

FOR THOSE OF US WHO CAN'T SLEEP

July 26, 2012

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It is really hot here. Although thunderstorms are threatening outside, it is still almost ninety degrees here in my little office at 1 AM. I can't sleep from the heat, from the thunder, and so on. And I am still very sad about the passing of the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche, whose death brings home to me once again the thought of impermanence, something I would do well to contemplate more often.

I guess I was looking for Buddhism early on, way back in the 1950s. We would stay up late, smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, and talk about Buddhism and topics like existentialism. It was all just intellectual talk, and I was so serious back then.

I can remember when Coltrane's album "My Favorite Things" came out, with the incredible piano of McCoy Tyner. I was up all night at Harvey Armstrong's 2nd-floor apartment on Packard Street in Ann Arbor listening to it over and over again. The title track is still one of my favorite tunes of all time... and I mean of all time. Of course I love Coltrane on that tune, but it is the trancelike piano of Tyner that sealed the deal.

And there was that all-day sesshin sitting zazen with Roshi Phillip Kapleau. That was when I wanted to be a Zen practitioner. Or the Chinese Buddhist monk that Margaret and I met in Woodstock, New York while visiting a fellow astrologer. We invited him to live at our center, flew him there, but it did not work out. I wish I could tell you that story, but it is a little too crazy for here.

In other words, I was looking, early on, for something like Buddhism, something that was more psychology and a method to live life than it was a formal religion. I am not by nature religious or, if I am, Mother Nature is my religion.

And like so many of us back then who yearned to find a teacher, someone older and wiser than we, someone we could trust, I tried about every guru or spiritual teacher that blew into town. Yet I was very, very fussy about who I would let teach me. It sure wasn't school teachers. I had left school early, never even finishing high school, because I was bored out of my mind and uninterested in the teachers I came across.

I ended up spending years studying black music and sitting at the feet of some of the great blues musicians, players like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Big Mama Thornton, Arthur Crudup, Big Walter Horton, Little Walter, and many others. I was lucky enough to interview and spend time with them all and, more than just the music they shared, it was the light in their eyes, the practical wisdom of life that I saw in them that I liked. I was thirsty for that.

Eventually I found the Tibetan Buddhists, who were as knowledgeable as the great blues players about life, but taught a spiritual path I could accept and follow. The life choices or situations of many of the blues greats were not something I wanted to imitate, but their spirit and common sense was.

With the Tibetan Buddhists, I found everything I needed in one package. Today there are hundreds, if not thousands, of Tibetan monks here in this country who teach. I would have

trouble knowing which ones were for me. Back then there were about none.

Although I met the Dalai Lama early on, up close and personal, it was not until I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, that I was satisfied that here was the real deal for me. Trungpa was certainly that.

Although I loved Trungpa, his followers were too much into parties and drinking. As a musician, I was way past that and yearned for something simple and without a lot of baggage. I found that when I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who (believe it or not) came to me in a dream. I will tell that story once again, and then try to go to bed.

It was in 1983 and I was a businessman living where I live now, in Big Rapids, Michigan, managing Matrix Software, the astrology company I founded and still run today. My close friend James Coats phoned me to say that he had met a Tibetan teacher in Ann Arbor and did I want to come to Ann Arbor to meet him? James always had a new guru.

Not really, I said. I am running a business, married, with kids, and way past my guru-hopping days. Well, I didn't put it that way, but that was how I looked at it. I wished him well and let it go at that. Been there, done that.

It was a day or so later, just before dawn that I had the dream. It was one of those rare dreams that are more real than the dream of daily life we wake up to. In the dream I was driving to Ann Arbor to meet this radiant golden oriental man and I was as happy as I could imagine. And then I woke up.

In the early October morning light, as I sat up in bed, I was struck with sadness that my life had become such that realizing in the flesh a dream like I just had was seemingly no longer possible. My sense of self just went void and life suddenly felt so empty.

In that moment I decided I wanted to go to Ann Arbor. I wanted to meet the man my friend James told me of, and I dialed him up right then, even though I knew he was a late sleeper, always. Sleepy-eyed James told me that it was too late and that the Rinpoche he had told me about was leaving that morning at 10 AM. It was already 7 AM where I was and the drive to Ann Arbor is three hours, so that was that.

Well, I was not having any of it that morning. I told James I was coming, no matter what and that I was not working that day and would be there as soon as possible. If I missed the Rinpoche, so be it. I was taking that day off. Period.

Then my wife, who had also had a similar dream, and I grabbed our kids, including our eighteen-month old daughter May and, with toothbrushes in hand, we were on the road. I drove as fast as I dared.

James knew we were coming and even was waiting to flag us down at the end of the long driveway and guide us into where the Rinpoche was. The lama was still there. As I came up the driveway I saw a handsome but young Tibetan man sitting outside on the front steps. This was not the Tibetan of my dreams, so I was taken aback. Then James pointed out that this was not Rinpoche, but his translator Ngodup Tsering Burkhar, who today is one of my dearest friends.

We went inside and were received by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche who was everything my dream spoke of, and more. He was radiant and we were radiant in his presence. The meeting was

short because Rinpoche was soon on the road and driving to Columbus to another one of his centers. However, that meeting has never ended and we were left in a transported state, and wandered around for days with some kind of spontaneous compassion that gradually faded as our bad habits regained control of us. If we wanted to live in that state, we would have to do some practice.

I am still working with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (who is in his high eighties) to this day. His teachings and guidance have made it possible for me to be somewhat stable and be able to share thoughts like these with you.