

Blogs for 2020

Part One



by Michael Erlewine

2020 Blogs
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Readable, but not finely edited (no time)

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Jun 16, 2020, 4:06 AM

BEYOND GRASPING

Often, what I write, what comes to mind and I feel needs to be said, never gets said. It's like when I was swimming as a kid and lost hold of the inner tube. My own efforts to swim toward it pushed it beyond my reach. I find that certain topics are like that.

I do my best to describe them, but when I do, I find I have maybe said a lot (or too much), yet I never said what I meant to or started out to say. My own descriptions and words end up being a kind of forward or introduction to the topic and the gist or heart of it all, what I meant to say (and still mean to say), never got said. Like the inner tube, it slips out of my reach again.

It reminds me when I was a teenager and a certain song came on the radio, one that I could never hear enough. No matter how often I listened to the song, I was still getting something meaningful out of it. I seemingly never exhausted the content of that song or only did so after a very long time.

In other words (more words), in certain cases, what I write only pushes my meaning (like the inner tube) out of reach. I have learned to live with this, but I have also learned that such topics are so "hot" that they defy description and any attempt on my part only ends up with something cast off, and not the heart of my truth, not what I started out to say. Anyone else do this?

As the dharma texts point out, the true nature of the mind is ineffable, impossible to describe. And any attempt to do so only results in grasping at, but never obtaining, anything real or germane. It reminds me of those little fake-fireworks we had as a kid, called "snakes." You lit a little pellet on the sidewalk and they spewed off a long charcoal snake, but remained burning at the center.

I feel many key topics are like those snakes, they spawn an almost endless cast-off, but remain untouched (and unsaid) themselves. Another way to say this, is that these topics are "evergreen." They are never exhausted but keep on wanting to be defined, but yet manage to remain not defined and out of reach.

I have found that, over time, such impossible-to-define topics do get defined, are realized as to their meaning for me, and can finally be set aside as settled. Yet, I wonder if they are ever defined or do I just grow beyond the need to define them. Who knows?

Certainly, dharma realizations, like the nondual practices Insight Meditation (Vipassana) or Mahamudra Meditation cannot be defined or approached directly. Equally true, however, there are an almost untold number of dharma writings and teachings trying to do just that out there, put the ineffable into words and language. Like the inner tube, they keep being pushed just out of reach by my own desire to express them. Funny that.

Jun 15, 2020, 9:24 AM

GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT

Something that I have learned through my spiritual journey is that we literally pass through different realms. I believe these are what are known as “chakras,” although that term is pretty-much misused by this point. Nevertheless, these levels or realms exist and we pass through them religiously.

In brief, a chakra or life-stage has a beginning, a middle, and an end, after which we are on to the next one. The rules in one life-stage may be reversed in the next stage, and so forth. This should not be too difficult to understand, because we can clearly distinguish between single life, falling in love and getting married, having children and family, and then growing old. Those are clear stages, much like chakras.

I wrote (which to me is interesting) an article on why we cannot see beyond our current realm, using astrology as a metaphor, called “Cycles or Circles, Centers, and Circulation” that could interest some of you.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Circles%20or%20Cycles%20-%20Centers%20and%20Circulation%202020%20V2.pdf>

But here and now, the path of dharma is my focus and just how the landscape unfolds and changes as we tread the path. Time goes both ways, just as the rays of the sun shine in all directions three-dimensionally – all ways.

We never get so far along one path before we reverse direction and retrace our steps. Another way of saying this would be that everything cycles or pulses, like the heart beats, the breath heaves in and out, and so on.

There is no “where” we are going other than the process or way we get there. “All dressed up and nowhere to go.”

And so, the idea of pulsation and cycles emerges as central to who or what we are. I cannot forget the sentence that the German philosopher Hegel wrote, that “We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.” It’s not unlike the wizard behind the curtain in “The Wizard of Oz.” In dharma, this manifests by our learning to make a fist, so to speak, through developing the concentration needed for successful Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), only to later, when we have made that fist, in the non-dual practices relax our mind and allow it to open out to rest. Again, this is pulsing.

Unless we first make a fist, concentrate, we have nothing to un-concentrate and then let go. The great astrologer Dane Rudhyar wrote an important book titled “The Pulse of Life,” which is saying the same thing. The tide rolls in and the tide rolls out, and again. Everything pulsates.

That being said, perhaps you can see how very important what are called the Preliminary Dharma Practices are, because that is when we concentrate. If we do a poor job of concentrating ourselves, we have less to later relax and un-concentrate. Garbage in; garbage out. In many of the western occult literature, this whole idea is called rounding the nadir.

And so, giving short-shrift to the Preliminary Practices because we are in a hurry to get to the non-dual practices is self-defeating. If we don’t wrap up the present (in the present moment) as we go along in time, we have nothing later to unwrap, a serious consideration.

This is perhaps why my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, when I with considerable effort completed the quite involved Ngondro practices (hundreds of thousands of iterations) and asked Rinpoche what I should do next, his answer to me was “Do you want to know what I would do next if I were you?” I, of course, said “Yes.” And Rinpoche’s answer was “I would do

another round of Ngondro practice," which was not the answer I was looking for, but, Yes, I did another Ngondro and he was right.

And the reason for that is because in my first Ngondro, my attention was very much on the advanced practices I wanted to do AFTER Ngondro, rather than on the Ngondro itself. Big mistake. LOL.

As mentioned, I hope you can see why the preliminary dharma practices are so important. It's like saving money in the bank; if we don't save any, there will be none to take out. The moral of this is to practice in the present moment with determination, and not in looking to the future or lingering on the past.

Jun 14, 2020, 5:00 PM

PURE SENSE

Here is a little dharma sidebar that may interest some practitioners. With all the talk and writing about dualistic and non-dualistic, Relative and Absolute, and the like, it is interesting to note that our five senses (Buddhists often name six, adding thought) are stated to be non-dual. I find this a very important point.

By the senses being immediate or non-dual, indicates that they are pure and purified of dualisms like thought, concepts – the whole kit and caboodle. In other words, our eyes receive pure, untainted, visual stimulus. It is only after we see something that we comment on it or adulterize that purity. We can elaborate on what is seen as much as we want, but the pure vision itself is non-stop express and an immediate seeing.

The same is true for sound and hearing, and all of the other senses. Perhaps this is why music and the sound of music is so important to many of us. That pure sound reaches us unadulterated and, unless we clutter it up with thoughts and comments, we can rest and relax in the sound itself, if we can. Perhaps, somehow we are able to allow ourselves to hear the music and just go with the flow, so to speak.

The same must be true of all the senses. And while getting into immediate and purified mode with the mind itself is so very difficult

for us, it seems that our excursions into the senses, music (hearing), movies and art (eyes, seeing), and so forth, are much more common and easily accomplished. We can learn from this.

In other words, we seem to realize sound (and music) or seeing (and movies, art) much easier than we are able to realize the nature of the mind itself. It is clear that purifying the mind itself into non-duality is much more difficult. Since, as the dharma teachings tell us, hearing and seeing (and the senses) are in themselves a pure conduit, with no hiccups or thoughts, that much of our work is already done for us. We only have to “not react” critically to the music we hear, but rather just let ourselves go with the flow and rest in the senses.

Certainly, for many of us, our favorite music can be a very pure experience. That’s why it is favored.

However, the nature of the mind (which is perfectly pure), appears to us as not as immediately pure as the five senses but requires purification. The mind, as any sincere dharma practitioner well knows, requires all kinds of practices to purify and remove enough impurities so that we can see purely and get beyond our habitual tendency toward thinking dualistically, commenting, criticizing and otherwise; somehow, we let thought get in the way of pure realization.

I find it easy to see that the sense of sight itself is pure or the hearing and its sound is immediate and pure, and so on. This is an amazing gift to us, to have something that is in itself already so perfectly pure. Of course, what we do with a sight seen or sound heard, after seeing and hearing, admits all kinds of impurities, depending on how we react to it.

Yet, since I have a very strong affinity to music, and an ability to allow it to resonate in me, this same ability to relax with sound suggests that the same purity and immediacy is possible with the mind itself. And, of course all the dharma teachings tell us that this is so.

In fact, the mind itself is already pure, or so the teachings point out. Thus, it seems it is we who have a sticky clutch or difficulty relaxing and letting go, thus allowing the mind to go on and be just as it is, in its purity..

Jun 13, 2020, 4:36 PM

“DON’T THINK TWICE, IT’S ALL RIGHT”

[Below, a little poem I wrote years ago about anticipation.]

BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

“Looking at the mind,
It’s not what I’d expect.
Expectations can’t define,
And you can’t expect to find.

That’s the nature of the mind.”

Pointing at it, without knowing it directly, is pointless, “it” being the nature of our own mind. Language will always define that we are outside pointing at it and not inside the experience itself. Period. End of story.

And so, although language is very comforting, a deeply ingrained habit, it cannot but attempt to describe something we have never experienced or realized for ourselves. The natural approach would be to first experience (and then realize what we are experiencing) and only after that attempt to describe it.

Words are like a heavy suit of armor that, sooner or later, we will have to take off, piece by piece, and let the wind blow on us and feel the sun shining on our skin.

However, we can’t both watch (annotate) at the same time as we experience what must eventually be realized. That would be dualistic and realization is, by definition, non-dualistic.

The direct “being” of direct experience must always proceed the annotating, because to annotate we have to have something to annotate, some experience, to watch, and remember. In other words, first comes the experience, then the realization as to what we experienced. Only then can we describe it. This is the situation we dharma students find ourselves in as regards realizing the true nature of our mind.

We may want to recognize the nature of our own mind, but the very fact of wishing itself highlights that we have yet to do so. We

habitually put the cart before the horse, demonstrating that we have yet to recognize what has not been recognized. It is a vicious Catch-22.

Words urge us to continue in this state of non-recognition. Because words and concepts, by definition, cannot but point beyond themselves (point at what they are not), we have in language a perfectly made prison to keep us from experiencing and possibly realizing what we can only talk about. We don't KNOW what we are talking about. Do you see the problem?

Like the old family game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we first must deconstruct our dependence on words and language, finally putting the horse before the cart, so that we initially live and directly experience and only then are able to describe (or attempt to) what we have realized from the experience.

This becomes even more important when we are speaking of recognizing and realizing the very nature of our own mind. We not only have to deconstruct language, step beyond it, get ahead of it, and stop projecting, we must start experiencing what is already at hand, like this very moment. Realize "Now."

We CAN experience what is happening right now, what already is fully present. There is no fantasy about that, no future to the "Now," and no waiting for it. It is 100% here and now. All we have to do is let go of our thoughts and projections long enough to directly experience this very moment.

Or, as Dylan put it, "Don't think twice, it's all right."

A BRIDGE TOO FAR FOR THOUGHTS TO CROSS

There is a point in dharma practice where words, thoughts, and concepts are fatigued. Like the booster stage on a space rocket that is jettisoned, there comes a time when these conceptual descriptors are no longer of help.

I am not suggesting that thoughts and concepts are suppressed, denied, or in any way prevented, just that they don't (and no

longer) comprise the gateway to our dharma path. They are there, but not a primary focus for our practice.

Instead, we concern ourselves with what all thoughts are, which are pointers toward our innate non-dual senses and simple rest in the nature of the mind. Thoughts may point, but they don't take us there and can't be there with us. Second thoughts, dualistic concepts, etc. all point to the true nature of the mind, but they are not the realization of that nature. They are pointers only.

The realization of the nature of the mind is innately non-dual. We can't describe, but we can realize and experience it. We can experience and realize the mind's true nature, but we can't realize it and think about it at the same time. The description (words about realization) can only come later and, even then, words and concepts are a sorry second to the realization itself.

And so, there you have it, realization (Recognition) is a ring-pass-not or threshold, a bridge-too-far for thoughts to cross. Beyond thoughts and concepts is where we go to practice the non-dual dharma, resting in the nature of the mind itself.

Putting these all together, the teachings say that it would take us untold kalpas to figure out realization of the mind using only words and concepts to grasp the realization as to the nature of our own mind. Much easier is, instead of trying to figure this all out, that we just directly experience the mind, our very mind, for ourselves. Why wait? We can look at the mind directly, if shown how.

And, yes, we will have to practice a bit (or a lot), perhaps change our approach around, and so on. We also need an authentic dharma teacher using this method. And no, we can't realize the mind's nature and tell anyone else about it because words fall short of actual realization.

It is very much easier to go and see for ourselves, rather than try to think it so. Once we realize that language, words, thoughts, and concepts are by definition dualistic and can at best only point in the direction of the reality, we can stop beating our head against an intellectual wall and instead directly experience the realization as to the nature of our mind for ourselves. Go look!

A kalpa is said to be 4.32 billion years, so the period of untold kalpas needed to realizing the true nature of our own mind by

ourselves has to be contrasted with covering the same ground with the help from an authentic guide (one who has such a recognition); it is said that with the help of an authentic teacher, we can realize the nature of our mind in this very lifetime. Those are our choices. I am going with the second one, working with an authentic dharma teacher in this life.

A MOMENT OF SILENCE

I'm blogging here today about unnecessary thought and thinking. Of course, we are free to do whatever we like, so this is not a sermon, but rather an observation

Too often, especially when I am trying to get to sleep, I will go after thought like a dog after a bone. I need something to chew on to distract me from the sometimes difficulties of going to sleep. I also notice, now that I am aware, this happening many other times during a day. It's like I want to keep my thinking-motor always running

I remember when I was helping out as a "kasang" or security during one of the first visits to America of H.H. Orgen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa. Aside for us, the Karmapa had a detail with him of U.S. Secret Service protectors and, amazing to me, they kept their black Suburban cars running day and night, all pointing toward the nearest exist. You could hear them running

That's kind of how I see the addiction to thinking, always trying to keep our hand in, thinking something rather than just letting go and allowing the mind to be at rest – silence

You can check this out for yourself, and you may also like to have something happening, like the cow chewing her cud or people chewing gum

And, for me it was not as simple as becoming aware of this kind of treading-water with thought and then after that, it stopped. No.... It takes time to change a habit, even if that habit probably is totally fatigued. It's like some folks turn up the wave-machine of white-noise at night when trying to sleep. They have to have it. I found that given some practice I could do without it very well, as mentioned, after quite some time of practice learning to let it rest

I still noodle thoughts, when I need a distraction, but more and more, inch-by-inch, so to speak, I am giving it a rest and just being there in the moment and silent

Jun 5, 2020, 2:05 PM

THE REST OF OUR LIFE

In the last blog or so, I've concentrated on not consecrating with effort, but rather to just allow our mind to come to rest in the gaps or empty spaces between a thought and further thinking. These empty spaces or gaps in thoughts just naturally come along. They happen

Many people, and I was one, do our best to keep busy, and gaps of silence are often uncomfortable, so that I filled them up with the white-noise of busying every time I was face-to-face with silence. The sound of silence is not necessarily something we seek out or are at first comfortable with. I'm not saying all of us, just some of us

In my experience, learning to value and use these gaps of silence between thoughts was not something I welcomed as much and I tried to fill them with more thought and busyness of one kind or another. My point is that I had to first learn to stand the silence of these voids and, second, not to (by habit) automatically fill them with some kind of entertainment or another. As I used to say to myself might have been: keep the spinning quarter on the table, spinning

For me, this whole process of befriending silence took a very long time because I was a very, very active person and seldom fell into the habit of not entertaining myself with this or that sort of busyness

It seemed to me (somehow) like what was behind these gaps of silence was ominous and that when the natural din of entertainment fell away, it made me very uncomfortable. I certainly didn't relax or rest in these moments of non-thought silence, much less want to prolong them. I closed those gaps as efficiently with whatever as I could in hopes of keeping everything moving along "nicely."

Well, as I have retold perhaps too often, all of this came to a screeching halt when I had a major stroke. Not only was what I call my “Self” shattered and vacated, but any ability to entertain myself and keep busy was lost to me for days, weeks, and even months. I experienced extreme vulnerability at suddenly being exposed to life with no entertainment, no ability to entertain myself whatsoever

And yet, at that time, what we might call brute silence was like the brightest harshest sun filling the entire sky of my consciousness and it proceeded to fry me to a crisp. There was no escape and no place (zero) to hide. As mentioned, this went on in various respects for days, weeks, and months. I had no choice but to endure it, something I would never have done willingly

Yet, I did learn from it. To my astonishment, I learned that much of my life was (or had been) filled with this mindless entertainment, this white-noise for its own sake that was my way of whistling in the dark, so to speak. Of course, I had things that legitimately kept me busy and I’m more than an average accomplisher. That’s not what I am talking about here

Aside from the actual meaningful work I have done, I’m talking about all of opportunities to just rest my mind in its own place and nature. Instead, I make work and busyness just to fight off my fear of what I thought of as the emptiness of silence, I am very slowly learning to endure the silence without bolting

Jun 3, 2020, 9:24 PM

GIVE IT A REST

We all know that words are at best descriptors; they point toward or describe something other than themselves. I find it interesting that among the world’s “religions,” that the Buddhist texts and writings are not only greater in quantity than any other religion, but they are greater by an order of magnitude, or so I read

My only comment is that these Buddhists must be trying to tell us something. Otherwise, what’s the point? I used to joke with myself that all this Buddhist literature was because of all the caffeine; they drank so much tea, but I was just kidding

If I have learned anything in these (almost fifty now) years that I have been interested in and practicing the dharma, it all boils down to one very simple practice, to somehow allow our mind to rest exactly as it naturally is. One would think that should not be too hard

Yet apparently it is. As I ponder my experience with the dharma (and its practitioners) all these years, there is a multitude of practices, prayers, mantras, exertions, and what-not out there that people do or try to do. I know I have

And when I consider the vast number of people not practicing the dharma, who have never practiced it, I can't help but wonder what can these folks do (in terms of dharma) that might actually add up to something useful. That is if they are interested

And, as mentioned above, IMO, the single most useful simple practice I would suggest is to just let your mind rest as it is. And, by this I mean not to make great exertions to rest the mind, but exactly as you might sit down on a couch or comfortable chair after a long day, put up your feet, and just relax. In other words, give it a rest, dharma practitioners everywhere

And this same advice was pivotal for me in my dharma practice, years ago, where at one point I realized that when my dharma teacher said "rest," he meant exactly what you and I mean by rest, and not some dharma equivalent. As the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa said: "Relax, as it is."

If you can do this, that is enough; good things will follow in time. If you can relax in the midst of turmoil, more power to you. For those of us who have trouble doing that, the sage advice is to rest in the gap or empty moment between thoughts, the space between when one thought ends (dissolves) and another thought has not yet arisen. Rest in the gap or space between thoughts. Allow yourself to do that, but with no effort on your part. Just relax in that empty space and time that is empty of thoughts. Allow the mind to rest

If you can learn to do this, and it can take time, this rest will gradually become a habit and you will find that you can do this more and more easily and for a longer and longer time. It becomes a habitual

Of course, as you experiment with simply allowing your mind to rest, you will find obstacles to doing this that will appear. And those obstacles will bring forth all of the other dharma practices that practitioners need to do to efficiently remove these obstructions to simple rest. All roads lead to Rome; this is one path

It is my belief that we can become a very successful at practicing dharma by allowing our mind to come to rest as I have described

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

[Sorry if this runs too close to a rant, I don't intend it that way, but this is something that I feel most folks totally ignore to their own detriment. Please hear me out.]

Like a cow chewing its cud, how much of our constant mental machinations are just pure habit? "Thinking" is what we do when faced with the awkwardness of silence. Of course, thoughts come and dissolve. I'm not talking about that, but rather our compulsion to fill the silence or sensed "void" with the white-noise of thinking, just out of habit and to keep our Self company

And, if we can become aware of this thinking-habit, what can be done to remove or at least lessen it's presence? How do we help it cease and desist? Can we just tune it out and ignore it? Is that enough? Or do we allow it to gradually come to rest and not be bothered by it? These are questions

I'm afraid that I am so used to being entertained, so used to keeping myself involved at a high-enough pitch, so that I can ignore the deafening roar of the silence that is all around me

Going cold turkey (trying to ignore) just seems to bring it on; some more gentle approach must be the solution. For example, some time ago I realized that my habit when going to sleep is to immerse myself in some interesting thought or project (grasp on to) until I kind of pass out. I also understood that is not the best way toward sleep. And so, awareness of the problem provides the ground for a possible solution. And I have been working on it for a long while

I am not trying to suppress thoughts; I understand that only makes things worse. Rather, I am trying to learn to sidestep thinking and

just allow my mind to rest in place in its own nature, without having to constantly keep myself entertained. Such entertainment I have come to see consumes vast amounts of precious time. It is like having an air-raid siren going all the time. I am not used to silence, plain and simple. It seems I have had a lifetime of churn, churn, churn, and feel that I have to turn up the volume of thoughts until I am entertained and kept busy at a certain pitch or level

I have thought about this and it is not as simple as keeping busy getting things done. I do that and have a solid record of meaningful accomplishments behind me. That is gainful employment, so to speak

I'm talking about the rest of the time, what we could call free-time. It seems that if I have any free time, I habitually fill in those gaps of free time (i.e. silence) with anything that will entertain me, so that I am not forced to be alone with myself and suffer the reality of the void

I believe that there is an eternal emptiness inside that cannot and never has been filled in each of us. The very nature of the mind itself is empty of permanent existence and permanent being. Dharma makes this clear. Yet, I seem to want to cover up and avoid realizing this through all kinds of busy (meaningless) entertainment. It is a sort of glorified manner of whistling in the dark

I first realized this huge gap and the busyness I immerse myself in after a major stroke, when all of the busyness was just not available for some months, and I had to endure the brilliance of silence and the purity of emptiness. It was, for me, at first indeed terrifying!

And though I have pulled myself conventionally back together since then, I cannot forget and no longer ignore the obvious emptiness that is the nature of our very existence. It is the elephant in the room

Jun 1, 2020, 5:07 AM

“EVERY GOODBYE AIN’T GONE”

It is like in the “Wizard of Oz,” where Dorothy’s dog Toto knocks over the screen and behind the curtain is the Wizard of Oz, revealed as just an ordinary man. Or, like the German philosopher Hegel wrote in his book “Phenomenology of the Mind:”

“We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what’s there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.”

In a similar way, at some time (and somewhere along the way), each of us will not be able to continue to be “objective,” watching life from outside, but instead will ourselves have to experience our own nature without objectively distancing ourselves. This is called realization

We can be in one place in the middle of the two, resolving this objectification and duality, i.e. the subject and object. As the poet wrote “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

At that time, the constant comment of the mind dissolves and we realize that we are indeed alone, or another way of spelling that word: All One

However, we can’t just continue to think and talk about “realization.” We have to actually realize our own true nature and to do that we have to give up our perch on the edge of the mind and instead of dipping our toe in the swimming pool, we have to take the plunge into complete and total realization

We all know or have heard about this, at least obliquely, yet here we continue to hover on the edge of realization. We watch the train pass us by instead of riding it

Anyway, the point of all this is not to blather on, yada, yada, yada, but rather as the Roman poet Horace wrote in one of his odes, “Carpe diem,” which we know means “Seize the Day,” but we don’t remember (if we ever even knew) his whole sentence which was “carpe diem quam minimum credula postero,” which translated says something like “Seize the day; put no trust in the future.”

The key dharma teachers point out that this immediate “now” is not realization itself, but is the only doorway to realization. Realization or enlightenment will happen in the present. As many of the great siddhas have pointed out, “In the midst of experience, realization may arise.”

Sooner or later, for most of us so far, later than sooner, we each will have to let go of what we are attached to and enter the stream. As mentioned, I feel we all know this

Yet, finally, we each have to take time and do this. That is different than talking or thinking about it. We can’t be in two places at the same time. The two, thinker and doer, must become one. We can’t watch ourselves become realized. We have to realize ourselves, ourselves. No one else can do it for us

And, realization is not a state or place, but rather a process. So, although we go nowhere, we have to actually go nowhere alone. That “clinging” has to go, to be abandoned. We have to let go. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet said:

“When he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin?”

Our own release will only come when we have aerodynamically removed what obscures us. Then we are free to realize the nature of our own mind

As a kid, I remember trying to reach for the innertube in the lake, but my own efforts to swim toward it pushed it beyond my reach. In other words, the point of this whole blog, which (like the innertube) I keep trying to approach here is that it takes time to do this. There has to be a time (sometime) when we actually realize our own true nature and not just talk about it endlessly

And, we have to take time to do this. We have to call a timeout and each go and do this. I wonder when will that be when we are so busy being distracted?

May 29, 2020, 6:02 AM

CATCHING UP

I have not commented much about what I've been up to lately, mostly because I have been, like many of us, sheltering in place and not doing anything too special. However, time does travel, and stuff does eventuate because of it

For one, I broke my foot. I posted that, and recovery has been, well, painful. I didn't want to go to the hospital or a doctor because of the virus, and broken feet you can't do much with anyway. So, I strapped my 2nd toe to my 3rd toe and ordered a special boot that kind of straps the foot down. And that helped. Still, along with the physical pain came the pain of NOT being able to go for a walk in the woods or anywhere. That has been a real pain

At last, I am walking again, although gingerly and carefully. Meanwhile, I have been watching what I eat and that has been interesting. It's better than watching my foot heal or paint dry

In the process, I have lost 11 lbs., which is a good thing. Here is how I lost that weight, a novel (for me) and painless way to lose weight. It is very simple. I just began to examine my appetite to see if I really wanted to eat THAT (whatever came to mind), or was my wanting to eat just a reflex because I was bored, tired, or habituated to eating when I came to some kind of point or shift of mood. You know: when all else (or anything else) fails, then eat

As I carefully thought about eating this or that, I found several things. Perhaps I didn't really want to eat whatever I was thinking of and would regret it later, which I often do. Or, I wanted to eat THAT, but not now. I was not really, really hungry. I would eat THAT, but later

I have been finding, over the last couple of years, that I am instinctively drawn to eat what my body needs. Don't ask me to prove this, but there is gathering evidence (in my mind) that this is true. Another way to say this is, that food is medicine, if we will just be aware of it... take the time to consider...considerable time

Well, I've been considering what to eat and if I want to eat it, and over some weeks, by doing that, I find that I have lost weight... easily

Instead of automatically eating at regular mealtimes or when I am upset... and by not snacking, but instead letting the urge to snack pass (waiting it out), I find that I am both eating less and, more important, eating better food, a little more like taking medicine. And also, I am eating in small amounts, rather than a feast

In short, I am searching myself, taking real time to do this, to see if this item is something I really want to eat or just a passing fancy that I will regret

And, I inquire would I like to feel like I do (lighter, having lost weight) or do I want to pig out and drag my butt around through life instead. If I think about it, give myself some time, I would rather feel better and lighter than heavier and not-so-well

And, that's not all!

Otherwise, I have been growing hundreds of seedlings, taking them outside, protecting them, etc. And I am back to taking photos again, like the one here I took today, and also probably watching too much series-TV, although with a broken foot, it is easy to binge out

I find this whole virus-time to be restful and I have enjoyed a sense of peace I have not felt for many years. So, some good comes out of this time, I would bet for all of us

However, I am retired and those who are still working probably have much more to worry about

May 22, 2020, 12:09 PM

DESCRIPTORS

Words, words, words. They can be beautiful things and used beautifully. People don't read like they used to, myself included. But, in my day, I read extensively. So many worlds were opened to me, starting when I was a child and my mom read the "Wizard of

Oz” series to me, volume by volume. I luxuriated in books like “Tik Tok of Oz, and so on

I’m not going to read the Oz books to you, but I will share a few words from my favorite poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. I have read all of his works. Here is a photo of some of his books (left-side), diaries, sermons, letters, and journals... and of course poems, many which I know by heart

Just read a few examples from his journals that show his way with words and how I might be taken with them

Gerard Manley Hopkins

EARLY DIARIES

1863

“Note on water coming through a lock

There are openings near the bottom of the gates (which allow the water to pass through at all times, I suppose.) Suppose three, as there often are. The water strikes through these with great force and extends itself into three fans. The direction of the water is a little oblique from the horizontal, but the great force with which it runs keeps it almost uncurved except on the edges. The end of these fans is not seen, for they strike them under a mass of yellowish boiling foam which runs down between the fans, and melting, covers the whole space of the-entrance. Being heaped up in globes and bosses and round masses, the fans disappear under it. This turbid mass smooths itself as the distance increases from the lock. But the current is strong and if the basin into which it runs has curving banks, it strikes them and the confusion of the already folded and doubles lines of foam is worse confounded.”

Feb 24, 1873

In the snow flat-topped hillocks and shoulders outlined with wavy edges, ridge below ridge, very like the grain of wood in line and projection like relief maps. These the wind makes I think and of course drifts, which are in fact snow waves. The sharp nape of a drift sometimes broken by slant flutes or channels. I think this must be when the wind, after shaping the drift first, has changed and cast waves in the body of the wave itself. All the world is full on

inscape and change, left free to act, falls into an order as well as purpose: looking out of my window I caught it in the random clods and broken heaps of snow made by the case of a broom. The same of the path trenched by footsteps in ankle deep snow across the fields leading to the Hooder wood through which we went to see the river. The sun was bright, the broken brambles and all boughs and banks limed and cloyed with white, the brook down the clough pulling its way by drops and by bubbles in turn under a shell of ice.”

Aug 13 1974

“Heavy seas: we walked along the seawall to the Kennaway Tunnel to watch them. The wave breaks in this order – the crest of the barrel ‘doubling’ (that, a boatman said, is the word in use) is broken into a bush of foam, which if you search it, is a lace and tangle of jumping sprays; then, breaking down, these grow to a sort of shaggy quilt tumbling up the beach; thirdly, this unfolds into a sheet of foam and funning forward in leaves and laps, the wave reaches its greatest height upon the shore and at the same time its time its greatest clearness and simplicity; after that, raking on the shingle and so on, it is forked and torn and, as it commonly has a pitch or lurch to one side besides its backdraught, these rents widen: the spread and mix and the water clears and escapes to the sea transparent and keeping in the end nothing of is white except in long dribble bubble-strings which trace its set and flow.”

May 20, 2020, 9:30 PM

CAKED IN THOUGHT

Those of us who study and practice the dharma learn that this cyclic world of ups, downs, and arounds is called in the Buddhist nomenclature “Samsara.”

It’s like when we are asleep and dream of drinking a glass of water, but not being able to wake up enough to actually go and get a drink. This is a rough analogy for our inability to get beyond our habitual words and concepts, unable to jump into the crystal waters of the present moment without a monitor – without the fog of second thoughts

If the first thing we do or the only window we look through is the matrix of concepts and thought...if we first have to think about it or, as many do, when trying to go to sleep, we have to chew on some thought, we are already clouding ourselves. That's a recipe for obscuration

Conceptual thought is a cataract that only too easily becomes our only window on the mind, a poor one, our answer to everything. It does not seem to matter that thoughts (by definition) point beyond themselves for their meaning and are directives or calls to action, rather than anything in themselves.

Our conceptual world of continual reification (gilding the lily) apparently is too easily mistaken for the true nature of the world and smothers us from actuality, a reality that we have never experienced, which in the dharma is called the "true nature of the mind."

In other words, we don't know (and have never known for ourselves) what we are talking about, so to speak. We just continue to talk about it, in a round-about way. Think about that for a moment. Until the true nature of the mind is pointed out to us by an authentic master, we are basically confused and whistling in the dark. Always have been

And here is a little poem I wrote years ago about the dharma idea of ignorance in contrast to Plato's allegory of the cave, i.e. that knowing the nature of the mind is not something we used to know and that we somehow fell from grace (original sin). The dharma teaches that we have never known until now

NEVER KNOWN

If I know,

I don't know I know,

And I don't know I don't know I know

I don't know what I would know,

If I did know

That's how I know I don't know

So, I don't know

I know I don't know,

And I know I know I don't Know

I have never known

SPRITIALLY SENSITIVE BODY AREAS

The following is just my opinion, so don't freak out. There is nothing more personal than our own body, and we get to know it pretty well. I have found that there are several special or sensitive areas on the body that attract energy, a special kind of "chi," not to mention that they also seem to gather dirt. These special areas have to be kept very clean for any psychic sensitivity to function well. These areas should be very familiar to all of us, if we think about it

One such area is the underside of each wrist, just beyond where the palm ends. When you bathe, it seems that the accumulated grime or dirt rolls off this area with a little pressure. Another such area is the hollow just below and slightly behind the ankle bone in each foot. And another sensitive area is the area behind each ear, just below the earlobe. I find these very sensitive areas

Speaking of ears, they are another fascinating body part. Along with our fingerprints, no part of the body changes less and is more permanently identifiable than the ear. They type us. It pays to do your own research by looking at people's ears. The earlobe can be attached, not-attached, or somewhere in between. I will not delineate the ear because I am not an expert and to do so would be too revealing to put into words. However, if you will begin to become aware of the ear in yourself and others, it is very much like looking at someone's horoscope or natal chart. One very quickly learns to identify certain groups or types of persons by the style of their ears, as mentioned, the meaning of attached earlobes (i.e. no lobe), detached earlobes (separated earlobe), and just barely detached (no large earlobe)

Of course, there are other body parts of interest as well. What are your thoughts?

”

May 16, 2020, 2:19 PM

BINGE WATCHING SEEDS SPROUT AND TV SERIES

I have 100 little peat-pots with Morning Glory (“Heavenly Blue) and Moon Flower (Datura) seeds in them. These are inside my house, not outside, and I’m not only watching them sprout. I am also watching two batches of eating-sprouts grow, this time lentils and alfalfa. I do other things too in a day, believe it or not

Yet, not too much else of late since I smashed my foot. I have had to tie two of my toes together and wear a special shoe-likeboot that tries to keep my foot stationary. So much for walking in the woods for a while. I tried walking down to the nearby creek (block and a half from my house), but that was a big mistake. It really upset whatever broken bones I have

One thing I have discovered to a great degree is all the TV and cable series of shows available. I like movies, but have avoided these series-shows because it’s too easy for me to get hooked on them and end up binge-watching, which is actually a lot of fun

But here I am, forced by my foot to sit around, so I have tried a few of these series-shows out. I am a tough movie critic. After all, I founded one of the two largest movie database on the planet (AllMovie.com). I have seen a lot of full-length movies over the years but, as for these series, not so much

One thing I have found out from talking with my closest friends is that while these friends and I tend to agree what music we like, with movies, it is all over the board. People seem to vary when it comes to what they watch

I am also one who walks away from TV it series (or films) that mess with me too much. For example:

I never finished "The Sopranos"... or "Game of Thrones" because they jerked me around too much often or got boring. I did the same with "Downton Abbey." If you knock off too many folks I like, I'm out-of-there

As for what series I actually like, here are a few:

"Breaking Bad" (I loved it)

"Ozark" (loved it, a favorite.)

"Foucault" (loved it. This is the first series where Israeli and Arabs both are treated as human beings. The actor Lior Raz is brilliant and addictive. When the series came to an end (hopefully till the next season), I grieved

"Grand Design" (great series on architects and building special houses)

"Homeland" (watched the whole thing, but got tired of it all by the end)

My main beef with all series is that far too many lose their direction and fall into recapping the lives of their supporting actors each episode, while the main thrust is abandoned. This is true of "Ray Donovan. By time they get around to updating us on all the members of the cast each week, time is up, and not enough of a new story has developed. The result is too little Ray Donovan for me. I am hanging in there, but already tired of too many side shows

May 12, 2020, 1:58 AM

THE EDGE OF BUSY

My guess is that many of us who have been secluded in our homes by the coronavirus have become aware of how we spend our time. This is even more true if, by habit, we are used to being out and about, socializing

If we are and have been home 24x7 for weeks on end, what do we find ourselves doing? My guess would be that most people fill up

their time doing something, even if it is only watching movies, and so on

Keeping busy and occupied is an ingrained habit. Our attempts at busyness during this house confinement offer us an opportunity to learn how that busyness is working out for us. It is one thing to watch a movie in the evening after a long day of doing whatever we do, but quite another thing to keep busy just to fill up and pass the time. Why do we have to make work, i.e. busyness? What has it been like for you?

As for me, I find that much of my busyness these days has to do with my uncomfortableness when faced with just being there and doing nothing. When all that busyness comes to a stop and I am on my own, what then? What remains? That is something for each of us to find out

To put this in some kind of context, I don't find myself sitting on the porch in my rocking chair, even if I had one. I'm not that used to having so much time on my hands even though my life has not changed much due to the virus. And, beyond that, I find that I am not comfortable without some occupation, some kind of entertainment

It's like spinning quarters on the kitchen table, when the quarter stops spinning and falls on its face, silent. What is that and what then do I find myself doing? The answer for me seems to be: spin that quarter again. Keep it going. Keep something happening. I begin to see that tendency as some kind of disease, a dis-ease at the sound and feel of silence and, although I hate to say this, simply resting in the moment

And now, if you take the concept outlined above and apply it to dharma mind-practice, there are many similarities. If we do not want to follow every train of thought that arises, yet at the same time, not attempt to suppress thought, we are in a similar ballpark to looking at our fabricated busyness

If every thought we entertain only tends to shine us on, and thus leads to another and another thought, etc., then being free from that kind of mental furthering of attachment becomes a dharma practice all its own

In other words, we don't benefit from suppressing thought and we don't benefit from following a train of thought. In either case, we only end up become more attached

The dharma teachings say that it is our attachment to thinking and thought, not the thoughts themselves or their content, that is a bad habit that we could abandon, i.e. not become attached in the first place. Let it go, as in: let it go on. After all, it already is going on without our permission

And I find that dealing with busyness and self-entertainment is the same kind of dilemma, at least for me. Most of what passes for busyness, in my case, is just a lot of white noise to drown out the silence. The white-noise of "busyness" silences the silence, if that phrase makes sense. We fill up the silence (this void) with the sound of our own busyness

And we binge-busy or binge-entertain ourselves, lest we find ourselves with nothing to do. Heaven forbid! And that "nothing" or emptiness apparently terrifies many of us. I am reminded of a quote from the Zen tradition that is useful:

Dogen Zenji of the Sōtō school of Zen said, "When dharma does not fill your whole body-mind, you may assume it is already sufficient. When dharma fills your body-mind, you feel something is missing."

In other words, in the world of Samsara, feeling and being aware of our lack of comfort is a good sign. Rest in the uncomfortableness of not being entertained, which we will find waiting for us just beyond the edge of busy

THE SHEER WEIGHT OF EMPTINESS

We know when our plate is full and, equally, when it is empty. At least we have some sense of it. In fact, we each have a queue for the day and that queue contains several types of things

There are the things we, so to speak, "have" to do like brush our teeth, drink water, perhaps eat, and so on

Then, there are those things we want or hope to do in a day, if we have the time, energy, and can feel like it

And then, I believe, there is, for want of a better word, what I would call “entertainment,” filling our life-queue with just enough activity so that we feel right

If any of the above three types of activity are absent or removed, we know it and, more often than not, we feel out of sorts or, as the old saying goes, perhaps “beside ourselves.”

For example, if we don’t do the things we have to do, whatever they are, we begin to feel delinquent. Or, if we abandon, even for a day the things we hope and dream to do that day, or some effort in that direction, we know this is true and don’t like it

And lastly, entertaining ourselves is the one area where we can add and adjust to keep from facing what might be called “The Silence” or an emptiness out there that we struggle to avoid

If we look at our daily queue, it is usually the entertainment section that most fills our day. And what constitutes entertainment varies from the readily apparent, like watching a movie or reading a book, to the sketchy or more difficult to put our finger on activities, which vary from person to person but, nevertheless, absorb vast stretches of time each day

I have found that, seemingly, I go to great lengths to fill my cup of entertainment to the brim, if only to not endure the sinking feeling of my “wanting,” of my cup being less than half full. We keep appearances up, so to speak

Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, if we start removing, stick by stick, from our entertainment queue, one busyness after another, that feeling of emptiness draws closer and closer or gets louder and louder. The wolf of emptiness is soon just outside our door and looming. And so, we quickly fill up the glass of entertainment once more, so that we can toast life again

I find this a problem and a problem that is hard to talk about and discuss because almost no one is aware of it or yet open to discussing it. Right now, it goes without saying and those of us we want to point it out are not all that welcome, IMO, and in my experience

I am not saying we should not enjoy life or ourselves, but rather that we might look at WHAT we enjoy and at enjoyment itself to see what in fact we are actually doing. As for myself, I stumbled on this phenomenon quite by accident, when I had a major stroke. I had almost no one to discuss it with because everyone was unaware of the phenomenon or if they were aware, what on earth was wrong with entertaining ourselves

I did end up talking with my dharma teacher of 36 years about it and he understood and shared with me that he had had some elven small strokes himself. He remarked that my awareness of all this was a good thing

Since that time of discovering this, I have done my best to study this constant need to entertain myself, although any study has been punctuated by my own comfort in and need to cling to and continue my own entertainment. It's like my awareness is like diving into clear deep water, and coming up for air is like the entertainment. Mostly I entertain myself

And so, I have watched this phenomenon from the corner of my eye, all the while keeping up with my own entertainment as I always have. I do walk up to the verge or edge of this great void from time to time and look out, yet the sheer emptiness of it all soon finds me scurrying back under the cover of busyness and the entertainment I know so well

This is something I have not read about anywhere or heard spoken of, but rather something I have directly experienced and wonder about

What are you experiencing in this regard?

May 9, 2020, 7:48 AM

DHARMA BEYOND ITSELF

[Some readers are having trouble making enough sense of some of these more concise dharma teachings. I do understand. To give some relief from that, from time to time, I like to ramble a bit and just use my own words, yet words themselves can only point beyond this moment and what is the point in that?]

The dharma teachings themselves (in the form of their ideas, concepts, and words) are like a train that can only take us so far. And, when we come to the end of the line of words, we each have to get out and continue from there on foot. This blog is about that

And this is true for even the most refined, concise, and pith dharma, whether written or spoken, the kind of dharma we have to realize fully for it to make any difference at all

I am talking here about that point beyond words and concepts, where it won't do to just think it or even think about it. The written or spoken dharma, taken by itself, is like a blind alley, one we cannot go down and expect to find anything but that. At some point in our dharma path, there will not even be a trail of breadcrumbs. None at all

And so, after we have thought about the dharma, read about it, heard it spoken, and so on, we will eventually have to do without thinking. In fact, even any kind of effort or entertainment whatsoever is still just too much, even the slightest shadow of a conscious or passing thought, if we cling to it. We will have to go without

In other words, at the end of whatever entertainment (even dharma practice) we are habituated to, what I am referring to here (this Silence) is waiting for us. When we finally look up, there it is. Nothing could be more terrifying as the peace that exists at the end of our perpetual habit of busyness and entertainment. It waits for us and is why we cling to entertainment so fiercely as we do

This path-that-is-no-path is one each of us must eventually travel all by ourselves, alone. And while it waits for us, nevertheless, we must find or discover it on our own, when we are ready, when we can stand to bear it. It is a bridge that is just far enough to not be too far, yet a bridge that is literally nothing at all. Literally

The above description (like all written or spoken words) is all only words, words which cannot but point at or toward the general direction of what they mean. Yet, any directionality is not both here and now. In other words, there has to come a time where we step away from words (and what they point at) and instead don't go anywhere else at all other than here and now in this moment

In time, we will stop pointing with words beyond this very moment, the point where we cease and desist with references whatsoever. That is the naked clarity and vivid awareness itself of which all the dharma poets write, one with no references whatsoever, something we cannot track, monitor, or follow by any or all means. This is the point of rest

Certainly, these words I'm writing down here can only give yet more to cling to and they themselves must, sooner or later, also be given up, just as the addict gives up his drugs, although that is said to be a long and excruciating process, this giving up and going entirely naked, without so much as a trace to clothe us

The very meaning of language (dharma or otherwise) and its directionality, plus our clinging to it, is part of what perpetuates our motion onward from lifetime to lifetime. This directionality (or our clinging to it) must be allowed to come to rest

Just my two cents

A LITTLE EXCITEMENT

Well, not much news while staying in place here at home, but stuff happens anyway. Coming down some narrow stairs that curve at the bottom, I slipped and fell. And, before I knew it, while trying to cushion my fall, I bent and kind of seriously hurt my foot, bending it in on itself as I hit the floor. The whole side of my foot was bruised and all black and blue. Maybe a toe was broken. Hard to say, but it swelled up and became very painful

One result of that fall is that I cannot (and for a time) go outside for a walk. Can't even get my foot in a shoe. Well, I didn't like that. And, I was determined to get outside somehow. I did go out on the patio and sat in a chair with my leg out, taking in the sun

I could only sit there so long before it was too much sun, although it was a welcome experience after the long winter. Then, I realized that this is the time of year when the American Toads are in the ponds and all singing with their lovely trills. And, as a trained herpetologist, I knew just where to find them

"Let's go hear the toads!" I told Margaret and she was all about it too. I found an old slipper I could wear on my foot and figured we could just drive out to the ponds and listen to the lovely chorus

from the car or standing next to it. And so, we did. I include a little video Margaret took of them singing. Give it a listen

However, where we went, the winds were very high, even though the day was warm. We were out at the edge of the Manistee National Forest, a couple miles from our home, some 900,000 acres of Michigan wilderness. So, we decided we would drive a little ways up some of the seasonal roads and into the national forest. That turned out to be a mistake

Now, these roads are called seasonal, because they are just that, only drivable part of the year. Well, thought I, we will only go as far as we can, and so we did. Well, I should have remembered that there is no cell phone reception back in the forest and no real maps of the hundreds of tiny two-track trails out there

It was really beautiful, of course, and we kept on going into the forest. Well, as I should have imagined, after the recent heavy rains, the springtime roads were in many places more or less impassible, but you know me, I drove around them as best I could. And these tiny trails endlessly crossed each other in the wilderness, so you could go any of four ways, and we did

Well, the long and the short of it is that before too long we got lost back in there. The two-tracks became narrower and narrower, and wilder and wilder, until we were literally forced to drive through flooded areas and found ourselves climbing over boulders with the car, which is very dangerous for the tires, etc

And we finally came to a place, way into the forest, where it was impassible. We could go no farther, and even backing up to turn around was very difficult. We finally got turned around and were forced to retrace our path back the way we came, although when we came to one place where there were three paths to choose, it was touch and go to figure out which was the one we came in on. I tried to check the tire tracks, etc

Anyway, we were lost in the forest for a couple of hours, never came across another vehicle once we went in, had no cell-phone reception, and no maps. It got a little much, particularly since I was unable to walk far with my foot should we have to. I also had no water, etc

And, yes, after what seemed like a long time, and was, we found our way out and were back on a main road heading home. So, there you have it, a little excitement on a Sunday afternoon. However, the trills of the toads were very lovely

GRIEVING LOSS

The Tibetan word “Rinpoche” simply means “Precious One” and, of course, in America such superlatives are usually reserved for children. It would seem that we Americans are either shy of expressing our feelings about the value of others who are important spiritually in our lives (and the lives of others) or perhaps we lack the faculty; I assume it is the former, because all human beings must inherently have the faculty of devotion in there somewhere

Also, I have seen in my blogs (a number of times) comments from folks who were offended or resented using terms like H.H. (His Holiness) to describe beings like the Dalai Lama or the Karmapa, or H.E. (His Eminence) to describe the Heart Sons, etc

In my personal life, I had the non-fortune of having no grandfather on either side and also a father that, while I loved him very much, yet was unable to share at a deep level with his son. And so, I have had a natural thirst for guidance from above by those older than me, especially on the paternal side. I am the oldest of five sons, and so have been on my own my entire life. I had no elder male to look up to. Luckily, I did have my mom, who was a perfect mother. I am thankful for that

On the good-fortune end of things, I have had two great dharma teachers in my life. Individuals who cared more about me than I knew how to care about myself. They were Andrew Gunn McIver, who was a traveling Rosicrucian initiator and Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra). Both were impeccable teachers in this life for me, although at different times. Neither had a shadow

Andrew McIver passed away in 1969 and Khenpo Rinpoche passed away last October (2019), leaving me feeling much like a

ronin might feel, a samurai who had lost his lord or master. I am still getting over Rinpoche's passing and perhaps never will. One cannot replace one's Root Lama, because in our tradition (Karma Kagyu), our Root or Tsawi Lama is the one person who first introduced us to the nature of the Mind so that we got it. That can only happen once and through a single master. We can't replace what there is only one of, ever, although Rinpoche will always be with me

Oddly enough, the advent of the coronavirus, soon after Rinpoche's passing, only further underscored his passing. Up until Rinpoche's death, I had tried very hard to be worthy of Rinpoche's blessing and to receive and share what he taught me. Rinpoche told me directly that he had confidence in however I wanted to present the dharma. And, I tried to find my own words for Rinpoche's teachings, and I shared those words here on this blog for many years

However, after Rinpoche passed on, I realized that my own words and understanding were in essence but a reflection of Rinpoche and that pretty much everything I know about dharma came from him. And, while I can more-or-less put his teaching into my own words (as best I can), that his words are better. Obviously, Rinpoche says it better than I can. As a student, I reflect both Rinpoche's and Andrew's teachings

And so, lately I find myself sharing Rinpoche's teachings directly here on Facebook rather than paraphrase them as filtered through my own experience and understanding. It's better for you, the reader, because there are less mistakes. No need for a middleman

Also, I just don't care or feel the need to have everything "dharma" filtered through my personal experience, as I once did, which is not to say I won't ever write how the dharma affects me. I will

Until Rinpoche's passing, I felt I had to distinguish my words from Rinpoche's teachings, as a matter of honoring him by showing I understood, yet I no longer feel that way. Rinpoche's words are the same as my words, only better and more accurate. And his words are more than good enough for me. I could care less now about keeping them distinct from my own ramblings

Which is not to say that I won't ramble some, as I always have, but rather that the difference between Rinpoche and myself, to me, is

not important any longer. It's not worth emphasizing. To read Rinpoche's words is to know clarity; to write my own version of his teachings is an attempt to show that I understand and hopefully have implemented (as best I can) his clarity. I find that is not important any longer. Not sure why, but there it is

Previously, I felt (perhaps mistakenly) that I should present my understanding and realization (as to the dharma) to show that I am a proper student. However, with Rinpoche's passing, that desire to prove anything, that insecurity, simply vanished like dew on the morning grass

It's like there is no longer anyone (or any reason) for me to have to show or prove anything and no one to prove it to, including myself. Rinpoche's teaching and my own reflection of them are identical, although imperfectly reflected (I'm sure) by me

I am a slow learner, yet I feel I finally got the message and have the right attitude

”

Apr 27, 2020, 1:16 PM

TAKING REFUGE

I get asked how people become Buddhist. It's a decision that each person makes, but there is such a thing as "Taking Refuge," which is a short ceremony that can serve to mark our becoming a Buddhist

Typically, we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), and the Sangha (those Buddhists that have realized the dharma), which perhaps sounds pretty abstract. In reality, the refuge I personally have found has for the most part been in my dharma teacher, his words and teachings

Our sense of what is a refuge changes over time as we more seriously seek it out. There is no respite, no refuge in this world of Samsara in which we live. Nowhere else but the dharma have I been able to find refuge, a place to lay my head. Like the old song:

“THER’S NO HIDING PLACE DOWN HERE”

“I ran to the rock to hide my face

The rock cried out “No hiding place!”

The rock cried out “I’m burning too!”

“And want to go to heaven the same as you.”

The point is not so much that we take refuge in the little ceremony, but like cattle herded into a chute, by trial and error, we gradually find ourselves taking refuge from the difficulties of this world. Personally, I have found that the dharma is the only refuge (IMO) that is an actual refuge

I’m talking about refuge from the storm, from what is called Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs we live in. As mentioned, the Buddhists have a ceremony called “Taking Refuge,” which is the same thing, albeit, perhaps more formal. We are all seeking refuge in one way or another

To repeat, the Buddhists say that we can take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), and the Sangha (those who have realized his teachings.) I’m up for that, but just saying that does not make it so. We have to actually take refuge and to do that, we have to get in touch with that part of us that needs and seeks refuge. We have to reach out

The “Buddha” for me has always been my dharma teacher, and his teachings and guidance became my teachings and within them I find refuge. My teacher has passed on, but I have taken refuge in his words and his teachings. I’m like a faint carbon-copy of what he taught, a copy perhaps not realized, but at least I have a blueprint and map as to where I’m headed

Where, in the beginning, taking refuge in the dharma seemed to me like one option in life among many, now it seems to me as the only viable option there is. As I mentioned earlier, entering the dharma is like a funnel or chute, down which we are herded, ever narrowing until we get in alignment with the truth of dharma

The dharma is like a path, down which (like the blind) we feel our way, following echoes or “pings,” ever narrowing until we find

ourselves walking single-file and aligned with it. The dharma is a one-way street, like this little poem I wrote many years ago

MIND PRACTICE

Not an option,

But a refuge,

Less painful than:

Anywhere else

You get the idea. However, perhaps I have presented it too much as if we are dragged in the direction of the dharma, when that is just one approach. A better and more positive approach is to, as they say, go to meet our maker. Instead of being dragged to the inevitable truth, we can choose to, as they say, seize the day, and be pro-active. We can choose truth. Over time, we can reverse our approach from being reluctant to being motivated

It's a fine line between being masochistic (being dragged along) by life and Sadistic (too much chomping at the bit) and find the middle-way between negative and too-positive. "Straight is the gate and narrow the way."

Summing up, the most common way of describing this is "Taking Refuge," although "Going for Refuge" is also used. Both of these two words have meaning. "Taking" mean just that, going after it proactively, as is going for it. And "refuge" it indeed is. We have to reach out and take refuge

POINTING OUT YOUR WILD HORSE

[I have posted this some time ago, but it is so useful to those approaching Mahamudra meditation that I would like to share it again.]

These words are from my dharma teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche;

KKR:

“For example, imagine that someone owns a horse but for many years that horse has been allowed to run wild and free. After many years, even the owner would not recognize it, but the herder points out the horse to the owner and says, “This is your horse. This is the horse that you had and lost track of so many years ago.” That is very much like the situation of somebody who has had their mind pointed out to them. That which was always yours but had been unrecognized has now been pointed out or introduced to you

“However, just as in the case of the horse, simply knowing that this wild horse is your horse is not enough to enable you to ride it. You have to methodically tame the horse and get it to where it can be useful to you, where you can actually ride it and ride it safely. In the same way, simply having your mind pointed out to you is not enough. It having been pointed out to you, your mind is still wild, still habitually prone to distraction. Therefore, it says in the “Aspiration of the Six Intervals:”

“Now, when the interval of meditation arises:

Therefore beginners must cultivate a recollection or mindfulness that is free of distraction. In order to continue to work with your initial recognition of your mind’s nature, you must intentionally cultivate the state of undistractedness, and you must intentionally meditate. As long as the wild horse of your mind has not been tamed, you have to continue to tame it diligently through the enforcement of undistractedness. Just as would happen if you simply got on top of an untamed horse once it was pointed out to you and would either not be able to get on it in the first place or would be thrown off it and injured—in the same way, if you do not tame your mind, if you do not cultivate undistracted recollection, then you will be thrown off of the recognition of your mind’s nature by the habit of distraction.”

End quote

”

Apr 24, 2020, 2:51 AM

A MATTER OF REFERENCE

I need a break from “serious,” even if it is just for a moment or two – a little levity. And so, I want to rag on what is just a pet peeve, but here it is, nevertheless. It’s about what I perceive as a lack of reference in language, often your language, my Facebook friends

I get lots of emails, messages, and comments. I read them, of course. Yet, I am amazed, actually “AMAZED” at the presence of a lack of references in otherwise intelligent comments and people. So many folks assume that I know what they are talking about and referring to. I don’t

Sure, I can guess, like any of us, but I don’t like to do that. And some of you pile non-reference on top of non-reference until I am somewhere in the universe of language, but I don’t know just where

Of course, I am polite enough to follow along, assuming there will be an object that is connected to the subject, somewhere down the sentence. Yet, often, there is none, no reference whatsoever. The words are in free-fall, without any destination known. Just a subject without an object, and that, of course, is “You,” the writer, but I thought you were going to attach a predicate, telling me something about the subject other than “there the subject is.” Perhaps I need to acknowledge your existence more than I do

And, I guess it’s actually a little “Zen” of you, if I think about it, and not uncomfortable if I don’t expect anything at all, like that you are actually referring to something and not just referring to nothing whatsoever. In other words, there “You” are, referring or gesturing toward nothing at all, yet assuming I should know what you are talking about

Sometimes, I want to gently tap you on the shoulder and quietly ask what in the world you are talking about, yet I am too polite to do that. And, I sometimes try the Socratic Method, asking leading questions that I hope will elicit an answer that I can follow. Yet, that does not always work

Quite often, I just give up and let the flow of your words just run into the past tense and disappear in the fog of forgetting. Do I think this is some kind of “selfishness” on your part? I don’t. It appears more like some kind of myopia, a nearsightedness that never gets

beyond the subject. Or, is it the subject in search of an object that I mentioned above?

I'm sure that I do it too, but I try very hard not to. I'm talking about your assuming I know what you are talking about, when you have yet to make it exactly clear

PROACTIVITY ON OUR PART

One interesting fact that comes up with identifying bats as to where the coronavirus originated, is that bats, although mammals like ourselves, function at a higher body temperature than humans, something like 105-degrees Fahrenheit, if only at times or by leaps, like when they have to fly out and feed

We are at 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit and if we have 105-degrees, it means that we have a fever. My understanding from the what I read is that, because the virus originally came from bats, the virus can easily withstand 105-degrees, while the human body uses a higher-body temperature like that to kill virus. Well, with the coronavirus, that higher body temperature for us, which the virus is used to in bats, does not kill the virus in our bodies. And so, the virus persists week after week. CNN Anchor Chris Cuomo has had a fever for over two weeks and still has it. And now his wife has come down with the virus, I understand

This is some serious stuff, this virus. We've been through the PPE, each of us finding or approximating the equipment we need to somehow be safe, mainly isolating ourselves. And, it appears and looks like we are going to have to do this for something like a year. As we each know by now, that is going to be a long time

Given that, about the only thing I can concentrate on is building and strengthening my immune system. The way I figure is that, just as everything means something, however meaningless, so everything we eat is either good, bad, or indifferent for us. Through this pandemic, where not only is food a little harder to get, it is increasing clear through even a brief study that food is or can be medicine. In other words, whatever we eat has an effect on our body and health

Instead of eating or drinking what is of no value to our health or at least is indifferent to it, often what we eat actually shortens our life or is actually detrimental

The main way we can prepare for inadvertently contracting the coronavirus is by strengthening our own immunity, our personal immune system

I used to take my vitamins (and still do) and then some years ago I added various supplements, and now I am realizing that food itself is medicine. Every food has some effect. I know that many of you already know this, but I am climbing on board; I get it now; better late than never

Everything we eat or drink, could just as well be strengthening and good for us. If we are in danger of the coronavirus and the only thing we can do is develop and strengthen our immune system, let's do that

I have turned my attention and plan on (more or less) to concentrate on strengthening my immune system and I will share what I can here, for those of you in the same boat. I don't see an alternative

“TILTING AT WINDMILLS”

[Here, once again, I try to put into words what is ineffable, what cannot be expressed in words, i.e. what the realization of samsara, our habitual fixation on duality, is all about. If it is ineffable, why bother? For me, the answer to that question is that for perhaps just one person reading this, something will click and fall into place.]

We live, locked into a world of duality, meaning: I'm in here and you and the world are out there, and vice versa. Of course, we all know we share this world, so here I am pointing to the fact that we are the subject and whatever we fixate on beyond our skin is, somehow, an object and not an extension of our mind

Our consciousness is locked and fixated on this duality and, because of that, is not free from fixation enough to rest naturally.

And this is, so the dharma teachings point out, because we are too busy fixating on this or that. That is the crux of the matter

Breaking that dualistic logjam is crucial, yet difficult, because all of our life (and Buddhists claim that this is true for innumerable lives before this one) we have been caught up in and fixated on duality, what is commonly called Samsara

Being able to UNIFY and remove that duality (this inherent habit of this fixative division we have) goes against everything we have known up until now. It's like trying to focus a pair of binoculars into one image

There is little to no time for any kind of gap in our dualistic fixations to arise, a gap or chink in the dualistic armor that we have so that we can see through or beyond this to unification (non-duality). And this is because our habit is to fixate dualistically and to remain in lock-step with the march of time forward to nowhere in particular, just onward

What's the chance for us to unify (reunite) what has always been up until now divided into the "me" and the "them," i.e. between the me in-here and the you out-there way of seeing things?

This unification and the dissolution of duality is what happened "en-masse" back in the mid-1960s, creating the Sixties counterculture movement. That was when the advent of psychedelic drugs caused this ingrained sense of duality to elide and thin-out enough until the difference (duality) between the inside and the outside slipped away, leaving us with the one mind at peace with itself and not two, or, at the very least, provided a glimpse. Nonduality means no doubt or second thoughts and no unnecessary monitor or observer

As the Tibetans say, in an instant, the light of a single match can banish the darkness of interminable eons. That is an apt description of realization and that "realization" was experienced by the hippie generation on psychedelics starting around 1963 or 1964

It's a "realization," meaning that once realized, this habitual fixation on duality is increasingly weakened, and the unity or resolving of dualisms is increasingly realized as the unity it in truth is. And, the toothpaste does not go back in the tube. An entire generation realized this or at least the leaders of the psychedelic movement of

the 1960s did, and perhaps they became leaders because of the realization that drugs like LSD enabled. At least, that is my opinion

“... Because, something is happening here
But ya' don't know what it is do you, Mister Jones?” – Bob Dylan

The fiducial or crucial point here is that duality and our

fixation on it, once realized as actually non-dual (as, in fact, “one”), can never again be mistaken for two separate things. A realization is by definition irreversible, because we had it wrong all along, until we got it right. And once we see it “right,” it can't be walked back

When once such a realization takes place, every fixation and duality we encounter becomes just more grist for the mill, more food for realization. Once we have realized the unity of what was earlier seen by us as separate, all other separateness (duality) we encounter is increasingly also resolved and begins to fall into line. Thus, in realization we have a differential that, once attained, can be infinitely extended

This is exactly what happened to me from LSD back in 1964. For the very first time in my life, I saw personally that much of what I feared in the outside world was nothing more than the projection of my own fear. And by “saw,” I don't mean “think” abstractly, but rather I experienced my own state of mind in-the-flesh and in real time. It was absolutely convincing and this without a doubt

And, once I realized that, for me the cat was out of the bag, so to speak. If my fear was coming from within me and being projected out there on the screen of the outside world, while I watched it, riveted to it like a deer in the headlights, then, it follows that I could actually (me, myself, and I) do something about it because I was causing it. I realized in one night, for the first time, that I had the power to change my situation. I was not powerless against this outside world, as I has always assumed, and that, for me, amounted to a sea change. I could do this, change myself and how I viewed life. And I was suddenly empowered to resolve this duality. I could do this!

And from that night forward, I never forgot that realization, no matter what external experiences arose. Perhaps I couldn't control what happened to me, yet I could control how I responded to what

happened to me. And from that moment and night in May of 1964, I began to work with and change how I saw things

And that realization is as crystal clear today as it was some sixty years ago. That realization changed my life. I don't suggest that everyone run out and take LSD. It took me decades to stabilize what I saw on acid, and it actually took the teachings and dharma practice I have done to actually get a real handle on it

The takeaway is that everything enabled by LSD back in the early 1960s is part and parcel, an essential part of what is taught in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism

THE INSIDE IS OUT AND THE OUTSIDE IN

The dharma is a tool to realize how things are and nothing more. The dharma cannot be used or act on itself any more than the eye can see the eye or a sword can cut itself. We are trained in the dharma not as an end in itself, but as the means to realize everything else in life, in other words, to realize Samsara

The dharma is how we feast on Samsara itself through the process of realizing that Samsara is Nirvana. As mentioned, dharma cannot be turned on itself and, if we try, nothing is accomplished whatsoever. Dharma is to be used to embrace and realize everything else but dharma. Dharma only shines when applied to Samsara, and the dharma cannot realize itself because it is the realization itself

To the degree we can meditate is the degree that we can engage this world and make sense out of it. The only fuel for realization is the unrealized, so looking to dharma as anything other than a means for realization is fruitless and missing the point. It only will turn us into an educated guess and never a realized being. Dharma, however, deserves our respect

The quicksilver of the mind is subtle beyond subtlety, so subtle that its opened doors take us in on in on in and we should have no fear that we will be lost withing the mind, because the only thing that is certain is that time is sure to see us out. The end of "In" always has

to be “Out,” like turning a glove inside out. In and out are the same, identical, a gesture or mudra

[Graphic is what is called a torus, in this case animated to show how the inside and outside interact.]

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Feb 27, 2020, 5:36 AM

GRIST FOR THE MILL

Everything in our life is grist for the mill of realization. As my teacher, the very Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche so clearly put it, and I have quoted this before:

KKR:

“The statement that ‘this is very close to Buddhahood’ means that this is the unmistakable means through which Buddhahood is actually achieved, the auto-consumption of Samsara. This is feeding Samsara to itself, allowing thoughts to consume themselves. This is how Samsara is overcome

“You overcome Samsara by seeing its nature. Insight into the nature of those thoughts (which thoughts would otherwise accumulate karma and prolong Samsara) is more powerful than the potential of the thoughts to accumulate karma.”

And so, advanced meditation is pretty much a feeding frenzy on Samsara, realizing its nature ever more and more. Just like the placenta feeds the baby in the womb and all manner of insects and their nymphs have the dedicated food for transformation, like a caterpillar in a cocoon, so Samsara is the food that will see us transformed into Nirvana

And so, as the old saying goes “The bigger the front, the bigger the back,” having a heavy load of karma ultimately is just more food for the fire and will just burn ever so much more brightly

Being in a hurry only obscures the finer veiling of our inner light, and like the old saying “Hurry up and wait,” sooner or later we will

have to slow down enough to see for ourselves what is holding us back, and see to it that it is unfolded and out. Every last crevice and crease must be unfurled, fully expanded and extended

And this process itself is, well, “enlightening” would be the word. This process is the fire up front, so to speak, the flame in the butter lamp that burns as long as there is fuel to consume. Samsara is that fuel and we are not at a loss for fuel. 😊

Years ago, I wrote this poem which is about the darkness that will draw light

Phoenix

Personality,
Bright beauty of the night,
That terrible crystal,
Burning in the darkness,
At the very edge of time

Watching,
In rapt fascination,
Fires,
Impossible to ignore,

Forever frozen,
On the face of age
It is a dark light,

Indeed,
Funeral pyres,
Signifying nothing,
But impermanence

This is a fire,
That does not warm

”

Feb 26, 2020, 1:07 PM

GETTING PERSONAL

At a certain point in our dharma practice, we become aware that we ourselves are creating the veiling that obscures us. All we have to do is stop creating layer after layer of more obscuration and, instead, through the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra, reverse the process. In this way, we stop creating more karma. Remember, all of our karma is OUR karma and no one else's. We have been creating our karma since time immemorial. Give it a rest, which is why allowing the mind to just rest "as it is" is required. Just rest as it is and the scum floats to the top and can be transformed

If we continue to force things out of habit, it is like pinching ourselves. Indeed, then we are our own worst enemy, creating everything that holds us back all by ourselves. What is called in the dharma as Relative Truth, dualistic struggle, is like the tar baby in the old Uncle Remus tales. The more we force ourselves and "try," the deeper into the muck we sink. We have been doing this forever

If we can't be gentle with ourselves, how can we be gentle with others. We can't have it both ways, being gentle with others and harsh on ourselves. In my opinion, that is old-school. Personality is personality and persons are persons, including our own person. If we realize what our person or Self is, but an accumulation of reified likes and dislikes, there is nothing sinister or untoward about personality. It just is what it is. If you don't like your Self, do something about it. Bad habits can be replaced with good habits, ones that don't accumulate karma. Of course, this sounds easier than it is

Yet, sooner or later, and preferably sooner than later, each of us will realize how this all is. Called "Recognition," this process is as simple as becoming familiar with how the mind works. This is familiarization, thus becoming familiar is what is called meditation. And spirituality makes sense

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

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Feb 25, 2020, 12:35 PM

FORCING THE ISSUE

When you said "Wait!," you mean a long time. Yes, if need be. There are different views on this issue, and this is where folks differ and find their differences, IMO. The question is whether to force on through or wait until the right moment. As Shakespeare said, "Ripeness is all." Which is it?

In my own experience (and my younger years), I was more in the mode of push on through, whether you like it or not. However, over time, I have come more to the point of Shakespeare's view, to wait for the right or ripe moment

There is an old saying, not sure where it came from, "He wrote canzoni because he had a will to write canzoni and not because love moved him to it. And, no one thought much of him or his canzoni."

Lately, I am more of the persuasion to allow "love" to move me to action, rather than action for action's sake, i.e. just to get the thing done. It's not because I have not tried to do things because I had to, just to bet them out of the way or pushing them out of the way. I have

However, the results are never good and they remind me of Shakespeare's sonnet 129:

"Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame

Is lust in action; and till action, lust

Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,

Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,

Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight,

Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had

Past reason hated as a swallowed bait

On purpose laid to make the taker mad;

Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.”

Of course, I understand those of you who rule yourself with an iron fist and allow nothing to stop you or hold you back. As mentioned, I have done that too. My only comment on being a hard-liner is, well, look carefully at the result. Harshness is as harshness does, IMO, even with yourself

And, if you feather the effort back to be more gentle, then you get to my preferred opinion of, as Shakespeare said, “Ripeness is all.” Wait until the right season and moment, which is, IMO, not the same as being weak or procrastinating

Being hard with yourself is the same as being hard with others, and being hard with others is, speaking in the terms of modern psychology, on the sadistic side. If I read carefully, and this is especially clear in some Zen writings, action without effort or force is more appropriate

At the same time, again to use psychology, being a masochist, allowing ourselves to be dragged through life because of procrastination, is of no proper use, either. Not too much and not too little, the middle-way, always seems the best

Those of you who, as mentioned, rule with an iron hand, and take your Self out to the woodshed, are, IMO, missing the point. Eclipsing grace and fluidity through a hard-scrabble approach never works for me or always leaves something to be desired that should not be ignored. Taking yourself to task by command is, IMO, not knowing your Self. Who do you think you are for punishing yourself. It's like pinching yourself, IMO

“Robbing the cradle” of life, so to speak is what the western occultists used to term “failing to round the nadir,” meaning not

allowing the body of the issue to develop fully and, instead, shorting the process by ruling by the head and not the heart. Perhaps this is why, in the Tibetan popular tradition, when asked where is the mind located, they point to the heart

I'm not telling you what to do, only sharing with you what I find myself doing, which is waiting for the appropriate moment for action. Very Zen-like

For example, if there is something I have to do when I get up in the morning, I like to do it and get it out of the way. However, if doing it depends on doing it with heart or love (and I lack that), then it is better that I wait until later in the day or until I am relaxed enough to do it properly. If I can't do it with some heart, for me it is better not to do it at all. And if I have no choice or time and still HAVE to do it as opposed to not doing it at all, I should at least take note that the doing is just perfunctory and probably not useful at all, dharmically

In other words, if I put off doing things just because I have to or will feel like I'm backsliding if I don't do it, hopefully I have another thought coming. It's a very delicate middle-way balance that must be maintained, IMO

[Photo looking out mind window looking for spring.]

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

Feb 20, 2020, 8:48 PM

TALES FROM THE HEART OF THE SIXTIES SCENE

As someone who is aging, I have been doing my best to place 40 years of research where it will be of THE best use. Most of my collections are placed in major universities or non-profit organization in the U.S. and overseas. As we used to say, I'm getting down to seeds and stems. Lately, I realize that much of the

data I have collected about rock concert posters, while perhaps donated here and there to non-profits, still may never see the light of day or ever be used, at least not in the near future. This data is more timely than that

So, my thought is to put some of the history of modern concert posters into a form that is hopefully more approachable and easy to assimilate

I not only have made posters, but I have carefully studied and collected them. And I have met and personally interviewed many of the main artists that are still with us. And where I could not see them eyeball to eyeball, I interviewed them by phone and email

These are folks who, for the most part, risked their lives (or had no choice) to choose a vocation that while at the very center of the great Sixties movement, was at the very fringe of society's protection. There are lessons to be learned reading their interviews and understanding just what these great artists had to face (or still face) and overcome. I want to share some of the life information with all who have an interest

I thought that if I collected and collated all this data, photographed some 30,000 posters, measured them, critiqued them, and passed them on to interested universities or establishments that my job is done

However, I see that is not enough. I do not want to see the lessons learned by few (or many) get lost in the shuffle of time. So, here are eighteen free e-books that are interviews, biographies, notes, and articles on the very seminal Sixties poster scene. And there are more to come as I make time for additional books like these. I have literally scores of transcribed interviews that I will try to make available as I can

All of the free e-books shown here are available at this link:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Posters>

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Feb 19, 2020, 11:26 PM

DON'T THINK ABOUT IT

Some additional words of my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, on the nature of the mind, for those interested

KKR: “My point is that you are still trying to think your way out of this. We will never think our way out of this because we thought our way into this. We have been thinking throughout beginning-less time and it has never done us any good. The only way out, the only way to stop samsara is by seeing what has always been there. It is not an object of thought. You cannot see it by thinking about it. That is why you have to look at your mind for brief periods of time... very, very short moments, because you will only be able to remain free of concepts about it for that long.”

”

Feb 18, 2020, 5:47 AM

THE TRAIN TO NOWHERE

In the pith or essential dharma teachings, it states:

“In the midst of experience, realization can arise.”

What is being realized, when that happens, is experience itself. We are realizing what we have experienced and, if we pursue our dharma practice, we realize the true nature of that experience

It is in the gaps or breaks in that unending experience through which realization arises. We experience on and on, lifetime after lifetime, or so the teachings say. It is when that experience is interrupted, however that may come about, that we can realize what we have been experiencing or have experienced, and the fact that all this time we have been lost in experience

Just how can those gaps appear or take place? As my dharma teacher of many years would point out, those gaps can come about through any kind of sudden shock or interruption, a sharp sound,

an event that sobers us, anything that breaks the continuity of endless experiencing and allows us to pop out of it, if only for a brief time

And, as upsetting as some events can be (death of a loved one, loss of a job, etc.), in that precious time when we are thrown out of our normal pattern, when our Self is momentarily shattered or goes void, is when that kind of realization typically can take place. At least that has been true in my own experience

Instead of floundering around like a fish out of water when something untoward happens, we can gather our wits and rest in that (usually brief) time before our Self reanimates, returns to normal, and we soon forget the gap and get lost in experiencing life once again

It is unfortunate, at least in my experience, that this is what it takes to get my attention, something that stops me dead in my tracks long enough to have any realization at all. LOL

Yet, beggars can't be choosy, so I have learned to value these time-outs, rather than just rue my bad luck at the kind of shock it takes to throw me off course from my busyness in going nowhere

”

Feb 17, 2020, 5:38 AM

THE ROAD TAKEN

Some words of my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, on the nature of the mind

KKR “If you ask, “Is that awareness of the present moment the mind’s nature?” The answer is no. But it is as close as we can get in the beginning to the mind’s nature. It is therefore the direction we take or the road we walk on to reach the mind’s nature. It is as if someone were to show you that if you take this road, if you walk on this road, you will reach the place you are trying to go. The road is not the place, but the road is the only way to get there and you have to actually walk on it.”

”

Feb 16, 2020, 3:25 AM

MIXING EARTH AND SKY

The mixing of the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation with the dualism inherent in our everyday Samsara can result in a weakening of Samsara incrementally, as Samsara is transformed (or converted) into Nirvana, a more enlightened state or view. How is this done?

In attempting to answer such a question, it is best to keep in mind that words cannot express non-duality or the process of mixing mentioned above. Yet, we try words anyway in order to get some sense of the mix, keeping in mind that words only give us a “sounds like” sense of what actually takes place. We must each make the connection between words and the reality behind them through a bridge that hopefully is not too far. That’s what the pointing-out instructions as to the actual nature of the mind are all about

Non-dual practices like the Kagyu form of Insight Meditation are streamlined so that they are impervious to the dualistic interruptions that signify mundane Samsaric life and mentality. In my own experience with the special Insight used in the Kagyu Mahamudra practice, Insight Meditation is like a blowtorch that removes all reification, rendering any part of Samsara it is aimed at into the dharma that it, at essence, is. “Certainty” is the word I would choose

Certainty is a rare commodity in mundane life, IMO, and it is hard-earned, so hamstrung and nickel-and-dimed are we by the dualistic processes. To see clearly and lucidly is what Insight Meditation is all about. In my experience, “Certainty” is the result of correctly practicing Vipassana (Insight Meditation.)

Insight Meditation is impervious to relative-truth, i.e. dualistic and conceptual thinking. It is like sticking a red-hot poker into icy water. Through repeated attempts at immersion, the ice-cold water of Samsara is thawed and gradually warms up. It can be transformed

The goal of Insight Meditation (and all the realization dharma practices) is to transform Samsara into Nirvana, one degree at a time. Insight Meditation is like a light-saber in our battle against dualistic confusion. Insight Meditation is a light that appears in the darkness of our ignorance to the point that we can no longer ignore it

Through repeated practice of Insight Meditation, our habitual light-blindness is gradually overcome in favor of clear vision and certainty. As the Tibetan dharma tradition states, "A single match can end the darkness of innumerable eons." The practice of Insight Meditation is the repeated mixing of non-dual lucidity with dualistic Samsara and the result is transformation of Samsara into Nirvana, or so the teachings clearly state

While it seems that most folks concentrate on the two ends of the spectrum, Samsara and Nirvana, the truth is that the majority of time it is the mix that is taking place, and the transformation of Samsara to Nirvana, by almost infinite small degrees. It is that light saber of Insight Meditation that is, IMO, the pearl of great price, so to speak

This turning of the tide of Samsara toward Nirvana through the facilitation of Insight Meditation (non-dual) to achieve this sacred transformation is a most precious dharma technique that cannot be ignored. We can't find enlightenment without it, or so the teachings say, as I read them

"

MIXING NIRVANA WITH SAMBARA

[Another snowstorm, very blowy, hard driving. It's 3 degrees out as I write this. Winter is still with us.]

The special form of Insight Meditation, which is part of Mahamudra Meditation, is non-dual, meaning that there is no subject and object (i.e. no me looking at you), but rather the mind looking at itself. It's like going into hyperdrive. There is no friction and no observer. We are all-in, so to speak. And so, how does nonduality relate to this dualistic world we live in? How do they mix?

For starters, the fact is that they do mix. Realization through Insight Meditation feeds on Samsara and transforms it into Nirvana, one

degree at a time or, for rare individuals, much faster. The slipstream of Insight Meditation is where the totality of Insight is mixed with the duality of Samsara, so that the dharma of (and in) Samsara is revealed. That “dharma” is what is called Nirvana or enlightenment

A couple analogies that may prove useful are the analogy of red and white blood cells, where Insight Meditation is the white-blood cells that devour the red-blood cells that are not up to snuff, whatever we falsely have reified. And the analogy of an express train, a train (non-dual practices like Insight Meditation) that is not interrupted by endless stops of duality and just drives straight through

A third analogy might be that of a carburetor, which controls the mix of fuel and air. Here the fuel would be Samsara and that air would be Insight Meditation, and the carburetor that mixes the two would be Mahamudra Meditation. You get the idea

And so, whether we choose an analogy from above or make up one of our own, the function here is the concept of mixing and a proper mix of fuel and air, driven by the spark or fire of the present moment. I posted this quote from my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche before, but it fits right in here perfectly:

KKR: “The statement that ‘this is very close to buddhahood’ means that this is the unmistakable means through which buddhahood is actually achieved. This is the auto-consumption of samsara. This is feeding samsara on itself. This is allowing thoughts to consume themselves. This is how samsara is overcome. You overcome samsara by seeing its nature. Insight into the nature of those thoughts which would otherwise accumulate karma and prolong samsara is more powerful than the potential of the thoughts to accumulate karma.”

Truth is evergreen; it has no age

”

Feb 13, 2020, 10:13 PM

“YOU HAVE TO ACTUALLY DO IT”

Some words of my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche on the nature of the mind

KKR

“These are quite special instructions for revealing your mind’s nature to yourself through repeated scrutiny. However, you have to actually do it. You cannot simply learn it and then cast it aside. You have to actually go through the process of repeated scrutiny on each point until a decisive resolution has been achieved.”

“Recognition of your mind’s nature is not realization. It is not enlightenment or awakening. It is the understanding of how to meditate on your mind’s nature thereafter, and gaining that understanding involves assiduous examination and dialogue.”

”

Feb 13, 2020, 3:36 AM

MICHAEL, WALL-BANGER

[Yes, I like to bang my head against the wall of language, until (for me) some sense is shaken loose. I apologize, but it’s just the way I am. This amount of detail seems to be a part of how I achieve certainty. LOL.]

Language is inferential, meaning that it is used to point to something beyond itself and is not usually itself what it points at or toward. In that sense, it is dualistic and has no existence as an object in itself, other than through its academic study as a discipline

If that is clear, then it is easy to see why words, concepts, thoughts, and language in general are always one-step removed from themselves being an object that can be realized or pointed at, much less felt or known directly. And, it is more like something (as I blogged recently) that forever is beside the point rather than ever the point itself (if there IS any true point), and this by way of the above definition

In summary, words and language are but pointers beyond themselves. And this is made even more complex by the fact that the objects or “things” that words point out or at, themselves, have no permanent existence. So, what we have here is inference to what essentially has no “suchness” or permanent existence, a reference to a hologram or Catch-22, which is (at the very least) itself an infinite regression or recursion

And so, unpacking or carefully removing veil upon veil of inference, thus achieving directness, much like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, results in the end at our directly finding nothing at all for certain. Inferential logic is not the same as direct seeing. There is nothing but “nothing” to find and that nothing is the only something we can be certain about. And, how do we become certain about nothing?

In other words, we cannot see beyond the limits of Samsara or Nirvana; however, we CAN see (and realize) the entirety of Samsara and Nirvana up to and including their complete limits. We can't both see or realize the limits and also comment on them at the same time. It takes all that we have, everything and the kitchen sink, for the mind to look at or realize itself in full or totality

And so, there is no room, when full-out, to see or realize and also elaborate on the nature of the mind. We are all-in, so to speak. We can't realize the mind and talk about it at the same time. This is why we are struck dumb when we are in Insight Meditation. It is all-encompassing to realize totality, totally. There is no room to be fully present and to also stand outside of that and comment or remark on the realization. We can only, as Shakespeare, put it “Be or not Be.” And last, but not least, any being is empty of just that, permanent being. How ironic! 😊

100% is 100%, and requires 100%, with no observer. It is non-dual

[Photo by me today]

”

Feb 12, 2020, 9:58 AM

SIGHT UNSEEN

A comment on Mahamudra by my precious teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche:

“It is as impossible for mind to see itself as it is for a sword to cut itself.”

”

Feb 11, 2020, 4:37 PM

THE KARMAPA COMMENTS ON THE PASSING OF MY TEACHER

His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, has been in secluded retreat for many months. Recently, the Karmapa came out of retreat and sent a message to the recent Monlam gathering

He mentioned many things, but one of them was the passing of my teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. I will quote that part here for those interested:

“Last year (according to the Western calendar), two elderly Kamtsang Kagyu lamas outside of Tibet, Bagyod Rinpoche and Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, both passed away. They were disciples of the Sixteenth Karmapa, and both gave great service to the teachings with a pure, altruistic mind...

“Likewise, according to the wishes of the Sixteenth Karmapa, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche went to Karma Triyana Dharmachakra in America, where he spent many decades, working tirelessly day and night to establish a dharma center and retreat center

“He traveled widely to teach dharma and to give guidance. His accomplishments for the teachings were greater than those of many who are called tulkus these days

“During the Offerings to the Gurus in this Kagyu Monlam, we have prayed to fulfill all the aspirations and wishes of these two great lamas who have passed, and we have made vast offerings to them. First and foremost, if we can supplicate the gurus without forgetting, practice their instructions without forgetting, and benefit other sentient beings without forgetting, we will fulfill the gurus’ aspirations. We ourselves awaken to buddhahood by doing this, and repay the kindness of sentient beings by doing this.”

”

Feb 10, 2020, 6:23 PM

BESIDE THE POINT

Our “worry” about having things effect us, itself, has an effect. And so, much of dharma practice is the removal of prejudice, our likes and dislikes that, anything that amounts to reification, trying to gild the lily, to make something more real or different than it is. All of that “overage” must eventually be removed

Even the idea of removal and the act of removing is misleading. All effort to do anything eventually itself requires remediation. Instead, just allowing things to be as they naturally are is the point. And even making that point, itself, is too much, is beside the point. As Trungpa Rinpoche put it, “Just relax, as it is,” provided we drop the imperative in that command. In other words, there is no easy way out. Samsara is a tar baby

If we back way up to the beginning of dharma practice for any one of us, we have what amounts to a little story, that of learning to concentrate to a point and then backing off from just that point, letting go. That simple gesture (tightening and letting go) itself amounts to a mudra. We make a point and then erase it, like the heart beating

In short, we let go, as in: we allow life, just as it is, to go on. As if we could stop it, but that is beside the point

The point is that any point is beside the point

And that’s a good thing!

Feb 9, 2020, 9:06 PM

The Mahasiddha Tilopa taught:

”That which is beyond the intellect can never be seen by the intellect. That which is beyond action can never be realized through the dharmas of action. Therefore, regardless of how sophisticated your concepts or elaborations may be, even the concept “beyond elaboration” is still just another elaboration.”

”

Feb 8, 2020, 2:20 PM

THE MIND CANNOT SEE ITSELF

Another pith quote from my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche:

KKR: “That is your mind’s nature. That is how it works. It can see everything but itself. It cannot see itself. It can only see that it cannot see itself, but it can never see itself. This is why Tilopa said, “I have never seen anything and I have nothing to show you.” You might ask, “What good does understanding this do for me?” When even a beginner who understands this has outbursts of anger and other kleshas, they will see its nature because when these outbursts arise, they will know how to look at their mind. When they look at the klesha that arises the same way, they will see its nature – that it is without true existence. While the klesha is still there, they will see that because it does not exist, it has no inherent power.”

”

Feb 6, 2020, 9:12 PM

THE FOLK-MUSIC REVIVAL: 1950s-1960s

[I am trying to mix it up a little here, This is another long music article, written for those who would like to know where folks like myself, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and many others came from. You can also save this as a booklet here:]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The%20Folk%20Music%20Revival%20FIN.pdf>

I grew up in the folk-scene environment of the late 1950s and beyond. Even back then, Pete Seeger was a landmark, a single person who perhaps best represented what the folk music scene was all about to me. So, much of that world revolved around Seeger. Even when the younger players begin to emerge, Pete Seeger was always in there somewhere, just being himself. Seeger has passed on but will never be gone. He is like a rock that has always been there. I was very much part of that folk scene, so perhaps a little history is in order

By the 1950s, more and more young Americans were interested in their own indigenous music – American folk music. In the later '50s and early '60s, folk music had become increasingly popular, in particular on college campuses and among more affluent white Americans. Along with the interest in folk music came the folklore societies and eventually the festivals

My first experience with these groups was the University of Michigan Folklore Society in Ann Arbor in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1957, freshman student Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Today Al Young is a Poet Laureate of California. The Folklore Society was a natural interface between the University folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout, I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just 'folk' and it was a culturally rich scene

And Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what came to be called the folk circuit, a

constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians like Bob Dylan would hitchhike into town, hang out, play a gig or two, and soon head down the road. And well-known folk singers came and played

Folksingers like Ramblin' Jack Elliot and groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor and this was before anyone was famous. They didn't stay in fancy motels, but with us. They stayed in our houses, slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. We all hung out together and played music or sat in the M.U.G, the Michigan Union Grill, and drank coffee all day, and most of us smoked cigarettes. Whatever music and culture they brought with them really had a chance to sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us. They were just like us

Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Howie Abrams and we sported folk musicians like Marc Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Perry Lederman. There was also an important lady named "Bugs," but I can't remember her last name. Anyone know?

And we put on festivals and events. For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann Arbor, where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I am told that I helped to put that concert on, but I can't remember the details. I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan, drinking coffee and smoking, while we waited for the review of Dylan's performance the night before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news, Dylan proceeded to hitchhike out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked there to see her. And there was also a subtle change taking place. I could write more, if there is interest. God speed Peter Seeger!

MORE ON THE FOLK SCENE -- PART-2

Since I see no reason to stretch this out for many days, when Seeger's passing is so fresh in our minds, I am just going to blog on this and let those who feel like reading it, read it

And of course there were the folk festivals, of which the one in Newport, Rhode Island is perhaps the most famous, if not the first. The Newport Folk Festival was established in 1959 by George Wein, the same man who in 1954 established the Newport Jazz Festival. The first Newport Folk Festival was held on July 11-12, 1959 and featured, among other acts, the Kingston Trio, a group that had exploded to national prominence only the year before. Flanking the Kingston Trio were classic folk singers like Odetta, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and of course, the ubiquitous Pete Seeger

During a set by the singer/songwriter Bob Gibson at that first 1959 festival, a young Joan Baez made her national debut to a wildly enthusiastic audience of over 13,000 people. The Newport festival is still considered to be the granddaddy of all folk festivals, even though it has been reduced in size in recent years

The folk scene in the early '60s was very active and organized enough to have a well-established set of venues (coffee houses, church sponsorships, etc.) and routes that stretched across the country and over which performing folk artists traveled, mostly by hitchhiking. By the early 1960s, folk enthusiasts everywhere were learning the rudiments of music research, at least to the point of tracing particular songs back through time to their roots or at least trying to. It was axiomatic at that time that the original version of a song was preferable to later versions, almost always enriching the listener's experience and enjoyment of the tune. "Sing Out! Magazine" was one of the main repositories of this research, our musical collective-heritage. I still have a bunch of them somewhere

It should be remembered that the folk-music revival emerged toward the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, a time when more and more young people were rejecting the culture of the 1950s (the flattop haircuts and what we felt was a cookie-cutter mentality) and thirsting for something a little more earthy and real. It is a simple fact that most of us looked to the folk music tradition as a way of grounding ourselves, a way to somehow get underneath or break through the social veneer in which we were raised. Future events cast their shadows and the counterculture

hippie revolution that was to come later in the mid-1960s was already emerging

THE FOLK SCENE

Unlike folk music, whose roots were often in England or Ireland, with blues (to the surprise of most white folk-blues lovers), a trip into the history book was often as easy as venturing into a different part of town, only we didn't know it then. The folk music scene was flourishing on college campuses, and what started at Newport in 1959 was echoed in the next few years by startup folk festivals all across America, including the Berkeley and Chicago Folk festivals, both of which debuted in 1961. And, although these folk festivals also featured some blues (country blues), the blues at those festivals was mostly treated as part of the folk genre, and as a sidelight at that

For example, one could hear Jessie 'Lone Cat' Fuller at Hertz Hall (Berkeley, CA) in 1959 and at Newport in 1960. In 1960, Robert Pete Williams performed at Newport. Other festivals in the early 1960s had Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and Mississippi John Hurt, Rev. Gary Davis, Sleepy John Estes, Jesse Fuller, and

occasionally John Lee Hooker. It is hard for me to imagine John Lee Hooker or Lightnin' Hopkins not getting mainstream attention wherever they played. In 1965, an electrified Bob Dylan, backed by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, shocked the Newport folk crowd and helped to bring awareness of modern city blues to a mostly white folk crowd. Dylan was booed. Dylan's album "Highway 61 Revisited" was released in August of 1965, including the hit single "Like a Rolling Stone."

THE FOLK REVIVAL – LOOKING FOR ROOTS

This folk music revival in the later 1950s and early 1960s was just that, a revival, an attempt to revive a music that most felt was already deeply embedded in the past. The revival started out looking back and, for the most part, stayed that way for many years. We sought to revive and find our future in past songs rather than writing our own songs for the future

Initially, younger folk artists were just too shy. Emerging players like Bob Dylan, Ramblin' Jack Elliot (and scores of now-unknown players schooled in traditional folk music) were (at first) not focused

on writing songs themselves. Their favorite contemporary songwriter was probably Woody Guthrie, but most of the songs they played came from even earlier times, sometimes all the way back to England and Europe. The great majority of folk artists did covers of earlier songs, Dylan included. The goal then was to do them well, make them live again, to revive them

Pivotal artists of the time like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers were not writing their own songs, but instead re-enacting and re-presenting the finest in traditional folk music. Their technique was flawless, but it was not their own songwriting creativity that was being featured. Groups like the Kingston Trio and the Weavers are perfect examples. The folk music magazine "Sing Out!" is a written testimony to this approach. White America was exploring its roots, but we were looking backward to find what we felt was missing in the present – our living roots. Folk artists as a group had not yet empowered themselves to write for the present, much less for the future. They were too busy trying to make the past live again, reviving their heritage. That's why it is called a folk revival

I was fortunate enough to be part of the early folk scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There was a route we all traveled that went from Cambridge, Massachusetts to New York City, to Ann Arbor, to the University of Chicago, to Madison, Wisconsin, to Berkeley, California, and then round back again. For the most part, we all hitchhiked or piled into cars that could barely run all the way across this wide country

If I remember right, I believe I hitchhiked the distance from Ann Arbor to New York City some ten times, and hitchhiked to and lived in Venice Beach and North Beach, San Francisco as early as 1960. I even travelled with Bob Dylan for a while, hitchhiking together with my friend Perry Lederman, who then was already a legendary guitar instrumentalist

The folk route also included side trips to places like Oberlin and Antioch colleges in Ohio, and so on, wherever colleges and universities were. In Ann Arbor, folk artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were frequent visitors, while groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were pretty much regulars, and Ramblin' Jack Elliot spent a lot of time there. We met mostly in houses or apartments and it seems we spent an inordinate amount of time drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes in the cafeteria of

the University of Michigan Student Union, the place called M.U.G, the Michigan Union Grill. I can recall sitting around the Union with a nervous Bob Dylan who was awaiting the Michigan Daily review of one of his earliest performances in Ann Arbor. He couldn't bear to leave town until the review came out. When he saw that the review was good, Dylan was on his way, hitchhiking out of town

SINGERS, NOT SONGWRITERS (PART 3)

For the most part, the folk movement at this time was oriented around covering traditional folk tunes. The folk artists originality was in how well they sang the song and not yet in the writing of contemporary songs. This is not to say that no songs were written; some were. My point is that back then it was all about the 'singer' in 'singer/songwriter' and not yet so much about the 'songwriter'. For most of us, that came a bit later

I can remember well traveling in 1961 with Bob Dylan and stopping at Gerde's Folk City on West 4th Street in New York. Gerde's was 'the' happening place back then and the folk star of the moment in that club was a guitar virtuoso named Danny Kalb, who later became part of the group known as the "Blues Project." Dylan was obviously jealous of the attention Kalb was getting (you could hear it in his voice), but it was not just petty jealousy. He honestly could not understand what Kalb had going for him that he didn't. It boggled his mind. I didn't know then that my traveling companion was "The" Bob Dylan, but I am certain he must have. After all, he had something to say that we needed to hear

Remember, all of this was in the early 1960s, well before Haight Ashbury and the hippie scene. Most folkies (like myself) were wanna-be Beatniks, but that train had already left the station. We stood outside conventional society, but we were not so much politically alienated from that society as we were repulsed by it, and fascinated by the world of music, literature, art, and our own little social scene. Things were happening man! I was 19 years old

THE FOLK BLUES

Real folk-blues artists like Elizabeth Cotton and Jessie 'Lone Cat' Fuller began to be featured at festivals like the Berkeley Folk Festivals in the late 1950s. Many of them came to Ann Arbor where I lived and we heard them live, songs like "Freight Train" (Cotton) and "San Francisco Bay Blues" (Fuller). To folk enthusiasts like

myself, this was still just folk music, but you did get a different feeling when you heard the blues. To me at the time, this just sounded like really good folk music – ‘really’ good. Back then we didn’t know much about the blues, but we sure could feel that music

While folk enthusiasts heard some blues early on (as mentioned), it was at first mostly only the folk blues, and folk blues were seen as just another form (albeit, with a lot of feeling) of folk music. Later, and only very gradually, more and more country blues began to appear, but usually only southern acoustic blues, not music from the North and nothing at all from the inner cities. There was no awareness of inner-city blues or electrified blues and no interest either. At that time electric-folk music was an oxymoron

BEING PART OF THE SCENE

As a folkie myself, I can remember listening to acoustic folk-blues and really loving it, but I treated it the same way I treated traditional folk music, as something that also needed to be preserved and revived – learned, played, shared - kept alive. It was a natural assumption on our part that we were listening to the vestiges of what had once been a living tradition and we wanted to connect to that past, to revive and relive it

We had no idea that modern electric blues music was not only “not-dead,” but was playing ‘live’ most nights of the week probably only blocks away, separated from us by a racial curtain. We just had no idea. The folk music scene had few blacks in it (other than a handful of performers) and those that were present were usually the older folk-blues artists like Sonny Terry, Odetta, and so on. Their music was perceived by folkies as coming out of the past, not part of the present

Please don’t get the idea that our exposure to folk music was only at concerts or folk societies. Like most musicians, we played or practiced music all the time, if only to learn the songs and how to play our instruments. We were also exposed to a lot of jazz. In Ann Arbor in the early 1960s, before bars could serve liquor by the glass, everyone met in apartments and houses around town to drink, smoke pot, and play music. This was primarily a jazz scene and young folkies (underage high-school kids like me) were tolerated as long as we kept to the shadows and sat along the far edges of the rooms

And quite a scene it was. I remember one house on E. Williams Street in Ann Arbor. Protruding horizontally from its second story hung a huge flag with a picture of Thelonious Monk, no words. At nights, especially on weekends, there was impromptu jazz in that house that went on most of the night, with players like Bob James, Bob Detwiler, Ron Brooks, and many others. It was music, music, music plus wine and pot. High school kids like me sat on the floor, squeezed in along the back wall. We didn't rate any pot, but we used to snort the ashes from joints that others had smoked. That should tell you how desperate we were to be part of the scene!

SEARCHIN' FOR ROOTS

We experienced jazz along with our folk music, but still not much blues. And the jazz was anything but bluesy jazz; it was more frenetic, like bop. And if it wasn't jazz we heard, then it was classical music played in the background on the stereo. Again: not much blues. This is an important point, because when the mostly-white folk musicians like myself were suddenly exposed to modern (and virile) inner-city blues players like Junior Wells, Magic Sam, and Howlin' Wolf, we were astonished. It went to our gut

As folkies made the gradual transition from studying and researching traditional folk music to also searching out historic country folk blues and then on to discovering modern city blues, all of a sudden things lit up. We got it. Blues was not simply R&B or pop music like you heard on the radio, but music by plain folks – folk music! We could see that blues was the same as folk music, only modern, fresh – alive, well and incredibly potent

What we had assumed must always be lost in the past, like folk music that depended on our efforts to restore and revive it was, when it came to blues, was very much alive and in the present – staring us in the face and more-or-less happy to see us at that. This blues music we were hearing lived in the present and not just in the past. It did not need us to revive it. Our idea of folk music as something to restore and treasure suddenly moved from the past into the present in our minds. We made the connection. Blues didn't need restoration. It was still with us and it was powerful. It was like the movie Jurassic Park; we had found a living dinosaur, folk music that lived in the present! And this music revived us and not vice-versa!

The blues scene in the early 1960s as played out in the small clubs and bars of Chicago, Detroit, and other major industrial cities, while very much still alive, was by then itself on the wane, only we newcomers didn't know that yet. To us, it was way more alive than the standard folk music we knew. Intercity electric blues music was still authentic and strong, but (for the most part) the next generation of younger blacks was already not picking up on it; they were just not interested. Chicago-style city blues was, to younger blacks at that time, old-peoples music, something from the South, a past and history they wanted to get away from rather than embrace. Younger blacks had already skipped ahead to R&B, Motown, and funk. Forget about those old blues

My band played in a black bar for something like a year or a year and a half, a bar filled with mostly older black folks and a sprinkling of hippie whites who had come to see us. This was in 1967. Right next door was another black bar, where all the younger blacks hung out and where they played only the latest R&B hits. The younger blacks seldom came into our bar and, in general, were embarrassed that their parents and elders were listening to blues played by a racially-mixed band – listening to white boys play the blues. How embarrassing! Interest in the classic Chicago blues was just not there for the younger generation of blacks. They felt that blues was music from an older generation, music for old people

While within the black community the door was slowly closing on the Chicago blues artists (even the artists knew this), another and much wider door for this music was opening onto white America, an open door that would extend the careers for many of these artists and secure their music well into the future

B.B. King said in Time Magazine in 1971:

“The blacks are more interested in the ‘jumpy’ stuff. The whites want to hear me for what I am.”

FOLK MUSIC SCENE: PART 4

1965: A Sea Change

This will be the end of this series on the folk-scene in the later 1950s and the early 1960s and how it gradually turned into "The Sixties" and the whole hippie scene

As pointed out, in the early 1960s the folk music revival was one of the main things happening on all the major campuses across America: Cambridge, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Madison, Berkeley, etc. What happened to it?

For one, in the mid-1960s, pop music groups like the Rolling Stones were busy recording covers of blues classics and pointing out the source – the artists who originally wrote and recorded them. White players like me, eager for guidance, hunted down the original blues 45s, which were a revelation to us. I can remember rummaging through bins of old 45s in downtown Chicago and finding just incredible music

That first “Rolling Stones” album, of the same name, was released in April of 1964. It contained tunes like Jimmy Reed’s “Honest I Do,” “Willie Dixon’s “I Just Want to Make Love to You,” “I’m a King Bee,” plus songs by Chuck Berry and Rufus Thomas

The Stones second album, also released in 1964, veered away from the blues and contained tunes recorded by Chuck Berry, Wilson Pickett, Dale Hawkins, songs like “Under the Boardwalk.” It also included the blues-R&B tune made famous by Irma Thomas, “Time Is on My Side.” In 1965, the album “Rolling stones, Now!” had the Dixon-Wolf classic “Little Red Rooster.”

From that point onward, the blues content of Rolling Stones albums decreased. In 1965, the album “Out of Our Heads” had no real blues tunes, and neither did their other 1965 album, “December’s Children.” It was those first two albums in 1964, and in particular that first album, that pointed the blues out to many in the white audience. The U.K. was all about authentic blues well before white America ever heard of them

In the wake of the Beatles and Rolling Stones, late summer and early fall of 1965 saw the emerging dancehall scene in San Francisco and the arrival of bands like the Grateful Dead. This was the beginning of the hippie era, and it’s when my own band, the Prime Movers, formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We knew nothing of the Grateful Dead, yet we too arose at the same time and represented a new era in music and lifestyle

In fact, the summer of 1965 was the trigger point for so very much. It marked a sea-change in the folk scene with the advent of groups like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. If there was a single band that

opened up blues to white players, it was the Butterfield Band. That first Butterfield album appeared late in 1965, and it totally kicked ass. The Butterfield band in person was way more powerful than anything they ever managed to record

This racially mixed band playing authentic Chicago blues sent a lightning bolt-like signal through all of us who were just waking up to the blues anyway. Their message was that white players could overcome their fear to play black music, including the blues. The Paul Butterfield Blues Band set the standard and set white musicians on notice that anybody was free to try to play the blues. We were emboldened to try

Unlike many areas of folk music, modern city blues at that time was anything but a dead art. While the lineage of most folk music required revival, like trying to trace out the history and line of the music, this was not true of blues. The blues lineage was not only unbroken, but indeed very much alive, both on black record labels and in thousands of bars and clubs across the nation. Perhaps some forms of country blues were endangered, but inner-city blues (at least for the older generation of Blacks) was in full swing. White Americans just knew little or nothing about it. During the later 1960s, all that changed. And last, but not least, many of the modern city blues players were still reasonably young and more than willing to be discovered. They needed the money and appreciated the recognition

Historians would agree that from the middle to the late '60s, music in general was, to a real extent, fusing. The whole psychedelic era blurred the boundaries of different music genres and emboldened white players to play music of all kinds – black, Indian, Asian, etc. The first extended psychedelic-like guitar solo/jam was Michael Bloomfield and the tune “East-West ” on the Butterfield album of the same name in 1966. It was over 13 minutes in length and inspired legions of heavy metal players that followed

Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Feb 6, 2020, 2:24 AM

REFLECTING

It has been some months since my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, passed away

It is almost as if, with Rinpoche's passing, his influence and teachings have even more effect with me. It was not immediate, took some time to manifest, but now it seems to be coming on like the sun coming up in the morning -- steady

The reoccurring experience for me is that Rinpoche's insight is my insight, albeit relative to the abilities I have to reflect it. Not only that I understand his teachings, but that these teachings shine from within me not as separate from my own, but rather as me reflecting his teachings -- unified. And what a relief this is for me, not to have the burden of having to make all the ends meet as best I can, which I now see I have been doing for years -- trying

It is as if Rinpoche's pure insight, after his passing, somehow matures and galvanizes the minds of his students, at least my own. At this point, this certainly seems true for me. It is as if I am suddenly wandering in some vast chamber of luminous clarity, looking here and there, yet almost always seeing beyond my own personal vision, Rinpoche's teachings are now completing themselves in those areas where I was until now less certain. This is straightening out what was not so straight in me, removing what is not needed

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Feb 5, 2020, 2:10 AM

VIVID AWARENESS

A useful insight from my dear teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, which I share here:

“In spite of the fact that you do not see anything, there is ‘vivid awareness’, Your mind looking at itself is a state of awareness, not a state of bewilderment, and it is a direct experience of itself. It does not see itself because there is nothing to be seen. The mind

cannot see itself. But it does experience itself nakedly or directly without any kind of border or veil, without any duality. That experience is vivid. It is open, but also vivid.”

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Feb 4, 2020, 3:59 AM

THE TWO AND THE ONE

Here is a quote from my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche:

KKR:

“In the beginning you act as if these two are different things. In other words, at first when you look at your mind you treat it as an object even though it is the mind that is looking at the mind. You initially think of it as an object. Then, when you have seen whatever you see when you look at your mind, you look at the looker, even though they are not two different things. Because you treated them as two different things in the beginning by looking at them separately, then you make sure you are not treating them as two different things in the end. This is because they are not separate.”

Feb 3, 2020, 4:27 AM

WORDS FROM MY TEACHER

Here is another short teaching from my precious teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche:

KKR: “For this natural flourishing to occur you have to continue to look again and again at your mind’s nature. If you do so, without anything else being done intentionally, all of the qualities of your mind’s nature will be gradually revealed like things growing in the Spring as the ground softens. If on the other hand you neglect to

look at the mind's nature, then gradually the whole thing will get colder and colder and freeze over like the ground in winter.”

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Feb 2, 2020, 4:27 AM

CORONAVIRUS NOW CONSIDERED UNCONTAINED

I put off blogging on this topic because I wanted to make sure that it was not contained. World health officials have now declared it not-contained, but on its way to going global, if not global already. The spread of this very deadly virus is exponential, meaning it is not just linear, and growing proportionally. Instead, being exponential, it is growing by leaps and bounds. A couple of days ago there were some 6,000 cases, while this morning it is around 12,000. It has doubled in a very short time. What to do?

The virus spread without symptoms appearing, so we can't see it coming. We have to depend on reports of it being found in our area

About all we can do is stay inside when it is active in our area, learn how to wash our hands as doctors so, and find some sort of face mask for use when we have to go into the public. And all masks are not the same

The little green or white masks we see everyone in China wearing, are of minimal use, mostly cosmetic. They do not keep much out

So, if we want some real protection, we have to seek out a genre of masks called “n95,” meaning they keep out about 95% of what needs to be kept out. These are better than nothing, but the genre of masks called “N100” or “P100” are particulate respirators that IF you know how to put them on, care for them, and use them can keep out around 100% of the airborne virus. Look for them

These superior respirators are 20x better than the “n95” level, so they are worth finding. Examples of a brand and item number are the “3M 8233 N100” and the 3M 8293 P100.” These are already hard to find

In case this became a pandemic, I thought I would get a few of these masks for when we have to go shopping for food, etc. I did find some in stock, ordered them, and put on my credit card, and the order was acknowledged. However, a little later, a notice came that said my credit card was declined due to the masks being out-of-stock. So, you can see what is a growing problem. And it will get worse

I searched and finally found a smaller supplier who had some, although they limit how many can be ordered. They did have them

And so, while I don't want to frighten anyone, this growing problem should be met with some common sense. If you can find a "N/P 100" style mask, it will help for when you have to go into the public. I hope that here in the U.S., we will not have this problem, but it is already in this country, A public health emergency has now been declared here in the U.S., so some attention and action on our part is warranted

I feel I would be remiss not to blog on this

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Feb 1, 2020, 8:22 AM

FAMILIARITY WITH THE MIND

Here is another brief teaching from my dharma teacher of 36 years who has recently passed on, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.:

KKR: A distinction needs to be made between the recognition of the mind's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood. Someone who has recognized the nature of their mind has not by any means attained Buddhahood by doing so, but they have attained a recognition that they can use through gradual familiarization to eventually achieve Buddhahood. “

“If someone has not recognized their mind's nature, the best thing they can do is to engage in conventional imperfect virtue – by means of gathering the accumulations, and so on. If you have not recognized your mind's nature, there is no point in pretending that you have and trying to practice in a way that would be appropriate

for people who have. It would be kind of like banging your head against a wall. However, if you have recognized it, then that is the beginning of the training. It is not the end of it.”

“As far as practicing this or working with this is concerned, it does not involve meditation on anything whatsoever. There is no object of meditation in the practice of Mahamudra because it is simply your mind becoming more familiar with itself, with its own nature. We use the term “practice Mahamudra” simply to refer to that.”

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Jan 31, 2020, 9:01 PM

RECURSIVE TAUTOLOGY: A SIGN OF THE TIMES

Tautology is saying the same thing twice using different words and, here, recursion means drilling down on it, repeatedly

Just now, I have nothing to say that does not seem recursive or a tautology. The problem is that I never noticed my doing this so clearly before or, if I did, it did not bother me. Now it does

I believe this is a form of not-accepting-my-Self, just as it is, so that it can be modified or, worse, being ashamed of myself. It boils down to (as far as I can tell) my now identifying as someone (or with something) other than myself, after a life, long filled with identifying WITH that Self. For me, this is not a good sign and is a problem I must work with and negotiate. It may be more universally present at this time for many

And so, where before I tolerated (or even liked) my own Self, now I feel (at least temporarily) somewhat repelled by myself, or at least uncomfortable. While this is totally understandable to me, it is also clearly prejudicial against my Self, which is, if not unfair, is at least a hindrance. It seems I should consider my Self as I would anyone else’s Self. Yet, I keep coming up with what I call the “Stink of the Self,” which only makes de-emphasizing the Self in life that much more difficult. Do you see my point? The Self is too easily a target, like the proverbial tar baby and, IMO, should not be taken so

seriously. Yet, I am, more so recently than I have in the past taking the negative aspects of a Self perhaps too seriously. I don't like to give it so much attention, because that just encourages it in its negative aspects

If I find that I am, without realizing it, always pointing at and including myself recursively, that is what I am talking about here. It puts, as they say, "a hitch in my get along," and is an obscuration or veil at worst, and perhaps an opportunity for increased clarity at best

Apparently, up until now, I needed to accent myself. I believe that repetition is a powerful way of learning dharma. And I note that groove music, at least in jazz (Original Funk), is perhaps my favorite genre of music. Yet, groove music can accent and hit the same note, repeatedly, as long as the groove is maintained. For me, this is just another sign that a number of roads seem to all be converging lately

It's like the old game of "Cat's Cradle," only in this case I don't know how to pick up the string and take what I have and turn it into something different. I have called to myself for a time-out, so that I can examine why, as they say, "anything on god's green earth" is not acceptable just as it is. And this includes my (or anyone's) Self. Like pain in the body, the Self is a symptom and not a cause, but I am confused about that at present

Up until now, I always tried to understand my Self and to be kind, unafraid, and not apologetic for the Self and the selfishness it entails. And now, for various reasons, my Self has offended me, creating more of a duality, something that perhaps is not useful and stalemates me for now

It's not unknown to any of us that attention on our Self often comes up more frequently than chance would allow. And, I don't like painstakingly removing all self-reference in an attempt to appear more puritan to my own vanity or to others. The simple truth is that if we like to play the note of our Self more frequently than others might like, yet at least this is nothing more than it is, i.e. just that

I also feel this time we are in politically, astrologically, and event-wise is somehow pivotal. It suggests, for me personally, to perform more purification practices, yet most of my current dharma practice is not purification-oriented in the ordinary sense

I can't expect that many readers here will understand what I am saying. I am sure you have your own problems and path. As for me, I have to slow down, more carefully examine everything, and work with what I am going through, on tip toes, if necessary

I am also disturbed by the Coronavirus that perhaps is in the process of going global, another clear sign, IMO, of the recent Saturn-Pluto Conjunction that just took place and is still reverberating. I am afraid this is very serious for the world or close to it and I suggest we all take note and prepare for this, if it does go global

And in closure, I am not as interested in entertaining myself or anyone here as I was. The signs I am reading don't add up to clear sailing, IMO

Your thoughts are welcome!

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Jan 31, 2020, 2:48 AM

SAMSARA'S CAUSE

A teaching that catches our attention and can be life-changing can be long or short, a mudra, poem, a phrase, or even a single look or word. My teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche taught:

KKR

“The mind not looking at itself is the single cause of beginningless Samsara.”

Jan 28, 2020, 3:14 AM

FEEDING SAMSARA TO ITSELF

Here is another of what, to me, is a pith teaching from my dharma teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

KKR:

“The statement that ‘this is very close to Buddhahood’ means that this is the unmistakable means through which Buddhahood is actually achieved, the auto-consumption of samsara. This is feeding samsara to itself, allowing thoughts to consume themselves. This is how samsara is overcome

“You overcome samsara by seeing its nature. Insight into the nature of those thoughts (which thoughts would otherwise accumulate karma and prolong samsara) is more powerful than the potential of the thoughts to accumulate karma.”

[My comment: In this kind of practice, we don’t follow the train of thought or focus on the content of a thought (what it is about), but rather learn to directly look at the nature of the thought itself, regardless of the content.]

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

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Jan 27, 2020, 11:44 AM

GROOVE AND BLUES IN JAZZ – THE ALBUMS

Here is this entire article in a downloadable format, so you can refer to it later

“Groove and Blues in Jazz”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Groove%20and%20Blues%20in%20Jazz%20BOOK%20FIN.pdf>

Music is good for the soul. It is one of the best medicines that I know of and the better the music, the better I feel. Hearing the good stuff makes all the difference. And that is what this article is all about -- how to locate the best blues music. Blues is so radical

-- such a root music -- that it fuses with and gives rise to other music genres with ease. Jazz critics point out that the roots of jazz can be found in the blues. This article is about where in jazz blues lovers can hear and feel those roots -- the blues in jazz

A little background on where I am coming from: I have been a blues and jazz lover for over fifty years. In the late 1950s and very early 1960s there was a strong jazz scene in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I grew up

This was before liquor by the glass became legal in 1963, after which a lot of the jazz scene moved into the clubs. Most any night of the week, but in particular on weekends, there was live jazz played in houses and apartments. Teenagers like myself were tolerated and we hung out. Players like Bob James, Ron Brooks, Bob Pozar, and Bob Detwiler were playing straight-up bop and exploring some cool jazz. The music and the parties often went on all night. On occasion, I heard Cannonball Adderley and others play in one of the many Detroit clubs like the Minor Key. Jazz records were big too. I can remember staying up all night listening to John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" album over and over when it first came out. This was about 1960

I fell in with the folk scene in the early 1960s and managed to hitch-hike all over the country several times. A fantastic guitarist by the name of Perry Lederman, a young singer/songwriter by the name of Bob Dylan, and I hitched together for a stretch. Later I helped to put on the first Bob Dylan concert in Ann Arbor. During that time, I hung out with the New Lost City Ramblers, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, the Country Gentlemen, Joan Baez, and some other great folk artists that you may never have heard of

It was in those years that I got introduced to blues and gospel music. The Swan Silvertones, an a capella gospel group of infinite beauty had an enormous effect on me in 1964 when I first heard their records. I had also been listening to classical music for a number of years, but had no real guidance. I spent all of 1964 listening to and learning in depth about classical music from a real expert. Then in 1965 I helped to form a band called the Prime Movers

Although we never recorded much (one album is now out), we were no slouch. Iggy Pop was our drummer, avant-garde composer "Blue" Gene Tyranny our keyboardist, music-columnist

Dan Erlewine played lead Guitar, Jack Dawson (later in the Siegel-Schwall Blues Band) on bass, and I sang and played amplified harmonica

Sometime in 1965 we heard the Paul Butterfield Blues Band live. That changed my life. We got to know those guys and they introduced us to all of the blues we had not yet found on for ourselves. We became, in an instant, the Prime Movers Blues Band. That was a time

The net effect of all of this was that, during the 1960s, I listened to blues records day and night trying to learn to play the licks. And I just loved the music. In the mid-1960s, thanks to Bob Koester of Delmark Records, I heard players like Little Walter, Magic Sam, Junior Wells, Howlin' Wolf and many others live in the Chicago clubs. Later, working with various blues and jazz festivals, I had the good fortune to interview (audio and video) just about any blues player you could name (scores of them) that was around back then, and most of them still were

This article is about blues in jazz, and I am getting to that. My first love is the blues and it took me some time to get much into jazz. At first, about the only way I could hear jazz was through a blues filter, so any jazz I got into had to have those blues elements. Now that I know my way around the jazz catalog, I know that it contains some real treasures for blues lovers. Yet, don't expect the standard 12-bar blues progression

Blue notes are found in jazz, but seldom in the form we are used to in blues recordings. It is the blues as a feeling, the soul-full experience of the blues and gospel elements that can be found in jazz. So, I am writing this for blues lovers who may want to explore jazz through the same blues doorway I went through

The jazz I love is the blues in jazz, whether that means bluesy jazz, funky jazz, original funk, soul jazz -- terms which I will explain in due course. I tend not to like (very much) jazz that does not have some kind of blues or modal element in it. Swing and bop, to the degree that they lack the roots sound of blues and gospel, fail to hold my attention. I like my jazz with blues, please

Something I realized some time ago is that jazz (and most kinds of music) are either energizing or calming in their overall effect. If you are the kind of person who needs something to get you moving (to

energize you), then you will be attracted to music that is agitating and energizing like: marches, Dixieland, bop, free jazz, and other forms of progressive jazz. It appeals to those who need that cup of coffee in life -- get a move on! It stirs you up

However, if you are a person (like me) who tends to be very active and sometimes even hyper, then you need music to relax and calm you like blues, original funk, soul jazz -- groove music. It helps to get me in a soothing groove that dissipates energy -- relief!

Regardless of the fact that as a person we may (in general) be drawn to music that either stimulates or calms us, at times all of us may need some pick-me-up music and at other times some slow-me-down stuff

You will find that the above (admittedly simplistic) concept works very well. Blues and the blues that is in jazz (for the most part) has to do with the release and expression of feelings. The effect is calming to the system. It is "get down" and relaxin' music. Here is a brief tour of the bluesy stuff in jazz

AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY OF BLUES IN JAZZ

This is an abbreviated history because I want to just skip over the standard playing-the-blues-progression in jazz stuff. There is not much of it anyway. If you like blues, you already know that by now. So here, we will also pass on all of the old-time blues found in traditional jazz -- the early New Orleans jazz. There is plenty of great old blues and blues-like music to hear there and you will want to hear it someday. But, it is just too much like the blues that we already know

The same goes for what few blues tunes came out of the swing and big-band era. You don't need a guide to check swing-blues tunes out because there are not that many of them. When you can find them, they are pretty much straight-ahead blues songs or tunes played with a big band. Further, the arranged feeling of the big band is not up to the impromptu kind of blues feeling you may be used to, so let's pass on that too

When I speak of blues in jazz, I mean some get-down funky blues sounds in the jazz that you have not heard before, so let's just get to that. If this history stuff bores you, skip over it and just read the recommended albums list. Start finding and listening to some of the

picks. As mentioned, we will pass over the earlier forms of jazz including the New Orleans varieties, Dixieland, and swing. However, since a lot of the bluesy jazz that may interest you grew out of bop (bebop), you will need to know what bop is and how this music style came to be. We will start there

BOP (BEBOP)

Bop distinguished itself from the popular big-band swing music out of which it emerged by that fact that it is most often played in small groups. You can hear each of the players as separate sounds. And while swing can have a groove that soothes you, bop is wake-me-up music. It's faster tempos, more elaborate melodies, and complex harmonies do not tend to establish a groove. It is more frenetic, even frantic, than swing. In other words, this is not relaxin' music. Bop has an attitude

Unlike the large swing bands, where there were a few featured soloists, most members of the small combo could and did solo -- democratically. In addition to an increase in improvisation and solo virtuosity, there was little dependence on arrangements. And fast tempos too. Bop is more energetic (read agitating) than swing, with the rhythm section keeping the time on the ride cymbal. Bop tunes can be very fast, often with elaborate harmonies and complex chord changes that take an expert player to negotiate. In fact, fluency in bop became the benchmark of the young jazz musician. Bop is a sophisticated music that can be, for many, somewhat of an acquired taste. In this respect it resembles classical music. Here are some bop artists and a sample album of them at their best:

BOP ORIGINATORS:

Charlie Parker (just about any album; the box sets are the best)

Dizzy Gillespie, "Dizziest"/Bluebird

Thelonious Monk, "Thelonious with John Coltrane"/OJC

Bud Powell, "Genius of Powell Vol. 1"/Polygram
Dexter Gordon, "Our Man in Paris"/Blue Note
Miles Davis, "First Miles"/Savoy

Fats Navarro, "The Fabulous Fats Navarro, Vol 1- 2"/Blue Note

Sonny Stitt, "Constellation"/Muse

J.J Johnson, "The Eminent Jay Jay Johnson Vol 1"/Blue Note

Max Roach, "Freedom Now Suite"/Columbia Lucky Thompson, "Lucky Strikes!"/Prestige Tad Dameron, "Mating Call"/Prestige

1950s Bop Players:

Sonny Rollins, "Newk's Time"/Blue Note Jackie McLean, "Let Freedom Ring"/Blue Note Oscar Peterson, "The Trio"/Pablo

Clifford Brown, "Brownie"/Emarcy

Phil Woods, "Pairin Off"/Prestige Kenny Dorham, "Una Mas"/Blue Note Barry Harris, "Live in Tokyo"/Xanadu Tommy Flanagan, "Thlonica"/Enja

1970-1980s BOP REVIVAL:

Richie Cole, "New York Afternoon-Alto Madness"/Muse

Chris Hollyday, "Ho, Brother"/Jazzbeat Blues in Bop:

Thelonious Monk, "The Thelonious Monk Trio"/Prestige

Miles Davis & Milt Jackson, "Bag's Groove"/Prestige Miles Davis, "Walkin'"/Prestige

Horace Silver, "Senor Blues"/Blue Note

HARD BOP

Hard bop was a reaction to the somewhat brittle and intellectual nature of straight bop. Hard bop distinguished itself from bop by its simple melodies, slower tempos, and avoidance of the (by then) cliched bop chord-changes. The constant up-tempo frenetic quality of bop pieces is absent. Tunes are often in the minor mode, much slower paced, and often moody -- more feeling and thoughtful. Hard bop reaches into the blues and gospel tradition for substance to slow the up-tempo bop music down, stretch the time out, and imbue the music with more feeling. It was as if jazz had once again found its roots and was nourished. The public thought so too, because it was more approachable than bop. Hard bop is one big step toward establishing a groove, but it lacks what has come to be known as a groove, as in "groove" music. Blues lovers will

appreciate the more bluesy nature of hard bop, but probably still yearn for more blues yet

HARD BOP PIONEERS

Horace Silver, "Pieces of Silver"/Blue Note

Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, "Moanin"/Blue Note

Cannonball Adderley Quintet, "Quintet at the Lighthouse"/Landmark

Nat Adderley, "Work Song"/Riverside Art Farmer, "Meet the Jazztet"/Chess Crusaders, "Freedom Sounds"/Atlantic Lou Donaldson, "Blues Walk"/Blue Note

Kenny Dorham, "Trumpet Toccata"/Blue Note Donald Byrd, "House of Byrd"/Prestige Coltrane-Influenced Hard Bop:

Wayne Shorter, "Native Dancer"/Columbia Freddie Hubbard, "Hub-Tones"/Blue Note McCoy Tyner, "Sahara"/Milestone

Herbie Hancock, "Maiden Voyage"/Blue Note Joe Henderson, "Page One"/Blue Note

Weather Report (Joe Zawinul), "Mysterious Traveler"/Columbia

MAINSTREAM HARD BOP

Sonny Rollins, "Saxophone Colossus and More/OJC

John Coltrane, "Blue Trane"/Blue Note Wynton Kelly, "Kelly Blue"/Riverside

Clifford Jordan, "Glass Bead Game"/Strata-East Booker Ervin, "The Book Cooks"/Affinity

George Coleman, "Amsterdam After Dark"/Timeless Charlie Rouse, "Two Is One"/Strata-East

Harold Land, "The Fox"/Contemporary Blue Mitchell, "The Thing to Do"/Blue Note Kenny Dorham, "Afro-Cuban"/Blue Note Oliver Nelson, "Soul Battle"/Prestige

Hank Mobley, "Soul Station"/Blue Note

Wes Montgomery, "Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery"/Riverside

FUNKY JAZZ

Some hard-bop players like pianist Horace Silver began to include even more feeling in their playing by adding blues riffs and various elements from gospel music to their playing. Silver, considered by many to be the father of funk, describes funk: "Funky means earthy, blues-based. It may not be blues itself, but it has that down-home feel to it. Playing funky has nothing to do with style; it's an approach to playing... "Soul" is the same basically, but there's an added dimension of feeling and spirit to soul -- an in-depth-ness. A soulful player might be funky or he might not be."

The hard bop jazz that they were playing became in Silver's hands still more earthy, bluesy or, as it was called, "funky". This was jazz, but with a funky flavor

It is quite easy to distinguish this funky jazz from the all-out jazz funk described below. I really like funky jazz because it sometimes has a groove, but I love jazz funk better because in that music there is a total groove

Horace Silver, "Song for My Father"/Blue Note

Cannonball Adderley "Somethin' Else"/Blue Note

Nat Adderley "Work Song"/Riverside

Bobby Timmons, "Moanin'"/Milestone

THE BLUES GROOVE - GROOVE MUSIC

The whole thing about groove music is that everything exists to establish and maintain the groove. Solos, egos, instruments -- what have you -- only exist to lay down the groove and to get in it. There is a steady constant beat that can become drone-like or trance-like. You get in a groove and you stay in the groove and that feels good. There are no absolute rules about what makes groove music. Anything can happen as long as the effect is to put you in and keep you in the groove. It often has a Hammond organ in the sound, but

not always. It can have any number of instruments doing all kinds of solos and what-not, as long as these things don't break the groove

Everything exists to create and maintain the groove. Blues lovers tend to like groove music because the blues is nothing but a groove

Groove music can be up-tempo or slow, bright or dark, but the net effect of getting in a groove is always to satisfy and relax. There is always a constant rhythm section driving the groove, invariably danceable. Grooves always have a funky, earthy flavor, and blues and gospel elements are essential

All grooves are bluesy, by definition. It can be as funky and nasty as you want to be, but groove is not stir-it-up music. It is always cool-you-down music. If it is not relaxing, then it is not groove. Which is not to say that groove is not energetic or fast paced. It may sound wild, but the final effect is: a groove. Although I hesitate to characterize it this way, groove music is always a little trance-like. The result of the funkier, baddest piece of groove music is a bit of clear sailing -- relaxation. Get in the groove! That's the place to BE

ORIGINAL FUNK/SOUL-JAZZ

The transformation of bop did not always stop with hard bop or even funkified jazz. Some players dove rather than dipped into the roots music and an even more bluesy music was born that came to be called funk or soul jazz. For the first time, we are talking real groove music

Funkified Jazz, also called soul jazz, jazz funk, original funk, or just plain funk is a form of jazz that originated in the mid-1950s -- a type of hard bop. It is often played by small groups -- trios led by a tenor or alto sax, pianist, guitar and the Hammond organ

Funk music is very physical, usually 'down and dirty'

Funk or soul jazz emerged as a reaction to the bop/cool jazz (cool, intellectualized) prevalent at the time. Funky music is everything that bop/cool jazz is not. It is hot, sweaty and never strays far from its blues roots. The term "soul" is a link to gospel roots; "funk" links to blues roots. This fusion of jazz with blues and gospel elements

became known as “soul jazz” during the 1950s, partly through the promotion of the Cannonball Adderley Quintet as a “soul-jazz” group

Fast-paced funk pieces have a bright melodic phrasing set against a hard, percussive dance rhythm. Funk ballads are never more than a few steps from the blues. Above all, this is dynamic relaxin' music that is easy to listen to -- the groove. Those of you who like blues and R&B (and gospel), but find some jazz just a touch remote, may well like original funk. There is no better music to kick back to than this. It is my favorite music

Jazz funk is sometimes called “original funk” to distinguish it from the contemporary funk sound of the James Brown/George Clinton variety. Along with blues and gospel, original funk or soul jazz had some R&B (soul music) elements thrown into the mix and the resulting fusion was even more to the public's taste. Soul jazz has remained one of the most popular and successful forms of jazz to this very day. Bop is stir-it-up music while funk or soul jazz (no matter how up tempo or percussive) is at heart calm-you-down or groove music. Here are some classic funk albums:

Eddie Lockjaw Davis, “Cookbook”vol. 1-3/OJC

Gene Ammons, “Gene Ammons Story: Organ Combos”/Prestige

Arnett Cobb, “Smooth Sailing”/OJC

Red Holloway, “Cookin' Together”/OJC

Willis Jackson, “Bar Wars”/Muse

Ike Quebec, “Blue and Sentimental”/Blue Note

Jimmy Forest, “All the Gin is Gone”/Delmark

Bobby Timmons, “Soul Man”/Prestige

Johnny Hammond Smith, “Breakout”/Kudu

Harold Vick, “Steppin' Out)/Blue Note

Harold Mabern, “Rakin' & Scrapin'”/Prestige

Stanley Turrentine, "Comin' Your Way"/Blue Note

Houston Person, "Soul Dance"/Prestige

Grover Washington, "Mister Magic"/Motown

Harold Maybern, "Rakin' and Scrapin'", OJC-330

Cornell Dupree, "Coast to Coast"/Antilles

Les McCann, "Swiss Movement"/Atlantic (soul jazz)

ORGAN COMBOS

At the heart of original funk and soul jazz sits the Hammond Organ, 400 pounds of musical joy. This unwieldy piece of equipment can do it all -- work by itself, as a duo, trio, quartet, or with a full band. It is a full band. More important, is the fact that the Hammond-organ sound pretty much defines real funk. There is something about the percussive sound and the adjustable attack/decay effects that, coupled with the famed (rotating horns) Leslie speakers, epitomizes that music called funk

Whatever the reason, you will find a Hammond organ at the center (or as backup) of the majority of soul jazz recordings, not to mention contemporary funk and R&B recordings. Jimmy Smith is the man who tamed the great beast and turned the Hammond from a roller-rink calliope into a serious jazz instrument. I have owned two Hammond organs in my life

The story is that Jimmy Smith locked himself in a warehouse with a Hammond for almost a year and came out playing that sound we all love

And Smith is just the tip of the top. There are many great Hammond players that are every bit as great in their own way, names like Richard Groove Holmes, Jimmy McGriff, Shirley Scott, Charles Earland, John Patton, Larry Young, and others. Put a Hammond organ and some drums together with a tenor sax or guitar and you have all you need for some real funky music. This is groove music par excellence

Jimmy Smith, "Back at the Chicken Shack"/Blue Note

Jimmy McGriff, "At the Appollo"/Collectables

Jack McDuff, "Live!"/Prestige

Richard Groove Holmes, "After Hours /Pacific Jazz

Don Patterson, "Genius of the B-3"/Music

John Patton, "Let em' Roll"/Blue Note

Shirley Scott, "Blue Flames"/OJC

Charles Earland, "Black Talk"/Prestige

Charles Kynard, "Reelin' with the Feeling"/Prestige

Larry Young, "The Complete Blue Note

Larry Young"/Mosaic

Joey DeFrancisco, "All of Me"/Columbia

The Commercialization of Soul Jazz

Soul jazz sometime gets a not-so-great rap. Anything so potent and popular lends itself to misuse and a great many so-called soul jazz albums were recorded that had no "soul" -- bad commercial funk. On the theory that you never know what is enough until you have more than enough, artists sought to increase their popularity by making their music more and more commercial until, in the end, they lost touch with the roots of the music -- the soul

To make matters worse, the advent of bop and the various forms of progressive jazz that grew out of bop, gave birth to a somewhat elitist, conservative, and overly intellectualized attitude -- the jazz purist

This purist looks down on jazz that partakes too much of its blues and gospel roots, and any R&B influences are really frowned upon. These mainstream jazz purists used the overt commercialism aspect of soul jazz as grounds to dismiss the entire music off hand. Funk and soul jazz was somehow (in their opinion) not as worthy of respect as the bop or progressive jazz they admired

The fact that soul jazz is the most successful and popular form of jazz was cited as further proof of its commonness. This elitist attitude is now on the decline and soul jazz is beginning to take its place in the history of jazz as a legitimate form of the jazz. Soul jazz reissues are a hot item. It is a fact that most great jazz performers also have a funky or soul side and albums to prove it. Often very little is written about the soul jazz side of these artists

Well, there you have a quick tour of the funkier side of jazz -- groove music. It is important to point out that soul jazz, although always popular with the people, has received short shrift from the jazz elite. The attitude is that groove music is something, like the blues, which should be kept in the closet -- keep back. That time has passed

GROOVE MASTERS

We are coming out of a time when jazz has been measured by how outstanding the soloist is -- how high can they fly? Critics only seem to know how to rate what stands out. This won't work for groove music. In groove, the idea is to lay down a groove, get in it, and deepen it. Groove masters always take us deeper into the groove. These artists are our windows into the groove, and their hearts become the highway over which the groove can run. They reinvest. And we ride the groove

This is why jazz critics have either passed (never got it) over groove masters like Grant Green and Stanley Turrentine or heard something, but did not know what to make of what they heard (and felt). If music is not viewed as such an intellectual thing (something to see) but more of a feeling kind of thing, then groove masters can be appreciated. You may not see the groove masters, but you sure can feel them. In groove, the solo (and all else) only exists if it adds to the groove. Witness Grant Green's incredible single-note repetitions. Who would ever think to do that?

You wouldn't dare think of that. It is done by pure feeling. It feels good and you keep doing it. Nothing to think about

Stanley Turrentine has been laying down grooves for many a year for all to hear. I am surprised at how many books don't even mention him. Grant Green has received even shorter shrift. There have been a few voices crying in the wilderness of soul jazz criticism. Producer Bob Porter of Atlantic Records and Bob Rusch

of Cadence Magazine have always known and told us about the groove. Recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder is another pre-eminent groove expert. More than half of all great soul jazz sessions were recorded by Van Gelder. The next time you hear some real groove music, in particular if there is a Hammond organ on it, just check the album for this engineer's name

GRANT GREEN: THE GROOVE MASTER

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

To get your attention and make clear that I am saying something here, consider the singing voice of Bob Dylan. A lot of people say the guy can't sing. But it's not that simple. He is singing. The problem is that he is singing so far in the future that we can't yet hear the music. Other artists can sing his tunes and we can hear that all right. Given enough time... enough years... that gravel-like voice will sound as sweet to our ears as any velvet-toned singer. Dylan's voice is all about microtones and inflection. For now, that voice is hidden from our ears in time so tight that there is no room (no time) yet to hear it. Some folks can hear it now. I, for one, can hear the music in his voice. I know many of you can too. Someday everyone will be able to hear it, because the mind will unfold itself until even Dylan's voice is exposed for just what it is -- a pure music. Yet, by then our idea of music will also have changed. Rap is changing it even now

Billy Holiday is another voice that is filled with microtones that emerge through time like an ever-blooming flower. You (or I) can't hear the end or root of her singing, not yet anyway. As we try to listen to Holiday (as we try to grasp that voice), we are knocked out by the deep information there. We try to absorb it and before we can get a handle on her voice (if we dare listen!) she entrances us in a delightful dream-like groove and we are lost to criticism. Instead we groove on and reflect about this other dream that we have called life. All great musicians do this to us

Grant Green's playing at its best is like this too. It is so recursive that instead of taking the obvious outs we are used to hearing, Green instead chooses to reinvest -- to go in farther and deepen the groove. He opens up a groove and then opens up a groove and then opens a groove, and so on. He never stops. He opens a groove and then works to widen that groove until we can see into the music, see through the music into ourselves. He puts everything back into the groove that he might otherwise get out of it. He knows that the groove is the thing and that time will see him out and his music will live long. That is what grooves are about and why Grant Green is the groove master

I hope that some of what I have written here will help blues lovers push off from the island of blues out into the sea of jazz. You can always head back to the solid ground of blues if you can't get into the jazz

Blues and jazz are not mutually exclusive. Blues in jazz has been a thrilling ride (groove) for me and I have found a whole new music that satisfies much like the blues satisfy. I listen to groove music all the time. If you find some great groove tunes that I have not mentioned here, drop me a line. I want to hear them

BLUES IN JAZZ AND R&B

There are forms of blues in jazz other than the groove music presented above. Here are a few notes on some of the major styles:

BLUES SHOUTERS AND SINGERS -- There are blues singers who tend toward jazz and almost all jazz singers sing some blues. This is not the place to point these out since they are more-or-less straight-ahead blues singers when they sing blues. The one exception, of course, is Billie Holiday. Holiday is probably the most seminal singer ever recorded. But is her music the blues? Everything she sings is way beyond blues and blues is supposed to be the root music. Holiday is the equivalent of Delta blues singer Robert Johnson in that she is seminal -- pure source. Period

If you have not listened to Billie Holiday and gotten into her music to the point of real distraction (being moved!), then you have missed one of the premiere music experiences of a lifetime. Enough said

BLUESY JAZZ

There is also a style of blues-laden jazz that is not so much funky as downright bluesy. Kenny Burrell is perhaps the chief exponent of this style of jazz

Bluesy jazz has a slow or mid-tempo and is easy to listen to -- relaxing. It makes great background or dinner music and yet is integral and stands on its own merits as a music. A lot of artists play bluesy jazz; some play it often. Much bluesy jazz can establish a groove

Kenny Burrell, "Midnight Blue"/Blue Note

The Three Sounds (Gene Harris), "Introducing the Three Sounds"/Blue Note

Ron Carter, "Jazz: My Romance"/Blue Note

Grant Green, "Born to be Blue"/Blue Note

Ray Bryant, "All Blues"/Pablo

Red Garland, "Soul Junction"/Prestige

Wynton Kelly, "Kelly Blue"/Riverside

BLUES/FUNK SAX

HONKERS, SCREAMERS, & BAR WALKERS

Although the emergence of blues sax can be traced all the way back to the great Ben Webster, the honkin', screaming tenor sax of the bar-walking variety originated with Illinois Jacquet and was carried to its logical conclusion with the R&B sax of King Curtis. The term "bar walkin'" came from the habit of emotionally driven sax players walking on the top of a bar among the customers playing at a frenzied pitch -- often in contests with another sax player walking from the other end of the bar. This honkin' blues-drenched sax style was as much performance bravado as sheer music

As Cannonball Adderley said about the funky big-toned sax, "It's the moan inside the tone." Since many of the main players in this

style hailed from the Southwest, players in this style are often referred to as "Texas tenors." Some of the main artists in this style include Al Sears, Big Jay McNeely, Willis Jackson, Sil Austin, Lee Allen, Rusty Bryant, Hal Singer, and Sam "The Man" Taylor. Most of these players came out of the large swing bands and either formed their own groups or found work in various R&B settings. This raunchy honkin' music scratches that blues itch and satisfies. This is often groove material

Since many of these sax players can (and often had to) play it all -- blues, R&B, honkin' sax, soul jazz, straight jazz, etc. , they are listed here together. I have made some notes to guide you as to their main directions. If you can find the 3-CD called "Giants of the Blues and Funk Tenor Sax"/Prestige (3PCD-2302- 2), you will get a superb 23 cut collection with many extended solos and liner notes by Bob Porter. Worth ordering or searching for

SAX: BLUES, R7B, FUNK, HONKERS AND BAR-WALKERS

Lee Allen (R&B)

"Walkin' with Mr. Lee"/Collectables (R&B)

Gene Ammons (R&B, bop, soul jazz)

"Boss Tenors -- Straight Ahead from Chicago 1961"/Verve

Sil Austin (blues)

"Slow Rock Rock"/Wing Earl Bostic (R&B)

"Best of Earl Bostic"/Deluxe

Rusty Bryant (R&B, soul jazz)

"Rusty Bryant returns", OJC

Arnett Cobb (blues, soul jazz) "Smooth Sailing", OJC-323

King Curtis (R&B, soul jazz) "Soul Meeting"/Prestige

Hank Crawford (soul jazz) "Soul Survivors"/Milestone

Eddie Lockjaw Davis (blues, soul jazz) "Cookbook, Vol. 1-3"/OJC

Jimmy Forrest (blues, bop, soul jazz) "Out of the Forrest"/Prestige

Frank Foster (blues) "Soul Outing"/Prestige

Johnny Griffin (bop, hard bop, blues)

"Big Soul Band"/OJC Eddie Harris (soul jazz) "Best of"/Atlantic

Coleman Hawkins (blues, hard bop) Red Holloway (soul jazz)

"Cookin' Together"/Prestige

Joe Houston R&B Honker (Honker, blues) Willis Jackson (R&B, funk)

"Bar Wars"/Muse

Illinois Jacquet (Honker, blues, R&B) "Blues: That's Me!"/OJC

Big Jay McNeely R&B (Honker, blues)

Wild Bill Moore (blues)

(Look for him as a sideman)

Oliver Nelson (blues, out) "Soul Battle"/OJC

David Fathead Newman (R&B, soul jazz) "Lonely Avenue"/Atlantic

Harold Ousley (blues, soul jazz) Sweet Double Hipness"/Muse

Houston Person (soul jazz) "Goodness"/OJC-332

Ike Quebec (blues, soul jazz) "Blue and Sentimental"/Blue Note

Al Sears (blues)

"The Swingville All-Stars"/Swingville

Hal Singer (blues)

"Blue Stompin'/Prestige Sonny Stitt (bop, soul jazz) "Soul Summit"/Prestige

Buddy Tate (blues)

“Tate’s Date”/Swingville

Sam “The Man” Taylor (blues, R&B)

Eddie Cleanhead Vinson (blues) “Kidney Stew”/Black & Blue

Ernie Watts (blues, bop, soul jazz) “Ernie Watts Quartet”/JVC

BLUES IN FREE JAZZ

Blues in free jazz are present; the notes are there. The problem is that the constant beat is missing and thus the groove never gets laid down. More important, most free jazz is stir-it-up music rather than cool out. While this is great music, it is not groove music. Here are some outstanding examples of some blues in free jazz

Archie Shepp, “Attica Blues”/Impulse

Oliver Nelson, “Screamin’ the Blues”/New Jazz

Charles Mingus, “Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus”/Candid

John Coltrane, “Love Supreme”/Impulse

Sun Ra, “The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra”/ESP

Ornette Coleman, “Tomorrow is the Question”/Contemporary

BLUES IN JAZZ-ROCK & FUSION

The Same is true for most jazz rock as for free jazz. The notes occur but the energy is more agitating than not, and the groove is seldom established

Crusaders, “Crusaders 1”/Blue Thumb

David Sanborn, “Backstreet”/Warner Brothers

Mahavishnu Orchestra, “The Inner Mounting Flame”/Columbia

Miles Davis, “Star People”/Columbia

THE GROOVE GUIDE TO BLUES IN JAZZ

Here is something that I wished I had when I first started to get into groove and blues jazz -- a quick guide to the best recordings. It can save you both time and money. These are some of the main jazz (and R&B) artists with a strong blues content. You will want to hear them out. In each case I have tried to point out key albums that are worth a listen from a blues or groove perspective

The albums are rated and reviewed, (where possible) to give you insight into why these might or might not interest you. A short biography is also included and sometimes additional notes on how to approach the artist from a blues perspective. We would need a whole book to do this right, and the All-Music Guide to Jazz (2nd edition) is available when you are. I am sorry to say that many of the albums listed below are not available on CD. Some probably never will be. Although I love CDs, I have had to get back into vinyl to hear a lot of this music. Many of you will also -- back to the old record bins. It's worth it if the music is there. And it is. I hope you enjoy this short guide to groove music

LANDMARK JAZZ ALBUMS

Putting aside the blues in jazz aspect, here is a list of landmark jazz albums that every jazz lover should hear. And this does not just represent my personal opinion. Any serious jazz listener would agree that these are classic albums that should be heard at least once. Whether you like them or not does not matter. It will show you the wide world of jazz and help you figure out what you do like, which directions to take, etc. One thing is certain: if you don't like these albums, it is not because they are lousy performances, but because it is not your kind of music. This list is admittedly weak in traditional, swing, big-band jazz, and fusion

Air, "Air Lore"/Arista

Mose Allison, "I Don't worry About a Thing"/Rhino/Atlantic

Louis Armstrong, "Hot Fives and Sevens Vol 1-3"/JSP

Art Ensemble of Chicago, "Jackson in Your House"/Affinity 9

Count Basie, "The Original American Decca Recordings"/MCA

Sidney Bechet, "The Bluebird Sessions"/Bluebird
Art Blakey, "Jazz Messengers with Thelonious Monk"/Atlantic
Anthony Braxton, "For Alto Saxophone"/Delmark
Clifford Brown, "Jazz Immortal"/Pacific Jazz
Dave Brubeck, "Take Five"/Columbia
Ornette Coleman, "The Shape of Jazz To Come"/Atlantic
John Coltrane, "A Love Supreme"/MCA
Chick Corea, "My Spanish Heart"/Polydor
Charlie Christian, "Solo Flight"/Columbia
Miles Davis, "Kind of Blue"/Columbia
Eric Dolphy, "Out to Lunch!/Blue Note
Duke Ellington, "Blanton-Webster Band"/Bluebird
Bill Evans, "Sunday at the Village Vanguard"/OJC
Keith Jarrett, "The Koln Concert"/ECM
Erroll Garner, "Concert by the Sea"/Columbia
Stan Getz, "Getz/Gilberto"/Verve
Dizzy Gillespie, "In the Beginning"/Prestige
Herbie Hancock, "Maiden Voyage"/Blue Note
Billie Holiday, "The Quintessential Billie Holiday Vol. 1-9"/Columbia
Milt Jackson "Bag's Groove"/Prestige
Roland Kirk, "Rahsaan"/Mercury
Shelly Manne, "At the Blackhawk"/OJ

Charles Mingus, "Mingus at Antibes"/Atlantic

Thelonious Monk, "Genius of Modern Music Vol. 1- 2"/Blue Note

Wes Montgomery, "Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery"/Riverside

Fats Navarro, "The Fabulous Fats Navarro, Vol 1- 2"/Blue Note

Oliver Nelson, "Blues and the Abstract Truth"/Impulse

Herbie Nichols, "The Art of Herbie Nichols"/Blue Note

Oregon, "Out of the Woods"/Electra

Charlie Parker, "The Charlie Parker Story"/Savoy

Bud Powell, "The Amazing Bud Powell Vol. 1-2"/Blue Note

Sonny Rollins, "Saxophone Colossus"/OJC

Sun Ra, "The Heliocentric World of Sun Ra Vol 1"/ESP

Cecil Taylor, "Unit Structures"/Blue Note

McCoy Tyner, "The Real McCoy"/Blue Note

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Jan 26, 2020, 2:33 PM

CONCENTRATION TRAINING

As long as I am sharing what for me were pith teachings, I will pass along this comment that my dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, made to some of us that were present:

KKR: "Basically, when your mind is in a state of apathy, neutrality, or pronounced bewilderment you need to tighten up, as was described in this morning's teaching. I do not know that much about it because I do not use one, but having watched people work with computers, I think that the type of concentration that people employ in order to work on a computer is probably a good

opportunity for looking at your mind's nature. Judging by the demeanor and facial expressions of people as they work on the computer, it involves a state of concentration that is equal to that of a state of great pleasure or great misery [laughter], and therefore I think that if you want to see the nature of your mind you should look at it while you are working on your computer."

Upon hearing the above, it struck me deep because I had used computers very intensely for decades. I have no trouble concentrating on programming a computer, and so I instantly knew I already had what was needed in terms of concentration and need not worry that I was deficient in that area any longer

I did not need to concentrate any harder, but instead learn to relax as it is, so to speak

Jan 25, 2020, 5:12 AM

RECOGNITION: POINTING OUT YOUR HORSE

Some years ago, about 2005, my dharma teacher Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, in a teaching, gave a very interesting analogy, one that stuck with me since then. I will communicate it here for those who might benefit from it as I did

Khenpo Rinpoche taught:

"To start with, in other words, it is important to have a recognition of your mind's nature through its being pointed out and so forth. However, you must not think that gaining that recognition is the culmination of the path. It is the starting point of this phase of the path. Remember that recognition of your mind's nature when it is pointed out and realization of your mind's nature are different. Recognition is the starting point of the practice of resting in your mind's nature. The culmination of that is realization. The quotation continues:

"For example, imagine that someone owns a horse but for many years that horse has been allowed to run wild and free. After many years, even the owner would not recognize it, but the herder points out the horse to the owner and says, "This is your horse. This is the horse that you had and lost track of so many years ago." That is

very much like the situation of somebody who has had their mind pointed out to them. That which was always yours but had been unrecognized has now been pointed out or introduced to you

“However, just as in the case of the horse, simply knowing that this wild horse is your horse is not enough to enable you to ride it. You have to methodically tame the horse and get it to where it can be useful to you, where you can actually ride it and ride it safely. In the same way, simply having your mind pointed out to you is not enough. It having been pointed out to you, your mind is still wild, still habitually prone to distraction”

” Therefore beginners must cultivate a recollection or mindfulness that is free of distraction. In order to continue to work with your initial recognition of your mind’s nature, you must intentionally cultivate the state of undistractedness, and you must intentionally meditate. As long as the wild horse of your mind has not been tamed, you have to continue to tame it diligently through the enforcement of undistractedness. Just as would happen if you simply got on top of an untamed horse once it was pointed out to you and would either not be able to get on it in the first place or would be thrown off it and injured—in the same way, if you do not tame your mind, if you do not cultivate undistracted recollection, then you will be thrown off of the recognition of your mind’s nature by the habit of distraction.”

[End of Quote]

The teaching should be self-explanatory

THE TIBETAN CALENDAR

From this point forward in this series, we are ready to begin looking at the actual nuts and bolts of Tibetan astrology. I have introduced you about all I can. It is time to work with the actual content itself

There is no right or wrong order in how to approach this material, but it will take time to post all the series. I have tried to arrange it so that some of the main concepts and techniques are presented first, but it is really up to you. Of course, everyone knows about the twelve animal signs, and you may want to know what the element-animal combination for the year you were born is, like, in my case,

“Year of the Female Iron Snake.” The graphic will allow you to do that

While this series can be read sequentially and this works pretty well that way, some sections are very general, while others offer step-by-step calculation methods. If you are just browsing, you may want to skip over the more technical stuff

Where possible, I have included image-cards and illustrations to make things more visible. Many of the designs are based on age-old descriptions, while others are modern interpretations of whatever verbal descriptions I could find

I am not a practicing Tibetan astrologer. Rather, I am someone thoroughly trained in Western astrology (60 years) who is studying the Tibetan methods and trying to make sense out of them. Although I have learned to read the Tibetan script, I am not fluent (or confident) enough to do my own translations. I have worked with a skilled translator, Sange Wangchuk (who speaks 7 languages) and together we have translated considerable amounts of astrological texts as written by the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje

There is very little written in English on this topic, and unfortunately one of the main published books on the subject is filled with errors. At this very beginning stage of bringing Tibetan astrological methods to the West, I guess errors and misunderstandings should be expected. We are all learning. It is my wish that this series be of some use and help to make this fascinating subject sensible to more readers

The Tibetan Calendar

The heart of Tibetan astrology is the annual almanac or Tibetan calendar. Every lama (and monk) has one. Here we will go over what you might expect to find in the average almanac, but this is not the place (and I am not the expert) on all the subtleties of the Tibetan calendar system. I refer readers to the very excellent book by Edward Henning “Kalachakra And the Tibetan Calendar,” which hopefully is still available. Here it will have to suffice to lay out the general characteristics, point out some of the problems involved, and mention how some students of the subject are dealing with them

I don't know how many lamas and rinpoches I have approached with questions I have about the Tibetan calendar system, but it seems that most of them are not concerned with this kind of detail. They tend to use the Tibetan astrological calendar as it is handed to them, with no questions asked

The problem is that these small practice calendars (and there are quite a few of them) for the most part don't even state what time zone the calendar refers to and, as any astrologer here in the West knows, you can't list the time of the New Moon, without declaring the time zone it refers to. Is it India or New York? You need to know

Before getting too much deeper into this, it is crucial that you understand why this type of astrological calendar is produced in the first place, and that has to do with group dharma practice, for these are primarily practice calendars

If one is coordinating the practice schedule at a large monastery with perhaps several hundred monks, everyone has to agree on what calendar day and time any group practice should convene. The various astrological indicators like the moment of the New Moon, the moment when the Moon changes lunar mansions, and so on are not so considerate. The natural astronomical phenomena change when they change and that's that. And that's a given

If the Full Moon occurs at 3 o'clock in the morning, this is not a time when just everyone at a monastery is likely to be up and ready for practice. So, as a hedge against the natural order of things, the communal practice calendar was drawn up. It really is a compromise and goes against the grain of how one might imagine this astrological information ideally might be used. In other words, in some ways, almanacs are counter-intuitive, trying to pigeonhole natural events, but it is easy to understand why these compromises are made

What the Tibetans have done with the practice calendar (in most cases) is to declare sunrise for a given day as the point to take the surrounding astrological temperature, so to speak. Somewhere around 5 A.M. is the time when Tibetan almanacs sample indicators like which lunar day it is, what Nakshatra (lunar mansion) is in play, which Karana, and so on. These indicators are listed in the astrological almanac for sunrise, even though the actual time most of these indicators actually began could be as far off as much

as who knows how many hours. In other words, these calendars indicate where a given astrological factor is at 5 A.M., which says nothing about when it started

For example: If at sunrise on a given day, it is the 10th lunar day, that day could change to the 11th lunar day five minutes later, and so literally the entire calendar day would be in the 11th lunar day, but still be listed as the 10th day. You get the idea. Whenever we make up rules like this, there is compromise and some information is lost. In this case, the information can be (in my opinion) quite important

It is understandable that for group practice, decisions have to be made that cut through the niceties of monitoring the actual changes that the sky offers us. However, something valuable is lost. Today, more and more dharma students (who are not engaged in group practice) are beginning to use astrological calendars in which the exact time of various astrological changes are listed. Instead of following the group listings for sunrise, these students note when the actual change from one lunar day (or whatever indicator they are using) changes and time their practice based on that. This only makes sense

If you use an astrological almanac or calendar, be sure to keep these thoughts in mind and to ask at least what time zone whatever time listings give are calculated in

Zodiacs: Tropical or Sidereal?

As to which zodiac to use: this is an even thornier problem and I will not get into the long history of Tibetan zodiacs. Please consult Edward Henning's book for more details. Let me just be very general here:

There are two main kinds of zodiacs used by astrologers, the tropical and the sidereal. The tropical zodiac can be defined as one where the zero-degrees Aries can be characterized as the point in the heavens when the transiting Sun reaches the vernal equinox. In the sidereal zodiac, the first point of Aries is measured not in reference to equinoxes or solstices, but from some key point or star out there in the heavens – nothing to do with the equinox or Earth

While there can be no argument as to the definition of the tropical zodiac, as you might imagine, sidereal astrologers have seldom

agreed which star should be the starting point for their zodiac, although they do more or less agree on the general area of the heavens where this point should be found, somewhere in the constellations Aries to Pisces. This dispute has gone on for centuries and will not be elaborated on or solved here

The tropical zodiac (the earth's general frame of reference) is very gradually shifting, and this very slow shift is called precession, with the result that the zero-degree Aries point is drifting backward in the zodiac something just less than a minute of arc a year – some 50 seconds

A long time ago, around 1,500 years, the two zodiacs (tropical and sidereal) matched up, but since that time they have slowly drifted apart until today they are something like 30 degrees apart, thus the confusion. I will not go into more detail about the phenomenon of precession or the history and practice of these two zodiacs (tropical and sidereal) in the astrological tradition. There are many good books out there that handle this. What we want to know here is what system is used in Tibetan astrology?

The main treatise on astrology in India is the Kalachakra Tantra, which came from India and literally translates as the “Wheel of Time.” The Kalachakra clearly uses the tropical zodiac, as Tibetan scholar Edward Henning points out in his book on that topic. However, most Indian astrology today is sidereal, so many assume that the Kalachakra would share this quality. It does not. The Kalachakra depends on the moment the Sun reaches the winter solstice, and this by definition is the tropical zodiac

The long and the short of all this, and it is bad news too, is that most Tibetan astrologers today use a zodiac that is neither tropical nor sidereal. It is somewhere in between. As Edward Henning so aptly puts it, it is “simply wrong,” a product of misunderstandings technically

As a student who has great respect for the lamas and the Tibetan dharma tradition, I found it very difficult to confront these few areas of knowledge which are not particularly enlightened, and where errors have been compounded and passed on for so long that they become hard to challenge or question. This is one of those areas. The upshot is that the Tibetans intended to use the tropical zodiac as indicated by the Kalachakra, but due perhaps to confusion when bringing the system into Tibet from India, something was lost along

the way and they were left with a zodiac that is neither fish nor fowl, neither tropical or strictly sidereal. It is something of a red herring

Modern astrologers are simply tiptoeing around this problem. The Tibetans, in general, are deep into the concept of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and it is difficult to change anything, especially in the chaos that has threatened the entire system since Tibet has been in political upheaval

The Lunar Months

We have a similar problem with the definition of the twelve lunar months as defined by the Chinese, the Phugpa tradition (Dalai Lama and Gelugpa Lineage) and the Tsurphu tradition (the Karmapa and Kagyu Lineage.) These three systems do not always agree on Losar, the Tibetan New Year, which marks the first month of any year. The one thing they all agree on is that the point of the New Moon marks the start of the year, but which New Moon? These three systems can be off from one another by an entire month, and sometimes are

The Phugpa system is the most divergent from the other two, with the Tsurphu system generally agreeing with the Chinese New Year, but not always. You and I are not going to solve this for the Tibetans and the Chinese, so the most we can do is note it and not be surprised if we discover that two different astrological calendars for the same year have the start of the New Year on different dates. Since so much depends on when the year starts, you can imagine the problems

The Lunar Days: Double and Omitted

I have described the lunar month of 30 days elsewhere in this series. What I want to point out here is the existence of what are called double and omitted days in Tibetan astrological calendars. This concept is actually quite simple and depends on the length of the solar or calendar day, which is measured from mean sunrise of one calendar day to mean sunrise of the next calendar day, approximately 24 hours

Since lunar days depend on the relation of the Moon to the Sun and the Moon goes faster in one part of its orbit and slower in another, the following takes place: It can happen that the Moon is

in a particular lunar day at sunrise of one calendar day, and the Moon is moving so fast that it reaches the start of the next lunar day (not calendar day) BEFORE the next calendar day's sunrise. In this case that short lunar day is not noted on either the first or second calendar day, but is simply omitted from the calendar

The reverse situation also holds. When the Moon is moving very slowly in its orbit, it can happen that the same lunar day is noted at the sunrise of two contiguous calendar dates, thus effectively doubling that lunar date on the calendar

Please keep in mind that omitted or doubled days are only an artifice of the solar calendar. No lunar day is actually lost or doubled. They are all there. It can be confusing

The Intercalary: Lunar and Solar Months

We have mostly been describing the lunar months in this book, which are measured from the moment of New Moon to the succeeding New Moon. These months, as we have pointed out, do not neatly match up with the standard solar calendar month

We should differentiate between lunar months and the solar month or what are called the "solar terms." Solar months have to do with the passage of the Sun through the tropical zodiac, and the first solar term or solar month is called by the Chinese the "Beginning of Spring." In Chinese and Tibetan astrology, it begins the moment the Sun reaches 15 degrees of the tropical zodiac sign Aquarius (15° Aquarius), which takes place somewhere around February 4th or 5th each year. From the Chinese point of view, the familiar vernal equinox (0° Aries) is the middle of spring, not the beginning

As mentioned, lunar and solar months do not neatly match, and the number of lunar months in a solar calendar year (Gregorian calendar) are more than the standard twelve calendar months we all know. The net result is that every 32.5 lunar months, these extra lunar days accumulate to the point that an extra (intercalary) month has to be added to that year's calendar. Just as we occasionally add an extra day at the end of February in the solar, an extra month is added every few years

Another point to keep in mind is that the Tibetans use the mean longitude of the Sun for their calculations, and not the true longitude that astronomers would use

This has been a quick overview. I have tried here to point out a few of the calendar concepts that concern the Tibetan astrologer – some of the problems. It would take most of a book just to define what these problems are and how best to view them. Luckily that book exists in Edward Hennings “Kalachakra And the Tibetan Calendar.” Please see that book for a very thorough explanation of these matters

[The enclosed graphic was created by me, including all 60 of the cards, which I made as nice as I could using only available clip art. You can look up the year that you were born and see what Animal Year Sign you are. You may have to expand the chart to read clearly, but it will expand. Note that there is an Animal, an Element, and a Gender. Over the years, I created some 13,000 tarot-like cards for every kind of astrological indicator, in western, Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese astrology. Later in this course, I plan to give meanings for each of these sexagenary Animal Signs, all sixty of them.]

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Jan 16, 2020, 11:52 AM

ASTROLOGY’S SELF-SECRETS

In addition to eastern mind training, I have studied western occultism and its esoteric knowledge for many years, and not only from books. I spent years with a Rosicrucian teacher, who had been a traveling initiator for an order (Andrew Gunn Mclver), working very closely with him. In fact, when he died in 1969 at the age of 82, I was the one that took care of his things, saw to his burial, and even designed his tombstone

I am often asked, just where is the secret (or self-secret) occult knowledge of astrology as a practice. I am tempted to say it is in the stars, planets, and heavens all around us, but that probably won’t be enough of a clue. All words and thoughts, etc. come from the mind itself, so that is where all insight comes. And so, I ask, how good are you at unpacking such secrets, even if they should be made available to you?

Here is an article I wrote back in the 1970s that contains several profound astrological teachings that would be difficult to find anywhere, at any price. Where did I find them? I found them deep in my own mind, where all such treasures come from. These mind-treasures or “terma” as the Tibetans would call them are always there, waiting to be found by those who have enough interest and the blessing to encounter them

Astrology too, like dharma, also has “terma” or hidden teachings, which can be called “Mind Terma” (Mind Treasures). Here are a few for the serious student of astrology. See if this makes sense to anyone:

Cycles or Circles, Centers, and Circulation

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Circles%20or%20Cycles%20-%20Centers%20and%20Circulation%202020%20V2.pdf>

[Photo my esoteric teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, and the tombstone I designed for his grave, which is located in Forest Hill Cemetery in Ann Arbor, Michigan.]

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Jan 15, 2020, 9:23 PM

THE POINT OF CERTAINTY

[This comprises the result of my search for certainty as far as busyness and keeping busy is concerned. I am ready to move on.]

The point of certainty for any of us is just a point on a linear scale that is not otherwise distinguished or recognizable. In other words, it is purely individual, particular to each of us. “Certainty” is as certain does. It is all up to us, which makes it all the harder to evaluate. We each have to decide. “We” have to be certain

I could subtitle this blog as “The short end of “busyness,” as this is as far as I can get with thinking about and meditating on all of this “busyness” stuff, whether keeping busy is good, bad, or indifferent. It depends not only on our interest in what we are doing, but mainly on our awareness of what we are doing as we do it

We can see this clearly in Zen Buddhism, but this is true of any kind of recognized Buddhism and most important in the dharma that drives all forms of Buddhism. Getting mindlessly lost in busyness, without insight awareness, is just that. It's a good way to pass the time, but at some level, it is a waste of time as well. We could clock in at birth, live our life in busyness (with no awareness), die and, as Laurel & Hardy used to say, "Nobody will be any the wiser," so to speak

And being busy WITH awareness is, at least initially, no walk in the park, either. It is not easy. After all, that's what learning meditation is all about, and why they call it "meditation practice," rather than just meditation. The effort needed in just trying to be aware of what we are doing soon gives way to fatigue. It is hard to "try" to remain aware for very long. Solving that problem is called Tranquility Meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit)

And so, as mentioned, I have more than less completed a many-month study of "busyness," about as detailed as I probably can get. And certainly, what stood out was that busyness per-se, without awareness, is not really living, except in a kind of ignorant way. It's like the ostrich that sticks his head in the sand until he decides to pull it out. It can't see much

Another way to say this, is that there is no back door to enlightenment, most certainly not through just keeping busy. What, then, is there? There is the keeping busy as lit by the torch of our inner awareness – Insight Meditation. Otherwise, we are just killing time, putting off the inevitable until it is inevitable

In my dharma training, the way I have been taught is to totally exhaust any search until I attain certainty, something that apparently varies and is individual. It probably takes me longer to be certain than the average bear, so to speak. Always has, for some reason. "Certainty" is the point of conviction, when we are convinced, nothing more, but also, nothing less

And so, I'm back to where I started, whether that is a full circle or just me doubling-back. How far from an oasis do we walk before we return the oasis? "Certain" is as certain does, and I am certain. The dharma is filled with points or areas about which we have to be certain. Yet, certainty, while always a searching to find (as well as a point where we have found as much as we can or are able) is also itself nothing but a turning point, a ceasing to search. There is

nothing to be found. “Certainly” is often defined as the point where we are fatigued and have totally exhausted whatever we have to exhaust. And so, we turn around, turn back, or just stop searching. Certainty is when we “are” certain

If a skin-tight glove is turned all the way inside out, that’s it, as far as it can go. We could say that we empty out all the way, so that exhausted, we can receive whatever kind of certainty floats our boat. “Exhaustion” is always required, as long as it takes

And so, for myself, although I have done it all my life, I am certain that busyness without awareness is a non-starter. Busyness or action with awareness is what is called Insight Meditation. I am certain that, for me, I have to continue to expand and extend my realization (such as it is) to be ever more inclusive and unwavering. I am certain that there is no back door or value in busyness for busyness’ sake

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Jan 14, 2020, 8:56 AM

THE ART OF DOING NOTHING

[I am winding down this series on busyness and being busy. For myself, I have figured busyness out and it only took most of a year. 😊 I still have not made my entire case about being busy or not being busy, but I have exhausted my search. This blog, and perhaps one more tomorrow should complete my study.]

I can’t really make assumptions or judgement about other people’s busyness. For example, my teacher, my Root Guru, was very busy. He could do and did almost everything and, to my knowledge, kept a very busy schedule. If we read or study Zen Buddhism, Zen extends to everything a practitioner does, wash the dishes, drive a car, cook, clean, teach, sit, breathe, etc

And so, I really can only comment on my own busyness or lack thereof. For most of my life I have been busy, very busy, always doing something, and hardly ever doing nothing. It never occurred to me to do nothing. LOL

Now, after my second stroke, it has occurred to me to look into doing less, even the occasional nothing at all, as in: give it a rest. I am considering it, yet for me doing nothing is not all that easy. It is much easier, IMO, to do something than to put up with myself trying to do nothing. 😊

In a way, being busy is like going around with your head down all your life, always looking directly into doing something and never looking around or just being there. Above all, for me, being busy is a habit, one it is hard to venture out from. I tend to fill up my life time with activity, doing one thing or another. I can't believe I am the Lone Ranger in all this. Many people like to be busy

So, when I had a stroke and found myself unable for quite some time to be busy, due to all my filters, Self, and means of entertainment being temporary voided, I had, as they say, another thought coming. And it did come

I found that free time in which to do nothing very unusual for me, and actually painful. It was obvious to me that I was addicted to having the filter of busyness between me and the art of doing nothing. I was happy being lost in doing something all the time

Finding myself, through the stroke, stripped of all filters, and literally unable to find any cover of busyness (and for weeks on end), I felt exposed and vulnerable without something to lose myself in, something to see through as through a filter, and I was happiest looking out from behind the mask of busyness. It was like having sunglasses suddenly removed in the middle of full sun. I was blinded

Being busy makes the time go fast. We are immersed in the busyness and it is about as close as we get to a non-dualistic state or true meditative state. We are extended in the busyness of what we are doing. When we pop out (like from a stroke) or wake up from that busyness, we are in the unadulterated here and now. In my case, that was almost never, and thus the shock

Learning to do nothing or to get along on nothing has to be an art, one I have yet to master. I don't have a rocking chair or a porch to sit on. And the view from our house hides our seeing the sun go down, so I am out of luck. The hardest part of my day is dusk, the time I am tired from the busyness of work and before its time to go to bed

Of course, I can watch a movie, yet I've seen all the movies I want to see on any given day. So, there I am, wishing I could just go to sleep, but if I did, I would wake up at midnight, and I frequently do. When I'm exhausted, I am exposed to the nothing of everything

And so, I think the operative issue here is that even if I want to stop being so busy, the first thing I do is get busy working on that, i.e. on not being busy. This endless involvement (and re-involvement) troubles me. It is incestuous in some way. I'm re-infecting myself as I go along, so to speak. This, to me, is one of the main hallmarks of Samsara

I know, because I have been a prodigious doer, all about being busy. And I have contributed a lot to this Samsaric world in my own limited way. Yet, I find myself asking myself, how is this different from just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? In other words, I am making myself (and perhaps others) more comfortable in Samsara, which is perhaps useful, but of a limited usefulness, IMO. And now I know it

What would total freedom from Samsara be like, with every step a step toward enlightenment? That seems to be what the Dharma is all about

[This graphic, put together by me, used to be four-feet wide and on the side of our dharma center door, and a second copy on the shingles of the upper story. I share it here for old times sake. The signs got too old and fell apart. This symbol back then is the answer to my busyness question now.]

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Jan 13, 2020, 4:02 PM

BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

Something I have been questioning of late is “busyness,” and our being so wrapped up in it. As for me, I have been that way for decades, if not forever. And I pointed out that, in my experience, the key to busyness is the interest in what we are doing. The keener the interest, the more involved it seems I am in what I'm doing – lost in it

And, I also mentioned the similarities between being keenly interested in something (busy with that) and the special Insight Meditation that is part of the Kagyu lineage's approach to Mahamudra. Both exhibit keen interest, but in the case of Insight Meditation, there is also an awareness of the Awareness itself, while with what we can call mundane busyness, there is not. We are just busy, but time flies or even seemingly vanishes

"Busy as a beaver" is an old chestnut and busyness, in general (at least in modern society) is considered a good trait and a fine way to spend our time. "Stay busy," "Idle fingers are the devil's workshop," and so on. Plus, we get a lot done too!

I can't help but wonder where that puts the old Zen-like or Tao mottos like "Do Not Do a Thing" and "Do Nothing." And what about the Hindu saint, sitting naked on the backroads of India, doing nothing at all? And here I am, with a lifetime of orchestrated busyness behind me, wondering at the value of being busy at all. That has to be funny. 😊

Should I be doing less or even doing nothing at all? And just how would I learn to be busy doing nothing, if there is such a thing? Is my busyness like the ostrich with its head in the sand, always doing something, and ignoring the doing of nothing and nothingness? And if I peek out, as mentioned above, would I just become busy being not-busy, busy doing nothing at all? That kind of sounds like Insight Meditation all-over again, yet without the awareness

At any rate, I'm paddling up that stream, however far I can manage. And, if busyness with awareness is or is something close to Insight Meditation, then that is what all of us meditators are working on, being aware of being aware, so to speak. Perhaps. That's not such a leap for those non-meditators who only managed to be busy. They have just to realize or be aware of their own busyness and it becomes "Insight." In other words, take the torch of awareness into our busyness and be aware of our interest or awareness, and by that, see that we are seeing

This does, IMO, make "busy, just to be busy" a waste of time. Certainly, intense busyness ignores time, even if it does not realize time. There is this whole idea of our not being able to take it straight, not being aware or awake. It's just too hard or painful to

endure straight on. Is this the realm of shadows (as it is said) that we prefer when we wander in the bardo realms after death?

In that case, as the teachings point out, we are wandering right now in the bardo, endlessly putting off the realization as to the true nature of the mind, dreaming up dam after dam to hold back what we have

I just want to take it straight, that is, if I can stand it. And “standing it” has gradually revealed itself as the main problem, something like a willful (or at least habitual) ignorance that prevents me from looking directly at the light or nature of the mind without blinking and turning away. Until my recent stroke, I had never looked at that forbidden Sun

If Samsara itself is but the state of our being turned away and not having ever looking at the actual nature of our own mind, then we should at least be able to see the problem, if not take steps to solve it

“I LIKE TO WATCH TV”

That above line is from the movie “Being There” with Peter Sellers. Many years ago, I realized that while we Americans, as a group, were not into formal meditating, that many of the ingredients of meditation already are part of watching TV and movies. It’s no joke. Sitting still, watching an area on a wall or monitor for hours at a time, must train us in something. Seriously

I have been, over the last months, more carefully examining what I do with my time, especially what I might call my “free time,” even though I’m retired and, in a way, its all free time. In the process, I have been considering what people in general do when they have free time

We can start out with watching TV, as I mentioned above, or watching a movie or documentary on cable, and so on. What constitutes a “good” movie and what a “bad” movie? Ask yourself that and you will find the answer is all about our interest. If a movie captures our interest (or does not), what is it that happens?

Having worked with some of the more advanced meditation practices, like Vipassana (Insight Meditation), I have a least something to compare to my interest in movies and TV series or shows. I have concluded, at least for myself, that a movie that I am really interested in, one that “holds” my interest, so to speak, has something in common with Insight Meditation. And that is because of what it does to time. A movie (or for that matter anything) that really holds our interest makes time evaporate or at least pass very quickly. We are engrossed in what interests us and tend to lose our sense of time. When the movie is over, we come out of it, and time begins to re-assert itself once again to our consciousness

In fact, IMO, this kind of “loss of time” when we are interested is very similar to what happens with Insight Meditation, which is said to be non-dual. In other words, with Insight Meditation we are all-in. We are also mostly all-in when we do something that greatly interests us, yet we are not aware that we are all-in. We are just all in

However, with Insight Meditation, we are also all-in, but we are aware of being all-in. And that is because Insight Awareness is a form of awareness of Awareness itself and being aware

So, my takeaway here, and it may just be my opinion, is that being lost in something that greatly interests us a “poor-man’s” Insight Meditation, so to speak, or at least as close as most of us come to experiencing it

Time (or anything else that is relative or dualistic) is not part of Insight Meditation and neither is it a part (to some degree) of being deeply engrossed in a movie or some other form of entertainment or busyness

And all of this brings me to the idea of busyness itself and choosing to be or keep busy. Is keeping busy just an effective way to avoid the tedium of time and relative or dualistic thinking in general? I wonder about that

Are we afraid (or skilled at the ignoring) of just being alone with ourselves, rather than being wrapped up with whatever we are doing? In other words, are we a whole nation of ostriches, with our heads in the sand of busyness, unable to appreciate the organic and natural sound of silence and the space that encloses it?

Now, IMO, this whole topic opens up a real can of worms, one that most folks appear only too happy to ignore. This concept came to me through my stroke, where I was thrust outside all my filters and simply unable to find any way or means to be busy or lose myself. It was due to having to endure no access to entertainment, no means to lose myself in busyness, that I noticed that all of that time, there was this brilliant light in the sky of my mind that was blinding me so that I could not bear to look at it

That brilliance was like the light in a movie that allows you to see anything on the screen at all or. In a similar way, there is a light (shining like a sun) in the firmament of our mind, call it an "awareness," that lights up the mind so that anything at all can be seen. And we use and depend on that light, much like a flashlight or searchlight, to light up our life so that we have any vision at all

This is a lot to take in, and I apologize for that, but there may be a few of you who can grasp what I am pointing out here, which is our basic awareness itself, that which makes having a lit or lighted mind possible at all. The image of a bright light is understandable as an analogy, but for that analogy to work, we need to substitute the idea of light with awareness. Our awareness is that light in the analogy, and to make it more complicated yet, it is an awareness of our utter lack of entertainment that forces us to look directly at it

Most of the time, we are totally busy entertaining ourselves and enjoying the sense of timelessness that can come out of being engrossed in our own interest of busyness, whatever interests us at the time, a movie or whatever totally interests us. And when that interest wanes, that is when the dirge of time overtakes us once again, and we get fidgety

Try this concept on and give me your thoughts, if you will

Jan 11, 2020, 10:09 PM

THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES

[I would like to share, for those interested and who have the time, a pith dharma-teaching that I feel is very worth considering; however, it will take a little time to present.]

It has been many years now since it was first pointed out to me that there is more than one kind or form of “lama” available to us. And this was pointed out to me by a Tibetan Monk, one who had completed two three-year closed retreats, which is what, in the Kagyu Lineage, is what qualifies one as a lama, to my understanding. I was at a precarious point in my dharma training, when this concept of what constitutes a “lama” was pointed out to me. As was explained to me, there actually are four different types of lamas, which I will describe here, as it was told to me:

(1) THE LAMA OF THE LINEAGE

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

(2) THE LAMA OF THE SCRIPTURES OF THE SUGATAS

In addition the lama most of us know, the extant Buddhist teachings and texts themselves are considered a lama in their own right. This “Lama of the Scriptures” refers to the dharma teachings themselves as guides, the actual texts and instructions left by the Buddha and his enlightened followers. Of course, I knew about the teachings, but I never understood that these, by themselves, were considered a “lama,” although this makes perfect sense

(3) THE LAMA OF DHARMADHATU

And there is a third kind of lama called “The Lama of the Dharmadhatu,” and this refers to the final goal or state of realization itself, which itself is a teacher or guide, the true nature of the mind itself

(4) THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES

And last, but totally new to me, there is also a fourth type of lama, one I had never heard of, which is called “The Lama of Appearances,” literally the lama of the natural world surrounding

us. In other words, this world of appearances we find ourselves embedded in is also a perfect reflection of the dharma and can serve as a lama and guide to us in pointing out the dharma path, if we will just take notice and observe carefully

Although, all appearances reflect the reality of the dharma, I am mainly talking here about the world of nature that is as close as the nearest parks, fields, woods, and streams. Of course, man-made civil law also exists and appears, but IMO it is much easier to see the Lama of Appearances in Mother Nature, rather than try to decode it from civil law, where too often, someone has their thumb on the scale. Mother Nature is still pristine in many places

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

In fact, while we are searching for a living lama or dharma teacher that we can work with, the world of nature is always fully present around us and is as clear and unflinching as any physical teacher could be if we can be aware of it. The message of the natural world and the message of the root lama are in truth the same. Let me give one example:

In all the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, there exist what are called the “Common Preliminaries” or “The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward the Dharma.” These four thoughts have real power, for only they can turn our minds away from the endless distractions of everyday life and toward real dharma practice. That is why these four preliminaries are the entrance gate or starting point to the dharma for many forms of Buddhist practice. And, although they are called ‘preliminaries’, they are hardly only that, for awareness of these four thoughts are also considered essential for the most advanced forms of meditation, such as Mahamudra practice. In fact, it might be interesting to know that when a dharma student finishes all the preliminaries and is ready to undertake the realization practices (like Mahamudra), the first thing they encounter is a request once again to spend real time with “The Four Thoughts.” In my own case, I spent three years just on that, the Four Thoughts.

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

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

- (1) This human life that we have is precious
- (2) Life is impermanent and fragile
- (3) We each are subject to Karma. Every action has an effect
- (4) This world of Samsara is undependable. Our daily world of business-as-usual is inherently unstable and cannot be gamed. We will never get all our ducks in a row

I first encountered the “Four Thoughts” in early 1974, when I spent some time with the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. I had designed the poster graphics for a talk that Trungpa Rinpoche was giving at the University of Michigan and was serving as his chauffeur for the weekend. The poster showed a Tibetan woodcut of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds, with a jewel held firmly in each of its four claws. I include the image here

When Trungpa Rinpoche looked at the dragon, he remarked to me: “Do you what this dragon stands for?” And I responded, that I did not, but chose it because it moved me. Trungpa Rinpoche went on to explain. The dragon can only fly as long as he holds these four jewels, one in each claw. If he drops even one of them, he can no longer fly and falls to the ground. The four jewels are the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.”

When I first encountered the Four Thoughts, I was amazed at how real and practical they are, just what I had always been thinking about anyway. For example, the first thought about the preciousness of having a life: I always felt that my life was precious, and I wanted to be used in some meaningful way. I sure did not want to waste it. I want to be put to good use and for my life to have a purpose

And impermanence, a thought that has always been in the back of my mind whenever I can stand to think about it. Everything that is

born will also die, and that includes me! How could I avoid coming to terms with that thought, at least once in a while?

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

The last of the four thoughts is that this world around us (the Buddhist call it “Samsara”) is (by definition) inherently undependable. In other words, no matter how hard I try, I will never get all my ducks in a row, so to speak. I keep thinking that I am clever enough to somehow game the system and have only the up side of this cyclic life and keep what I don't like at arm's length, but life proves me wrong consistently. We go up and down and around – cycles

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

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

Of course, I never forgot about the Four Thoughts, any more than I could forget about my eventual death or my wish to have my life

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

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

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

Of course, finding a qualified dharma teacher is key, and I had the good fortune to have found a most qualified lama to work with. And I am not alone in that. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the lama I have worked with for the last 35 years, has many, many students aside from me, and that involves sharing his time, and few of us have as much face-to-face time with Rinpoche as we might like

I am not complaining, only explaining. And the point of this whole story is that there is another very qualified lama available to us all of the time, 24x7, that is expert at helping us to recognize the “Four Thoughts” and keep them ever in mind, and that is the “Lama of Appearances,” and commonly know as Mother Nature. And nature is as near as our own backyard where we live; and the fields, streams, meadows, and woods nearby. And Mother Nature is a fully qualified and most-enlightened teacher! Nowhere are the “Four Thoughts” more obviously and consistently pointed out than in Mother Nature

Spending time with the natural world, soaking in the organic dharma, is what I spend most of my life doing from a young child until my late teens. I learned the laws of nature, not the laws of mankind. And this has made learning the Dharma very natural for me

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Jan 11, 2020, 5:14 AM

TIBETAN ASTROLOGY: CHAPTER FOUR

Astrology is Astrology is ...

[This is the last of the introductory chapters, after which we can begin to get down to the nitty-gritty of Tibetan astrology itself, the nuts and bolts.]

Tibetan astrological methods are in some ways less complex than the computer-generated technology that most of us here in the West currently use. Much of it involves the manipulation of the various animal signs, elements, Parkhas, mewas, etc., and takes considerable skill (great care) in calculation and, as might be expected, even more expertise when it comes to interpretation. The net result is that the Tibetan system of astrology is a somewhat complex system that, like its Western counterpart, allows so much interpretation that hard and fast conclusions can seldom be drawn. As far as I can determine, one can't predict the stock market with either Tibetan or Western astrology, at least I can't. If I could, our center here would be much larger

When all is said and done, astrology East or West is essentially an oracle, and like all oracles, its purpose is to allow the universe to speak to us. For it to be any use to us, we must be able to listen

Astrology as an Oracle

We probably can agree that astrology is a somewhat complex and intricate oracle. There is another factor in Eastern astrology that deserves general comment. It has been the view of Western observers that the East has a tendency toward fatalism and resignation to whatever fate has delivered to them

I was always somewhat surprised that most of the Tibetan lamas and teachers that I met (outside of using the lunar cycle to plan and time events) were not all that interested in the astrology. Perhaps astrology may have a number of more secret uses in Tibetan Buddhism, which are not presented to the general public, and of which I am not aware of. One thing I can report is that Tibetans are not interested in the kind of astrology of personality so popular here in the West

To the Buddhist mind, our personality makeup is not really all that important. Unlike Western astrology, Tibetan astrology is not an astrology of personality. For, no matter what our personal makeup, good or bad, the remedy remains the same from the Buddhist point of view: mind practice of one form or another

In fact, throughout the East, you do not find the interest in personality psychology that we have here in the West. The reason is clear to anyone who has studied Eastern philosophy. They have no need to flirt with the deeper areas of the mind, but have long ago been introduced to matters of psychology, and assume them as a matter of course, rather than as a novelty. Here in the West we are just beginning to learn about the training of the mind. Psychology here is still new to us

Remember that reincarnation is the accepted belief system in both India and Tibet and, for that matter (in sheer numbers of people), the greater part of the world. They have, as a standing belief, what we have as yet to accept -- the continuity of consciousness beyond death. They are the majority, we the minority

Here in the West, this awareness of cycles or life beyond physical death is not self-evident to most of us. As astrologers, we may attempt to bring it to the public's attention. Yet as a society, we have yet to come to such a conclusion, much less push toward making this a part of our day-to-day beliefs

Buddhist countries, long trained in the analysis of emotions and desires, have little interest in re-examining emotional and personality issues, which have already been clarified in ancient times. Instead, the interest in expanding the awareness of the person (happy or sad) beyond such personal issues and focusing on the actual root of our problems and sufferings is assumed

Everyone over there in Asia knows this from childhood. Any Western astrologer can easily check this out for himself by doing an astrological reading for an East Indian. They are not remotely interested in our psychological observations. Concepts that fascinate us here in the West like: soul, spirit, unity, are already their old friends

Their response to our psychological pap is "Yes, yes, yes... please get on to something of importance, like exactly how many children will I have, and what will their sexes be." Or, "How much money will I make this year and when."

There is no point in hinting to a Tibetan or Hindu that consciousness may extend beyond this life or that he or she is somehow "one" with the creative forces. That is for them already a given, a fact upon which they have depended all of their lives. The psychological crib out of which we Westerners are just learning to climb (when it comes to the mind), the continuity of consciousness, and all that these thoughts suggest, is old news in China, India, Tibet, and most of Asia for that matter.

The fact that the whole world is, in reality, our personal mandala and that everything that appears to us is a sign from the cosmos may be a revelation to a New Yorker, but not so for a resident of Katmandu or Delhi. While here in this country we continue to explore our psychological infancy, this holds little interest for those from the East. With this said, let us look at some of the main elements of Tibetan astrology

OUR PILGRIMAGE TO TIBET: CHAPTER FIVE

Gonghar Airport in Tibet

Descending from the clouds, the plane dodged the mountains and landed at Gonghar airport (the only large airport in Tibet). We were in an exhilarated mood. Even the officious Chinese guards in their ill-fitting uniforms and holding machine guns (guards we had been warned about and dreaded) failed to bum us out. We walked from the plane and across the tarmac to the airport terminal in the bright Tibetan sunlight, breathing in cool clean Tibetan air

We were euphoric, at least during those first hours

Our Guides: Pemba and Tashi

We had been warned about the guides that might be assigned to our group once we reached Tibet. There was only so much control that could be exercised from a distance, so it would partly be a matter of dumb luck. If you were lucky, you would get a Tibetan guide who was not in the pay of the Communists, and one who knew and cared something about the dharma. If you were unlucky, you could count on having to argue with and perhaps even order your guide to go to the places you wanted to go—not only to places most convenient for him. In this regard, we were exceptionally lucky

Tashi and Penba

Our guide and driver were waiting at the airport for us when we exited the plane. One look at Penba, our translator guide, and I knew we were in safe hands. Here was a gentle intelligent soul who did everything in his power to make our journey a safe and meaningful one. There was a rumor he had once been a monk, but I don't know if that is true or not

Certainly, he knew an enormous amount about the places we visited—complete to the last detail on statues. And his English was quite good. Our driver Tashi spoke no English, but was the perfect complement to Penba. There is no question that he was what we would call a redneck here in the states. Cigarette smoking and beer-drinking, he always had a smile—and was ready for anything that might appear. I have no doubt that, had we been threatened at any time or in any way, Tashi would have stepped right up to the plate and hit a home run. You just knew that about him. Not too easy to get close to, but the more time you spent with him the more loyal and friendly he became. And he liked little Michael Andrew a lot

Together, Penba and Tashi were an unbeatable team, and they served us well in a wide variety of difficult situations. When a day ended, and our group stumbled into one hotel or another, they kept going, hauling our baggage around, getting fuel for the van, finding bottled water for us, scouting out restaurants, hassling with officials and hotel clerks—whatever it took. And my understanding—gained from others—was that a guide like this might make only \$200 a month!—and I am sure the driver made even less

As time went on, we shared more and more meals with them. And the kids would shoot pool (and smoke cigarettes!) with them in the evening hours, after I went down with the sun

Pemba took great care to explain, and in great detail, about the sacred places we visited. In fact, many times I had to wander off during his explanations so that I could have time to connect with the place and make aspirations. He was very thorough, and knew almost every statue and every thangka

Nor was he faking interest, either, even though he had been to these sacred places a great many times. He had visited His Holiness, the Karmapa, more than once, and he shared with us the time His Holiness had looked at him and said, “You are starting to have confidence in me”—and how it brought tears to his eyes

The Tara Shrine

The guides came with a 12-seat minibus, which would house our crew and all our baggage. This was better than the 2 jeeps I had expected. We piled in and headed up the road toward Lhasa, traveling alongside the wide Tsangpo River (Upper Brahmaputra). We were on our way to a very special shrine of Tara—the Drolma Lhakang—at the village of Netang. We were in high spirits, and altitude sickness had not yet reared its ugly head

We pulled up to what looked to be a small store, behind which was a large monastery-like compound made of adobe. Dharma banners were hanging from the walk-through gate as we entered the long courtyard and at the end of the courtyard was a large shrine room, the front covered by a dark cloth or hide—you entered on the left side and eventually came out on the right

Here is as good a point as any to say something about shrine etiquette in Tibet and in Asia (or anywhere, for that matter). When one enters a gompa—a monastery shrine room, the first thing one does is offer three prostrations toward the central deity, or toward the center of the shrine. After this, you proceed down the left-hand side of the room and go to the very front. Most shrine rooms have areas of particular significance: usually the front left, the front middle, and the front right. Often you will find two smaller shrines at the front—one on each side of the main and central deity

The Tara Shrine

At any rate, you approach the front of the shrine by way of the left side (like circumambulation) and survey what is there, often bowing as you go to any side shrines or deities. At the front, you again move from left to right, eventually moving to the main center of the shrine. You now bow or pay homage to the central deity. Often pilgrims bow and touch their heads to the base on which this deity is

sitting. Others will touch their mala (rosary) to the base of the deity. More common is to just place one's hands together and bow toward the deity. One then moves a bit farther to the right, to whatever shrine or deity is at the far right-hand side, and bow again, acknowledging the deity there

This finished, you complete the circumambulation, ending at the back of the shrine—at the center of the back. From that point, you can bow and leave the shrine, or, just be at ease and perhaps walk around some more. I am no expert on it, but this seems to be what happens in shrine rooms

Some of the Large Tara Statues

The Tara shrine we visited had 21 large and exquisite statues of Tara, plus statues of other deities. As we moved across the front of the shrine and to the center, a monk came forward and pressed a special sacred conch on the back of each of us. Many of us were overcome by the spirit or vibrations of the place, and just found ourselves weeping. We were very happy here. Perhaps it was because it was our first sacred contact in Tibet, or perhaps it was because this is, indeed, a very special place—I just could not keep from crying; for me, this is a most special place. Every pilgrim stops at the Tara shrine on the road from the Gonghar airport to Lhasa

Altitude Sickness

It took about half a day for altitude sickness to really take hold. And I, who got the worst case of it, was not really prepared. Khenpo Rinpoche had had a premonition that one of us would have problems, and maybe even need some extra oxygen, but he had kind of been looking at my wife, Margaret, and she and I had both thought it would be her who might have trouble. As it turned out, I'm the one who had a terrible time with it

From the books, one doesn't get the idea— when 'altitude sickness' is discussed—that they really mean sickness. But you often do get very sick when you are rushed on a plane from Kathmandu to Lhasa—when you go from being at around 3,000 feet to over 13,000 feet in less than an hour. At this very high altitude you are getting about 60% (or less) of your usual amount of oxygen. Wham, there you are. You get out of the plane and it feels different. At first, your body has not figured out what the heck is happening. You feel a bit odd, but not really bad, perhaps a little spacey, but that is kind of cool too. It could be just the thrill of

being in Tibet, at last, with the bright, bright Sun, the crisp, clear air, and the clouds close overhead. You get the idea

Within about half a day, after the trip from the Gonghar airport to Lhasa, the deposit of myself and my stuff at a hotel, and that first flight of hotel stairs, I began to get a different picture. I could hardly walk up the damn stairs—and I mean one flight! There I was, leaning against the wall, gasping for breath, my heart racing. What is this, I wondered? And then I flopped down in a chair. Boom

Altitude Sickness and Fever

This must be what it feels like to get really old, I thought. I couldn't do much of anything, and I didn't like that feeling. I struggled to my feet, determined to go and see the town. I headed out, only to find myself soon feeling my way back to the hotel room, gasping, and grasping for that chair again. And there I sat. Or, I would lie down on the bed and there I would lie—for a very long time. I couldn't believe it. I was trapped in what amounted to an 'old-age' body, limited to doing the very least of anything

Typically, they say you must spend at least three days in Lhasa just getting used to the altitude. And this means three 24-hour days and nights. Often you can't sleep. You are just awake. Your head aches and your face feels puffy and tingly. Something seems very wrong—or at least very different. You can't really do much, because, despite your desire to get out and see this new country, you don't feel like doing much. You just don't feel too great, period, even though you are raring to get on with the trip. I found myself waiting this thing out

And, I had a bad case of it, coupled with a cold, which eventually resulted in a fairly high fever that lasted for three days. In the end,

the cold went into my lungs and became bronchitis. I had to take antibiotics and was just plain old sick. I did not like it one bit, but there was nothing I could do about it. Part of it was the cold; part was the endless presence of smoke, fumes, and smells oppressing my lungs, which were already weakened from my prior history of smoking some 30 odd years before. In a word, this was a bummer

There is no known permanent human habitation above 20,000 feet. According to the books, altitude is measured by a scale, where High Altitude is anything from 8,000 to 12,000 feet, Very High Altitude is in the range from 12,000 to 18,000 feet (Lhasa is at 13,000 feet), and Extremely High Altitude is any place over 18,000 feet. Tsurphu Monastery, where we were headed, is some 15,000 feet

Jan 6, 2020, 7:36 PM

ORGANIC DHARMA

Like streams and rivers find their way to the sea, so does our growing awareness through dharma practice find the true nature of the mind itself, and quite organically at that. Or, another analogy would be, as the veins and capillaries find their way back to the heart

And there are no straight lines in nature; our realization wends and weaves its way through time. And, IMO, organized religion is, speaking as somewhat of a maverick, IMO, very much an oxymoron, although obviously some organization seems imperative. Ultimately, the dharma is natural and organic. Even the Buddhas of the past realized the natural dharma that was in the present moment

My dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, used to tell a story of a house with many windows and one monkey inside it that races from window to window and looks out, even though it is the same sky outside from any window. No matter what form of dharma we practice, if it works, the ultimate realization of each individual is identical. It has to be the same. All roads lead to enlightenment or away from it

My house-with-a-monkey-in-it analogy is a house with many windows, and although the sky outside the window is the same for all, the clarity of each window differs. And, I liken this to our body and personality and the many filters (windows) that we have, some clear enough to see through, but many dim or even opaque. We try to be even and stable, but inevitably some areas within us are more advanced than others at a given time

My point in raising this thought is that I believe (and I have found) that an individual's progress in dharma does not follow only from what we can read in the teachings and books. At least, I have found that progress in dharma is much more organic, free-form, and does not strictly follow a straight-line format. It seems that individuals vary as to the various dharma practices required. Although, many generally follow the textbook order of things, quite often, for a given individual, they mix it up to meet their needs

As a general rule, what realization we have had (and I am sure this is true by definition) is NOT what we expected or anticipated. Many times, while realizing something through dharma, we only eventually recognize it as something we read about in the dharma teachings and texts themselves. Take that thought in, please, because in my experience it has been very important. There can be a lot of "Aha!, that's what they mean" involved. Look for that in advance, if you can

And, as suggested above with the example of the monkey (within the house of many windows), finding that windows are like filters or various colors, qualities, and opaqueness is useful. Our dharma progress does not just grow uniformly. One area of our life may not be equal in growth or realization to another area. One part of life (one window) may be clearer and more transparent to us than another, which other may be more backward or dim. Dharma takes time, IMO. And our actual practice (in particular, when it comes to a yidam practice) is more natural or organic than any rulebook or text can anticipate. It is almost like the old saying "Where there's a will, there's a way."

The point of this blog is that dharma itself is natural and organic and, like the streams, rivers, and tributaries that weave their way through life, they only eventually find their way to the sea

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OUR PILGRIMAGE TO TIBET: CHAPTER FOUR

The First Day in KTM (KATHMANDU)

That night, sleep was all upside down. Keep in mind that our internal clock had just turned 180-degrees. Only two days before, at this time, it had been the middle of the day for us in Michigan, while now it was the middle of the night for us in Kathmandu. Trying to sleep that first night was one of those never-quite-drifting-off affairs, not helped by the fact that the jet-lag we were experiencing was accompanied by strange smells and sounds. Just before dawn all of the surrounding monasteries (right next door!) began sounding gongs and chanting

Sets of Tibetan horns rang out, some sounding like oboes and others deep bass and rumbling, and then—the dawn! It was eerie but beautiful listening to the sounds that first dawn in Kathmandu. I was so tired and yet so awake

But rest, I could not. We had already accumulated real problems. Because we had been delayed for two days, we had lost the three-day safety zone we needed to apply for the visas for India and Sikkim. We also had almost lost the time we needed to get our Chinese group visa for Tibet, but this visa was soon taken care of by paying a bunch of extra money—we were to fly to Tibet the next day. Whether we would get to visit India when we returned was another matter, for the three-day waiting period for that visa application had vanished. Worse, this one remaining day we had in Nepal was a Nepalese strike day— something we would come to know only too well

It seems that the government of Nepal was trying to create a value-added tax (VAT), something like they have in the United Kingdom and in many other countries. It was perceived as something that would be a real hardship for the people, and they had organized a series of national strikes in protest. On such strike days no motor traffic (cars, buses, etc.) is allowed, thus strangling business for that day. The penalty for violators is the stoning of the vehicle. The result was that we were stranded at our hotel area, unable to take any action on our Sikkimese visa. The embassy office was some 7 kilometers away

As for our Tibetan visa, the tour guide had arranged for a courier to come by bicycle and pick up a rather large sum of cash we had to pay and then—through the streets of Kathmandu—deliver it. Trusting this much cash to an unknown carrier worried us; in the end, the main guy came to get the money himself, including the extra cash we had to pay the Chinese to do all of this at the last minute. I asked the man if he could help us get the Sikkimese visa, but he just shrugged his shoulders—sorry, he could not help. If I could somehow get to the Indian Embassy, he suggested, at the center of downtown Kathmandu, something might still be done

There was still time, but it would have to be done right away

I was suffering from sleep deprivation, jet-lag, culture shock...and I had not yet had any breakfast; I was unwilling, however, to give up on visiting Sikkim, because Gyalsap Rinpoche was there, a lama I had always dreamed of meeting. I resolved to find a bicycle and go to the Indian embassy myself—that morning. My wife, who couldn't believe I would attempt such a trip, was too beat to come with me, but my 21-year old daughter, Michael Anne, was game. We would go, no matter what

At first, no one seemed to even know where the Indian embassy was, much less be willing to accompany me there on a bicycle; I finally managed to find, though, a man about my own age who knew where it was. He said he would go with us. As for bicycles, all we could find were some not-too-bad, old-style, one-speed American bikes: you know—the kind with foot brakes and one loop of chain. No ten-speeds! As for the man who would guide us, well, it turned out that what he really had in mind was for his young (perhaps 12-year old) son to accompany us on the trip, not himself. And so the three of us—with the young boy leading in a Mary Poppins sort of way—started out on that 7 kilometer trip through the streets of Kathmandu. We started from Boudinath (where we were) and traveled to a location near the Royal Palace—where the Indian Embassy was located

Primary Means of Traveling

One lucky thing was that there was no traffic, and so the normal dangers of Kathmandu were reduced to only the presence of military vehicles here and there and the odd car or truck that dared to break the strike—and, of course, there were still motorcycles and motor scooters. On the down side, the streets were

unbelievably potholed and rough, not to mention the ever-present dust. However, I did get an instant and close-up introduction to Kathmandu culture. I was so tired and zoned out that the whole thing was quite beautiful even if somewhat surreal—and so, through the streets we went

Everywhere, there were people and animals, with shops crammed into any available space—one next to another. Often a shop was little more than an old bucket for a seat and one jar full of something or other (like hard candy)—this was the store—a single jar! And there was this sense that everyone was everyone else's customer, if that makes sense. Let me try that again. It seemed to me that there were no store customers from outside the neighborhood, but that everyone was just kind of hanging out in each other's store—like one extended family. It was kind of like kids selling lemonade on the streets—gone mad

We reached the embassy, and my body was almost vibrating on its own after the ride and from the exertion. We had the young boy look after our bikes while we went through the long procedure to apply for the visa. The process would take ten days, which is why we had to do it now—before we left for Tibet, so that the visas would be ready when we returned. Forms and officials, more forms, and, of course, the waiting. At last, the head honcho explained to me how, really, it was impossible for me to get what I wanted, but that he, on the day that I returned (a Saturday = holiday), would interrupt his day off and come down to this office and, unofficially, complete our visas so that we could fly out the next morning. He would do this for me, if, and only if, I could reach him before noon of the day we returned from Tibet. With that news—fees already paid and forms filled—we headed back up the long road to Boudha, which was this time mostly uphill

I did make it back, covered with sweat, exhausted and hungry, but exhilarated. My butt was bruised and sore from that ride for many weeks after. Margaret was so proud of me and so amazed at my going. We then got to meet Ward Holmes (of the Tsurphu Foundation), and Gloria Jones, secretary of Thrangu Monastery, for a late lunch. Things were cool. I liked this Kathmandu place

Just to complete this story, when we came back from Tibet, I was able to get in from the airport (through a strike zone), and phone the embassy official just barely before noon, arranging to meet in his office—which we did. Taking a cab this time, we met, and he

completed our visa for India and Sikkim. He never asked for any money but I gave him a good sum anyway—for the idea was in the air. We ended up (when he found out I was an astrologer) discussing very abstract spiritual philosophy while we filled out the forms—it is something I believe every Indian, at least the Brahmins, are fully able to do. Here I am, slipping him money under the table, and he is telling me about my soul's journey through time. That's India

To the Airport and on to Tibet

Our trip to the airport to fly to Tibet was in the hands of the assistant tour guide, and he was a pro. Driving a large Toyota mini-bus, he was unable to get the vehicle close enough to our hotel to pick up our baggage, so he commandeered a smaller street vehicle, whisked us and our stuff into it, and then transferred us to the bus. He should have known, though, that he couldn't have gotten that mini-bus through the tiny alley by the hotel, so this was not so impressive in itself

What was really impressive was the way he handled the airport. The problem was that there was a planeload of people and baggage and only one counter for everyone to file through. When we arrived, there was already a long line of people. Paying no attention to this, he positioned all of our baggage up front, went behind the counter with the officials, and, in a few moments, was working at the front desk, with a crowd of people around him. He began to look at and handle their tickets. I have no idea what he was doing, but he looked for all the world like an official. Before we knew it, he had us at the front of the line, our baggage being checked through ahead of everyone else's, and soon we had three sets of window seats on the left side of the plane, from where Mt. Everest and the rest of the Himalayas could be seen. Of course, he applied liberal baksheesh (bribe money), but besides that, it was still an amazing display of grace and power. He pushed us through the checkpoint and wished us a good trip. We were off to Tibet. We were finally on board for the one-hour flight from Kathmandu, to Lhasa, in Tibet. There we were, in the sky over Tibet, gazing on Mt. Everest and the whole Himalayan range—from the window of the plane. No stopping us now

Jan 5, 2020, 5:47 AM

TIBETAN ASTROLOGY: (Part 3) WHERE I CAME IN

My own background in learning about Tibetan astrology started around 1974 when I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and the 16th Gyalwa Karma, Rigpe Dorje, and with my asking just about every rinpoche I encountered about astrology. Surprisingly, most of them knew (or claimed they knew) very little, and often their only interest seemed to be reading the small Tibetan practice-calendar books, looking for dates for this or that kind of practice

As a student who was trying to studying Buddhist psychology and also learning about mind training, I continued to be fascinated by Tibetan astrology. My reasoning went something along the lines of: if their psychology is so powerful (which it indeed is), their astrology must also reflect this as well. I read through the various Buddhist scholarly works in which astrology was even mentioned, finding only an occasional few words and the odd diagram here or there. There was no sense of any comprehensive understanding

I then met John Reynolds, an American who was studying Tibetan Buddhism and who also had an interest in Tibetan Astrology. He spoke and read Tibetan, fluently. I set up a workshop here in Big Rapids, Michigan and John came and gave a seminar on Tibetan astrology. This was in the early 1980s. I learned a lot from meeting Reynolds, but most of all I remember these words of John's to me. He said that in order to learn Tibetan astrology, you have to learn the Buddhist psychology around which it was based. He confided to me that the Buddhist psychology was much more interesting to him than the astrology, and that he had become fascinated with that, leaving the astrology somewhat unfinished. "Interesting," said I

My next step was to invite Nepalese Sange Wangchuk and his wife Tseten to come and reside at our center here in Michigan in 1985. Wangchuk, a former monk, skilled calligrapher, and artist was fluent in seven languages, including Tibetan, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Hindi, Pali, and Sanskrit. Wangchuk went on to be the director of the National Library of Bhutan and it's cultural minister. Sange Wangchuk spent 2 1/2 years with us and, during that time, we translated a lot of Tibetan astrology from the original manuscripts, mostly the works of the 3rd Gyalwa Karmapa,

Rangjung Dorje. This really helped me fill in many of the blanks. I was finally learning. By now I was also working on learning what meditation practice was all about. And I learned to read Tibetan script, but never that well

Like John Reynolds, I was becoming increasingly seduced by the Buddhist psychology at the expense of the astrology. There is no doubt about the fact that if it is personal results you are interested in, the Tibetan Buddhist psychological teachings are the very essence of that of which astrologers dream. Or, as mentioned earlier: astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root or trunk itself. Sooner or later you want to learn about the root

The Buddhist psychological or dharma teachings themselves are the root, and these profound teachings are deserving of the respect they inspire. They have value because they help an individual orient him or herself within their current situation and provide a method for them to take action of a clarifying and creative nature

By this time, our center here in Big Rapids had become one of the primary centers in North America for the translation, transcription, and publication of Buddhist texts of the Karma Kagyu tradition. We had become the Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Chöling), and affiliate of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery in Woodstock, New York. For many years, we maintained a full-time publication staff, starting in 1986

During our time together, I worked with Sange Wangchuk translating from a number of astrology texts (he did the translating), and we put together an outline for Tibetan astrology, some of which was published by Wieser in a book on Eastern astrology some years ago. Among other things as mentioned, Wangchuk translated some of the astrology teachings of the 3rd Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. I also programmed most of the Tibetan astrological techniques, and released a program in May of 1998. A new and expanded version of that program has been released in 2007 and was available for a time

In the summer of 1997, our center brought Dr. Drubgyud Tendar to our complex, the Heart Center KTC here in Big Rapids. Dr. Tendar was an accomplished Tibetan astrologer and Tibetan doctor who had been trained at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim in the Tsurphu tradition (the astrological methods used by the Karma Kagyu Lineage), originating from His Holiness, the 3rd Karmapa,

Rangjung Dorje. Together we worked to reconstruct the calculations for the traditional Tsurphu calendar and thus try to preserve its integrity

In the late summer of 1997, my family and I traveled to Tibet and we were able to present our preliminary results to the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, His Holiness Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa. The Karmapa is the actual “Golden Child” after which the Eddie Murphy movie was based. His Holiness gave me the name Tenzin Nyima – holder of the Sun

I also traveled to Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, the seat of His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, where I met with one of the main astrologers at that monastery. While traveling in the East, I was also able to meet with the Venerable Bokar Rinpoche and His Eminence, Gyaltsap Rinpoche. I continued to work with Dr. Drubjud Tendar through the fall of 1997 to complete the calculations we had been working on

In the spring of 2006, I met Khenpo Ugyen Tenzin, who was Senior Abbot at Nalanda Institute of Rumtek, Sikkim. Lama Ugyen had been thoroughly trained in the Tsurphu method of astrology and he was able to clear up some questions that had been troubling me. And lately I have been getting some help from Edward Henning, a translator of Tibetan and a scholar of Tibetan astrology. Henning, who in my opinion is doing the most important work in this field helped to translate much of the material about the Tibetan Earth Lords, the Sa-Dak found in this book

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

I should also mention my main dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who has worked with me since 1983. Khenpo Rinpoche has been of invaluable help, far beyond any words I could possibly write. In addition, Ven. Bardor Tulku Rinpoche has also been very helpful in many ways, including providing the verbal reading or instructions (Tibetan: Lung) for the Tibetan Mo form of divination

Lamas and rinpoches that have been helpful in my journey to learn something about Tibetan astrology are many, and they include Lama Karma Duldul, Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche, Ven. Bokar Rinpoche, His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche, His Eminence Jamgon Rinpoche, His Eminence Shamar

Rinpoche, His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, and of meeting His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje, and His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje

You would think that with all this help I would know a lot by now, but I am still just learning the essentials. Much of this is due to the fact that to learn the Tibetan astrology system, you have to first learn and practice the dharma, and that has been much more difficult to learn and do than the astrology part of it. I am still working on that

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Jan 4, 2020, 9:44 AM

RESTING

[This is me articulating the non-dual rudiments of the realization practices, as best I understand them.]

Meditating with the certainty of Insight Meditation, where Samsara, our experiences and concepts are the fuel for transformation through Insight Meditation, is a process, and a process whose very functioning precludes any possible monitoring on our part, i.e. pure non-duality. Insight Meditation (Vipassana) produces clarity and a non-distracted continuity or envelope that excludes the discursive mind to the point that no karmic traces are recorded. Insight Meditation of this special kind (part of Mahamudra Meditation) is a clear lucidity that is fueled by the conversion of the matter of Samsaric experience into seeing clearly or a clear seeing, and the resting in that “Seeing” itself. Seeing “seeing” itself seeing, where the process of this seeing, itself, a clear certainty, is perhaps the main byproduct in this type of meditation

Of course, words cannot express Insight Meditation, because it is one of the realization practices, which are said to be ineffable, beyond language and language’s ability to describe -- grasping at nothing. Insight Meditation is not a state to be reached, but rather a process to be maintained, much like you would turn on a light in order to see. If you turned off the light, you can no longer see, which is what is meant here by a “process.” In other words, like any process, Insight Meditation, at least in the beginning, must be

maintained. This seems to be akin to the line in the short Kagyu “Mahamudra Lineage Prayer” that states “Unwavering awareness is the body of meditation.” The process of unwavering awareness is just that, a process

To the degree that Insight Meditation depends on Samsara to get its fuel for realization (i.e. the idea that Nirvana is the realization of Samsara, by degrees or all at once), there is some “noise” involved, if only that of the process itself. And, this brings into view the idea of something akin to formless meditation, meditation that requires no form at all, and does not depend on any “fuel” from Samsara and its conversion or transformation

The event called “Recognition” as to the true nature of the mind has been defined, in simple terms, as just becoming familiar with our own mind so that we can use it. This familiarity extends to realizing Samsara in all of its complexity, and the gradual transformation (through Insight Meditation) of Samsara into Nirvana

In other words, through becoming familiar through Insight Meditation with the process of realizing Samsara, we may begin to develop a form of meditation that does not require any further familiarity with Samsara, a degree at a time. In other words, there is a form of meditation entirely without “meditation.” Way down the line of dharma practice there is one of the four yogas of meditation called “non-meditation,” which is not what I am referring to here

What I am pointing to here, and the whole point of this blog is that, while continuing with Insight Meditation, we may also find ourselves developing (or wanting to) a form of meditation that does not meditate, in the sense of our meditation on “something.” Instead, we mix our awareness with our innate awareness and simply rest there, with nothing to meditate on or with

Resting on top of our innate awareness. Resting, without thinking or meditating or “doing” anything at all

Jan 3, 2020, 8:44 PM

OUR PILGRIMAGE TO TIBET: CHAPTER THREE

Hong Kong to Kathmandu

After our Hong Kong experience, the 4-hour flight to Kathmandu was a welcome experience. For one, suddenly we were with a mix of Asian peoples—Chinese, Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan. The flight attendants had to announce everything in three languages instead of just in Chinese and English, as they had on our flight to Hong Kong. The seats were a little scruffy, and the food a bit funky, but the atmosphere on the flight was a lot more like a party than anything we had experienced so far. We were going to Kathmandu! We sat next to a Nyingma monk who was returning to his monastery—it turned out we knew some of the same people. It was a very nice time

We Arrive in Kathmandu

The flight from Hong Kong began to descend from the clouds into the beautiful Kathmandu valley, and thus we caught our first view of Nepal. In the approaching twilight, we could still see, clearly, the rich terraced green of the endless rice paddies and the fields below. As we got lower, we saw whole towns, and then individual houses. After deplaning and entering the airport, we walked along a path filled with blooming plants, the air alive with the sound of katydids and crickets. It was warm and smelled great. After almost 48 hours of traveling, we had arrived somewhere we actually wanted to be—at last

Nepal from the Air

It took what seemed like forever to fill out all the forms, pay airport taxes, examine our passports, receive a visa, get through customs, and exchange money. A note about money exchange: I spent far too long studying the various travel catalogues, trying to pick out a money purse or a secret money pouch—as they are sometimes called. In the end, I took a wide variety: the money belt, the wide purse that straps around your midriff; the packet that hangs around your neck; and even the secret money pouch that hangs from your belt, inside your pants, etc. We had them all. However, the one thing that none of these catalogues bother to tell you is that, in most

of these countries (Nepal, India, China), even a small amount of money takes up a huge amount of space. LOL

The problem is, almost no vendor is able to cash something as huge as the equivalent of twenty dollars, much less that of fifty or \$100. Perhaps a few of the largest hotels can, but never anywhere else. Finding a place to exchange money is difficult, so when you do find a place, you need to exchange enough to last you until you get to the next bank in a large city. Worse, any money you do exchange has to be exchanged for about the lowest common denominator, since this is the only cash that the common people and the shops will even look at. It is not that they are not willing to— they just don't have the change!

So, the result is that you exchange, say, one thousand dollars, for huge packs of money that end up being somewhere between 4 to 5 inches thick. It is bad enough in Nepal and India, but in China they staple these packs of currency with an industrial stapler, and the staples cannot be removed by hand—you need pliers. So here we are, with all of these nifty secret money pouches, and a wad of dough 7 inches thick. Go figure. So, you fill up all the money pouches with about ten dollars worth of money and stuff the rest (most) of it, in your knapsack. Your money belts cling to you and you cling to the knapsack

At any rate, with large rubber-band-bound packs of Nepalese currency jammed into my pockets (like Uncle Scrooge), we were ready to leave the protected area of the airport and venture out to where mobs of taxis and touts were waiting for us. By now, it was quite dark. Originally, there was to be a car sent to meet us, from Thrangu monastery in Kathmandu, but now, since we were a day or so late (remember we had to drive back home for a night) there was little chance of people we did not know being able to track our belated progress through the various delays to this late arrival. Thus, the lot of us crept outside the terminal. I had my family stand back (behind the police lines), with our mountain of baggage, while I ventured forward and carefully surveyed what awaited us

And it was indeed scary. On all sides, men rushed up and tried to seize any baggage a person might be carrying. Each person spoke in broken English, authoritatively asserting that only they could help you and see to your safety, and yet they were just what I was afraid of. How to choose, from the array of cars outside, which taxi was trustworthy and which might drive you off to who-knows-where?

As I emerged from behind the police line, I could see a whole wall of people behind a fence across the road, beckoning to me. I was about the only passenger coming out just then, but all of these people seemed to want my attention. And then, in the middle of those people, I saw a group of maroon-colored robes— Buddhist monks—who almost seemed to actually be waving at me—as if they knew who I was

Could these be the monks we had hoped would come, or, in my tiredness, did I only want to believe this? But no, they kept pointing at me and beckoning. I wasn't dreaming. They did come! These were the monks from Thrangu Monastery, including their head monk, and they had been waiting for us for a very long time. It was too good to believe, but sure enough, there they were, and they had a Toyota Land Cruiser as well. Goodbye taxi hunt!

We moved towards them, and suddenly we almost had to fight to keep track of our luggage, as many hands from unwanted helpers appeared everywhere. The monks struggled to control the flow of our luggage, which sort of floated on a sea of arms toward the back of the vehicle. It was all confusing to us, and we slowly realized that most of these folks were not with the monks. Somehow, we got our mountain of bags into the Toyota and started to squeeze ourselves in also—not to mention the monks climbing in on top of that. The unwanted helpers, who had obviously been drinking, were now demanding money, but I had not had the foresight to have any small bills handy at that point. The monks were laughing. We were packed in! There were four of us, I believe, smashed into the front seat. Much of my self was hanging outside the window as we pulled away from the airport

Words fail to describe that first night's ride from the airport to Kathmandu. I was about to get my first taste of a third-world country. We were tired and somewhat disoriented. As mentioned, I was jammed (like never before) into the passenger side of a Toyota Land Cruiser

Much of me, literally, was leaning and hanging out of the window, so everything along the streets was crystal clear to me. It was night, and there were no regular street lights—only a few lights of any kind. It had been raining recently, and the road was filled with both small and very large puddles, many of which had to be driven around. More, we were moving at what I felt was considerable speed, given the road conditions. The road was in bad shape

Worse, there were all manner of things in the road, a totally new experience for me. Hurtling through the dark we would come upon cows just standing there, and packs of dogs everywhere. And people—people all over the roadway—walking, standing, alone, and in groups. The extreme poverty of this city impressed itself on me, along with all the other input. Beyond the road, people were everywhere in the dark, gathered in small groups, smoking, exchanging things, watching us, and getting out of our way

It did not seem to me that the driver, leaning on the horn of the Land Cruiser, really gave anyone or any animal enough time to escape our forward motion. I kept looking for the main part of the city, or for any area of bright lights (civilization) to appear before us, but all I saw was the darkness of the streets, with brief glimpses here and there of what was happening around me. The city I imagined to exist never materialized and it began to sink into me that no such city actually existed—that we were in a very different kind of place than I had ever been in before or had even ever imagined. I was numbed by the constant jolts of the car on the street as it lurched from side to side, hitting the potholes. It was a crazy ride, seemingly right out of a movie like *Blade Runner* or *Road Warrior*. It had a post-apocalyptic feel to it, like a bad acid trip. I knew I was very tired, but I was also very awake now, taking all this in

We Never Got to the Bright Lights

The streets got narrower and narrower, until we were crawling through alleys having only inches of side-room to spare, and passing so close to people that their faces were right before my eyes. “What had I gotten us into?” I thought. Thousands of miles from anywhere, I knew, with no obvious place to get to—no city lights, no Holiday Inn. Just alleys and smells and dogs and darkness and... stop. We had arrived through the darkness to a large locked gate, which soon swung open, allowing us to drive into a kind of compound. We were at the Lotus Guest House—our hotel

Piling out, we were greeted by two woman friends of ours who had arrived some days before. One of them was in tears to finally see us safely there. I was, at this point, quite numb. We were literally helped to our room, our luggage deposited with us, and left alone

Gecko lizards, holding onto the walls with their suction-cup toes, were outside our door catching insects. Dogs barked continuously

in the distance. Our rooms were shabby, dirty, soiled, and used. There were no towels, and the bedclothes made me certain I would use my sleeping bag. Any lighting was stark and minimal. The bathroom was a new experience entirely, with a showerhead that used the entire room as its stall—the water just draining out a corner of the room. We were all experiencing jet-lag, shock, and culture shock at the same time. Yet, I was so glad we were here. This was Kathmandu

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Jan 3, 2020, 4:49 AM

NOTHING DOING

We rob our own cradle. Before we are done with something or a phase of life, we are done with it and already have to move on. I used to feel that I needed more time to work on each phase, but the time was up and either I graduated or was forced beyond wherever I was at. With our work still undone, we are done. We have already moved on. Time's up

Life is like that. It comes to an end before we are done with it. Is it that we have a certain allotted amount of time for each phase, like an SAT test, and done or not, we are done, or is it just time to move on? Either way, we move beyond. And why?

Because, whatever we are doing (even meditation) is still a doing of something, an effort, and we eventually (and naturally) no longer “want” to do that, to make effort. We used to want to do that, but now, not so much. And so, the alternative is to do nothing, for which, however, it doesn't take “anyone” to do. We reluctantly leave anyone at the door of doing nothing, what is called “formless meditation.” As if we ever had a choice. 😊 A little poem for today

FORMLESS MEDITATION

Meditation,

Without meditation,

So, to speak,

Without doing anything

Hard, not to do anything,

Because:

Doing nothing is still something

[

”

Jan 2, 2020, 10:12 AM

ASTROLOGER NOEL TYL PASSES

Noel Jan Tyl passed away on December 31, 2019

Noel, who was always adamant that you pronounce his name correctly, which as he would say in a loud voice “NO-ELL,” and god help you if you called him “knowel.” I have seen it many times

What can I say, Noel was one of my closest astrological friends. I believe Noel and I met in 1972 at my home in Ann Arbor. He came there and gave a talk to a small group of astrologers. It was “friends” at first sight. And Noel was instrumental in drawing attention to me when I was just starting out. He wrote the following, which was published a number of places:

“Michael Erlewine is the giant influence whose creativity is forever imprinted on all astrologers work since the beginning of the Computer era He is the man who single-handedly applied computer technology to astrological measurement, research, and

interpretation. He founded MATRIX Software long ago, and from crucial algorithms to interpretation zenith, Erlewine has been the formative and leading light of astrology's modern growth. After inventing the technological applications, Erlewine humanized it all, adding perception and incisive practical analyses to modern, computerized astrology. Now, for a second generation of astrologers and their public, Erlewine's genius continues with StarTypes and its simply amazing!" – Noel Tyl

We were good friends from the get-go. He called me his Little Leprechaun and I always said to him (because he stood 6'10" tall) that he was "outstanding in our field." We stayed in touch, although not so much in these last years, for which I now regret. Noel Tyl was nothing if he was not gracious, yet he could be very direct at times. We liked that about each other

I would help him with computer questions or problems and we would spend time at any conference we both attended. Mostly, we talked by phone. I liked Noel and he me. There was no one like him. He was a prolific writer, lecturer, and, as far as I could tell, made a good living through astrology, something that few astrologers could boast

I could go on, but perhaps a better way to gauge Noel is through this interview (and discussion) I had with him many years ago. Also, at the end of the interview is a more formal description of some of his accomplishments

I will very much miss Noel Tyl

INTERVIEW WITH ASTROLOGER NOEL TYL BY MICHAEL ERLEWINE

[This is an interview I did with my dear friend Noel Tyl decades ago. In re-reading it recently, I find it stands up well and deserves to be made available. I hope you enjoy it. This is not a strict interview, but also a dialog, a discussion.]

MICHAEL: Here, I'm interviewing the interviewer. We'll just run for a while, until I feel I have enough stuff to build a little picture. And you can guide me as well. Again, I don't care what order we do things. They may not be in this order. One of the things I don't want to forget is some comment about the state of astrologers and

astrology, any of that kind of stuff, and also all the parenthetical stuff may not be there in the final interview

What I'm interested in, aside from all the stuff we need to cover, is any of the things... first of all, the comments... this is why I like to spend more time getting to know the person and then do the interview, but we don't have a lot of time, so we'll do the best we can. I have to ask about your recent re-entry into astrology after some absence

NOEL: I object to the word "reentering" astrology, because I don't feel that I left

MICHAEL: What was your phrase? You're definitely coming back to it. Charles Jayne described three times in his life that he... he wandered off into stock market stuff for a while. He never gave up astrology, but at the same time it was not the primary focus for him. Now I get the idea that you are reinstating astrology as a primary focus. You have been doing your ad agency, but you've also been doing AFAN, serving the community of astrologers

NOEL: I think it is the role of a teacher to ascertain a reentry position to the public audience when he or she feels needed

MICHAEL: Why do we need you? I say this with tongue in cheek. We are thrilled to have you being more active

NOEL: Well, it's nice to be needed. At least, I think I am. I think another generation of astrologers has bloomed from the heyday of the 70s

MICHAEL: We were talking earlier about that. We felt that maybe a whole generation bloomed that we didn't even know about

NOEL: Exactly. I mentioned to you that it is a very good sign to be 6'10" tall and to have a grand reputation in astrology (hopefully) and go to conventions now and be forced to wear a nametag. People don't quite know me. And then if you say your name is Noel Tyl or Michael Erlewine, they maybe don't quite register who you are. And I think that's a very, very good sign that we have a burgeoning body of people fascinated by astrology, who bring to it more education background than perhaps heretofore

MICHAEL: And they haven't heard all our stuff before. 😊

NOEL: And haven't heard all our stuff, and we start to feel needed again. And that's why I just wrote a seventeenth book, a book I never thought I would write. I thought I'd said everything I knew how to say on paper. And here was an opportunity to challenge my own growth again and to share it with others

MICHAEL: A question about the set of books that you wrote: Now I would like you to verify something that may or may not have anything to do with it. Somebody told me that the set of books you wrote for Llewellyn...

NOEL: "The Principles and Practice of Astrology."

MICHAEL: That's right. They said that that set sold over a quarter of a million copies. Is that true?

NOEL: I think that's true

MICHAEL: Is that a quarter of a million sets or a quarter of a million books?

NOEL: Books

MICHAEL: So, divide that by 12

NOEL: If you wish, although there was an imbalance. Some did a higher volume of sales than others

MICHAEL: That's a lot of sales

NOEL: Yes. I think that's right

MICHAEL: What book has sold any more than that in astrology? I'm curious

NOEL: Oh, I'm sure the "A to Z Horoscope Delineator" did very well. Grant Lewi's books are classics. I think there are probably one or two of Rudyhar's books that have had a constant sale history over 30 years. His book "Astrology and Personality" was written in 1936, mind you, the year I was born. Rudyhar wrote that book, which still today challenges the mind and the spirit to further growth

MICHAEL: That's true. I'm thinking of other things that came up in our conversation that were interesting: Your whole take on computers and the modern counseling astrologer. We didn't finish that up. You know, some of this can be a discussion. I'm not going to mind that, either, if we just talk a little bit

NOEL: I've had a thesis that I've published in some of my works and often have spoken of in lectures about this eternal argument between "is astrology science?" and is astrology art?"

I have said that the stress upon its being a science to get all possible measurements and all of this stuff is perhaps a flight from the responsibility and challenge of being artistic. By that, I mean that I see astrologers in a one-on-one relationship with a client to be supportive and helpful so the client can help himself or herself. I think measurements must stop as quickly as possible, so that the substance can come in through inspiration to the medium

MICHAEL: What do you mean by measurements? Some astrologers make their whole astrology nothing but the refinement of measurement, like finer and finer orbs, etc

NOEL: I think that there's a time where the measurements are enough. Enough has been revealed so that you can get into the structure from a humanistic perspective

MICHAEL: We were talking about computers before. Computers do most of the measuring now for us

NOEL: Yeah, but I think that there's a fascination...

MICHAEL: On some people's part

NOEL: Yes, on some people's part to just dwell on the extraordinary measurability inherent in the field of astrology. You can go on and on and on. I love to tell the little story of the person who comes up to a lecturer with a horoscope that is filled with everything there is and says, "I have a locomotive, a seesaw, a teeterboard, and an IUD in my horoscope" — something like that. How much do you need to know to start to appreciate someone's position in life?

MICHAEL: I see your point

NOEL: And I think that's where the art of astrology comes into play. I remember Barbara Watters saying to me... she was a formidable intellect and one of our very, very sharply honed astrologers some years ago...

MICHAEL: She was a friend of Charles Jayne

NOEL: She said to me in one of our many conversations, "You know, not everyone who studies Latin in school becomes a classics scholar. Not everyone who takes a chemistry course in high school becomes a chemist. Not everybody who studies astrology can be an astrologer." I like to remind myself of that often, because there are times as a seasoned professional when I don't feel that I'm on, that I'm being the medium I think I am, for what I have learned about life and translated into the symbols of astrology and updated through time about a person's life

There are days that are good and days that are bad. There's a performance curve that we have as human beings. Again, this brings us back to the fact that astrology is not predictable. It is not 100% reliable. And I think the more we recognize that, the more we are freeing ourselves from the expectations of astrology that often get in the way of good performance. I like to say that if it were so reliable, as many people like to assert and that many critics falsely suggest, then the government would have taken over and we'd be charged for it on our income tax, and we'd get these reports and put \$5 in a grand central kiosk...

MICHAEL: Or at least there would be a lot of very wealthy astrologers, which there don't seem to be too many of

NOEL: Yes, there'd be a lot of very wealthy astrologers. And everybody is talking about how they've got the hold on the stock market and all these trends and...

MICHAEL: It doesn't seem to be true

NOEL: The proof is not in the pudding

MICHAEL: No. I had the best financial astrology newsletter writers here for a conference some years ago. There were some twenty-one of them. And almost to a man, no one seemed to have any money. I had to pay the way for many of them, and under the cover, for them to even get here, aside from the ones I'd already

agreed to pay for. Whatever they were doing wasn't enough to even make a decent living. How could they be advising others. I don't get it

NOEL: I can't comment on that

MICHAEL: No, I'm commenting on it because it amazed me. I know I can't use astrology in the stock market and make money, but I imagined these folks had figured out a way

NOEL: I'm just saying that I think that my contribution as a teacher in astrology is singularly focused on the creativity of the one-on-one relationship as a guide or as a counselor (I don't necessarily like those words) as sharing space with somebody and putting a tremendous fact in the foreground. And that fact is that, under stress, under development, nobody wants to be alone. And in that moment with the client, neither astrologer nor client is alone. And this is a very powerful, powerful gift, worth a hundred dollars to pay for

If somebody says to me, "How do you pick a good astrologer?" — a question I've had on a hundred television shows. I say you look into their eyes, you listen to them speak. You find out that what you know about life is much more important than what you know about astrology. Our symbols mean nothing until we give them meaning from experience. And then astrologers must learn — and this again is the teacher speaking — I want so much for astrology to understand that communication is the art. You can't necessarily put it on paper

There is an exchange of emotion and rapport and eye contact, this spirit-to-spirit communication that takes place in a good session, reading, that is dependent on artful communication. All of this brings me to the need constantly for the teaching of astrology to be improved. That's where I feel needed, and I think that the more our educators in astrology get into this artistic dimension of one-on-one, personal interaction through astrology, the more professional, we're going to be more reliable

MICHAEL: What can you say about the art of the one-on-one relationship, counseling, whatever you want to call it. Give us some insight about what you're talking about. What kind of techniques... what is it that someone can learn about how to do that. Can you give us some ideas?

NOEL: Francis Bacon said something that meant a lot to me in this regard. He said, "One-half of wisdom is the prudent question." I love to point out that you can ask three or four prudent questions and you've done your homework. You've met the client, you've made a physical, personal, chemical, neurological assessment of this client in that chit-chat moment of getting into a comfortable position with each other, and then you start your well-choreographed exchange. As a professional, you're going to have to take about the same length of time every session you meet someone, so you can see six people a day and earn your living this way. Say you take an hour and ten minutes. You've got to start and know where you're going. If I can ask you two or three very, very important questions about your life, I can get a good conversation going

I like to say to astrologers: "Do you still use jargon when you're meeting with a client?" If you take the jargon out (and it's meaningless)... if you take the jargon out, you find out how much time you have left to say something meaningful. It's shocking! It's shocking to hear on tape or witness and hear from people's experiences from an astrologer, how much unnecessary stuff is being said. And that's out of a fear and a sensitivity about performing with astrology

MICHAEL: This is an aside. I never use any jargon, ever. How would the client know what Mars Sextile Jupiter means? Forget about it

NOEL: Even with famous astrologers, for example, for whom I am their astrologer — nobody will be named — I say, "I'm not going to say a word in Astrology, and you have to understand that." Afterward, and it's always been successful, because I think I'm an engaging conversationalist as well as a reasonably good astrologer. And when I'm sitting with these people, I ask them the question. And I can say to an audience... I haven't statistically charted this, but I have found perhaps 60-70% of all my clients will probably tear up or literally shed a tear, sometimes convulsively within 5-6 minutes of our discussion

This is not anxiety; it is recognition. It is the feeling of release. I hear, "God, I knew you would get to that!" What does that mean? That means "I've been wanting someone to talk about this with me, and the fact that you can tactfully and gracefully present it to me, and I trust you, and I can talk about it makes me glad I came to see

you.” That to me is an art form, and not everyone can do it. And you have to do it in different ways with different clients. You have to use your strengths

I give master classes with astrologers, which may be limited to fifteen professionals, intensely, in a hotel suite, and I cater the lunch. And I spend the whole day intensely going over each of these individual astrologers, showing them their strengths and their weaknesses, and my strengths and my weaknesses, and putting them together in pairs and performing. It’s like creative dramatics. That’s how you learn technique. You don’t just go into a room and sit down with some measurements and hope what you read in a book pays off. Again, that’s why the teacher is needed

MICHAEL: That sounds good. I think that different astrologers... You have to satisfy some demand for measurement; otherwise, we wouldn’t have to call it astrology

NOEL: This is the scientific part of astrology, the fact that we can make reliable measurements

MICHAEL: But what’s also interesting is what it takes to satisfy someone, in terms of measurement...

NOEL: Someone being...?

MICHAEL: Anyone, an astrologer. How much measurement? First of all, sometimes I wonder about the fact that astrologers are these people who really measure their lives in a way that most people do not. Astrology in general. When you learn about yourself through studying your chart and transits and progressions and directions and so forth, that’s quite different than what the average person does with their life. (This is just an aside for us to talk about.) Sometimes I wonder about the kind of insecurity someone has to have to even be an astrologer, that they want to measure life this way

NOEL: Oh, I think you’re being gentle. I think that one of the prime motives in the beginning study, starting to study astrology, is not necessarily this very, very gentle dimension of “Gee, self-discovery will make me more comfortable and help me grow better.” I don’t think it’s that

MICHAEL: What do you think it is?

NOEL: I think it becomes that in the best scenario. What I think it is, is a combination of fear and a yearning to be in control

MICHAEL: Yeah, the second part for sure. We would all like to have at least some control of our lives

NOEL: There are some people who say, "I've heard that a thing called squares is bad. I am going home and I'll praise God, let me not have any squares in my horoscope." I've heard this a thousand times, and so have you

MICHAEL: Right

NOEL: "I want all trines," they say. Well, these are tragic cases when they happen in reality, having all trines. They are people who can't fend for themselves and they get victimized. It is a very difficult thing, and very few astrologers have actually seen two grand trines, or three, with no outlet squares for the corners. Very few astrologers have seen horoscopes with no oppositions, no conjunctions, and no squares — no 4th-harmonic dimension at all. I probably have seen five in my career! But when you do, you know it. So fear is a very important part, because you want to say, "I want to set up well by something I want to learn about, called astrology. And I think if I can see the good side of myself..." And then it starts to get into growth mechanisms and what-have-you. "I can control it if I can see it and measure it."

MICHAEL: The concept that I was kind of focusing on, which I think is just an interesting thing to see if you understand it in this field we call astrology is that the demand for some kind of measurement is implicit in the field itself. Otherwise, we could do palmistry or we could do...

NOEL: Absolutely. We could just throw pebbles or entrails onto the table

MICHAEL: That's right. What has been a source of interest to me, at least casually (and maybe even more than casually), is the fact that... and I've had a chance, like you have, to meet so many astrologers, and being somewhat technical myself, I've had a chance to know a little bit about the measurements. And what's interesting to me is that... and I don't know whether I can find the words to say it... it's like "Render unto Ceasar that which is Ceasar's"... everyone pays homage to the measurement part of

astrology. That is what we key on, that is the literal talisman we cling to. The degree to which astrologers pay homage is where they differ. Some of them... and we can make jokes and make fun of groups of astrologers... some of the siderealists are extremely heavy into measurement. It is like a dance

NOEL: The Uranians

MICHAEL: Yes. In order for them to be moved to the point of really being able to benefit a client, they must go through an arduous procedure of measurement. And there are other ones that just... so, I think one of the interesting things in my life about astrology — this is just something I want to talk to you about over there, and I'm doing it now, and I think we'll have plenty of tape — is that... isn't it funny? What does it take to pay Ceasar? For each one of us, it's different. In other words, what preparation must we go through to be ready for a client?

You talk to someone like Rob Hand or me; we've probably done a lot of technical stuff. There was one time in my career when I certainly felt I had to do... and I have talked about this with Great Britain's astrologer Charles Harvey, one of the best. He's the one I've talked to who's made it clear to me that he sits down and does an inordinate (from my point of view) amount of measurement, to the tune of many hours for each client! He does hours of measurement before he feels confident to bring to bear whatever he brings to bear, which is probably the same thing we all bring to bear. I think that's interesting. For myself, I've always gravitated toward the kind of techniques in astrology that required very little preparation

NOEL: Me too

MICHAEL: And if the thing, the technique, didn't work strongly for me, then I usually just didn't hang around with it long

NOEL: This is a very important thing that we're both saying here. Because all of astrology is volatile in nature, all measurement work. All systems and measurement work because it is the astrologer that gives them meaning

MICHAEL: That's right. I agree. That's fascinating. Astrology is an oracle, and the astrologer is the medium through which the oracle can speak

NOEL: It is fascinating. Rob Hand told me once — and I think I got it right; I called him up to confirm it when I put it in my book, but I can't recall it exactly now — all systems work for astrologers the first time and in retrospect, which I think is a beautiful way of saying what we just said

MICHAEL: What do you mean? All systems work the first time...

NOEL: ...you use one. You can make up a system. We can have a new system called the "duogesimal system of protracted directions" tomorrow, based on one-fourth of the lunar orbit...

MICHAEL: But if you make that up and give it to me, the first time I use that, it may not work for me. That's not what you're saying. You're saying we discover...

NOEL: You discover meaning. Take that out then

MICHAEL: No, none of this is necessarily in it. I want to have a discussion

NOEL: I just think it is important to understand that we give measurements meaning. And our minds are so swift and so innovative that we rush to make something significant. You walk into the room. You're a Catholic priest. You've driven to my house in a red Ferrari. Something's wrong. My mind rushes to bring together my expectation of you as a Catholic priest and my appreciation of the fact that you drove up in a very expensive, hot sports car that a playboy would use. To put those two things together is very difficult... my powers of observation... so I'm going to give it meaning. Maybe you're driving a car because the dealer is contributing to the church, and I haven't learned that fact yet. So I have to ask an artful question here to satisfy my social expectation of this status incongruence

MICHAEL: Right

NOEL: So those kinds of things are called deductions when they're done with one's eyes and brains and feelings, and they're called measurements when they're done with a computer or a hand calculator or a pencil. The same thing: our minds are constantly challenged to give meaning to everything that we do. And each gives unto Caesar that which Caesar requires

MICHAEL: And just to continue this another little bit further (see if you follow this): If you — which I'm sure you have, and I can speak for myself — if you've had the good fortune within your field (which I think all real astrologers do) to actually... for the techniques you use to become alive for you, the techniques that you've discovered or for you actually to carve out some techniques that no one's ever really done before, some amazing stuff happens

What happens is that what you're discovering (this is where you might not agree, but I think if you think about it, you would)... what we are discovering when we have an epiphany, an experience like that, at that time we always learn more about ourselves, and it results in a greater acceptance of ourselves. The residue — what remains after that experience — which has always fascinated me, that is: what remains after one of those experiences IS a new technique. The result of our discovery, what remains after the experience passes is the technique — how we did it. And the technique is the ritual to make it happen again for ourselves or for others. Yeats had a line in one of his poems that said, "The grass cannot but keep the form where the mountain hare has lain."

NOEL: It makes an impression

MICHAEL: Right. So, when we have an AHA! experience in astrology, when it's over and gone, the remains of that experience are what we call technique

NOEL: Yes. But it might not belong in every Caesar's technique

MICHAEL: Of course not; it is our technique. No, not everyone is going to be able to use it. If someone gives you or teaches you a technique, then you must energize that technique. Techniques need to be empowered, preferable from someone who has realized the technique and is capable of empowering others

NOEL: With your own mind, and giving it meaning

MICHAEL: My point is that if you fail to do it, to become empowered in a technique, then you are in doing a ritual with no meaning for you and this could result in actual harm to your practice or at least: no help

NOEL: Or it's like selecting a house system. What is more subjective than your personal apportionment of space and time?

You're a world authority on these things, on the division of space and time

MICHAEL: Right. Astrologers are

NOEL: Well, but you especially, Michael. You've made a specialty out of that. (That's beside the point.) The thing is that all of these things are arbitrary divisions just to give order to our measurements

MICHAEL: They're not arbitrary; they're conventions arrived at by common sense, by looking at how things actually are

NOEL: There are 56 house systems you could probably name in the next ten minutes

MICHAEL: A bunch, anyway

NOEL: And the midheaven and the ascendant are the same in almost all the house systems. Well, I picked the Placidus house system because my relativity of life and time fits that

MICHAEL: You mean you like the results it gives

NOEL: Yes. Because my symbolism gives to this Caesar what this Caesar is living

MICHAEL: But isn't that astrology as we know it, at least in this country?

NOEL: Yes. And coming back from Norway, they have so many births that are so far north, that it doesn't work very well. And they are hard pressed to give meaning, so I use Placidus system as a projection of me into somebody else's life, but if I see by my observation that Saturn is not in the 11th but in the 10th, because they are living in a different time/space division and different house system, I can make that correction in my own interpretive skill

MICHAEL: Ok

NOEL: I don't have to dispense with the system because it might not be applicable to that person

MICHAEL: Right. One of the things that I had trouble learning at first — and astrologers today don't seem to know this as a group — is just what you said. I'm going to echo what you're saying, but it took a long time for me to realize it was true. All of these systems work. The first hundred or two hundred astrologers I might have met, I had the systems that worked for me, and I wanted to tell them (if they would listen, and no one wants to listen because everyone wants to tell) and that goes for me too. I didn't particularly want to listen to what they were doing, but it took me a long time to realize that if it doesn't work for me, that doesn't mean that it doesn't work at all

NOEL: Correct

MICHAEL: That's a big lesson

NOEL: That's the lesson that I think we've been saying several different ways in this talk

MICHAEL: But, I would think that a lot of people need to hear that. I think that's a hard one to learn, that you can only say what does not work for you, and not that this or that astrological technique does not work. Period

NOEL: That's true. And this is how we grow. For instance, heliocentric astrology: I've read your work on it, and others

MICHAEL: And you can't get anything out of it

NOEL: And I've looked at it here and there, and it's just not in my bag

MICHAEL: It doesn't happen for you

NOEL: It didn't happen for me. But I'm not discrediting it

MICHAEL: No. It happens for me

NOEL: Because all measurements do work

MICHAEL: Right. So, that's a tremendous insight that all astrologers need to have. That should be one of the tools that any beginning astrologer must develop: that kind of respect for other astrologers

NOEL: I think so. Isn't it fascinating, when you're watching a news report, say, of a Kurdish rebel saying something in pain and passion and upset. And they can hardly get these foreign words out, because they have no food in their stomachs and they're dying on the mountainside. And you hear this strange language. And it's so foreign, and the whole state of this being is so foreign. And then you hear the simultaneous translation coming out in perfect English. And all words are saying the same thing. You don't give credit to something you don't necessarily understand immediately, symbolically. It takes a time to give it meaning. And you hear some Swahili tribesman drinking cow blood, saying something in sounds that are so foreign to you. And the translation is erudite. Fascinating, isn't it!

MICHAEL: Yes, it is

NOEL: One system just is so foreign, and yet it has its own beauty and eloquence symbolically

MICHAEL: That's good. And then if you look into it...

NOEL: ...and learn Swahili, you will find the same thing

MICHAEL: ...that in the same situation, you would have behaved the same way

NOEL: Again, we're back to communication and symbolization. That's why we can continue to write astrology books, I guess

MICHAEL: I haven't done any astrology writing lately, but you have. Let's talk about this new book

NOEL: "Prediction and Astrology." It's a dangerous subject

MICHAEL: That's a big topic. Give us some insight

NOEL: I tried to, first of all, teach this process of solar arc projection into the future, because it's been sorely neglected in the United States. Solar arcs are "where it's at" in many astrologers' opinions, because it's a fundamental symbolical projection system that goes way back to Ptolemy's early work with primary directions, and it's much simpler

MICHAEL: Just to sidestep here (what we call a sidebar), who are some of the astrologers that you know in the world today who really use solar arc?

NOEL: Europeans

MICHAEL: Mostly

NOEL: And I think it is centered in the brilliant work of Ebertin and the cosmobiological school. And he wrote that marvelous formative book of midpoint pictures called "The Combination of Stellar Influences." There has been...

MICHAEL: There's another sidebar. We can arrange all this. One of the most important things you've told me here is that you've taken that book, the concept of all the midpoint combinations and you've written an American English version of that. Not a copy — you've not translated it — but you've written...

NOEL: I've updated it, in my opinion. I took out some of the enormous... Well, I took out the enormous strain of Germanic pessimism, if you will...

MICHAEL: Good point

NOEL: ...that pervades Ebertin's work, which was written (as you know) at a very pessimistic time

MICHAEL: Where can we get a copy? I think everyone would like to read this. This is included in your book, right?

NOEL: Yes, this is the appendix of the book. It's about 85 pages

MICHAEL: That alone is something I know a lot of people really look for

NOEL: Thank you. It will be updated by somebody else as times progress in the future, as well. But it's fresh. It's using modern language and good images

MICHAEL: Great. Because I still go back to the Ebertin book, but I always have to compensate. I have to discount all of that pessimism. And I have to keep it in mind, but it creeps in. And if

you don't keep it in mind, it just creeps in. This way, with new words you wrote; that's good

NOEL: And I think that the introduction of solar arcs can change the way American astrologers understand time. I think we've been harnessed by the system of secondary progressions to an extent that is inhibiting. It really is inhibiting. I don't want to get into that now; it's in the book

MICHAEL: In America we have... My friend Charles Jayne was a great proponent of solar arc. That's all that he did, and he spoke out loud and...

NOEL: But the time wasn't quite ready, perhaps, for his presentation of it

MICHAEL: No, and he felt very badly toward the end of his life, that no one was getting that

NOEL: I discovered it when I lived in Europe, where it has the beautiful name SONENBOGEN in German. Curiously, Dane Rudyhar, in 1936, in "Astrology of Personality," was writing about what he called RAPPORT measurements, using a French word. And that's the beginning of solar arc application. And I cover all of this in the book, and Llewellyn has been nice enough to say it is the most comprehensive presentation of solar arcs ever written in the English language

MICHAEL: This is "Prediction and Astrology?"

NOEL: And that's the whole book, using solar arcs and transits to capture great predictions of past history. And I wrote it before the Iraq war (Mideast crisis). It didn't even have a name then. And all the predictions that came through measurements into the future actually came to pass in reality. And it's a great way, I think, for a student of astrology (a practitioner) to start to learn a new technique, a new set of symbolization

MICHAEL: In a word, what is your take on prediction in astrology?

NOEL: I think we have to know that it doesn't always work. And as soon as you say that, you're free. If you say the converse, if you say "Prediction and astrology is just a matter of mastering the technique," you're a prisoner

MICHAEL: Why doesn't it work?

NOEL: I don't know that we know the answer to that question. Boy, have I pondered it! It can be that your hands might be dirty, and you're being distracted, and perhaps you're not the best medium for the symbolization. Or maybe you're not listening to the answers to the questions you're...

MICHAEL: What does the average astrologer tell himself?

NOEL: I don't know. I just think you have to admit fallibility. I think wisdom comes from knowing what you don't know. At age 54, I have learned through my career in astrology what I do not know. Conversely, what I do know, I have a high reliability about — a high reliability. And that's the making of a professional. A tennis star knows just when to lob the ball as an offensive measure, or when to aim a certain shot down a certain alley. You learn these things. And knowing what you don't know keeps you from erring off the path of your major strength

MICHAEL: Don't you think that a lot of astrologers... or do you feel that a lot of astrologers, when things don't work predictably, they assume... we've always assumed that there's a piece of the puzzle missing. Do you feel that's true? Or is it that some things just don't work?

NOEL: I don't know. That gets very existentially complicated

MICHAEL: It does indeed

NOEL: Not knowing all, keeps all of us human. You can look at it that way too

MICHAEL: No problem

NOEL: No problem with that. And that's a very, very nice thing. I think one of the keenest things an astrologer can communicate with a client at a difficult time of discussion is simply to say, "I don't know." For some reason, the client immediately feels very comfortable, because here's somebody else who doesn't know. I mean, there are problems we face where we do not have a solution

MICHAEL: Amen

NOEL: Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief, or astrologer cannot give a solution. Time is the solution

MICHAEL: Right. Time will heal all wounds

NOEL: Well, why do we have these marvelously conventional adages in our languages? It is because they prevail with truth

MICHAEL: That's right

NOEL: This is the fascinating thing. So, I've tried in this book to be brave

MICHAEL: What does that mean?

NOEL: I've tried to be courageous and say... The final chapter is "Managing the Indeterminable." King Olaf of Norway died on January 17. He was 84 years old. His personal reality included a heart attack the year before. Now as I start to add details — that he was a very old man, that he had a heart attack — all of a sudden, the measurements that happen there (a very interesting set of solar arcs and a very powerful transit) occur with more meaning because we know more about the reality of the situation. Backtracking from that kind of observation and studying great predictions set up in the past (the birth of Alexander the Great or Evangeline Adams's famous stories), we find that we have to know as much as possible about the reality in order to take it gingerly into the future. We can't just say, "Because of this measurement in future time, such-and-such is going to happen." As soon as we understand that we must expand the present backwards into the past to find out past reaction, past reality development, growth rate, we can then expand it into the future through cycles, because it ends up that absolutely everything in our symbology, when it moves through time, is based upon the concept of cycles

MICHAEL: Things recur. When you reach the point of no return, that's a bad spot

NOEL: Your cycle has ended

MICHAEL: Well, your interest is lost if there's nothing coming back, if you get no return on your investment

NOEL: Yes. The most fascinating thing for me in the writing of this book (besides coming to grips with the very, very difficult premises) was trying at the same time to teach a technique I truly feel has a high incidence of reliability. I was fighting myself, and that is a struggle that goes on in learning astrology and applying it. I researched as thoroughly as I possibly knew how to do the major hotel fire of the Windsor Hotel that Evangeline Adams made her reputation on. She supposedly met in the hotel one evening with the proprietor of the hotel (it was a big-time hotel) and read his horoscope and saw the worst possible things in the world. When he came back the next morning, she was still shaking in her body from the portents of the danger around this man. He came in with a smile on his face and checked her out again, and she advised him, "You are in real danger (your whole family)!" And she said that he walked through the door to the greatest flaming hotel disaster of all time. It turned out that she wrote this account 28 or 29 years after the fact. It turns out that the fire took place 6 1/2 hours later than she said it did. And so the drama of the thing starts to break down a little bit. Her own way of seeing her own career was very self-aggrandizing. She was a very dramatic woman

MICHAEL: It's understandable when that happens

NOEL: Yes, exactly, to a degree. And she was very, very sensitive and well meaning, and this was a powerful combination, especially in a woman during that time in history. And then I tried to set up what she saw in this man's horoscope, and I could not locate this man's birth record or marriage license anywhere. I go through the whole research to show how to rectify a horoscope under those conditions. I finally found his gravesite in Chicago, and his gravesite had no birth date on it. And then I found, finally, the old records of when his body came in to be buried, and it said how long he had lived in years, months, and days. And then I proceeded to create that moment of what Evangeline Adams saw in that horoscope that was her "claim to fame" — intentional pun — the great fire prediction of Adams. And in this process you learn the drama of dealing with a prediction, the responsibility of talking about it. These are hard things to teach and hard things to learn. I hope I contributed some of it with a book that has some courage about these things in it

MICHAEL: Let me ask, and this might not be on the tape. I'm just curious. What did you learn in this process about yourself?

Obviously, any time we get really energized, we end up learning more about ourselves. Was it something like that?

NOEL: About myself?

MICHAEL: Or about your life or whatever. Usually when we have an epiphany, there's something we discover

NOEL: Well (chuckle), the motivation of my writing this book, which I never thought I would write, was very poignant and swift in my consciousness. I had made some predictions for a major life change of my own, which did not come to pass as I anticipated. And they were very grand. I talk about them in the book. And they were very disruptive. It was a midlife crisis. It was a change of direction in my life. It's still happening as we speak now

MICHAEL: I'd like to hear a little bit about that. We all are interested, especially those of us who are a little younger than you but still close to your age. What is going on?

NOEL: My Sun is in 10 degrees of Capricorn, and we know that for the last two years we have had successive transits of Neptune, Saturn, and Uranus over that degree. The United States is at 12 Cancer. There are 10 or 12 degrees of cardinal signs all over this world that are feeling an accumulation of extraordinary developmental tension, affected by conjunction, opposition, or square. I absorbed it all in a very, very powerful way when, at the same time, a major solar arc measurement (solar arc Uranus) conjunct my ascendant. That's powerful! And in 90% of all cases, it is a major individual change of life direction, usually with concomitant geographic displacement

I applied for new life directions in other cities. I was trying to work the astrology. It has yet to come to pass. But this delay (this slight delay, because it is starting to come to pass) enriched me, I guess, through a lot of self-questioning, analysis of my needs, strategizing about the best deployment of adult perspectives and energy. And I said, "My gosh, I'm going to write about this." The teacher in me came out again, and perhaps it is a return with greater intensity than in the last ten years, for instance, to the astrology world. And I'm highly enthused about this, and we shall see

I also came up with a concept that helped explain measurements that seem to parallel events slightly out of time phase. Very often,

astrologers report, “My gosh, this very complex set of measurements or this very dramatic set of measurements occurred in October, but the event that seems to be tied to them did not occur until January.” The following January, four months later. For instance, I anticipated my mother’s death, not in the point of death but as a major change of life situation for her and her health and all of those things, that added up to death, and I like to smile because I know she may be appreciating this with her sense of humor, but she died four months later than she “should have,” so to speak. Her life situation changed four months later. So I started thinking that there is a hierarchy of measurements, especially in solar arcs, where the very powerful ones expand over a length of time. This concept I like to call “time orb,” which gives the astrologer symbolical freedom to go ahead or backwards in time in the future

MICHAEL: Can you clarify that please?

NOEL: Yes. Let’s just say you’re doing a reading in January, and there’s a major situation centered around July. The first thing you do is ask a question to the client, “What do you project for yourself for the next six months?” That’s a prudent question — one-half of wisdom. And we get to a projection and we start to understand the symbolizations in the person’s life, and what happens is, you must know from experience that the time-orb might see this starting in March and it might go through December. And that’s a very small time orb in solar arcs. That’s 5 minutes of arc per month, which is a very small orb, so it’s valid by any measurement system to have that size an orb. But it’s a remarkable span of time sometimes when the measurements are very powerful

MICHAEL: Coming events cast a shadow? Is it that kind of...?

NOEL: Very well said

MICHAEL: Both ways, right?

NOEL: Both ways

MICHAEL: It’s like a bubble

NOEL: Yes. I love this idea of expanding the present backwards and forwards

MICHAEL: What does that mean exactly?

NOEL: Well, we make the present moment significant in terms of past experience and also future projection. So, this sense of time orb helps the astrologer deal with complex measurement images like lots of midpoint pictures, which is a very simple thing now with Matrix Software and other software that comes out with solar arcs, and you just have to know which ones are going to have the potential of symbolizing something extremely important. Then you look for a transit trigger and put it into the personal reality system of the client, and you're in business. And that's all we can do in astrology

Another thing that I've found in my research of prediction is something we've lost sight of in astrology, and I think it's a new frontier. It's a frontier rediscovered

MICHAEL: They all are

NOEL: The thing is fixed stars

MICHAEL: Tell me about that. I've done a lot of work with that material myself.

NOEL: I know, and nobody has really brought it down to earth, in my opinion, in this epoch

MICHAEL: Okay

NOEL: The ancient astrologers, as you well know, really dealt only with what they could see: conjunctions and squares sometimes, but mainly conjunctions, eclipses, and fixed stars

MICHAEL: Right

NOEL: And the ascendant, the horizon

MICHAEL: The rising of the stars

NOEL: Rarely, rarely was there discussion of the midheaven, although Ptolemy did. But all the others around did not. And you read about the Black Plague and the London Fire in Lilly's work. And all these great predictions that I reassembled in my book showed the reliance these people had on fixed stars. Lilly's prediction of the Black Death and the big fire in 1666 in London was based upon a fixed star position on the ascendant of London.

And that's about it! I found out when the fire started, where it started. We've drawn all the event charts possible, and they're eminently uneventful. Was something else happening? Do astrologers have some other magic? Or did just Lilly just crib from Nostradamus' quatrains predicting exactly the fire and the plague of that year? He saw the fixed star. Did his mind rush to give meaning to it, influenced by all the things he had read? And that prediction by Nostradamus was made 111 years earlier

So constantly astrologers are pulling stuff out of past experience and trying to relate it all to forge something that's reliable in the future. This is a tremendous drain on creativity. It is an art form. It is a highly intra-social, interactive, demanding exchange between astrologer and client, and not enough is being taught about it. So I'm trying to contribute

MICHAEL: So, what did you find about fixed stars?

NOEL: Fixed stars need a lot of work

MICHAEL: Is it the fixed star, or is it that general direction?

NOEL: You mean the position of it?

MICHAEL: Is it the position of the star, the point, or is it the area of the heavens in which that star is embedded?

NOEL: I don't know. It seems to me that... let's put it this way. These astrologers, like in the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries, were no dumbbells. They really weren't! They really and truly knew their stuff

MICHAEL: I hope so

NOEL: And they were writing for the public at this point. They weren't just getting money from kings. When we get into Lilly's time and John Gadbury and all those others, they were at each other's throats. They were highly competitive because they were earning their money off drastic predictions and selling them in pamphlets. They would make these predictions for many years into the future so they could cushion their bets. And the public loved to read it

MICHAEL: That's not dissimilar to today

NOEL: Thank you for making my point. So, I play it very close to the vest. I think you can only go six months or so, eight months, looking at a time warp very carefully and adjusting all of that with a personal reality. Nothing is going to happen that has not already happened, if you will, in the extension of the personal reality, what is possible

I can't be a neurosurgeon, but I can certainly "doctor" a situation of a certain kind by controlling my nervousness. I'm using the same words in a different way to fit my reality. Fixed stars, by conjunction, without all the parameters of declination and those things that become terribly technically sophisticated now... line-of-sight measurement seemed extremely important, and it permeates all their work. We've lost sight of it. The only thing we know now about are using the dire, suggested symbolic meanings given to fixed stars that have come down from those times (filled with plague and murders and assassinations and upset) ii Vivian Robson's book, and that was 60 years ago. Somebody has got to come out with a practical, easy-to-use, reliable reference on fixed stars to start us on another wave of research. And it's a very interesting frontier

MICHAEL: It is an interesting frontier, something I know a little bit about and we can chat about it for a minute because I think we've gotten a lot of good stuff anyway

I spent some creative time looking into it very intensely, which is the way anyone is going to have to look into it, no matter what they do. There's going to have to be intensity and that kind of intense activity that expands the moment or the research (that's what these things are like). What came out of it for me (and I did present it in my book "Astrophysical Directions") is that, instead of focusing on fixed stars as this fixed star or that fixed star, I grouped them all so that people could understand the groups to which individual stars belong. For example, the group of stars of which the fixed star Antares is a member is a certain kind of star, a red star that indicates that the star is in a certain place in their lifetime, in this case slowly dying. The life and death of a star is not dissimilar to that of a human. I did that kind of grouping for everything out there (fixed stars, black holes, quasars, etc.), and I really believe for myself (and I also found a lot of myself through that exploration), I went through some real discovery times, which is a sign of success, a sign that what remains of your work may not be good

for anyone else but the technique that results from that is going to be a valid technique

My point is that all celestial objects out there cluster or group. They each belong to a group and by knowing about the nature of the group you know about the nature of the star or object much easier than trying to treat each object on its historical reputation, like that Antares on the ascendant indicates blindness, and so forth

NOEL: You made that point earlier

MICHAEL: I know. I'm just restating it because it is essential to understand. All real astrological techniques are the result or remains of incendiary personal experiences. They are rituals to recreate the experience, techniques are

NOEL: I don't know enough to speak smoothly about fixed stars. You know, I'd like to be glib and say, "Algol, which symbolized decapitation for the ancients, could today be updated to losing one's head in many different ways." But that's too much in jest. I know what you've done in your work with fixed stars, but I had a real problem, for example, in something that I discovered in setting up the birth of Alexander the Great by what the great magician Nechanabus anticipated

MICHAEL: Which was this precession thing

NOEL: Yes. But hidden in this precessing thing (I wasn't going to talk about that)... What I discovered was, the fixed star Regulus, which became very important in the arrangement of the birth time of Alexander the Great (and it was arranged)... that star, with all its leonine proportion at Cor Leonis, the heart of the lion (that constellation) was actually laid in Cancer when the birth of Alexander the Great took place in Leo. Now I wonder, did Regulus and Cor Leonis get its bravura meaning from the fact that it was at the heart of the lion in this constellation, which never changes? Or did it have to wait until it got into Leo for Ptolemy to label it as leonine and heroic? I personally feel it's from the constellation and not from the ecliptic longitude

MICHAEL: This is the age-old argument, right?

NOEL: But I bring it again to the fore (1) to ask for more research on fixed stars in a practical way, (2) to show how pervasive it was

in ancient times, and (3) if it meant so much then, why doesn't it now?

MICHAEL: And I repeat a little bit here the idea that unless astrologers begin to understand the whole structure of space and how all of the different planes you're talking about move and interact together, interdependently, and how the whole thing evolves, I don't believe that we're going to see fixed stars in a singular sense assume the importance that they once did. I think that what we're going to have instead in the future is an understanding of the structure of space. I think what is significant from my investigation was "Where is all the stuff? Where is all the matter?"

And it isn't evenly distributed; it's very unevenly distributed. In fact, it's incredibly massed in just two areas of the sky. One is the center of the galaxy. Then even more predominant, much, much more, of all the matter that's known to us by science, by all our means of measurement, is centered at 1 degree Libra at the center of the supergalaxy, which in a word is: just about everything is in that direction

There is a lot more to it. There are a lot more centers and planes and stuff. Once you understand that, you find it easier to take a different approach to this kind of study. You understand where things are, and of course, anything that's going to be going through late Virgo and Libra, etc. In fact, you can even derive the meaning of the signs (the popular sun-sign meanings) from understanding the structure of the matter in space. You can understand why they say Capricorn...

I went through, and this is just an aside, but it's an interesting one. I'll just be brief. I could go on and on, like anyone. The point is that I spent years studying the galaxy center — I mean years! I've seen people write about it now

NOEL: The galactic center

MICHAEL: Yes, the center of our galaxy. I described it. I minutely tried to describe it. And years later, I suddenly realized that all I had to do to correctly describe what I'd spent all this time on was simply to take the two signs bordering it (Sagittarius and Capricorn) and mix them together and understand them. That's where it is, right near the galactic center at about 26 degrees Sagittarius. And that's

what it is, the traditional meaning we give to the two signs Capricorn and Sagittarius. All the time, the meaning was already right there, captured in our understanding of those two zodiac signs. It was always already there, right in front of me. I did all this looking at charts and looking at it and this and that, paying no attention to the traditional, simple sign stuff, which was telling me the same thing all along. What a surprise!

NOEL: And the ancients were so skilled at sign delineation, and we've gotten away from that a little bit too. Just as a footnote here, I wanted to say something else: Tycho Brahe was known more as an astronomer than as an astrologer. Today in Denmark, his home, he was the astronomer, because he invented all these special viewing instruments, and this was before the telescope. Now he wrote a book that Kepler brought out in 1604, I think it was right after that Brahe died, that cataloged by line of sight some 777 fixed stars. Think about this. Isn't that amazing?

MICHAEL: Yes

NOEL: There's something out there

MICHAEL: Right. That is for sure

NOEL: It's fascinating

MICHAEL: Yes, it is interesting. That is for sure

NOEL: Thank you, Michael

MICHAEL: Yes, I think we have plenty of stuff here. The end of it for me (I think I've told you this before) is that the end of my study... I went out looking at the stars and all that stuff, the blackness and the coldness of space that I had been raised to understand, being brought up in the '50s and 1950s science, that when I finally saw myself there, it wasn't black and cold. We were raised to think of outer space as black and cold and that mankind was huddled here in a warm spot cringing before the vastness of the void. It was like we did not belong. We were not a part of this, but were alone out here in space

But then I realized that I was its product, the product of space. I was its very child and that "we" are in fact intelligent life we have

been looking for. We are the spaceman we are always thinking will come. We already are here. We came

Before that, I had never made the connection that I was a product of the galaxy. I'm its child. I'm its eyeball, right? We are the universe looking at itself

NOEL: Landscheidt talks this way, as you know

MICHAEL: Landscheidt and I talk together about this. But my point is that I actually had that realization myself. It's easy to say the words and say, "Well, of course, we're of the universe. We're not separate from it."

NOEL: We're nerve ends of the earth

MICHAEL: That's right. And I hadn't realized that. I had been brought up in the '50s sort of to feel isolated from... we were cast out... man was lost out here at the end of the galaxy, on a tiny speck of dust. That's a bunch of baloney

NOEL: This is why your beautiful center here is called the Heart Center

MICHAEL: Well, it might be

NOEL: And it's filled with light. I want everybody to know that

MICHAEL: Thanks. Anyway, I think we have some good stuff from which I can build a nice article out of. A little interview...

Noel Tyl can be reached at www.noelyl.com

[end interview]

About Astrologer Noel Tyl:

Noel Tyl [no-el' til] is one of the foremost astrologers in the world. His thirty-three textbooks have led the teaching of astrologers for two generations. Tyl wrote the comprehensive professional manual for the field— the 1,000-page text *Synthesis & Counseling in Astrology* – which put astrology securely in pace with the most sophisticated disciplines of humanistic studies extant today. As well, most recently, he has written *Vocations: The New Midheaven*

Extension Process, a much-needed guide that will forever change the process of astrological vocational counseling

In the 1970's, it was Tyl who first integrated psychological need theory into astrological analysis. In the years thereafter, he has continued to hone that process with an eye to keeping analysis clear and relevant to his clients' lives. He has eschewed the all-to-common practice of adding unnecessary layers of measurement complexity onto chart analysis simply because computers allow it to be done. He offers a streamlined approach that brings each horoscope vividly to life and properly centers astrological consultations on the reality experience of people rather than upon a compendium of technical textbook measurements

Tyl lectures frequently in many countries and maintains a client list of individuals and corporations throughout the world. He is now making some of his seminars available on DVD's with his new "Tyl Teaches" series. In August, 2006, Tyl released the first two volumes – Volume 1: "15 Indispensable Keys to Analysis" and Volume 2: "The Magic of Solar Arcs." In these two full-day seminars, Tyl shows astrologers how to unchain themselves from "this means that" thinking and thereby free themselves to engage their clients in meaningful, productive conversations

Tyl is a graduate of Harvard University in Social Relations (Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology)

Tyl was a co-founder of AFAN (Association for Astrological Networking), astrology's world organization, and retired from the position of Presiding Officer after serving AFAN for eleven years

In May 1998, Tyl was honored at the United Astrology Congress, the world convention for astrology, as the recipient of the Regulus Award for establishing and maintaining professional image in the field

Noel Tyl's birth info: Dec 31, 1936, 03:57 PM EST, West Chester, PA

Jan 1, 2020, 10:36 AM

MY NEW YEARS RESOLUTION

In recent months, I have been quiet about my own inner goings-on because those goings-on have been, well, going on and have not come to any conclusion or even to a real point. And, if there is no point, I can't make a point. Neither can I not make a point. And so, while I understand this, perhaps I can say this much. This has been in the process of resolving itself, so it must be my New Years resolution

My root teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, taught that all fear or anxiety (outside of a direct threat like a car about to run us over) is the result of our undue fixation on the Self, and that such fixation is hopeless because the Self has no permanent existence or "Soul," NO POINT, but is simply a collection of our attachments – likes and dislikes. Perhaps, we cannot become enlightened while such self-fixation continues to exist, yet, IMO, such self-fixation can become less and less important to us through dharma practice as, through that careful practice, our fixation on our Self becomes fatigued. It is still there, of course, and atrophying, but no longer our main focus or distraction. We can let some air in, although the whole process (if too public) may well be offensive to others

And, we can eventually reach a point when our fear of losing the Self is no longer a habitual reaction, but at best an obvious sidebar. In other words, we slowly phase out our fixation on ourselves, our continued self-reference, rather than oppose and struggle with it, which opposition just makes the Self into a tar baby to which we then stick like glue. And, for me personally, this has been very hard to do, this letting go of self-reference

Where did this Self-fixation come from? Apparently, there is no time up to now when this fixation was not present in all of us. And this is probably why it is so shunned. How do we act without reference to our person, the one who is doing the acting through the filter of a particular person and personality?

In my own case, such fixation was exacerbated by the fact that I never got out of high school, and so was perhaps more sensitive (and insecure) than most about being recognized for whatever useful things I have done. And so, pride in my self was endemic. Or, was it because when I was being potty trained, my mother used to tell me to "Do more!" And this she did so much that I thought poop was called "Do More," and it was not until I got in grade school that I realized that none of the other kids knew what "do

more” was. I joke with myself that perhaps that is why I became such an over-achiever, always trying to do more. I digress. ☺

Granted, the Self can be a sticky subject, so to speak. And, yes, I finally see that we should have no finger on that scale, no hitchhiking of our Self-fixation along with the purity of the dharma. It's like a variant of the old line by Gertrude Stein, “Before friendship faded, friendship faded,” but morphed to suit me, “Before the Self faded, the Self faded.” Yet, the Self's continual interference by demanding attention is (or can be) a stain or obscuration, although I feel that this approach I prefer, of gently toning back the Self, is preferable to locking horns with it in a death grip, which is more common, i.e. actually hating our Self or taking up arms against a Self, which is only a reflection of our own likes and dislikes held together by the glue of our own attachments or fixation. I prefer a more gradual and gentle exhuming of the flaws of Self, however objectionable that may be to the public

As a teenager, I used to handle snakes, big poisonous snakes, like 5-6 foot rattlesnakes, whose girth was as big as a man's upper arm, etc. One had to do this very carefully. Handling the Self is similar. The Self has to be desensitized and that involves repeatedly touching it until that sensitivity or fixation is lessened and gradually lost. Conventionally, this is considered a rather ugly process, especially if it is exposed to public scrutiny, and lord knows, it is. People hate the revelation

I realize how obnoxious my self-reference may appear to others, for which I apologize. Yet, it has been the most direct way for me to work with my Self, instead of hiding that self-reference under a bushel, under a mask of smiles and conventionality. About the best I can say is that this process should not be unknown to any one of us and, as “ugly” as it may seem, it is a process with a beginning (timeless), middle, and an end. I am working it out and perhaps have recently made some progress in de-fixating on the Self until it does not demand as much attention all the time. For me, this amounts to a realization

And, the state of this process is quite recent, that I realize how obnoxious it may appear. And, as mentioned, about all I can say is that we can easily recognize the invoking of the Self. Such recognition is not lost to us because we can see it in others. I have never had anything like a handle on it until now. And, now that I am

more aware of it, I plan to (and I believe) am more (or will be) able to not inflame that fixation so easily

Here is a poem I wrote years ago about this situation. A little dark, yes, but it should be recognizable to all

PHOENIX

“Personality,”
Bright beauty of the night,
That terrible crystal,
Burning in the darkness,
At the very edge of time

Watching,
In rapt fascination,
Fires,
Impossible to ignore,
Forever frozen,
On the face of age

It is a dark light,
Indeed,
Funeral pyres,
Signifying nothing,
But impermanence

This is a fire,
That does not warm

”

Jan 1, 2020, 2:31 AM

HAPPY NEW YEAR 2020!

On this New Year's Eve and New Year, I wish everyone the best for this New Year of 2020

Below are four free e-books, one for each season of the year 2019. They contain most of my blogs on dharma, astrology, music, etc. for this last year, all in one place, for those interested

Dharma Blogs: Winter 2019

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Blogs%202019%20Winter%20FIN.pdf>

Dharma Blogs: Spring 2019

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Blogs%202019%20SPRING%20DONE.pdf>

Dharma Blogs: Summer 2019

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Blogs%202019%20Summer%20.pdf>

Dharma Blogs: Fall 2019

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Blogs%202019%20%20FALL.pdf>

[Images by me.]

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