I was taken by certain poets and authors, like Henri Alain-fournier, who wrote a single novel called “Le Grand Meaulnes” in 1913, which appeared in English translation as “The Wanderer.” It was a heartbreaker and tearjerker of the first water, and represented an entire genre of literature called “Bildungsroman,” novels charting ones formative years, in particular our spiritual education -- our growing pains. Other bildungsroman included books by Johan Wolfgang von Goether like “The Sorrows of Young Werther” and Gottfried Keeler’s “Der Gruner Heinrich” (“Green Henry”) and others.

The net result of such literature was that I often could be found walking the streets of Ann Arbor late at night smoking cigarettes and looking for the woman that was destined for me, but not finding her. You get the idea. We were a whole generation like that and this was before the 1960s and the Hippies existed. We were kind of the wannabe Beatniks, but were too

young; that train had already left the station. Anyway, the point of describing all of this was to kind of set the stage for my state of mind back then. And there were many others like me although I may have liked to think I was the only one. LOL.

Certainly, reading the works of philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and others, we were very much in the mode of the “you only go around once” mentality. So, as mentioned, young or not, we were very much into the world-sorrow that I mentioned earlier. So, there you have the picture of that time, the late 1950s and very early 1960s in America. We all watched Ingmar Bergman movies and wanted to go on the road with Jack Kerouac and do things like that. We were looking down, not up. “Looking up” came later.

It was in 1974 that I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whose books I had been devouring and got to serve as his chauffeur for a short time. Now here was someone who not only was as brilliant as anyone I could have ever imagined, but was totally right there, fully present, and indeed very much up and totally positive. He too was aware of the sufferings in this world, but obviously was not suffering himself. He was not world-weary as we students of Existentialism were, but was all about helping those who were suffering do something about it. He not only wanted to help others; he was in a total position to do so. Hmmm. I had never thought of that. I wanted to help myself out of my “misery,” but never thought that I had anything to offer others.

And the main thing Trungpa Rinpoche taught me (and a multitude of others) was that the Dharma was not something just to talk about late at night, but instead was a path to greater clarity and enlightenment that we could all travel. A path, something devoutly to be

wished for by someone my age. Dharma was something to do and it was positive. Up until then, such an idea had never occurred to me or to most of my generation. We were all about our own melancholy and misery, not about doing something about it. And we had never realized that Buddhism was a method that resulted in greater clarity or a positive attitude. Who woulda thunk it?

And so, what emerged from my meeting with Trungpa Rinpoche was that not only was dharma a path I could walk, but that it was a way out of all the sorrow and suffering I had been contemplating that life was, a refuge from the bleakness and conformity of the 1950s, which kids my age came from. And that is how the concept of “refuge” first entered my mindstream, somewhere around 1974 and it was Trungpa Rinpoche who first pointed this out to me and to many others.

The dharma was something that I actually could take refuge in from this world-sorry world in which that I had been trying to keep my head down in since my late teens. And so, I soon found myself actually taking refuge in the dharma, tuning into it. It was only much later that I realized that that taking refuge in the dharma was traditional or that they even had an official refuge ceremony that almost all sincere dharma students took part in. What is taking refuge in the dharma all about?

Refuge just naturally happens when we realize that the dharma is an antidote to our life confusion and suffering up to that point. And Buddhist tradition tells us that we take refuge in the “Three Jewels,” which simply are the historical Buddha, his teachings (the dharma), and those people living today who actually embody those teachings (the sangha). That’s pretty

simple. I had just spontaneously (and naturally) already done that, found that the Buddha and his teachings (dharma) were the remedy for what ailed me and, after meeting the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa, face-to-face, I certified for myself that the living embodiment of those dharma teachings, realized teachers such as Trungpa Rinpoche, were how those teachings were transmitted and shared. I experienced this in real time, in the flesh.

So, it is traditional for those of us who find ourselves taking refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha (the Three Jewels) to eventually say so. And this is done by the traditional hair-cutting ceremony, when we formally witness what we have discovered for ourselves. I took refuge in 1983 after meeting my root teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. That meeting was so powerful and filled with love and kindness that soon afterward, I found myself wanting to formally take refuge through the outward refuge ceremony. And Margaret and I (surrounded by our kids playing at our feet) did just that.

So, how important is the formal Refuge Ceremony? As I pointed out by way of Gertrude Stein, that before the Refuge Ceremony, I had already taken refuge. And such a formal ceremony was important for me in that it indicated that I had found the dharma to be a path that I could take and for which I felt real gratitude. I deeply appreciated the dharma! And it is considered important to receive such a ceremony from someone who is a living example of dharma realization, someone who has by his or her own realization the ability to transmit and extend the lineage to formally include us. I wanted to be in that company.

At the formal Refuge Ceremony, we not only have a tiny snip of our hair cut, but are given a dharma name to seal or protect us on the path. My dharma name is Karma Dhundup Dawa, which translated into English is "Moon of Accomplishment." And just, as they say, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea," and so do I share in the path of dharma lineage of which I am now a part of.

If you are interested in Taking Refuge in the dharma, here is a list of centers that I know are authentic. I am sure there are others center, but I can't speak from experience about them.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF WORDS

December 2, 2017

Words fail me, which makes writing difficult and the results always on the border of boring. It's like dancing around a keyhole or trying to thread a very fine needle. The best I can hope for is an approximation, a "sounds-like" or reflection in words of an ineffable concept; there is no true reflection possible. Words cannot mirror reality, period. End of story. So obviously, I have no choice but to get real through my actions and not just through my words. And I try to do that, but "trying" is trying.

It's no wonder that the various forms of dharma, especially Zen Buddhism, have their stories of physical gestures like a Zen master taking off a shoe and hitting his student on the head with it. There is something beyond words, but how do we get there? We obviously can't get there with words. I can see that; more important, I can sense it in my bones.

All I have left are the stories and concepts. And these are stale reflections of the reality and will always be so. It gives me pause about how effective these endless descriptions here in my blogs could possibly be to readers. What's the point in endlessly approaching, but never reaching a goal with words. I feel stymied, yet at the same time understand how patience is required.

I don't mind trying, yet trying will never do it. There is no doubt that I am exhausting my every effort and running out of options. That itself is beautiful. What happens if I stop trying and just let things be as they are? It's mostly about time, anyway, and how much time is involved? If we are not in a hurry, hopefully

realization will eventually happen for all of us. So, why worry?

I'm like Don Quixote, forever tilting against windmills, and I even know better. So, why do it? The answer to that goes back to when I had a first taste of realization myself, enough at least to make me want to share what little I knew with others. I felt that perhaps I could help others save enormous amounts of "time" and perhaps the suffering that goes along with it.

It may be that time is something we can't save, but only spend. Which leaves me with the physical things I can do to be of use to other people in my life and, of course, the stories.

I can tell stories, but the problem with my stories (as I see it) is that they are always so didactic. There is always a point or moral to them. And I am so predictable. On the other hand, my photography is free of that for the most part. Images and photo impressions express for me the beauty that I see and feel. Perhaps that is enough, enough being something rather than nothing. And, of course, it's "nothing" which has to be expressed! LOL.

How to express nothing, but not in words?