

Dharma Blogs

2018 Winter



by Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Winter of 2018 posted on Facebook and Google+.

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THE NEED FOR OXYGEN

December 3, 2017

There's little to no oxygen in the conceptual cage many of us live in. I can remember 1964, the year I spent living in Berkeley California, ostensibly studying with a professor there. But in reality, most of that time was spent discovering myself, not studying books. Looking back, that was much more important than the tutoring.

I lived in a small flat near the corner of Haste Street and Dana Street. It was just a tiny thing, with one room, a bathroom like you might find on a train, and a miniature kitchen. The whole thing was like living in a subway car. The entranceway was about a 50-foot pathway covered overhead with flowering fuchsias. Walking through those fuchsias was like a scene out

of Dante's inferno. Those days I was working busing dishes at Caffè Mediterraneo or simply "The Med" as it was called.

My apartment had a flimsy screen door at the back that opened into a parking structure. And I would sometimes go to that door and lean out just to take in the cooler air of night. That's the way I feel about conceptuality. It's anaerobic; there's no oxygen.

I was 23-years old and it was there that I kissed the 1950s mindset in which I had been raised goodbye. It was the night I took my first dose of LSD, pure Sandoz acid, direct from Switzerland. Very few people had taken it at that time. LSD tore my world apart and I could breathe for the first time. Acid was a blessing.

And while I would not recommend it to young folks today, LSD back then was a shortcut to sanity for this child of the 1950s, shattering the glass bubble in which I had lived up to that point. Suddenly, there was dialog and airflow between myself and the world around me. We were one thing, not two. In fact, that night was when I first realized that I was a victim of my own tortured mind and psyche. Much to my amazement, there was no longer an inside or outside; they had always already been one, only I had never realized it. And then, that night I did.

I have written about my first acid trip before, so I am not going to drag out again all of what took place that night, but I include some articles for those of you with a need to read that. Suffice it to say that through that experience, as mentioned, I realized that everything out there in the world, especially what I had been most afraid of, was coming from in here, from my own mind. And in that revelation, given that insight, I suddenly had a calculus that I could work. I was no longer a victim of, well, myself. And although it took decades for me to sort it out, I was fully engaged from that one night in Berkeley, California. Like a newborn infant, I was alive and breathing from that moment onward

Here are a couple of articles on all of that, the first is more formal or general, the second very specific and not at all formal. You are warned.

Meanwhile I am contemplating my life.

ANN ARBOR MICHIGAN: A WISHING WELL

December 9, 2017

Most of us have a home town where we came from. Ann Arbor Michigan is my home town; I grew up there. In the 1960s, Ann Arbor was very different from the overly-caffeinated and sophisticated city it is today. For one, it did not use to take me 20 minutes to drive across town and there were places to park back then, but that is beside the point. In the 1960s, Ann Arbor appeared much less sure of herself (or was it just me growing up?). The city seemed at the time to be overly self-conscious (me again?) and playing second fiddle (weak sister) to other more aggressive college towns like Cambridge, Madison, and Berkeley.

Way back then Ann Arbor had not yet found its place in mainstream America and what it lacked in bravado, it made up for in introspection and a quiet humility. Was it humble or being-humbled is a good question. What I did not fully grasp at the time is that Ann Arbor is fecund, a fertile place, indeed a womb. It is a very pure feminine.

In the 1960's, Ann Arbor's innate receptivity and 'femininity' might well have been mistaken for passivity and naiveté, not that there was not some of that also present. We were looking out at other college towns and not inward at our own. Ann Arbor in the Sixties was not fully aware of itself, a city yet to awaken to its mission, but nonetheless busy taking a direction that time would reveal as significant. And, yes, it took a while.

Most city names are feminine, but that is not what I mean by saying that Ann Arbor is "feminine." There are two kinds of sculpture, one made by adding clay until we have a form and the other by cutting away stone until we have a form. Ann Arbor is definitely of the second variety. It reveals rather than posits; it is passive rather than active, passive enough to give and actually allow birth to take place.

At the time, growing up in Ann Arbor (and never really knowing any other city), I was only dimly aware that my home town was more 'passive', more giving (as in 'giving way'), and generally just more receptive and understanding than some. I

might better say that I felt that other college towns (like Berkeley or Cambridge) were in some way more aggressive or just 'on their game'; perhaps "mature" is the right word. For those of us who lived there, it was natural to assume that Ann Arbor was busy bringing up the rear. Obviously, it had not yet found itself.

Exactly when Ann Arbor did find itself (in the contemporary sense) I cannot say. I was too busy finding my own self and that happened in 1967. In 1980, I moved about 180 miles northwest to Big Rapids Michigan where I live to this day. As near as I can tell, Ann Arbor became an adult somewhere after I left town. But then again, so did I! LOL. Certainly it is confident and sure of itself today, and I am not just talking about students walking right in front of your car either. They always did that.

My best guess is that Ann Arbor became aware of its feminine qualities the same way I discovered my own gentler side, gradually but certainly, by surrendering to surrender. In time, the passive qualities of the town have become a feature or power, not a defect or liability. It is my opinion this fertility, this receptivity that Ann Arbor has in such high degree is very rare among cities. At least in this regard, to me, Ann Arbor is very special indeed.

And I sometimes wonder just how many of us there are who lived in Ann Arbor beyond our college years (not that I went to college) and were somehow unable to be all that we could be while living there, and yet blossomed almost as soon as we left the town. It's almost a myth that you have to leave Ann Arbor in order for the world to see you, for you to be found. That's how much of a reducing-agent Ann Arbor is.

This was true for me and it has always been puzzling; perhaps every town is like that, "A prophet is never known in his own country" kind of thing, but is immediately recognized from the outside. Perhaps we must leave Ann Arbor to find ourselves or be found. I don't have enough data to even make a guess at this, but I have a feeling that something like that is happening.

Or, is the deep receptiveness and anti-macho quality of Ann Arbor Michigan something that makes traditional superficial

“outward” success more difficult-to-impossible to achieve in this town, yet, at the same time builds strong habits for responding and accommodating life. It’s that feminine thing again. This something I wonder about.

It is interesting that my first real business (incorporated) was formed in Ann Arbor, “Matrix Software.” I chose the word “Matrix” not for its mathematical meaning, but because it meant ‘womb,” a place where something could be born. In lieu of my remarks here, I find that fact fascinating and maybe even revealing.

Or, am I just a little crazy when it comes to the meanings in life. I find it hard to get away from myself and all the crazy signs and associations that run through my mind. And there is no use apologizing here over my endless self-referencing either. Isn’t it natural? Trying to disassociate oneself from referring to oneself has got to be some kind of oxymoron, the ultimate tar baby. The more you protest and struggle, the deeper into the tar you sink. It’s OK to reference yourself. Who else did I have in mind? I can’t presume to know what you are all about and that’s a good thing.

My point here is that Ann Arbor has always seemed for me to be a sacred womb from which good things come. Whether this just works for me I cannot say; I can only say it is true for me.

After all, how do towns come to be located where they are? Is it only because this road is connected to that road, is connected to another road? Or does the natural world have springs of spirit just as it has natural springs of pure water flowing? I like to believe in the later take on this, that particular land or locations have and indwelling spirit that also speak to us or for us – oracular places.

It is my belief that Ann Arbor is such an oracular place. At least in my life, it has functioned like an oracle, that rare vortex through which the universe has spoken directly to me, albeit not always in words that I have immediately understood. In essence, Ann Arbor has been a wishing well for all my hopes and dreams. And like the Magic 8-Ball, I have looked into it.

In ancient Greece they had oracular places, why not here in America? What great female spirit indwells in a city christened after two women named Ann and a stand of bur oak? The Anns' arbor -- Ann Arbor. Tree Town, a wishing well or wishing star.

"When you wish upon a star,
Makes no difference who you are,
Anything your heart desires,
Will come to you."

OUR INTERNAL GYROSCOPE

December 10, 2017

Life is like a merry-go-round; it goes round and around and, in my case, it's also a Ferris Wheel, going up and down, and while I'm at it, back and forth too. That would be me. And as they say, "For Every Thing There is a Season" and it seems as if they are all perennials.

In my case, things I want to better understand drift in and out of vogue, at least as to my access to and acceptance of them. One day a certain pith-dharma book comes alive and I can read (and absorb it), but a few days later it's just all a bunch of words again. It can take months or years before it comes around to where it's once more ripe for me to grasp the meaning. And the "meaning" changes as I change. LOL.

This is what I call "instability" and don't tell me that we all don't have some. Shaking down and smoothing out our instabilities is dharma practice, whether you want to call it that or not. The "Dharma" is the truth of how things are and we need to practice it. Everything is in flux and sometimes my life feels like I'm on an elliptical machine. All I need is a little circus calliope-music for context.

Perhaps this is why when we get around to actually to "wanting" to learn meditation, the first thing to master is what is called Tranquility Meditation, simply how to help our mind to stabilize and settle out. Finding a firm place to stand in this ever-changing world is difficult, if not an oxymoron. As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa used to say "The bad news is that we are falling through space with no parachute; the good news is that there is no ground."

Astronomers tell us that the earth is going through space around the sun at 67,000 miles per hour and we're on it! And the Sun (carrying with it Earth) is going around the center of the galaxy at 483,000 miles an hour, so we are not exactly standing still here. Is it any wonder that I might look into how to stabilize my mind?

Just as we must have a bicycle in hand before we can learn to ride, it is almost universally agreed that we must master

Tranquility Meditation before we can learn Insight Meditation. In other words, we need some stability of mind as a base if we want to “See” with Insight Meditation. It’s like we need a leg to stand on. First the leg and then the standing. First the stability and then we will “See.”

THE ORACLE

December 11, 2017

Oracles are as old as time is memorable. They are how our universe speaks to us most directly. And in this too-often-very-confusing-world, true direction is always at a premium. For me, oracles, the signs and signatures along the path of life, are how I know myself. In this regard, confirmation is everything.

Most of us know that an oracle can be anything that speaks to us from within. So, it does not matter if it is the I-Ching, the Tarot, tea leaves, chicken feet or, for that matter, whatever appears to us or is permitted to appear. It is not important what the trigger or means through which the oracle speaks to us is, but rather the message and the communication itself – the fact that we are relating with our own intuition. After all, every thought, word, and deed originally came from within the mind itself. Look for it.

Whenever I hit a crossroads in life (great or small) and find myself suddenly questioning deeply, I'm feeling for an oracle of one kind or another, looking for some sign or direction from within, call it intuition or whatever. The results of finding an oracle and "getting on our contacts," as the psychics say, is always conformational, confirmative. It's like holding up a blade of grass to determine which way the wind is blowing. And the winds of life are directional.

I always like to point out that astrology is just a very complex oracle, but when it is oracular it is as much an oracle as any other medium. Oracle is as oracle does. That's the idea.

For me, it's like going fishing in the mind, trolling for signs and messages that help, like a gyroscope, to reorient and stabilize me, i.e. keep me on point. Unless I can see by the signs and my intuitions, for me life can be like sailing on a dark cloudy night. What guides us acts like a steering wheel in our life. I am always open to the oracular, for the signs and signatures (no matter how small) that point out to or confirm in me direction itself, either the one I'm currently on or by offering

me an alternative. True confirmation is one of life's rarest gifts.

Here is a video I put together some years ago of the great Michigan songwriter Robin Lee Berry putting this all into words in her song "Bloom" and her words that "everyone is searching for a safe place to bloom." Just so. Have an experience: Hear her sing this song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaTxU7mccnw>

WHEN “THERE” AND “THEN” IS ALREADY “HERE” AND “NOW”

December 12, 2017

This is a bit of a tongue-twister, so take note. At the very least, it will prove that realization cannot be pointed out to us in words. LOL.

We read descriptions and conceptions of how things are; I write them here myself as best I can for you to read. But even the best descriptions are only “sounds like” concepts and are not the reality they describe or attempt to point out. The reality is always directly personal, tailored to us, and form-fitted; it’s already too close for us to see, but we can feel it. And we often don’t recognize a concept because we already are it but we don’t realize that. What I’m describing here is what realization is all about.

For example, we are each living this life now. Somewhere, down in there is us, right? My point is that projecting our expectations, what we imagine (as taken from a teaching, book, or poem) is, by definition, just an approximation, a conceptual reflection (like a hologram) and never itself the reality that a concept describes or points to. The trip from concept to reality has to be “realized” and brought home to us and by ourselves. And this is because we have trouble realizing that most spiritual concepts point out not something we have to get, but a reality we already have, but just have never realized.

And it’s THAT which we have to realize or recognize and it’s THAT which we have always been. In other words, we already ARE it, but just don’t realize this. We can’t get in our own skin because we are already in it. It’s like salting the salt or when we want to put on some music and then realize we are already listening to music. It’s something like that.

Trying to make sense of somebody else’s description or concept of a state of mind (or of a realization) is doomed by design without some help. That’s what concepts are for, trying to help or point out. An authentic teacher can at best place us in context, in the ballpark, so to speak, but the transfer of our

conscious identification from the concept to the reality that a concept is pointing out we have to do ourselves. It's like those old figure ground paintings, where embedded within one painting is another, but one almost impossible to see without having it pointed out to us. When we look, we don't see, but with some help, usually it can be pointed out until we can see.

An authentic dharma teacher (one who has themselves had the realization we are after) can point out "how" or "where" to look, but ultimately we have to ourselves look and recognize the nature of our own mind. It doesn't come in a box and no one else can realize it for us. This is what is called the "Pointing-Out" instructions and the realization being pointed out is called "Recognition" of the true nature of our own mind. And we each have to do that ourselves.

Anyway, that's the general process and we do this all the time, come up with a conceptual image that we then try to reify (make be true), instead of ourselves realizing what that image is pointing to in ourselves. It's like the old story of the teacher pointing at the moon in the sky to their student and the student ends up looking at the finger and not the moon. Here, the concept is the finger and the moon is realization. When we project a concept for ourselves and then try to realize (reify) that concept, we are already in error to the degree that the concept is not (and never can be) the reality it points to. That always has to be our own reality. Conceptualizing is a verb and concepts are maps or plans on how to get somewhere – road maps. That is the problem with spiritual realization, if you understand me.

We will never realize our conceptual projections because they are concepts and not the reality. Concepts are, at best, templates or maps. We have to realize the reality of what the conceptual projection is but the pointing at, i.e. the moon and not the finger. Concepts, as used here, should always be considered as verbs and not nouns. In other words, we are conceptualizing and the conceptualization-process is NOT the reality its conceptualizing. It is just trying to point at the reality or possible realization, a sounds-like or even just a guess. When we mistake our concepts and expectations for the reality they are pointing at (what we are trying to realize), that is called reification. We only make it harder for us.

Our conceptual projections are just throwaways, concepts to help get us into the ballpark, into the general vicinity of the reality, and at best are little more than maps to where we want to go. And from in-the-ballpark to the actual reality requires a synapse within us to flash and light up in realization. We have to actually get it, to grasp the reality of what the concept can only point at. And the concept is abandoned at the moment of realization.

And that's what the hullabaloo is all about, the Rinzai Zen koans and the Tibetan pointing-out instructions. How to get from there to here (from concepts to realization), when "there" is already "here," but we don't REALIZE it. As my car GPS is always telling me "You have arrived at your destination." I'm already there, but don't realize it.

THE HEART IS WHERE HOME IS

December 12, 2017

My own hesitation to stray too far from home is well-known to my family. Perhaps it came from years of running a business and not wanting to miss that important phone call or connection. Holidays were always for me the worst times of year, that and vacations, because at holidays everything stopped and I found vacations boring. That's the easy impression of me. IMO, it is a little more subtle than that.

Of the five Buddha Families, I seem to belong to the Karma Family, which is one of intense activity, and I tend to like being (and have been) active much of the time. Perhaps more difficult to grasp is the idea that I have that wherever I go, there I am, so why make a huge point of traveling when in a very real sense we never get away from who we are.

And why take the show on the road? All too often for me, when I finally get to some great nature spot or state park, in my experience it's a lot like a movie, even a travelogue. To let the reality of a new place really sink in, I have to be there for a while (like days), which is why many folks feel it is better to go to fewer places and spend several days at each one, rather than go to more places for a nanosecond or two. Either choice does not interest me.

For me, I don't have to go anywhere at all (even to the grocery store) to feel fully engaged. I have a remarkable tolerance for tedium and it does not take much to entertain me. I find my own mind and activities totally engrossing. As my first dharma teacher Andrew Gunn McIver used to say to me, travel is like the French word, "travail," which means "work." Travel is hard work for me and not my idea of relaxation.

I am like Odysseus from Homer's *Odyssey*, endlessly trying to get back home and live simply or simply live. For me, home is where the heart is (and vice versa). After all, my tropical Sun-Sign is "Cancer the Crab," the original home-body.

It does not matter where I am, whether at home or some other place, but I would have to get there before I can call it

home. Once I get somewhere, I immediately make it as much like home as I can. In other words, I don't mind being at other places, but I see little point in going there, not just because of the travel involved, but also places to stay, finding food I can eat, and all of the distractions of being in a strange place. And all of that so that for a few minutes I can look at the Grand Canyon and take a couple photos. I get it why folks do it, but that's just not me.

For the most part, I choose not to go anywhere, since (as mentioned) wherever I go, there I am. And I am already there now. I have studied this through the discipline of astrology, by looking at many tens of thousands of charts over 45 years in terms of how their internal (helio) chart is balanced. My internal chart (which I call the Dharma Chart) is VERY well balanced, so I am not tipping this way or that. If I am spinning, it's like a top, dancing in one spot.

So, I don't mean to be a party-pooper, but a party is not my idea of where I most enjoy finding myself. I am the oldest child of five boys (no girls), so I am very much used to being alone or at least on my own even in a crowd. And if not alone, I am most "myself" when I'm on a one-to-one basis with others, but I find crowds (and even small groups) not much fun, probably due to conflicting signals and levels of interest and understanding. Talking one-to-one with someone is what I find satisfying.

Even what I write here in this blog, I write as if I were talking to just one other person. I don't know why that is or how it turned out that way, but I do know that's the way it is for me. My idea of fun would be sitting down with each one of you who are interested (if we had the time) and talking together about our spiritual lives.

“LIFE IS BUT A DREAM”

December 13, 2017

“Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream,
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.”

What if life IS a dream that we just can't seem to wake up from, no matter how hard we try. And for some of us, only the thought of death itself can move us to wake up from our normal distractions. I know that even when I dream at night, I often find it hard to remember a dream only moments after I wake up.

Waking up to life is what the dharma is all about -- awareness. Witness the dharma admonition in many of the advanced dharma teachings, that in the midst of our ongoing experiences (our cyclic world of ups and downs), true “realization” can arise. We can realize the nature of our mind. In this regard, I find Mother Nature so instructive.

At a young age, as a budding herpetologist, I waded through the cold spring-ponds each year. I could not help but see the huge egg masses that frogs, toads, and salamanders had laid in the waters. And each egg turned into a living (and moving) embryo -- myriads of them. The image of these masses of embryos, all tied together, but each suspended in their individual bubbles waiting to be born did not escape me. What if our life is like that, a dream we all (and each) are having that we just can't seem to wake up from? Instead, we dream on and on; and perhaps only the impending thought of death itself can help to wake us from that dream? Like Mother Nature's truth, the truth of the dharma wakes us up, makes us aware. To me, they are one and the same.

Just as on some nights in the past, when driving home very late, I used to have to shake or snap my head to stay awake, so does the sense of impermanence (thoughts of eventual death and dying) acts like smelling salts, the dharma's way of helping us to wake up and snap-out of falling ever more deeply asleep. The Buddha pointed out that we can wake up

and he described a method that we can use to wake up from our distractions.

My point is: who knows which life events are beneficial even though they may be painful or annoy us. Our physical body feels pain and scientists tell us that pain is just a warning signal that something is wrong that should be addressed. Who knows, perhaps our sense of impermanence (thoughts of death, etc.) is a kindness that saves us from a worse death, that of being endlessly lost in a life of just dreaming, i.e. we never quite wake up.

As my dharma teacher of 35 years pointed out to a group of us many years ago: in all the history of time (the innumerable lives we have lived up until now) we haven't managed yet to awaken. How do we plan to do it now?

That's a question.

THE TERRIBLE CRYSTAL

December 14, 2017

The sage advice is to not jump to conclusions, but rather to take our time and allow things to develop fully or, as Shakespeare said, "Ripeness is all." Just as we don't want to jump to the conclusion of our life, so on lesser matters, it also does not pay to jump to conclusions. And then there is also the simple fact that, ultimately, we can't (or won't) jump, anyway. LOL. We each wait it out.

It's not the early or quick judgment that matters, but the, so to speak, last (or latest) judgment, the ultimate or final judgement. Yet, by then, we are already there. Instead of jumping the gun and trying to make a quick decision (or exit), in most cases it is best to wait and allow our situation to just develop naturally. It does anyway, so we have no choice. By that time, we may feel much different than we do when we are (so to speak) on the spot and looking for a place to jump.

This gets (or seems) more important the further we progress down the line of linearity we call life. It's like one of Zeno's paradoxes, repeatedly traveling half the distance to a goal, and then half that distance, ad infinitum, etc. While theoretically we never reach the goal, with the judgement I'm pointing at here, the more time and patience we take, the less we jump to any conclusion. There's no point. Anyway, as mentioned, we can't. It takes time for time to takes us.

My point here is that when we get into a situation where things appear to be going south, that's not the time to panic or cut and run. Instead, that's the time to relax and more deeply embrace our situation and just work with it. "Get in the car and drive." Remember the old refrain:

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.

These little "stuck" times come upon us almost every day or at least every once in a while. All of sudden we find ourselves

“trying” to turn the corner on a sticky situation, perhaps wishing it would go away or we it. We have gotten ourselves into another tight situation and jumping to conclusions of any kind is not advised (or even possible). There we are.

Instead, we learn (and have) to be patient and wait to come out the other side, when things start to open up again. It’s like a flower closing when night comes, and then opening at first light. We agree to forget what we find so hard to remember. That passes for sleep.

In Samsara, everything is cyclic, coming and going. And if we can afford to wait and work with the existing situation, release will arise just as naturally as did the sticky situation. Like the proverbial snake that sheds its skin, such tight situations are an ideal opportunity to molt and cast off the old skin of what we were doing and inherent a new skin, afresh.

Perhaps we reach a point where we cannot go further into what we are doing (where we “think” we are going) and progress requires that we let go of the existing situation entirely and be open to a new approach, if only for a nanosecond. It’s the letting go that is important. Of course, this is the story of the chakras personified; time to molt, cast off a skin, and be both the same and different all over again.

And fear of change (writ small or large) on our part is fraught with, well, “change” and that can be tenuous or even scary. But one thing about change: it’s like the dawn; the sun comes up and there we are all over again, perhaps feeling foolish. In that sense, we can’t jump to conclusions even if we wanted to. Everything is rendered in its own time, including us. It’s what is called “The Terrible Crystal.” LOL.

Speaking of terrible crystals, its 1 degrees outside as I write this. Winter is ahead of the curve.

CONFIRMING WHO WE ARE

December 19, 2017

Quite a few years ago, I wrote a fun poem, which I will share here:

WHO YOU ARE

If who you are is who you will be,
And who you will be will be who you were,

Then:

Who you are is not who you are or who you will be.

So, who are you?

That, to me, is a good question, one that I asked myself fairly early-on as I grew up. Why am I here and, for that matter, who am I? What I'd like to discuss in this article is who we are and how can we find that out. It's about confirmation. And, it goes without saying (but I will say it again) that I have to limit this discussion to what I personally know and have experienced. There may be other approaches, but by definition, what I have actually experienced is all I know. Your conceptualizations and guesses are as good as mine.

There are basically two ways that I know who I am (to the degree that I do), one is from the outside (and conferred on us by others) and the second is what we can determine on our own from inside us. Let's start with confirmation from the outside.

We all know the old refrain "Can I get a witness?" Is there any acknowledgement or confirmation as to "who I am" coming from others, from the outside world? In my personal case, this was probably exacerbated by the fact that I did not have a grandfather on either side. They were both gone before I was born. And while obviously I don't know because I did not have one, I believe (and do know from having grandchildren) that grandfathers and grandmothers can play an important role in empowering us. They are that first step beyond our parents.

Of course, parents rule and are the 'numero uno' influence in our lives. We all know that. Yet grandparents, at least early on, can make a big difference and they are a step removed

from being parents, but only one step. We don't have to be locked in a relationship with grandparents as we do with our own parents; with our parents we are caught in the good, the bad, and ugly, as they say.

Perhaps because I had no grandfathers and only one grandmother that I was close to, I had to look elsewhere for much non-parental confirmation as to who I was and could be. And I did. "Who was I?" and "Who might I become?" was important. And although I can understand that some of you perhaps can be confirmed by your peers, that is an iffy proposition. Anyway, I was raised way out in the country between two large farms in a house my parents had built with no nearby neighbors or other kids. This went on until I was in the 6th grade when we moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan. Yet, by that time, the dye was mostly set, IMO.

Of course, as I grew older (like many of us) I pandered to my peers (or tried to), but received little confirmation in that department as to who I was. And what do I mean by confirmation? By that, what I mean (here) by "confirmed" is not the standard dictionary definition, which might be something like "establish the truth or correctness of (something previously believed, suspected, or feared to be the case)." In my use of the word "confirmed," it is not what I fear is true when I use that word, but rather simply who am I? And if I have leanings one way or the other (and I did), how might they be confirmed one way or the other from the outside?

Confirmation, IMO, is difficult to come by and, to me, it resembles a torrential river that is looking for a dam, something concrete that can hold meaning for us. Unfortunately, I never (or seldom) was able to find it in my teachers or instructors through those many school years. Those years only confirmed that I was on my own. And this went on and on. It was not until my mid-twenties that I found any kind of confirmation from the outside as to my existence and even then it was not personal, but rather general. It was of the "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" type, as in: because I could appreciate, therefore I was someone.

I became very interested in (and then quite devoted to) music, in particular blues and jazz, especially blues. Because of my

persistence, I ended up interviewing scores of great blues performers, first with audio and later with video. These would be players like Muddy Waters, Lonny Johnson, Son House, Robert Jr. Lockwood, Magic Sam, B.B. King, Freddie King, Albert King and on and on.

It was not only Black music that I loved, but the wisdom and life-savvy that the great blues players had accumulated that fascinated me. They were the closest thing to a grandfather that I ever had. I revered them, but as mentioned, it was very general and never specifically about me. I still had never had my personal existence (me, myself, and I) confirmed by anyone I respected outside of my family. "Who was I?," "Why am I on the planet?," and "How best might I be used up?" That's what I wanted to know. I did not want to waste my life.

That confirmation came when I met my first true dharma teacher, a traveling Rosicrucian initiator named Andrew Gunn McIver, who had retired to Ann Arbor, Michigan after a life working as a lumberjack, a recorder of the dead in the first-world-war, and a janitor up until he retired. Andrew used to joke that his job was cleaning up after others. And of course, as mentioned, he succeeded in initiating and mentoring young folks like me.

In my world up to the time of meeting Andrew, I had always been alone and on my own, so to speak. Sure, I was surrounded in life by a sea of people, but as for all I knew I was a just bit of flotsam and jetsam floating by. I had never been seen (or seen myself) for who I am, at least by the world outside of my family. And I don't believe that I am the Lone Ranger in this regard, either. Lack-of-confirmation appears to be more the rule rather than the exception.

So, what happened with my meeting Andrew McIver is that for the first time in my life I had met someone who cared more about me than I knew how to care for myself. And the "me" Andrew cared for was someone I did not know for certain existed or at least I had no way of crediting myself as existing. This had to somehow come from outside, from someone that I totally respected, who was capable of identifying me specifically in the general stream of life. Andrew McIver did that. And I responded to that identification as "someone" as

opposed to the non-entity I wondered if I was. Andrew saw me and when he did, so did I. That is confirmation.

And that was the beginning of “me” as I have come to know myself, as finally determined by someone in the outer world. At the very least, it pushed me over the top into objectivity. As the famous quote from the German philosopher Hegel points out: “We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what’s there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.”

With Andrew, I was seen for the first time. Before that, in my own mind, I had never felt seen, but was perhaps just one more insignificant speck in the world of the unseen. And we, the unseen, were legion, IMO.

And suddenly, here was an individual (in whom I had consummate respect) identifying me beyond the self-consciousness and insecurity that I was clothed in. After all my wondering, I too was the baby and not just the bathwater. That was like surfacing for the first time to life as myself in an ocean of sameness. Indeed, Andrew McIver was an initiator because he initiated and introduced me to myself. And when I was seen by Andrew, in that same instant, like “the dewdrop slips into the shining sea” I opened (like a flower) and also allowed Andrew to slip into my world. In some significant sense, I was no longer an island. Anyway, that’s a bit of my story.

Now, let’s zoom back to an overview of how all this works and focus on the dharma, in particular the Buddhist Vajrayana tradition, that of student and teacher that I feel I am a part of. What happened to me with Andrew McIver is the very essence of what Vajrayana dharma is all about. In the Vajrayana Mahamudra Lineage Prayer it clearly states”

“Devotion is the head of meditation, it is taught.

The Lama opens the door to the profound oral teachings...”

All I can say is how profound is that. Just as Andrew McIver opened the door for me to myself, in the Vajrayana tradition this is THE most important point, literally calling it (like a body part) the “head of meditation.” How can one not be devoted to (and accept deeply) someone who introduces us to ourselves? The Vajrayana is all about just that, finding a teacher who has themselves realized what we seek to realize

and who guides us to that same realization. How compassionate and kind! And it can start with the blessing of just being recognized at all and accepting that as I did with Andrew! And the essence of dharma is recognizing not just ourselves, but the actual nature of the mind itself. That's why the dharma exists, to assist us in realization.

What I am pointing out here may be too heady or difficult to grasp for some readers, but it is true nevertheless. This process of confirming for us (in ourselves) the true nature of the mind, at least according to the Vajrayana tradition of Buddha dharma, is the sole essence of Mahamudra meditation training. It exists for that. That is the ultimate confirmation that can be confirmed. And, as mentioned, this comes from the outside-in and simultaneously lets the outside in. And, as mentioned earlier, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

OK, so how do those who have NOT entered dharma training go about getting confirmed? In the beginning of this article, I mentioned that there were two ways to learn who we are and I have just pointed out one of them, confirmation from outside. There is another way to confirm who we are, from the inside out, and I will present that in the next blog.

CONFIRMATION: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

December 19, 2017

First, the batik you see here is a portrait of me in my twenties by my mother, who was a “fine arts” painter in the technical use of that term, but also a fine artist. This portrait used to hang in my parent’s home, and it creped out their grandchildren (which was easy to do), who claimed the picture was watching them when they walked through the room. LOL.

In the preceding blog, we looked at confirmation as coming from outside of us and a little at how the Vajrayana Buddhist views the teacher/student relationship. In this article, let’s look at what we can do on our own to find confirmation if we are not fortunate (or can’t make the effort) to find a dharma teacher that we resonate to. And, once again, I have to start with myself, since that’s what I have to work with.

I am going to describe some astrology here, much like when my granddaughter Iris (going on four-years old) brings to me a stuffed animal and says: “Grandpa, talk this one to me.” Here, I’m going to talk some astrology to you. And in this case, at least according to me, it’s the elephant in the room, in MY personal room. And I have sung the praises of this astrological technique here and in books and articles for going on fifty years, but it’s like a pin dropped in a padded room. There are no echoes. This blog is about a particular astrological technique, which you don’t need to know anything about to read this.

“Realization” is so transformative; it’s like turning a fine glove inside out or our world upside-down. We suddenly realize! With this astrological technique, at times, I feel like the prophet who has no country, because after all of these years I have yet to find a single person who has read, practiced, and gone on to realize the nature of this specific astrological technique. I tell myself it must be a reflection on my inability to communicate it. And you know I try.

I am talking here about an astrological technique which not only can describe how we appear and the circumstances in which we are embedded (the traditional natal chart), but one that can also empower us to properly use our life situation to fully realize ourselves (sun-centered chart). It did this for me.

I will try to keep my “complaining” to a minimum, and it is not just about being credited for putting this technique together that I write; it’s more that I feel the world could/would deeply benefit from using and realizing this particular form of astrology. I know I have.

And yes, some students of this idea have understood it conceptually to a degree, but none to my knowledge have realized it enough to come and question me for more information in more than 40 years. Zero. Nada. And I’m not going to explain the whole thing once again here; I have written a whole detailed book, with many illustrations on it for those who are curious:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev%20Nov2...>

In other words, if there is one astrological technique of mine that is like a voice crying out in the wilderness, this has to be it. Everyone must have a pet peeve or two. This is mine. And I hate the idea of leaving the planet without at least one other human being realizing this technique to where I can see that they realize it. Of course, folks have read my works and told me they understand them, including this technique. Yet, I have yet to see the light of realization in their eyes and/or words that would comfort me that they have anything but a conceptual grasp of what I am talking about here. Concepts are easy; realization is harder. And so, my remark to them (which I will keep to myself) is: that understanding (and a ticket) will get you a ride on the bus. That’s not realization.

It’s like the puppies we used to raise as a kid; when they were born, they were wrapped in a thin membrane or sac and were veiled from breathing. That sac has to be torn away, usually by the mother dog. In a similar way, reality too often is veiled in concepts that are suffocating. Realization is much more difficult, but IMO essential in order to breath realization.

I am speaking here of what in astrology I call the “Dharma Chart” and each of us has one. Of course, I am familiar with the standard astrology charts that astrologers have used for thousands of years. The traditional (and popular) chart I call the “Karma” Chart, literally a map of the circumstances and personality that each of us has and are embedded in -- karma. Yet, in my experience that is just the mask or persona we appear in and see through. Inside of this outer personality is another astrology chart (and a more fundamental one) that reveals WHY we each are here on the planet, for what purpose. And that is the “Dharma Chart,” literally a diagram of our dharma, which maps our particular journey to enlightenment, our particular spiritual path. Who would not want to know that?

I pretty-much stumbled on this astrological technique decades ago and for me it was like finding a spring of pure water in the middle of a desert. And I did not see it coming. Or, said in another way, it was like realizing that up to that moment I had always been in the middle of a desert with no water and didn't even know it.

Anyway, it woke me up and was empowering. To say that it changed my life would be an understatement. Through realizing the nature of this technique, I transmigrated (right there and then) on the spot and that is a better description of what happened. It turned everything I knew upside down and inside-out. It was an astrological “terma” that I discovered.

And like most “terma” (hidden mind treasures), it was not simply a slam-dunk kind of experience. I worked for decades to implement my realization so that others could use it too, including not just astrology wonks but regular people as well. And I am certain that decades from now, this particular astrological technique will (phoenix-like) burn off the personal dross and reveal the true life path (our proper use) for many, just as it did for me. Everything has a seal or signature; the Dharma Chart is a signature of our spiritual path, one that it is easy to read.

As mentioned, astrologers have had the outer, circumstantial and personal aspects of their astrology chart down for centuries – the karma of it. That's how I came up in astrology. What they lack (and don't have) is the “Why?” chart. Why are

we here and what are we (personally) good for? Which spiritual path is ours? Yet, we all know (or have read) that the inner is always the key to the outer. The Dharma Chart is the inner or root chart and thus the key to our karma chart or at least how to use it.

I know what it's like to open a door that I can never close, to transform my attitude and view so that I effectively transmigrate such that I can no longer see life as I once did. I had it wrong all those years and then just poof! There it was.

That is called, in the dharma, "Realization." It is a one-way, irrevocable, transformation that can't be undone. Just as we can't get the toothpaste back into the tube, so we cannot un-realize once we have realized. That's the nature of truth. It's irrevocable.

There, I feel better to have gotten that said and out of my system. I gave a link to a free book earlier in this blog called "Dharma Chart, Karma Chart." This method is a way in which we can confirm for ourselves who we are and what we are good for. Yes, working with a realized dharma teacher IMO is the best way to go, but second best (and fairly workable) is learning about ourselves through our Dharma Chart. I did it; you can do it.

I may blog more on this; we shall see. Anyone interested?

ASTROLOGICAL CONFIRMATION

December 20, 2017

My Tibetan dharma teacher of some 35 years speaks no English, but through a translator he explained to me that in Tibet, astrology is considered one of the limbs of the yoga, a very useful relative-truth, but he also pointed out that astrology is not the root of the yoga. Dharma is the root of the yoga, the actual path that each one of us will eventually find and take to realize enlightenment. The way I explain it to students is this:

Imagine this world as a sphere covered completely with water. And we are on a small sailboat somewhere on that globe. Astrology is what Rinpoche calls a “relative truth,” meaning that by using astrology we can help to set our sails so that we can travel from where we are now to any place in this world of Samsara that we want. In other words, we can improve our conditions in this Samsaric world. Using astrology, we just set the angle of our sails to the wind properly and we are off to wherever we can go. However, no matter where we go (and get to) on the globe, astrology will never take us off the surface and waves of Samsara and to the center. Only the dharma can do that. That’s why I practice dharma first and astrology second, i.e. the dharma of astrology, which I will share some of here.

With that in mind, understand that traditional astrology charts or maps where we each of us are in the Samsaric world, this world of our own karma. And good astrologers can be like skilled mariners helping themselves and others to sail around this world in search of a place that is most auspicious or comfortable for us to open. However, and this is a big “however,” although astrology can make us more comfortable, it cannot take us beyond Samsara. As mentioned, that is what the Dharma can do and why it is called an “absolute truth.”

However, there is an astrological chart that CAN at least point out to us our particular approach to Dharma that, if taken, will lead to realization and enlightenment. We each have one. And while that chart can vaguely be inferred from the

standard astrological chart (“through a glass darkly”) as used by astrologers for centuries, the standard birth chart is not adept at that.

And it is important to understand that the traditional astrology chart that each of us has is a snapshot taken of the entire solar system from our place on here of the entire solar system, i.e. how the Sun and that system appears to us from Earth – our view. But this traditional natal chart is not a map or chart of the solar system (sun, moon, and planets) as they are in their actual positions. Only the sun-centered (heliocentric) chart does that and the difference is KEY here.

As I mentioned in an earlier blog, the traditional astrological chart used by astrologers today is a map of our Karma (our view of the solar system), while the sun-centered natal chart (used by astronomers) is a map of our Dharma, how the solar system was actually setup at the moment of our birth. And the difference between the two charts is what has to be corrected in our mind for us to see straight and to realize what is fact beyond how our particular earth-centered (traditional natal chart) and how it is skewed. Conceptually, in a nutshell, that is the difference between our karma and our dharma. That is what we have to get straight to attain any kind of realization (and confirmation) as to who we are. And that resolution amounts to confirmation.

The Dharma or sun-centered chart was discovered some 475 years ago by Nicholas Copernicus. He pointed out to the world that NOT everything in the heavens revolves around us and the Earth, but rather Earth revolves around (orbits) the Sun, and not vice versa. This was a HUGE discovery and it especially affected the astrologers of that time, but unequally.

Some of the astrologers in the Copernican era accepted Copernicus’ realization that we revolve around the Sun and that the sun does not revolve around us as we believed. These astrologers suddenly had two charts to work with, the traditional earth-centered chart and the newly discovered sun-centered chart. These astrologers went on to become astronomers and used both charts in their work, like how to get a man to the moon, etc.

However, the rest of the astrologers, those who did not accept (or use) the sun-centered charts were left with the traditional single chart, one that looked at the solar system as if everything (including the Sun) revolved around us here on the earth and not vice-versa. They went on to become what today are known as astrologers. I should point out that the astronomers rose to be one of the two oldest accredited professions as taught in universities, astronomy, and the other being botany. They did very well. On the other hand, the one-chart-astrologers went on to become the fringe group that they remain as today. There is a message in that fact that these two roads diverged and astrologers made a choice.

What apparently astrologers missed (or ignored) is that the Sun is not similar in kind to the planets that revolved around it. Instead, the Sun is the “mother” or center around which all the planets revolve. However, in the traditional astrological chart, as used for centuries, the Sun is treated as only one body in the chart and not as the source of life itself that it is.

What was ignored (and this ignorance has been passed on to modern astrologers) is the enormous psychological initiation and spiritual change that the Copernican discovery indicated. Astrologers didn't get it. I trust that the astronomers experienced this, but in today's world I don't see much sign of an interest in spiritual ideas by astronomers. But I could be wrong.

Regardless, the psychological and spiritual initiation, the transference of identity (or center) from the center of Earth to the center of the Sun is profound. And that realization which the astronomers accepted and had is still waiting for modern astrologers as it has for 475 years.

Simply put, that “transference” was what happened to me as I realized that the Karma Chart (traditional astrology chart) was not the essential chart of our true nature, but rather a derivative chart (the child) and that the sun-centered chart was the fiducial or primary map (the mother) of our psyche or true nature. It is that complex or that simple.

In other words, the Sun is important beyond our imagination and we are connected to it like an infant is to its mother, so

the historically traditional natal chart has it just backward. And it would be easy to rectify if astrologers were not so habitually attached to assuming that everything revolves around the earth. The Sun does not.

And so, as an astrologer, much of my life has been spent trying to get the attention of my fellow astrologers (to wave them down) and point out to them the existence of the sun-centered chart and how it can serve to un-skew the traditional chart view we are so used to. These two charts are not mutually exclusive, but together they add up to a holistic view of our karma and dharma. They are complementary and offer a 3-dimensional (or stereo) view of who we are. Yet, I can only do so much and I am getting older. IMO, astrologers in my experience take refuge in their ignorance of this basic fact.

I wrote a very simple and easy to use book on this called "Dharma Chart, Karma Chart." It is a free download and has tables in the back that allow you to find your Dharma-Chart archetype and then read about it in another part of the book.

Our Dharma Chart contains our "archetype" as based on the whole-chart aspect patterns it contains. I have mapped out and interpreted scores of archetypes and even illustrated them, so this is not a difficult kind of astrology to approach.

CAN YOU HEAR THE MUSIC?

December 26, 2017

It is zero degrees outside and two in the morning. It occurred to me that something I seldom write about here is music, although it is music that has shaped so much of my life. Music touches me so very deeply, so much more than words. And while I love all kinds of music, women soul singers are for me the sweet spot, singers like Billie Holliday, Irma Thomas, and Barbara Lewis are just my kind of music. For example, most folks know Barbara Lewis's signature tune "Hello Stranger."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-VDbbjIto4>

This is to me one of the most wonderful songs I have ever heard, but Lewis has dozens of lovely songs, low-key tunes like "Oh, Be My Love." And she was a local girl to Ann Arbor, where I grew up. Here is that song.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch...>

When it comes to music, I am a hopeless romantic, and it has meant so much to me. In particular, from the late 1950s, it was music where I spent my life, first as part of what has been called the "Folk Revival," learning to play guitar and traveling (by thumb) back and forth to New York City many times. In 1961, I hitchhiked and traveled with a young Bob Dylan and my friend Perry Lederman along the East Coast and helped to put on one of Dylan's first show in Ann Arbor. Dylan and I sat in the Michigan Union Grill, nervously drinking coffee (and smoking cigarettes) until the review of his show the night before came out. It was a good review, and with that Dylan hitchhiked out of town.

Then, later, in the mid-1960s (1965) my brother Dan Erlewine and I started the Prime Movers Blues Band. Iggy Pop was our drummer; in fact, we named him "Iggy." The Prime Movers Blues Band opened for "Cream" in 1967 (The Summer of Love) in San Francisco at the Fillmore Auditorium, played with Jerry Garcia, and so on. I was definitely like Forrest Gump, perched on the edge of what was going on around me, taking it all in.

When the whole 1960s scene turned into the 1970s, I met and fell in love with Margaret, got married, and became a full-time astrologer. I still played music every once in a while, but when kids came along it was harder and harder to leave my family for late night gigs, so I didn't.

And later still, I founded AMG, the All-Music Guide, which became the largest collection of music data in the world today (AllMusic.com and AllMovie.com). AMG began when they started to transfer music from tapes to CDs, but purposefully would mislabel which music it was. For instance, one of the great early rock singers was Little Richard, whose best work was probably done in the years around 1957. Yet, Little Richard kept re-recording his greatest hits for decades afterward, but like all of us he was no longer at fever-pitch.

So I felt bad for folks when they would buy a CD of Little Richard marked "Greatest Hits," which they were technically, but they were those songs, but recorded many years later (and sounded it). So, if you bought the later versions, but imagined you were hearing Little Richard as we did, you would be wrong. You never heard him. I wanted something to be done about this, and so I did it myself, all in my tiny office here in Big Rapids. But it grew into a company with 150 full-time people and 500 free-lance writers, and so on.

In the band days, the Prime Movers Blues Band never managed to get an album out, but we were definitely on the scene. And only a few recordings of us surfaced years ago from someone's basement. Here is my playing Chicago-style amplified harmonica and singing an old Eddie Burn's song "Orange Driver."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2F95EtoIqKE>

And here is the band stretching out and playing an instrumental to make the long gigs go by, usually playing from 9 pm to 2 am.

"Endless Blues"

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

And finally here is a rather long piece, and a little strange as well, "Look Over Yonder's Wall."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MngsVYSd1C0>

That gives you a taste of what we sounded like. Wish I had more to choose from, but there it is. Paul Butterfield said that we were the second-best white blues band in America and, of course, they were the first. And there were, but we also loved that music.

“TURNING AND TURNING IN THE WIDENING GYRE”

January 2, 2018

This line from a poem by W.B. Yeats marks the time, including my journey into putting together my basement workshop; it means being very involved in the moment and just doing, doing, doing, which is quite different from my normal habit of meditating and musing. It seems that meaningful activity (hard work) is a source of refuge from conceptualizing. As far as concepts go, I've been there, done that, and I can do it well enough to satisfy me. Yet, like a grain-grinder with no grain, by conceptualizing without first having something to process (experience), we are just spinning our wheels. I have to put the vortex of my conceptual mind to work, give it something to chew on. Otherwise, as the Bible says “I become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.”

Conceptualization is not something I do for its own sake. However, I do find myself conceptualizing and thinking more than I wish. Like all language, words totally depend on the sense they make; otherwise they are nonsense. And “sense” is by definition sensual; it involves the senses. Verbalized concepts can be helpful, yet (in my understanding) they exist but to point the way for me toward the sense world and are meant to result in some eventual action on my part (of one kind or another) in the form of experience. Experience supersedes concepts and realization supersedes experience. That's the progression.

I don't find people who are all talk and no action (and thus no experience) very interesting. They are just going around in circles. And I can do that all by myself. LOL. I tend to respect folks for what they have done and how they act, not for their words alone.

It's like marriage or having kids. If we are married (and especially if we have kids), we have experience and by that involvement become part of a special group who know. Show me what you have done and I know something about who you are. But I am not so trusting that what you say, by itself, tells

me all that much about whom you are. As they say (and I don't mean to be rude), talk is cheap. Our actions tell the tale.

I should have known that my own referencing (and lazy dependence) on conceptualizations would catch up with me sooner or later. In my case, coming full circle means becoming aware of what I'm doing that is not helpful to the point of not doing it anymore. If I see a fly in the ointment, I pick it out. If I catch myself in a Catch-22, I do my best to resolve it or if I am focusing a pair of binoculars, I actually focus them. But what then?

Well, then, in every case, when things make sense, we move beyond just conceptuality and into the actual, the real. The end of searching is finding. There is no point in search for its own sake, i.e. in searching forever. When we exhaust our searching (and are exhausted in general) is when we "find," because not only is conceptual exhaustion what we are searching for (and eventually each will find), and all around us at that, but we are even now already it. When we finally exhaust and give up, there it is. In fact, it's all there is.

Just as experience is a refuge from conceptuality, conceptuality is also a refuge from experience. And we need experience for realization to take place. As Shakespeare said, "To be or not to be; that is the question."

Good Question!

COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOW

January 3, 2018

While digging through the basement I came across some very old writings that I did over 54 years ago. Now, I have to break out some caveats here. I would bet that almost every astrologer has somewhere in their garage or basement some overly detailed diagrams along with copious notes as to how the diagrams pertain to the true structure of the universe. I know I do, but these are more philosophical than astrological.

And I don't expect any of you to puzzle these out, but rather to just take note of them. I will take compassion on readers and only show four diagrams, but there are many, many more. Even I had trouble figuring out what they were all about and I had about 80 pages of handwritten notes plus sets of index cards to explain them to anyone interested.

The only reason I even bother to show any of this stuff is that, at least for me, these particular diagrams relate to certain Buddhist logic concepts, like "realization" and I had forgotten all of this early-thinking and was surprised to note that I was actively thinking on these topics years before I ever started seriously practicing dharma. So, it was more than just a walk down memory lane. It showed to me that I am very much like a dog with a bone when something interests me.

These diagrams (and texts) go back to the spring of 1963 when I was given a problem to solve by a University of Michigan professor I was working with outside of formal classes. I had been very busy reading many of the philosopher Hegel's weighty tomes. This particular paper is on Hegel's famous triad of Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis. I was asked to write a paper developing the idea as to how a thesis and antithesis could result in synthesis and how that might relate to consciousness.

To set the stage, there I was living in an attic room on Packard Street in Ann Arbor, Michigan, right across from Crazy Jim's famous Blimpy Burgers. The stairway to my room was a two-stage one, with a landing midway. On the landing to my attic room was a tiny refrigerator and a hot plate. Other

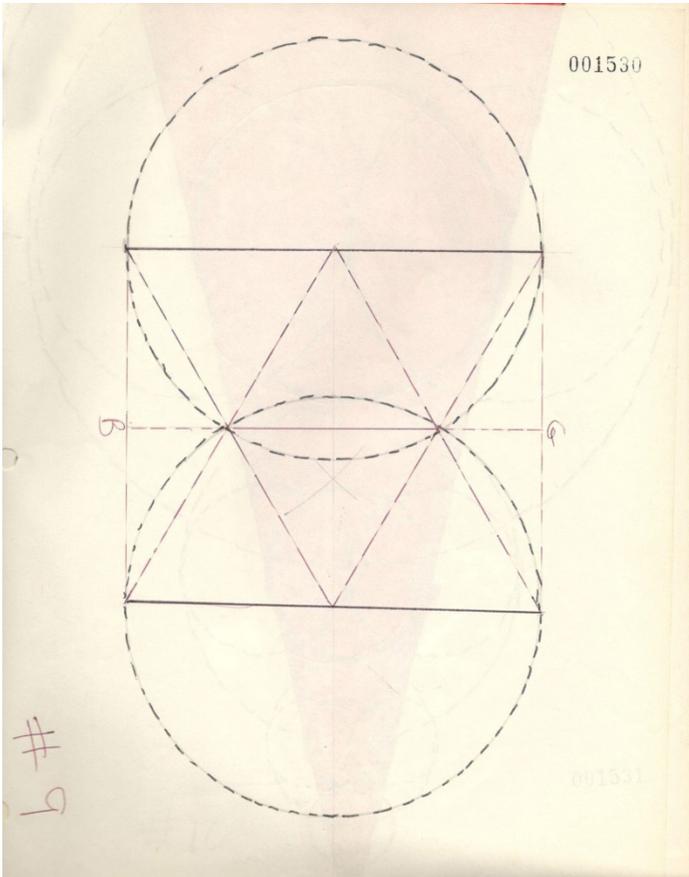
than that there was a small window of each end of the attic. It was there that I lived and worked on this paper. It took quite a while.

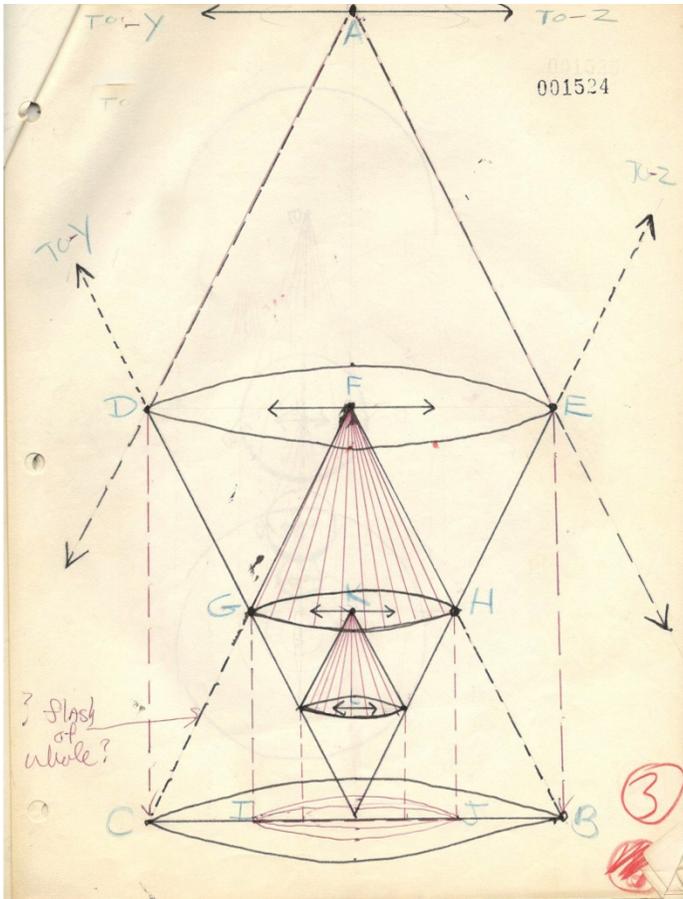
I believe that by just looking at these four diagrams will give you the idea. There are 17 diagrams in all, but I will spare you the whole group. What is interesting to me is that in this 80-page paper, I conceptually laid out intellectually the idea of what the Buddhist call "Realization" as distinguished from "Experience," which essentially describes the difference in dharma between what are called relative truths and absolute truths. This paper describes (with diagrams) why we fully immerse ourselves in the advanced practices like Insight and Mahamudra meditation. In other words, why is Mahamudra meditation ineffable; it can't be described in words, but has to be realized.

I know (and readers here must know by now) that I am interested in all of this, but over 54 years ago is a long time back and for a 22-year old I am amazed that I could conceptualize this kind stuff that in my later years has almost completely preoccupied me. For years now, I thought my interest in these ideas came along with serious dharma practice, but this paper was written many years before that. I was thinking about all this back then.

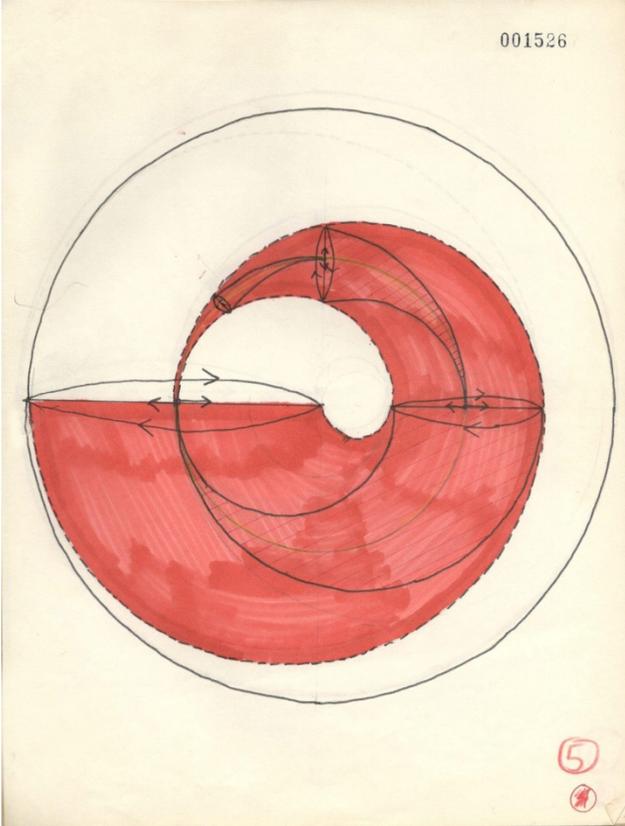
Yes, in those days I intellectually described the nature of "Realization" and consciousness, but that and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus. The reason for the later dharma practice was to make my conceptualizations into realizations, all the difference in the world!

Sorry if it appears that I'm tooting my own horn, but readers know I do that.





001526



THE BEAUTIFUL SOUL

January 4, 2018

The difference between conceptual reality (which is virtual) and experiencing that conceptual reality is profound, literally all the difference in the world. And this is not exclusively an Eastern concept, although its stem may have come from the East. As of a couple of centuries ago, it clearly exists in the Western philosophical tradition as well.

The German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel describes in the "Phenomenology of the Mind" the concept of the "Beautiful Soul" so exactly:

"This soul lacks force to externalize itself... the power to make itself a thing and to endure existence. And, to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from actuality and steadfastly perseveres in a state of self-willed impotence to renounce a self which is pared away to the last point of abstraction... and to give itself substantial existence or in other words: to transform its thought into being and commit itself to absolute distinction, that between thought and being."

And, the quintessential Hegel quote for me, taken from his masterpiece "The Phenomenology of the Mind" is this:

"We go behind the curtain of the Self, not to see what's there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

This, then, is the difference (using Buddhist terminology) between conceptualization, experience, and realization. Mistaking our own conceptuality for reality is a perennial mistake, echoed throughout literature over many centuries. Our words, which are concepts, are not the reality itself, but exist only to point out the reality to us. Shakespeare was only too aware of this and his line "To be or not to be, that is the question" perhaps says it best.

The idea of leading an "arm-chair" life is only too real in this virtual age. This is what can be so scary about the advent of virtual reality, mistaking media such as smart phones, tablets, computers, and the Internet (which are enablers only) for the reality they describe or point at. Out-of-body experience,

which is natural in itself, is no substitute for in-the-body experience. They go together like hand and glove, but a glove without a hand makes no sense. We need both for proper circulation.

In the dharma, as I understand it, clear distinction is made between concepts, experience, and realization, usually in that order. Hegel's "Beautiful Soul" is living conceptually, unable to be moved to experience what the concepts can but describe. And, beyond experience is what in the dharma is called "realization" of the true nature of that experience. That's what the dharma is ultimately about.

That's the flow, so to speak: concepts, experience, and realization, and in that order. To be stuck in a conceptual island of the mind is to be marooned, surrounded by life itself, but not experiencing it. That is what Hegel (and many others) describe as the "beautiful soul," one who prefers a life of the mind, not complete with, as Shakespeare puts it, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," perhaps today called "the 'boy in the bubble' concept.

How do we pop that bubble without driving the person within it farther into mental isolation and conceptualization? There are many techniques and the Zen Buddhists are famous for their often very direct approach, but also for their more gentle approach using koans. The Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists have a series of practices to accomplish the same thing, and methods of their own.

It's not like there are two things to do, but only one thing, that being "Realization" of the true nature of our own mind. Everyone seems to agree on that. It's how to do that where we differ and find our differences. As they say, "Different strokes for different folks" or as our UK friends put it: "Horses for courses."

There are said to be 84,000 dharmas or ways to realization. And what I find most useful about the Tibetan Vajrayana approach to dharma is that a student works with an authentic teacher, one who can successfully point out (so that we get it) the true nature of our own mind. That, IMO, is infinitely better than trying to figure out how to realize the true nature of the mind.

PROSE UNDER PRESSURE LEAKS POETRY

January 5, 2018

[It's still bitter cold here in Michigan and my laboring in the other half of the basement does lead to thoughts and musings, some of which are spun out here. They are a little "heady," so don't feel obligated to read them. These days I have less time to write. As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote "Suck any sense from that who can." LOL.

I'm always interested in what is called in the literature the "terrible crystal and I am not just talking about aging. In my case, it's just as much the ever tightening noose of conceptuality.

Perhaps caterpillars are comfortable in their hardening chrysalis; me, not so much. We start out like a bull in a china shop, but end up dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's. That is humility. And the spur of excellence is not all voluntary, but itself is part of the process of crystallization. Another way of saying this is that while we may rush into the cow pasture, we end up tiptoeing back. It affects my writing, actually improves it.

When the rules of life draw tighter, the tip of the pen is even more on point. Less is not only more, but by definition becomes the perfect gesture – a mudra. We find ourselves saying yes to no or even none. That is gratitude.

And entering the "silence" is not silent, but just ever more exact, precise. Again: we learn to say more with less. Separating the wheat from the chaff would be a kindness, if we had a choice. However, it's choice-less.

And that is when prose becomes poetry.

THE THREADS OF HOPE AND FEAR

January 6, 2018

Hope and fear are the intertwined fibers that make up the thread of our interests that (reaching forward toward an imagined future) can begin to fray and come apart, exposing ourselves simply to the present moment. The “Now” is where the buck stops”

Many of us are totally habituated (attached) to our hopes and fears, which like white-noise, serve to distract us from our actual reality. When through increased awareness-training hope and fear are reduced or eliminated, this can (at least at first) seem very disturbing, because we are so used to paying-life-forward, so to speak. Living in the future or the past is not living in the present as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa so clearly pointed out in his classic “Six Words of Advice:”

“Don’t Prolong the Past.”

“Don’t Invite the Future.”

So, if the ties to our imagined future run out of their ability to mesmerize us and seemingly “reach” into the future, what are we left with? Well, we are plunked down squarely in the present moment, as uncomfortable as that may at first be for us. We are not used to (and many feel uncomfortable) just being baldly present. We would rather (and are used to) the soporific of dreaming on the future. It’s a long-held habit and can appear very comforting.

So, it should be no surprise that there are dharma techniques that help to take the “hope” out of the future. In dharma training, hope and fear are not considered our friends. As mentioned, our personal freight train of “hoping” of “fearing” lumbers on through the night of time with no scheduled stops. For many, it is as much a way of life as any other ingrained habit. Deconstructing “hope’ is not only difficult; it can be unsettling and certainly disruptive to our current habitual-wish not to be interrupted in our imagined trajectory-cocoon toward the future. As mentioned, hope is so comforting and its motto is too often “Do Not Disturb.”

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” is a classic phrase, but here we might want say that learning to give up the habit of hope unleashes the furies of the present-moment upon our catatonic slumber. We resist waking up and are not used to having that kind (and amount) of time on our hands, instead of our being totally invested in the hope/fear slumber of the future. It can make us nervous to be present. We are not used to it.

However, once freed from hope/fear (and acclimatized), we are free to invest in the present instead. In fact, we have no choice. And the present moment is where all “future” actually comes from, anyway. What we do NOW determines what we will be then. That’s the law of karma.

Realizing how debilitating are hope and fear frees us to take advantage of the now rather than be stuck in the there and then or when.

IS IT ATTACHMENT OR ENJOYMENT?

January 6, 2018

I get asked a lot about attachment to the joys of life, as if, to be dharmic, we are not to enjoy ourselves. I want to speak to that.

Everything we do in life is an involvement, so if we live, this being involved is unavoidable and might as well be enjoyed. Remember: it's unavoidable. Are we supposed to hate being happy? Every introductory talk on Buddhism I've heard (and there were many) starts out with "All beings want to be happy and no being wants to suffer" or something like that.

There is a big difference between our involvement in life and our attachment or not (aversion) to that involvement. Attachment means to lose any objectivity we might have had and fall into trying to protect the status-quo (hold on to the happiness). And the reverse is also true of detachment (aversion).

"Detachment" is simply the reverse of attachment. In other words, detachment is negative-attachment, meaning we push something away instead of drawing it to us. All of that (positive or negative) is attachment.

The word we want (and I agree this can be confusing) is "non-attachment.": Non-attachment to something is neither being for it, against it, or neutral. Trying to be neutral also is just another form of attachment. So, what am I saying here?

"Non-attachment" is being able to enjoy something fully, whatever is there for us, but not becoming attached to it (we don't have to have it), and then being able to move on to enjoying whatever next moment is happening, and so on and on. We don't try to keep and hold on to something longer than it naturally is present and we don't push something away because it does not measure up to what we think it should be. Both are attachment and "trying" to remain neutral is just more attachment. In every moment, "it is what it is" and we can enjoy that.

We could say that non-attachment is pure enjoyment of what “IS” or, like the phrase Trungpa Rinpoche translated from the Lojong teachings, “Relax, as it is.”

CAPTURING THE CULTURE OF THE TIMES

January 11, 2018

I'm trying to wrap up this recent series on placing astrology books and magazines. And lest I fall into forgetfulness, what was REALLY a bear happened some years ago when I sent the entire library (and my personal papers) to the library of the University of Illinois to be part of their permanent collection. It took a full-sized moving van (and crew) to get the job done, plus a second vehicle about the size of a UPS truck. Here are some photos of getting ready for that move, just as a reminder to me, if to no one else.

The library was assessed by an expert for the IRS at 1.5 million dollars in value. Of course, I donated it all at no charge to the university and was glad to find a home for what amounted to a life's work in acquiring and curating the collection. Over the years, many people helped to curate, digitize, or donate materials. Today that collection is all carefully preserved and available to researchers and others, under supervision, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Why bother preserving astrological writing, especially periodicals -- all this ephemerality? I have never been that interested in history, per se, but I am interested in preserving what I can of the beauty around us and, as a trained naturalist, I don't just mean just natural beauty.

The beauty in our evolving popular culture seemed ephemeral enough for me to want to think twice about just letting it pass into history without some kind of curation – an attempt to preserve it. It is one thing to have grown up through the birth of rock n' roll and in the midst of many of the great blues and jazz recordings. There is no way to share or preserve the first-hand experience of growing up hearing each great rock tune as it hit the airwaves for the first time. Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and a host of other artists took the popular mind by storm. You had to be there to really know the music first hand. It had to sink in and emotively affect us; we had to dance to it, hear it all around us, and osmotically live in it. It was like a culture soup

For example, I vividly remember Ann Arbor on a spring day and a new song on the radio. It was by “The Tempos” and called “See You in September,” with the words “Will I see you in September or lose you to a summer love.” The year was 1959 and I can remember hearing it while driving up Madison Street toward Ann Arbor High School in my 1951 Ford Victoria Hardtop (dark green and cream). The windows were down.

I had just broken up with my girlfriend and hearing that song, I had tears running down my cheeks. To listen to the same song today, perhaps, is to say “Oh, how quaint,” but to hear it live when it was first released and to be immersed in the life and emotions of that time was, well, memorable, to say the least. Here it is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORGLjzFHa40>

To hear the same song in 2018 is to remember the up-tight 1950s and that whole emotionally repressed time, but whom among you younger folks reading this would have a clue as to that? Today, it sounds like a nothing-burger of a song, but back there, then, in a situation where I had just broken up with my girlfriend and was facing a summer without her and wondering who was with her now. Well, words cannot describe how I felt, the emotions, or, for that matter, that time in general.

And this is true for all of the music we grow up with and grow through. You had to be there to appreciate it. And what event caused a particular song to imprint in our young consciousness. And, what little appreciation we can have 58 years later is tempered not only by passing time, but by a freshness back then that can only really bloom once. And if you are too young to even have been around, well, you can very little idea as to what it was like. It’s a song, but not one you emoted to.

So, I do remember and ultimately cared enough to devote years of my life to documenting and preserving all kinds of popular music, the kind I liked, but also the kind that other people liked, music that perhaps I did not care for. And it was a major undertaking at that.

In the beginning, the big-wig music reviewers laughed when they heard that there was this guy from nowhere, in a tiny Midwest town (and a tiny office where I still sit) who claims he is going to document all recorded music and he even had the nerve to call his project that “All-Music Guide.” LOL.

Yet, in time, most of these same critics and writers ended up writing for the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com) and at its height (when I sold it) we had 150 full-time staff and over 500 free-lance writers.

My point is that, at least to me, our popular culture was as important and worth preserving as any other so-called historical subjects. I sure thought so. And I did the same for movies and film, for video games, for rock n’ roll concert posters, and (of course) for astrology.

I know that being there back then was best, but what can you do? We each have the music that caught us in the act of growing up, but that train has left the station. Hearing music or seeing movies from the past is second-hand, but perhaps it is better than nothing. If nothing else, we each can relive the songs that moved up, whether they are great art or just happened to be on the radio at the time.

And, as mentioned, to me our popular culture (music, movies, etc.) is something I value as much (or more) than a lot of other history. If nothing else, we each deserve the right to revisit the music that most affected us.

Anyway, that’s why I became an archivist of popular culture.



THE DELICACY OF FENG-SHUI

January 14, 2018

Different day, same story. I'm working in the studio to get ready to move a large quantity of astrology books and materials out from here Monday. At the same time, am preparing some thirty 27-inch-long boxes of magazines for placement, moving them out soon. They weigh in at a total of over 700 lbs. The photo shows the magazines in their boxes, waiting to be taped end-to-end and twice on the sides.

I also was next door in the basement (middle of the night) on the table saw again, cutting up scores of dividers for the magazine shipment, then down to the studio to assemble the remaining boxes and lids.

And we are in our third day of babysitting 4-year-old Iris, our granddaughter, which itself is a total experience as most grandparents know. We love our grandkids.

And lastly, I had a fit over an overstuffed closet in my office, and so (also in the middle of the night) I hauled three wooden cabinets (and everything in them!) out of there, cleaned and vacuumed the area, and moved the cabinets (and other stuff) elsewhere. Now I can actually walk into the closet and not climb over things.

And this closet-move was all about feng-shui. I don't like it when the way a room (or part of a room) looks or feels out of place. It finally drives me to change and morph it into something "nice," something that feels good or right. I wrote a whole book on feng-shui called "The Art of Feng-Shui" for those interested. It is a free download here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/p.../e-books/The-Art-of-Feng-Shui.pdf>

And I can tell you briefly how I came to write that book. Years ago, during one of two visits to our dharma center by His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche (one of the four Heart Sons of the Karmapa), who (among other things) is very skilled in feng-shui. His Eminence asked to see our home. So, we gave him a walk-through of our house and he pointed out a number of feng-shui situations. During that tour, I got a spontaneous

feng-shui transmission from His Eminence; by listening and seeing him at work, I just saw (realized) how feng-shui worked and have used it ever since. I then went on to study it and (as mentioned) even wrote a book on it.

Anyway, the feng-shui of the mess of my weird closet, which has always bugged me (but was too convenient a mess to do anything about) came to a head last night. With all I have going on, it was about the last thing I should be doing, but something just clicke in me and I found myself tearing the closet apart in the wee hours of the morning, sometime well after midnight. And what a mess it was!

It is all squared away now, with everything (well, almost) in its place. And... I can now walk into the closet and get at what is stored there. I can't explain why this happened; it just did. And now the feng-shui of the place feels great.

I can't express how subtle feng-shui can be and is. To me, it's not anywhere near as rough or crude as most books on feng-shui tend to be. Basically, feng-shui has to do with arranging things until they do not disturb the mind, but just the opposite. Properly-done feng-shui calms us or whatever it is we need to feel comfortable; that's what feng-shui is all about.

It's as simple as learning to be aware when something protrudes or intrudes into our space, our consciousness or mind. If we will take a deep breath and quietly rest in our awareness (just as it is), after a time we will begin to feel what does not feel right and know how to correct it.

It's like when the crickets all stop chirping in summer and we wait for them to start up again. If we rest quietly, the crickets will begin again and reveal themselves. Feng-shui is like that. Allow the mind to rest naturally and, like the princess and the pea, gradually (as the layers peel back), we will begin to feel and become aware of what is uncomfortable to us deep down. In a nutshell, that is the secret (and art) of feng-shui. That's what His Eminence showed me.

With a little awareness, then all we have to do is adjust things, adjust our situation until whatever it is that makes us uncomfortable does not bother us anymore. That's feng-shui, pir environment tailored by us for our particular comfort.

My closet had been this way for years, only because it was convenient to stuff a lot of things in that space. I ignored my inner sensing, but deep down it intruded into my consciousness. It was always there and I didn't like it; however, I never did anything about it. In the middle of last night, around 3 A.M., I suddenly did something about it.

Anyway, I'm on a roll or on a "tear" these days; who can explain it.

WHY ARCHIVE AT ALL?

January 17, 2018

Why bother archiving, when life is so ephemeral? Why not just live life and let bygones be bygones? Even the great Mahasiddha Tilopa's first rule of dharma advice was:

"Don't Prolong the Past."

Why would one do that is my theme here, at least why have I done it to the degree that I have? Now that last night's New Moon has articulated life a bit and is now beginning to head toward the Full Moon, I move on to the next phase in my project here, which for me involves preparing our studio for a gigantic sale in a few months. It's mostly grunt work.

After all of my recent physical labor preparing to off-load various archival collections, I just have to drone on a bit here, so bear with me, but you are warned. Where did all this archiving on my part begin?

I can tell you that it was early on, somewhere around six years of age. I was a relentless naturalist as a kid, learning and collecting almost everything nature-related, and I finally ended up as a herpetologist, specializing in amphibians, in particular salamanders, a word from the Old French that means "the creature that can live in fire." This, because salamanders used to emerge from fireplaces (because of the heat) and were imagined to have come from the fire itself.

So, I have always been the ultimate "amateur," driven by the love of interest to know more about certain subjects, first from Mother Nature herself, but later by the emotional content of music, film, concert posters, and other areas. I studied Black music for many years, closely.

When I was in my early twenties, I worked part-time for years at the University of Michigan's Graduate Library (and subsidiary library systems), the sixth largest library in the United States, with some 14 million volumes. I started out just learning the Dewey Decimal Classification system and the Library of Congress call numbers. Over time, instead of shelving books I ended up protecting any materials that were

falling apart, either through putting them in various protective envelopes, boxes, etc. or pulling the items from the shelves and sending them to the bindery. So, while I did not get a degree in library science (nor had any interest in that), I learned to fully use a library and understood why libraries exist.

Astrologically speaking, I have a very strong sixth house (Saturn conjunct Uranus conjunct the Moon, all within half a degree on the horizon in azimuth) and a Virgo Midheaven, with the North Node and Neptune exactly conjunct it (and each other). So, music, film, and astrology were natural ways for me to find.

Of course, the Internet changed everything and encyclopedias like the Britannica and others have taken a tremendous hit. As for myself, I had email in 1979 and was mounting major collections of music data on the Internet early-on (using what are called Gopher Sites), before what we call the World-Wide Web even existed. I also ran huge web sites of music and film for CompuServe, which at the time was a major Internet portal for sharing information. Yet, so much has changed since then.

This blog is not just about my experience, but I'd like to at least point at some of the highlights of sharing data as I go along here. I published many books as founder and president of AMG, the All-Music Guide, All-Movie Guide, etc. The books finally got so large that printing them became almost impossible; after a while the full enchilada so-to-speak was only available online.

I also produced software-databases for Philips, Corel, Blockbuster, Gale Research, and many others, plus licensed data for scores of companies like Borders Books, Barnes & Noble, Microsoft, and on and on. Interesting enough is that we provided all the movie data for Netflix during their early years; I saw that red mailer long before it became available. We also produced data for the largest distributor of CDs and DVDs in the world for many years.

All of the above is aside from other areas of my archiving, like concert music posters, video games, and, of course, astrology and the occult sciences. As for AMG, it contains

millions of discrete data items and my physical collection of music CDs, which I no longer own, but I am told, now is over 700,000 and counting.

“Why bother?” is a good question. Life moves so fast that any attempt to retain and remember the water going over the dam is at best but a gesture. As W.B. Yeats said “The grass cannot but keep the form, where the mountain hare has lain.” And, or so I keep telling myself, I am not an historian or even that interested in history; so what drove me in the direction of collecting data?

For me, it is more about remembering (re-member) the emotional content of life, the experience of “experiencing” and what that means for each of us. Emotionally, we are tied to what moves us and the music and film we experienced growing up are right at the top of the list for many of us. My interest was in creating databases, for each music artist, film director or actor, etc. was to pinpoint where their best, their most pithy and unique contributions were. And yada yada yada. You get the idea.

Of course, I could go on. And the watch-phrase for aspiring archivists might be the line from Dylan Thomas “Do not go gentle into that goodnight.” It is, IMO, a rare bird that dotes on the tedium of painstakingly collecting and organizing data. It is not a place where most folks would voluntarily go. Unless you have a love for the process, archiving is more like a sentence than a privilege.

As I see it, such archiving as I have done is fueled by love alone. Not even money would tempt immersing oneself in that kind of life. Personally, I never noticed the sheer boredom involved in all of my archiving. To me, it was like a rosary or Tibetan mala. I was just busy counting the beads and more interested in the clarity that can result from repetitive actions. It’s like keeping your head above water. That’s what mantras are all about, touching home to stay present. And all of this led me to establishing a dharma center for Tibetan Buddhism in the 1980s and producing all kinds of translations and publication of dharma texts. And I should mention that I archived and curated many thousands of Tibetan teachings (audio tapes). I returned them to our mother monastery some years ago, but that would be another story.

And so (I am winding up here), I am very gratified to see some younger astrologers concerned about archiving, curating, and sharing the results that remain of Astrology's trek through history. I don't see the searing insight today that I saw early-on in my astrological career in folks like John Addey, Theodor Landscheidt, Roger Elliot, John Townley, Robert Schmidt, Dane Rudhyar, Charles A. Jayne and many others that I knew personally when I came up, but perhaps it is there in a younger form.

Astrology is a diverse study. I first learned this by programming many kinds of astrology, chiefly western astrology, but also Hindu astrology. I put on (to my knowledge) the first two Hindu Astrology conferences in the U.S. This was before the word Vedic Astrology became popular. I also studied Chinese Astrology, in detail and also learned to read Tibetan script and (with help) translated a number of Tibetan astrological works, mainly those of the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje.

My point is that not only is astrology ancient, but it embraces many different views or perspectives that intersect to create a 3D view of the study. Like the familiar image of many blind people describing an elephant, depending on what part of its body they were feeling, astrology has more than just one significant coordinate system. Rather, it has many, each of which looks at the same moment in time and space, but from a different angle. Astrologers would do well to understand this more than they apparently do. Here is an article I wrote decades ago that would give you the clues. It is titled "Cycles or Circles, Centers, and Circulation:"

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

In fact, I am going to UAC (the United Astrology Conference) in Chicago in late May of this year (2018), not because I like conferences, but in order to meet and talk with younger astrologers and see for myself what the heck they are doing and thinking about. I actually would like to know.

Thanks to David and Fei Cochrane, who purchased my company Matrix Astrology Software, I will have a booth there, not to sell anything, but just to (hopefully) have conversations with astrologers who pass by. I am interested in the future of

astrology, but I also know something about our past, where we came from, and want to share my two cents about where we might be going and how we could get there.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO ASTROLOGY?

January 18, 2018

I get that question a lot, but the answer may surprise some of you. So much of the interest in astrology, the occult and many spiritual topics was colored by the 1970s, what is called the “New Age” craze. There actually was spiritual interest and alternate views on spirituality well before then and the 1970s are spiritually nothing to write home about, IMO. I was there and it was a bit of a zoo.

We might also ask what is astrology best used for, and I will try to touch into that later in this blog. For now, let me describe why astrology was so important to me. This will take a little time, so please bear with me. I was brought up in the 1940s as a kid out in the country in a house my parents had built, right between two large farms, with no neighbors anywhere close. As the oldest of five boys (no girls), I was on my own early-on. And I was a teenager in the 1950s.

I’m not going to whine here about being raised with the soviet threat of immanent nuclear-war or how we often had air-raid practice at school and had to cower under our tiny wooden desks for ten minutes or so each time. What would a kid like me think of that? It was enough to scare you, but there is something even worse that was happening back then, something seldom identified, much less ever mentioned. I’m mentioning it here.

Back in the “olden days,” before I was born, a child was raised with certain qualities to live up too, some of them moral, some not. I’m talking about qualities like Courage, Fortitude, Honesty, Loyalty and Basic Goodness, etc. Although those admonitions must have been around somewhere in my memory, with the blossoming of modern psychology in the 1940s, those were not the labels we were presented with -- not een close.

Instead, labels like paranoia, schizophrenia, Bi-polar disorder, Depression, etc. were all the rage. I think that if you look it up, there are something like 450 different mental disorders listed in the DSM-IV manual published by the American Psychiatric

Association. As just a kid, I didn't know from nothin', as they say.

Anyway, the cream of those disorders were having a field day during my upbringing. Those were the labels being applied wherever they could be and not any form of moral dignities or qualities from previous generations. The psychologists were beside themselves and the general public was like a sponge, just soaking it all up. Everyone was one psychological disorder or another, it seemed.

I can only say that it is tough for a kid to build a persona or self-image out of that psychological jargon-stuff, much less find a reason to be proud of who you are. So, is it any wonder that when I came across astrology in the one bookstore in Ann Arbor (Bob Marshalls Books) that had anything on astrology, I took a look. Any port in a storm, etc.

The picture that astrology painted of me was much kinder and more easily assimilated than the psychological labels bandied about and I was able to get at least some idea as to who I was or who I might be. Of course, as just a young adult I had little idea of myself and astrology somewhat filled in that gap.

It was not long before I preferred the mirror of astrology to that of psychologists any day of the week. Astrology helped me to tune out the psychological labels and I set about learning more about it. Of course this led to me not only studying astrology, but teaching myself to program it, which is no small feat.

Since astrology is essential cultural astronomy, the backbone of astrology is astronomy and programming astronomy is exacting, to say the least. I became the first astrologer to program astrology AND make those programs available to all comers. I did it for free until I had kids and then I had to charge something. I would copy programs to cassette tapes, verify them, and send them to folks for nothing.

One famous astrologer, whom I will not name here, wrote me that I had no right to charge more for my programs than the cost of the cassette tape and postage. This was before computer software had arrived for regular people. An article written for Red Herring Magazine on my work claimed that I

had the second oldest software on the Internet; the oldest was a little company called Microsoft.

Anyway, one thing led to another and before I knew it I had a persona, something I did not have to be ashamed of. My journey through programming almost all astrological techniques found me touching into areas of myself I had never known. Chief among them was the discovery that there is not only one way to look at our birth time and place. Astronomy has other coordinate systems aside from the Earth-bound one we are used to. We are not just a mass of humanity cowering in a tiny planet on the far edge of our galaxy, but rather we are representative life and consciousness learning to know ourselves.

The irony is that we already are the beings from space that we endlessly look outside ourselves for. Our consciousness is the eye of the universe looking at itself, not some random bit of consciousness in an otherwise unconscious system. By learning to look at who I am and why I am here via the various astronomical coordinate systems, I gradually formed what amounts to a 3D view of myself as seen from many angles.

Of course, our karma is locked in the traditional astrological natal chart used for millennia. Our dharma or life-path is charted by the heliocentric chart of our solar system, the micro-view of who we are and where is charted by Local Space chart (azimuth and altitude), and so on.

The most important astrological discovery in my life was discovering my life-path through the heliocentric natal chart. After all, we each are not only what we see from Earth, but also what the solar system (Sun-centered) is saying at the moment of our birth.

IS BEING BECOMING?

January 22, 2018

"Idle fingers are the devil's workshop." I'm taking a couple days off; actually I am working, but on a completely different project than the deconstruction of the studio. I even have had time for some thoughts to come up, so you have been warned. Free time can be a dangerous thing when it comes to thinking.

The idea of "time" as the infinite extension (or attempt) at being (or the lack thereof) might better be called "becoming," and often has been by philosophers. So, if being is still becoming (and has not yet permanently arrived), that is: if being is only "seeming" or only appearing to be, but is not actually permanently existing yet (or ever has), then much of what goes on in appearances is basically a fig leaf obscuring the actual reality that being neither is nor is not. It neither fully exists nor fully does not exist. And we (our idea of ourselves) go with it... LOL.

However, being that is "becoming" (being becoming) may appear to us, just like the old saying that this or that dress may become someone we care about, therefore, what we are looking at may seem becoming, as in "reflecting," etc., yet it never has amounted to what is called "permanent being"; we have yet never become permanent.

OK. I can buy that. It might be easier to simply say that everything changes but change itself. Only change seems unchanging or permanent. In other words, we never arrive at being, but endlessly fall short of permanently being or not being. Talk about inferiority complexes or being caught in the middle!

I know. Most of us would like our being to be permanent or unchanging, as in having an "eternal soul." According to the Buddhists, that does not seem to be the case and our lack of permanency is nothing new. It has always been there, impermanent, and has never been any different. So, nothing has been taken away from us that we ever had anyway. Remember the old saying, "You can't lose what you never

had.” What perhaps IS lost (or can be with practice) is our futile attempts at reification, always trying to make something more real than it, in fact, is. It makes us nervous that we are impermanent, does it not?

So, by ceasing to reify everything so much, we are not losing anything that we ever had. The universe is kind of saying to me, “Nice try, Michael, but no cigar!” Or, less gently, “if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.”

Here we are right now, so, rather than attempt to always reify something as more real or permanent than it is, instead, we might let go of that and learn to look at and realize the nature of the mind (and what is) just as it is and always has been. Since we have never been any different, we might accept and be happy in our impermanence, our becoming being.

Aren't you glad I go back to work in the studio tomorrow?

ENTREPRENEURS: THE EXTRA MILE ...

January 24, 2018

I guess I believe in going the extra mile and, as they say in chess, the endgame is all important. As an entrepreneur, I also know that we try many things that don't come to fruition or that we don't pursue, but that is not what I am talking about here. I remember studying the Russian mystic philosopher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff when I lived in Berkeley, California for a year in 1964. And he said, and I quote "When you go on a spree, go whole hog . . . including the postage."

To always include the postage says what I am trying to say here. If you are going all the way, don't skimp on the finishing touches. Do it to the end and with full throttle. That has been one of my own guiding principles. Don't wimp or lazy-out at the end. Give yourself and everyone else a treat, i.e. the experience of the full enchilada.

Another principle I have tried to follow is to do my best to make my dreams come true, for reality to be like I always dreamed or imagined it could be. Go all the way for that is what I believe is best and most satisfying. And true satisfaction is, IMO, a rare and precious commodity.

My first true dharma teacher, a Rosicrucian initiator, often used to say to me. "This is hell Michael and we have to make our heaven in a little corner of it." Yes, it often is hellish and yes we can transform or transmute it if we are patience and work toward that end.

And I also believe that working hard to give others the experience we wish they would give us is a good policy. Everybody wins and, IMO, it puts the cherry on the top. It not only satisfies others, but us too and perhaps like nothing else can.

I probably tend to measure people by what they have done or completed more than what they have set out to do and abandoned along the way. As mentioned earlier, of course I have tried dozens of things that I did not finish because for me they seemed to have no future. I didn't care enough to

finish them. Blind alleys are part of what entrepreneurs are all about, lots of them.

However, most of my interests, for some reason, have been so strong that I never tire of them. This is especially true of some of the areas I have developed like cataloguing music, film, movies, concert posters, and especially dharma. Some insights never fade or, perhaps more to the point, we can set our sights so that they are self-fueling or self-fulfilling, almost like a perpetual-motion machine. It's satisfying not to be satisfied with something we love.

IMO, true insight is eternally available.

IMMERSED IN THE MIRROR

January 25, 2018

“Rust Never Sleeps,” the album by Neil Young resonates for me, but I would change the phrase to “Truth Never Sleeps,” but incrementally always endures. I know it sounds incongruent, but the truth never sleeps and we have to realize this. That’s all there is to realize, because there is nothing else. The truth is it!

For me, I’m just talking here and it may sound loud, but what I wish to convey is very, very gentle. It is like a soft rain touching me as everything around me falls soundlessly into place. What’s been coming to mind a lot lately is the sense or basic principle of feng-shui, the art of adjustment until things just feel true.

It is perhaps a moot point whether feng-shui is global or local. It’s both, of course. There is the general sense of feng-shui, which perhaps we all share to different degrees. Yet, the tip of the top for each of us is what it takes for us personally to relax within our own space. So, there is general feng-shui and then for each of us a personal feng-shui, the cherry on top, so to speak.

Anyway, in the sheer busyness around me lately, like a morning fog or mist that crawls across the highway, my sense of space lately reflects what is changing within me, almost like a mirror. I can’t see my image directly, but reflected in my actions (in the sphere of action) I can see the shift in attitude that I have begun to actually maintain. It comes in the form of experience in action that reflects.

In that, it is like a mirror or polished copper plate that Tibetan oracles use. Looking obliquely into the space surrounding me, I can begin, perhaps dimly, to see the future, not the future of the stock market, but my own inevitability. And it’s all around me like a mist, something in the corner of my eye (or just beyond), but still visible. As mentioned, it’s a reflection, that although dim, mirrors the state of my mind and its progress. And there is some progress to be seen.

I would not have imagined it this way, that the sphere of action, with its full immersion, would mirror much of anything. Instead, I always thought that reflection was something that resulted from contemplation in a quiet moment. Yet, that's not the information that has been recently seeping through the cracks of my intuition.

What's going on there is the fact that, not only does action reflect, but it reflects vividly and accurately. Wow! It just never occurred to me. It's like being able to see in the dark!

And the message to me from this is so obvious:

Don't step back in order to better see the whole (or bigger) picture; instead, jump in the water with full immersion, so there is something to be seen.

It's like seeing ourselves in a mirror. Full immersion in the world of action reflects an image of our own true nature through an awareness that we can easily see, one so vivid that it is unparalleled by any of the more self-consciousness witnessing we all are used to. I would never have thought so, had I not experienced it. We are still so conceptual!

REST IN BEAUTY

January 28, 2018

I don't take photos just because they are there and I see them. I've been there and done that, and never felt any (or little) satisfaction. These years I have to be moved before I pick up a camera and choose a lens. In other words, I have to "feel like it." I have to feel it.

And no, I don't get tired of a flower just because I already shot some photos. I get tired when I get tired and not before. Take this little budding orchid. I did not take a photo of it just because it is budding. Flowers bloom all the time around here that I don't photograph. Instead, if when I see a flower I am struck by a feeling of beauty, then I tend to take a photo. And I do it, not to capture the moment, but to involve myself more totally in that moment of beauty.

Such was the case with this orchid with a single bloom appearing. To me, the bud was just beautiful. I'm sure that the flower it turns into may also be beautiful, but it would have to be pretty special to outclass this bud, IMO.

I am reminded of one of my all-time favorite songs written by Joan Baez, "Diamonds and Rust" and the lines:

"Now I see you standing
With brown leaves falling around
And snow in your hair

"Now you're smiling out the window
Of that crummy hotel
Over Washington Square

"Our breath comes out white clouds
Mingles and hangs in the air
Speaking strictly for me
We both could have died then and there"

Here it is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ST9TZBb9v8>

It might just be that I met and knew both Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Washington Square around 1961. This song has a bit of heartbreak in it, as I see it. That bud too is perfect. As

mentioned, I doubt that I will be moved as much by the flower, but I could be wrong.

As so it goes with me from day to day, very much the same, but also always different enough to notice time. A moment of beauty is beyond time, IMO. As I have written of many times here on Facebook, I am very much in agreement with my favorite poet Gerard Manley Hopkins when he labels such moments as “inscapes,” our way to slip between the clock-ticking seconds into a bit of eternity while in the midst of ever-marching time.

And so, my photographs (to me) are not so much what you see here as a finished image, but rather what happens in my mind during the process of taking them. A crude way of saying this is that when I feel beauty in something I see, I like to immerse myself in it through photography. As mentioned above, I feel that Hopkins said it best when he referred to moments when we are turned inward to the mind by natural beauty as “inscapes.” To that, I cannot but add my eye, confess my yes.

Lest you imagine this is just a snapshot, let me point out that the image here is the result of 35 separate photographs merged into one photograph, so my reverie (so to speak) involves some time, time during which I very carefully focus and photograph each part of the image. You could say that I am lost in the image during the photography. I concentrate on focusing and taking the photos, but beyond that I am resting my mind in the beauty of the image. That part is perhaps hard to explain; it is what in dharma is called Insight Meditation, which practice itself the texts say is beyond description or elaboration.

Perhaps from what I said, you have some idea of what I am pointing at here. I enjoy photographing when a moment of beauty and inscape overtakes me in my life and I feel that those moments are as sacred to me as moments can be. These inscapes flag me down from my busyness and usher me into the nature of my own mind, where true rest is possible at those times.

As busy as I tend to be, you know I need the rest.

LIKE PUTTING LIPSTICK ON A PIG

January 31, 2018

[Today is a Full-Moon Eclipse, one of two in the next two weeks. So, we are entering one of those legendary inner-eclipse times, which are almost like a life-episode all by themselves.]

Things in my life are seldom constant; they change. And every once in a while, some kind of spiritual wind moves through time like a tidal wave rearranging things; and it can last for days, weeks, or (more often) as far back as I can remember. This is because that wave of change imprints. The defining attribute about the imprinting of change is that it articulates (bends) time and often replaces “as far back as I can remember” with itself. The imprint then becomes as far back as I can remember. In some respects, after such a change, my history is new all over again. I tend to think back to that event, that time of change. Yes, I can go farther back, but it takes more effort now.

Is change an ill wind? I hope not, but anything “new” is marked by at least enough change for it to appear new; that’s why it’s called change, and who knows what will be coming next.

Meanwhile, like surfing, I work these waves of change as best I can. How radical the change is depends on how much the change is like turning a corner (or turning over a new leaf) in life instead of just circling around and on. Those right-angle turns get my attention. And, as I always tell myself, the straighter the line, the finer the curve. Everything comes back around, but when? Given our linear imagination, we can wait for a long time. We tend to forget that we even changed and then where are we?

I have learned to trust change, perhaps because I have no choice. After all, there it is! And new horizons are just that, new. It seems that I am always adjusting to change, making myself as comfortable as I can. And I suppose it is like, as the old saying goes, “trying to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic.”

Samsaric change is a major theme in learning dharma and the Buddhists call it “relative” truth, whatever makes us more comfortable in this life we are living. The Buddhists use it for various purification practices. At best, relative truth offers temporary relief, with the accent on “temporary.” It’s never a permanent solution.

There is nothing wrong with making ourselves at home in this Samsaric life as best we can. We all tend to do it. However, in recent years I do find there is the tendency on my part to more and more forgo comfort and, instead, move (and work) toward realizing the whole enchilada.

The heck with rearranging those deck chairs. Instead, I find arising in myself a drift toward grasping things as they are, warts and all and I’m not as concerned with cosmetics as I once was. As they say, it’s like putting lipstick on a pig.

Rebuilding our house-of-cards gets old too. Yet, becoming a wandering monk is, for me, a bridge too far, as well. I guess I’m a “tweener,” caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. My current project of deconstructing this large studio is like erasing my past, bit by bit. Where does that leave me?

I feel like a dandelion when it goes to seed and starts losing itself in the breeze. Scary? Yeah, but how refreshing!

SPEAK TO ME!

February 2, 2018

That's what I say to the universe almost every day: talk to me. Oracles are not just a part of my life; they are the harbingers of almost everything important. I use a number of oracles (astrology, I-Ching, Tarot, etc.), but mostly astrology. Astrology is a rather complex oracle, but an oracle just the same. And in recent years, thanks to dharma training, I have learned to look into the mind itself to a degree, my own crystal ball, so to speak. The mind is by far the best oracle of all!

The definition of an oracle, as I understand it, is whatever means we find that allows the universe to speak more directly to us, call it intuition or what-have-you. I don't frown on your choice of oracles, be it tea leaves or chicken-scratchings – whatever floats our boat. It reminds me of the old saying "it's not the razor, but the shave," where oracles are the razor, and the intuitive connection the shave. It's not the "kind" of oracle we use, but the inner connection it provides to our intuition. Anything that works can be the oracle or means.

Traditionally, psychics called this "getting on your contacts," tuning-in our intuition of the truth and monitoring the truth itself as it emerges. Some folks are just naturally tuned-in from birth; as for me, I have had to learn to allow my mind to rest enough for the day-to-day noise to subside and the signal embedded in it to emerge. Dharma training has helped me do that.

Following our intuition is the age-old recommendation for true insight. We ignore it at our peril and if we are not sensitive to it, then we are reduced to trial and error as our steering wheel.

In my case, I have had to augment my natural sense of intuition with various purification practices like not using caffeine, alcohol, sugar, and so on. It's not that I didn't enjoy those things (even though they were bad for my health), but that I value the insight of a clear mind more. We make choices and those choices determine our direction; in fact, they define it.

So, when I want confirmation as to what's going on around me (or within me), I usually resort to the oracular qualities of astrology. However, thanks to dharma training, most of the time my intuition is by now good enough that I can get around and see in the dark of time, so to speak. If I cloud up my intuition one way or another, I soon lose my way and find myself back in the hamster's wheel, with my mind quite unremarkable once again.

Once I tasted the virtues of Insight Meditation, my comment would be "Don't leave home without it."

THE VISION OF THE ECLIPSE

February 3, 2018

Time to rest my muscles (and weary bones) for a couple of days and I will be doing this via babysitting my granddaughter Iris, who is soon to be four-years old. She arrived tonight and will be here until Sunday, so it means a shift in gears as far as working in the studio. I will give that a rest. However, I wrestled the final recording-snake (one of four) out of the walls and cold-air returns and have managed to coil the 100-foot one-inch thick rope-like snake into a circle and bound it; it is very awkward to lift and carry. It must weigh fifty pounds.

Little Iris is here and she has already told me that there are a lot of things we are going to do together, including reading books, my telling her stories, using the magnifying glass to look at nature, playing together, and on and on. So I will be busy and give my sore back and muscles a rest.

And let's not forget we are in an intra-eclipse time, with two eclipses, one of the Moon (just passed) and another of the Sun, within a two-week period. And the time in between the two such eclipses is traditionally very special. According to the Tibetan Buddhists, New and Full Moons are times when the subtle winds and channels within us line up more than at other times. We are naturally in-tune.

I am told that in Tibet, before the concept of weekends swept the world (Saturday and Sunday off), instead of weekends, the Buddhists used to set aside special days for observing our own mind stream. New and Full Moons were examples of special days. And, according to my Tibetan dharma teacher, eclipses are the times when our inner channels are the most perfectly aligned. It was considered well worth setting those days aside to quietly observe our own mindstream.

At these special times we can be prone to visions. In fact, the whole two-week period between two eclipses (like we have going on now) is vision-prone. A vision is not something floating above us in the sky like a picture (although it could be), but rather times of intense vividness when some form of internal message (or knowledge) imprints itself deep within

our consciousness. Perhaps most folk ignore these imprints or are unaware of them, yet some are aware (at least at certain times in their lives), but it can take weeks or months to read out what is imprinted in our mindstream and learn to use it. It is like a scroll was placed in our mind.

It is helpful to remember that everyone in the world experiences these visionary moments at the same time. While the vision happens to us all, it seems that only certain ones among us, at any given time, are aware enough to remember and interpret the vision, much less to act on it. We are in one of those intra-eclipses vision periods until the next New Moon Eclipse on February 15, 2018 at 04:07 PM EST.

I have written an entire (and free book) on this for those interested. It is called the "Vision of the Eclipse" and you can find it here:

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

And so, these two weeks are a time of vision, if we can manage to be aware of it and read it, like a scroll, from within out mind.

THE DEPTH OF ECLIPSE VISIONS

February 4, 2018

I feel that I should say something more about what eclipses offer us in the way of vision; what they are like? Visions are an integral and natural part of living; we all have them, but sadly we tend to habitually ignore them or, because of distractions, can't manage to retain them in mind. Simply put, we are too busy being distracted. Although eclipse-visions are imprinted in everyone's mindstream at the time around eclipse, most of us can't seem to remember them and fail to bring them to mind later.

For one, it's important to recognize a vision when we have one, when they are happening all around the world to everyone. They are not like the idea of visions in the movies, you know, when a vision is a picture in the sky or in our mind, although that too can happen. Most visions are simply incredibly vivid moments, moments that are more real than life, moments and times that we are completely lost in. They are so immersive and vividly-there and then... they pass. When they fade is when we know we have had a vision because we are suddenly quite ordinary once again. We don't realize that we were not ordinary for a while because we were so into it.

However, times of vision leave an imprint in our mindstream and in the mindstream of everyone, much like in the ancient literature, a scroll is said to be placed in our mind that gradually unrolls, revealing itself so that we can read it. Vision-imprints are like timed-release capsules, gradually shining and emitting their essence so that we can take it in and become aware of it. As an analogy, they are like an all-day sucker.

I have learned that I kind of slide into visions, often not even aware that I'm having them. Things just gradually get more immersive, more vivid and real, until they literally are riveting. I am held transfixed by them like a deer in the headlights. Then, they pass, and I find myself normal-ling out again, coming back to everyday reality. It is then that I realize that I have been through something (if I realize at all), but what?

It is a sign of a vision that the imprints from them come to mind over and over and over again, each time allowing us to taste or sample and grasp it more and more. It is similar to when we have a powerful dream and keep touching into it as it goes away. However, visions are real-life experiences and not dreams or day dreams.

It often takes days, months or even many months to exhaust the meaning or essence of a vision. After the imprint of an eclipse vision, we kind of read it back into us a line at a time, so to speak. Or, as mentioned, it's like sucking a hard candy until every last bit is gone. That's a good analogy. We bring it to mind again and again until we reach the point of no return..

In other words, it's a bit like a sore tooth. We can't stop thinking about and touching into it until we understand its content to the full extent of our ability. I hope these words will give you at least a sense of what visions are about, albeit only as I have come to know them.

I can say that developing sensitivity to our natural visions has been very important in my life because of their meaning. As mentioned, becoming aware that we have even had a vision is obviously a place to start. An analogy that I like is that of listening to old 45 records as I was growing up.

I would hear a tune on the radio that really, really impacted me. I was so much lost in it emotionally that I could not really fully hear it enough, much less get all the sense out of it I felt I needed. So, I would listen to it over and over, each time grasping or absorbing a little bit more until, one day, I didn't need to do that any longer. I had absorbed all the content or meaning of it I could. Visions work like that.

They impact us and we subsequently bring them to mind over and over until we have absorbed from them all that we can. In other words, visions are an ultra-intense immersion in the moment beyond what we normally would feel, vivid enough that it requires repeated sampling on our part to draw out all the sense it contains for us.

As mentioned in the previous post, we are currently in a two-week period between back-to-back eclipses, a time during which we can access whatever visions of the eclipses have been implanted. And we don't do that by "trying," but rather by

relaxing and allowing the visions to work within us and come to mind. They arise, much like intuitions or ideas, like the old stories of Atlantis arising.

STARTYPES: FINDING THE LIFE PATH

February 4, 2018

For me, one of the most important factors in my life was finding out what I was good for; why was I here and what can I do with what I am? I had little idea.

Fortunately for me, I finally did find out and there is a book about it, but I had to write it myself in order for it to exist. LOL. In this world, it's definitely a case of help yourself and don't wait for others to do it for us.

I believe that there are many ways to discover what we would be good at in life; the astrological techniques for this used in this book are just one of them. However, I did spend about 40 years on this, trying to reduce what can be very complex indeed to something anyone who reads can use. The book is "Dharma Chart, Karma Chart" and it is a free download here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev%20Nov2...>

All you have to do is to turn to the back of the book where there is a table, look up your birth day-and-year and note the two numbers associated with your date. The first number is the astrological pattern for your Dharma Chart (to me the most important, the Life Path) and the second number is the astrological pattern for your Karma Chart, the circumstances and personal situation into which you were born.

Then, with those two numbers, just look up those patterns (and illustrated cards) in the front part of the book and read about your Dharma type and your Karma type. See if it fits. If it makes no sense, you are out a little time, but no harm done. If it does make sense, you may want to learn more, as I did.

It took me decades to make it as simple as it now is, because first I had to understand it myself. Then I had to figure out how to reduce it to something more simple than complex. I ended up with some 60 basic whole-chart types, each of which I interpreted and then designed a tarot-like card for each one. I called them StarTypes.

Each StarType pattern is part of a group or tribe that share many common characteristics, yet also differ from one another. This took decades and years of personal readings or interviews, not to mention looking at a great number of charts, many tens of thousands. So, what did all of this work produce and why bother?

The value of StarTypes in my work is that it allowed me to look at someone's dharma chart for the first time, including my own. Before that, the best I could do was try to derive the dharma chart from the traditional astrological natal chart as used for centuries. Yet, that only produced a dim view, like through a glass darkly.

However, the Dharma Chart was an actual map of the dharma type and function of the individual, something I had never seen before. And all of this work was driven by the experience of discovering my own dharma chart. It not only empowered me, but changed my life and view of myself forever. I ceased to identify so much with my personality and circumstances and began to identify with who I was inside and I understand why I was on Earth and just what I could accomplish. And I set about accomplishing it.

Once I identified with my own dharma chart, I never went back to seeing myself as I used to. It is a one-way trip, like finally putting the horse before the cart. In Buddhists terms it is called a "realization." Previously, I had it just exactly backward, assuming that everything revolved around me, but I discovered through my dharma chart that I too revolved around a center and that discovery set me free. It was not all about me!

I enclose some of the main dharma archetypes that are represented by whole-chart patterns heliocentrically. You would find your dharma-chart pattern and then look up that archetype and read about. Feel free to ask questions.

[Images designed by me of some of the main Dharma Archetypes.]

SOME OF THE WHOLE-CHART PATTERNS



SOME OF THE WHOLE-CHART PATTERNS



ARE WE COMING OR GOING?

February 6, 2018

Just as we grow up to being an adult, so do we grow down after the prime of life as we get older. I've been shrinking for years. LOL. There is that motion of growing up and out and then one of returning, coming back in -- sowing and reaping. It's easy to tell where we are in this arc by just looking at our age. Are we ahead of the curve or behind it? Are we pushing out or pulling back in?

As someone going on 77 years of age, obviously I am on the return trip. I'm looking back more than looking forward. I don't seem to mind because I'm still getting to know the nature of my mind and that is progressing.

If younger folks are looking forward and we older folks are looking back, what is it that we are looking at?

The answer, of course, is the "prime of life;" we are all looking at the prime of life, our physical majority, and what we imagine that is, the moment or time when we are best balanced between our future and our past. When we reach the tip-of-the-top of what is called the prime of life, we do a slow-motion 180; we very gradually turn around and begin to look back. Remember the admonition to Lot's wife, not to turn back, lest she become a pillar of salt. Or, the Satchel Page quote "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you." In this case, that would be age, so perhaps we don't look over our shoulder. LOL.

Where before, we were always looking forward, now we begin to look back. I call it the point-of-no-return. We are no longer getting any return by looking forward and, instead, we find ourselves starting to conserve our forces and gradually find ourselves clinging to what we have, rather than grasping for what is no longer ahead of us. That forward-looking expectation is increasingly frustrated as time goes by! We end up going back or at least looking back at the way we came up.

In other words, we do a simple pirouette and spin around, albeit perhaps this is done in slow motion. Either way, this is the ultimate samsaric-gesture, a mudra that we all will make.

And it is not celebrated because, in a way, it is the only thing we do celebrate, and all the time. It's already being endlessly celebrated, that gradual turnabout-sign or mudra. Just look at most advertising!

Perhaps the rate of change or exchange varies; especially our awareness of all this changes. Awareness is important and often lacking in so many folks. Obviously, we can't celebrate what we are unaware of. If we don't know it's happening, we don't know. It just happens and we don't even know it. It's that simple, but in that sense, it passes us by.

I realized this for the first time on May 12, 1967, during what was for me a profound time of experience. I just woke up and looked around. From that day onward I was able to witness my own life, my own changes. I had an overview, a "realization." Before that, I had little to no idea who I was or even that I was. And then, I was just there. Voila!

However, to my amazement, although I was present, it seemed that almost no one else was! How ironic. And you know me; I tried my best to get people's attention (and perhaps I could hold it for a moment or two), but when I stopped trying, things went back to automatic. Most others were not there with me. I held their attention only as long as I persisted. I'm still doing it to a lesser degree, even today.

It was like finally having something to give and no one to receive it. I couldn't get a witness and I didn't know what to do about that, either. It was like winning the lottery, but with no place to spend it. From there to now has been a long journey. I used to mantra to myself "for spirit must be made to matter," as I struggled to make my insights real. I was awake and living in something like my own dream, but unable to fully share it. What's the point?

From that day and time onward, I began to implement what spiritual insight I did have in actions, deeds, and in what I did. And here I am, some fifty years later, still working as best I can to share spiritual insight. And it's difficult because all I have is my own experience, what happened to me. If I can get your attention and share what I can, then you may realize that you have (we all have) the same experience and can

realize it; we can talk with one another. Otherwise, it's just me talking to myself.

So, that seems to be one of the dilemmas of spiritual insight. We have it, but can we share it? And who will or can listen? And to me, the wonderful thing about spiritual insight is that, through it, we realize everyone already has it but most just are not aware of it. So it comes down to a question of awareness. It's an everyday rarity from which no one is excluded. That's good news and it is natural to want to share it with others; and so I do my best.

It always comes down to a question of awareness.

WHAT IS RETREAT?

February 8, 2018

IMO, life itself is a bit of a retreat, that is, if you measure retreat by the virtues of being alone. I can feel very alone in a roomful of people sometimes, in fact often. So, forced or planned retreats have never appealed to me much. In this case, Margaret is going off to welcome in the Tibetan New Year at our monastery and I am staying behind, so I am in a kind of retreat situation by force of circumstances.

Being alone for me means, well, being alone and having time for that aloneness to compound itself enough that I am less distracted. Of course, trying to be undistracted, itself, is distracting IMO. In our modern lives, the phone or doorbell rings, someone comes into the room, we bump into our partners around the house, talk, and on and on. Distractions are endless.

When the house is empty except for me, the undistractedness amplifies and focuses the mind and I am simply less-distracted. There are less events to distract me. I have never been one to plan my retreat activities, especially spiritual activities. Guided meditations are, for me, an oxymoron. I prefer following my intuition, whatever arises. That's just how I am.

Saying more prayers and the like, making spiritual efforts, are also pretty-much a non-starter in my case. What I get out of my version of retreat, of being left to myself, left alone for longer periods of time, are simply the rewards of not being distracted. There is more signal and less noise.

And yes, I can get a lot more done when I am alone, but I get a lot done anyway. I am by nature, less distracted than most folks, as far as I can see. Distractions are noise and when they are removed, as mentioned, the signal more-easily overrides the noise and not vice-versa.

I do get great benefits from exposure to a stronger signal and less noise. I imagine we all would. So, my impending retreat of a couple of weeks does not involve my changing anything that I do or setting up a special program or anything. I am

sure that might work for some folks, but for me it would be just another distraction and a major one at that.

If I am less distracted, at the very least, I get more work done and prolonged non-distraction focuses the intuitive signals I depend on. So, that's my view of a retreat.

I should add, however, that in dharma practice, distractions play a huge part, especially in the more advanced "realization" practices. So, that adds a little humor to the mix. If our meditation journey is sometimes like crossing a desert, then our thoughts and distractions are essential to make the trip. Realizing distractions releases an enormous of energy that we need to guide us. We depend on them.

Our distractions make up the web that we each have to cross handhold by handhold, spiders that we are, and we create our own web. The food of meditation at some point becomes our distracting thoughts and reactions. In the end, it's all food for thought and thoughts and distractions become the means for realization. The universe does not waste anything.

So, I'm looking forward to my short "retreat" because I have no choice. The first few days always go well, but after a time, it can become a little too much like whistling in the dark. About that time, I'm looking for Margaret's return.

FUNKY MUSIC AND ME

February 9, 2018

As I stand looking out the window, I can see that we are having another snowfall here in Big Rapids, Michigan. I've been up for hours, driving around, doing this and that, taking tax documents down to the accountants. AND... I went to the flower store and bought a few flowers. Looks Like I'm going to start photographing flowers again, like today. [And I did, as you can see from the photo.]

That's a sign to me of something, probably taking a day or part of a day off from working at the studio. Margaret made it safely to New York and is staying for a couple of days at Karmé Ling, our retreat center in upstate New York, before moving on to the monastery in the mountains about Woodstock, New York. Everything is good.

It seems like a lot of people we know are passing on lately, one by one. At my age, I should expect it. Still, when a friend that I have known for fifty years or so leaves the planet, from a purely selfish view on my part, that whole relationship goes with it. It's like parts of me are just evaporating and taking flight. When I turn to any memories with that person, there is no longer a witness. It's like a part of the mirror of myself just went blank. And I'm making some big decisions today, like should I make banana bread? I made a blueberry pie yesterday and there it sits, waiting for me.

As for thinking, musings, and thoughts, I had this one today. Although probably astrologers will best appreciate this, I will share it anyway. Let's start with the astrology and move on to the music. That's where I'm going with this. It's just something that came to me.

My dharma chart, the heliocentric chart for the moment of my birth has a LOT of trines in it. In fact, it has what we could call the "king of trines," a grand trine, 3 planets almost exactly 120-degrees apart from one another. Not only is that there is this grand trine, but six of the nine planets in the solar system are part of what makes it up, including Earth as the main focus. Now folks, that's a lot trines. And trines indicate

receptivity and smooth going, so if I want to understand myself astrologically, I'm like a great big, let's say "grand," receptor. You can check it out. I was born July 18, 1941 at 5:03 PM EDT, in Lancaster, PA.

And now for the interesting part, at least to me. I have been, we could say, very involved with music all of my adult life. Anyway, I was thinking about the single kind of music that I most love, the one that I am most able to "receive," if I am such so receptive. You might think it would be very receptive music, but it's not. In fact, it is just the opposite.

My favorite kind of music is the hardest of the bar-walking, screaming & honking, blues sax, the nastiest stuff out there that there is. And... my favorite kind of jazz is what is called "original funk" or "soul jazz," certainly the most gnarly and funkier Hammond organ, sax, and guitar trios that ever played, performers like Jimmy Smith, Charles Earland, Shirley Scott, Big John Patton on the Hammond organ, Stanley Turrentine on sax, and guitarists like Kenny Burrell. It's nasty stuff, very direct. This kind of music is also part of what is called "groove music," another area of music that I know a lot about, thanks to constant listening. And so, what do I make of all this funky music in light of my very receptive grand-trines?

What I make of it is that my receptivity listens and can receive a whole lot more pain and roughness than I would have ever imagined. I can hear music "real good," and apparently I can't hear (deeply-enough) the most in-your-face blues/jazz that ever existed. When it comes to some of the most raunchy blues and jazz, I just can't get enough of it. When I mention, bar-walking sax, I am talking about the players that get up on the bar and walk along it, playing roughest sax you ever heard. Sax players Eddie Harris and Houston Person can do this.

This I find interesting, perhaps ironic, but certainly dead-on true. I share it here for those of you that like to appreciate how the universe works. I also include an essay I did years ago for blues and groove lovers who want to get into jazz. It's contains a lot of this funky music as references. It's called:

GROOVE AND BLUES IN JAZZ

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Groove%20and%20Blues%20in%20Jazz>

...

THE CHIMERA OF “SEEING”

February 10, 2010

Astrology is a lens that I know how to look through and see. People used to ask me whether I believed in astrology and my answer always was “No, I don’t believe ‘in’ it; I find it useful, like any other useful thing.” It’s not a matter of faith, but of practicality. I know how to use astrology to my satisfaction. I find it useful as an alternative way of viewing my life, especially if I compare it to modern psychological terms for our character.

I also know how to use rare and very fine camera lenses. Looking through such lenses at flowers (and other objects of nature), it’s not just that the objects I see through these lenses appear clearer, but that my “Seeing” of them is clearer. It’s the “Seeing” that is enabled, not only what is seen. I believe this is true with many other areas in my life. It’s not so much what’s out there, the objects in life that I see, but how they affect how I see them. Do you get the difference?

And most of all, in everything I see, what is reflected in that “seeing” is the self, some aspect of me. It’s like the reflection of the many facets of a diamond or jewel. With each facet I get a slightly different reflection, but what is reflected is always the same, me, self and I, just differently. And like so many of us, I am always interested in learning more about myself. It’s not just some form of narcissistic voyeurism, although it might appear like that. In every facet of self-reflection I am learning more about whom I am (and occasionally realizing what the “self” actually is), but more important I am gradually deepening realization as to the nature of the mind itself. But I have to look to see!

So, for example, in all of my nature photography, it’s not only the flower that I am looking at; it’s the reflection of myself in the flower that is fascinating. It’s not a static view, but a learning curve that everything around me reflects. That’s why I keep looking. Otherwise, by now I would have seen what there is to see and lost interest.

Perhaps it's like one of those mirrored globes in a dancehall and my fascination is just a deer-in-the-headlights fixation. Be that as it may, like looking in a rear-view mirror, I can see myself in the natural world (and where I have been) a little more in every facet of reflection. Everything reflects me (and how it is with me); I learn from that and thus move on. For sure, it's an ever-changing kaleidoscope.

Is this not a desert that we each have to cross or is it an endless chimera that fixes our gaze? My guess is that it is some of both, an addiction, yet also a learning curve that ultimately we transcend by realizing its nature. We learn to see beyond our self. Either way, good question!

And like the hero Bellerophon riding on Pegasus, at some point each of us must slay the Chimera within us. We stop looking at the ever-changing reflection of ourselves and instead learn to rest in the "Seeing" itself. It's no longer what is seen, but the "Seeing" that remains and is important. Why? Because, ultimately, there is nothing to be seen other than that same "Seeing" and resting in that, which is also an action, but one with fortuitous consequences; we learn to rest in the seeing and not in what is seen.

“OH LORD, I’M STUCK IN LODI AGAIN”

February 13, 2018

I’m just musing a bit, so walk with me if you have the time.

There’s more light here each day as we work on through winter toward spring. I know; expectation wastes the moment, yet I still find myself waiting for spring and trying to keep busy in the bargain. And I know that it’s my problem.

I’m used to living on the edge of the moment, which is a bit like flying blind. I like the freshness of the present, but too often the shadow cast by a future that I can’t yet see clouds my vision so that I don’t see much of anything; it’s just not clear to me, so I wait.

And I know, sooner or later I will pick up on the thread of things and it will seem once again that I’m going somewhere or other. It’s the “other” I’m pointing at just now as I write this. I can’t see very far into this particular moment. It’s like driving through fog and hoping you won’t run into anything.

Of course I am used to it, if you can ever get used to such a thing. Yet, I still can’t relax in this foggy situation when it arises. It’s like a stuck record and I need to examine it more closely. It has to make sense somewhere in there. I feel like a hitchhiker with my thumb out, waiting for a ride. I know I will get to where I’m going; I just don’t know how or when. And, of course, I am only (and always) going “somewhere” and that endlessly changes, so what’s the hurry?

Wisdom says that I have to embrace the moment more fully to actually find what I’m looking for, which it seems is some sense of continuity, as in: continuing. As mentioned, that is my first mistake right there, searching for continuity. I keep imagining that there is a thread in there somewhere, if I can just pick up on it.

And the humor in this is that the linearity of it all is going nowhere, so why do I always line up? My very inability to rest fully in the moment is also what drives me forward. Otherwise I would be here. I’m hoping to eventually not go anywhere but

where I am this moment. That has to be funny, because right now I'm still in a hurry to get nowhere. LOL.

Anyway, these are my thoughts on this day. Any of you thinking something similar?

TAKING “THE ROAD NOT TAKEN”

February 16, 2018

How far back does my desire to do nothing extend? “Way back” would be the answer. Somewhere in my mind has always been the refrain (amounting to a mantra) “Do not do a thing;” I don’t know why, but it’s always been there. And I have done a lot of things, but perhaps things done out of love or interest don’t count.

For the most part, those are the things that I tend to do and have done, i.e. the things I want to do. As an entrepreneur, my businesses have always been based on my hobbies, on what I would have done anyway, and that’s what I did.

My best guess is that this approach stems from being an oldest child who was raised out in the country between two large farms. Early-on, I got in the habit of entertaining myself and that became normal for me. And perhaps more important, I became habituated to doing what I felt like or love doing, rather than take directions from others as to what I should do. I certainly refused any kind of direction (whatsoever) through almost 12 years of schooling.

Perhaps my love of doing what I love to do was the grease that allowed me to slip along the cogs of life without sticking overmuch. Maybe the admonition “Do not do a thing” means don’t “try” to do anything that is not intuitive or natural, but instead find what you intuitively want to do and dare to flow through that. Make what you love your life. Risk.

Why is “trying” or making an effort not recommended? Is trying too hard something that goes against the grain? I do know that in the more advanced dharma teachings, the entire concept of making effort is discouraged. Effort is relegated to the remedial or preliminary dharma practices. In actual meditation (the ‘realization’ practices), going with the natural flow of things-as-they-are is what is required, accepting or receiving life just as it is. Perhaps we first have to accept life as it is, before we can work with it. In other words, we have to get up before we get down to reality.

In my case, it appears that I just got into the habit of doing what was intuitive more than it was an actual discipline that I was aware of. For me, it was the natural way-to-go rather than a conscious decision on my part.

So, how do we learn to act more intuitively when we have all these things we “have” to do each day to stay alive and exist? When I think back: without being very conscious of it, I refused to do as I was told and, instead, naturally followed the path of least resistance intuitively. I was not protesting, but rather adapting to the only way I knew how to be happy, i.e. doing what I wanted to do. LOL.

I certainly did not fully grasp the consequences of dropping out of high school or of being accepted to the University of Michigan as a freshman, but dropping out after three weeks when I realized that college was just more of the same. Obviously, I am still trying to figure all this out these many years later. It’s a bit like waking up and finding ourselves in the middle of a high-wire walkabout. Don’t look down!

And, of course, how absolutely selfish of me, to avoid responsibility other than what I naturally responded to and felt like doing. I also have always had the sense of extracting from any situation what I need to get out of it rather than feel resentful. I don’t need the whole enchilada, but just enough to get by, like: give us this day our daily bread... that sort of thing.

“Pie in the sky” has never been attractive for me. I want satisfaction as I go along rather than as a reward for going without. I guess that is pure selfishness on my part, but that’s the way I have always been. And, the deeper I get into dharma (and dharma practice), the more that tendency to be intuitive seems to be encouraged rather than frowned upon. In a word, I have not compromised much. And I guess that should worry me, but I don’t know how to rectify the way I am, much less to walk it back.

And I’m beginning to be more aware of how I work and, instead of criticizing myself, I am relaxing in the way I am more and not less. If I think about it, I took a huge risk growing up doing only what I felt like, but I seemed unable to do otherwise. It could be seen as pure selfishness on my part;

it was not a sacrifice, but a laziness or natural bent on my part. It is probably not me just getting away with something, as much as it was (at every turn) trying to protect a natural love of being intuitive that I learned (or had) from a very young age. No one taught it to me.

Like the line from the poem by Robert Frost, "I took the road less traveled by. And that has made all the difference." That encouraging thought is tempered by a line from the artist Michelangelo (who also wrote poems), "What if a little bird should escape death for many long years, only to suffer a crueller death." The fear that I am getting away with something that I will have to pay for down-the-line may after all turn out NOT to be a fact. Perhaps I have been rewarded for following my intuition rather than compromise. It's a good question, one I am living out to the very end. In the old parable of the grasshopper and the ant, the grasshopper may turn to have been the right choice.

Regardless: I'm sure we each pay our dues, one way or another and there is no free lunch.

THE ARK OF WORDS

February 15, 2018

Like Noah's Ark, if we put our words together properly, with great care and love, they will cohere and withstand the shocks that break out in life. They will last. Every phrase and sentence, if made well, is a seed that can fall on fallow ground and take root. It may take time, but time we have, until we don't.

I am reminded of the interview I did with blues-great Howlin' Wolf in which he said: "Just like a flower. You see, we're trampin' on this grass. We stay here a couple months and tramp right around here, we gonna' kill it. Just as soon as we stop trampin', the first warm sunshine, and then the grass gonna' start a growin' again."

If you want to read the whole interview, here it is:

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

There I stood in the open sun of the late summer of 1969 with the great Howlin' Wolf, while his mind walked me through what was like an acid trip. Wolf was sharing something with me, if I could hear it, and it came from deep down. It just goes to show you that the physical situation we are in does not trump our intuition and whatever comes from inside. It's vice-versa; the inside controls and speaks to the outside, if we can learn to hear it and act on it.

Words are limited in what they can do. At best, they are pointers to experiences we can have. At worst, they are fodder for dreaming-on and over the reality of life. Yet, words are seeds, tiny arks that can bring to life in us the urge to risk experience and find out for ourselves what life is. Words depend on the sense they make. If they make no sense, then they are obviously "nonsense." If they do make sense, how much sense do they make? And is that sense in fact convincing?

If words make sense and sentences are arks, how do we sprout those seeds they sow and break them open. As mentioned, a lot depends on the sense words make to us as individuals. The "sense" of it has to grab our attention, flag us

down from just dreaming on, and awaken in us the desire to experience what the word-sense illustrates and points out. We live in the desire-realm, this samsaric world, and if there is no desire, there is no experience. This works both ways; words can be good or helpful at one point in our lives and not so good for us in another. It helps to know the difference.

Words that strike us deeply have a greater chance of sprouting experience than those that, for us, are too intellectual and go right over our head. This is why there are so many “dharma,” dharma teachers, and dharma students. As we say “Different strokes for different folks.” In the UK, they say “Horses for courses,” which says the same thing.

If the words that you are reading do not engender the desire to personally experience what they describe, then they are not making enough sense. They are just distractions, pure entertainment at best and a waste of time at worst. Words, to be effective, must drive us to (or at least toward) experience. In other words, they must make sense. And sense is by definition sensual, an experience. Words should drive us toward experience.

In this samsaric life, we are hungry for experience and, without a desire to experience, we lie fallow, waiting for the urgency that would see us plunge into experience, whereby the possibility of realization might arise.

And so, if our main or primary way of learning is through language and words, then those words have to make enough sense (been crafted well enough), that we are directed and encouraged enough to enter into and risk actual experience, so that we would have something to realize. As the philosopher Hegel so elegantly said “We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.”

This language thing is no joke. It’s like eating all fast food or only Wonder bread. The words we hear have to make enough sense so that we are moved to the sphere of action and can experience enough to have something to even realize. Otherwise, it is all intellect, which often is devoid of what it takes to urge us into experience.

The pith dharma texts state, and I quote: “In the midst of experience, realization can arise.” With no experience, there can be no realization. So, as they say, get your feet wet!

HURRY UP AND RELAX

February 17, 2018

In dharma practice, after the preliminary (purification) practices are completed and we have done what remedial work we can, the call for forced effort is flagged down and gradually eliminated. If we aren't supposed to make effort (to try, try, try), what are we supposed to do?

It doesn't happen in a day or a week, but the elimination of effort can take years, as the habit of "trying" on our part does not just pack up and go away. We have gone to great effort to make efforts and now that habit itself becomes an obstacle to further progress.

The analogy I find myself using is that of a bobsled run. In the beginning, we make a complete effort to run and push the sled. Then we reach a point where we are going too fast to push and so we hop on the sled, tuck ourselves in, put our head down, and ride. The only effort made from then on is to help guide our slide.

A similar process happens in dharma practice. As mentioned above, we make great efforts in the beginning to practice the preliminary purification practices, but eventually we reach a point of no return on effort-made and have to learn to let effort go. It's like our hand, palm down, gently turns over to palm up and opens to receive. It's a gesture or mudra that we can all make, receiving.

How do we know when to do this? As my first dharma teacher used to say to me, "How do you know when you have to go to the bathroom?" We know because we just know. The operative word is "know." There is no doubt. We know.

The danger of turning the corner before the corner is reached (before the preliminaries are completed) is that we cease to make effort and never get to the corner, much less get round it. Western occultism is rife with analogies of not "rounding the nadir." When it's time to round the corner, trust me, we know beyond a doubt. And this is true because, at that time, everything points to lessening our effort. In fact, it hurts to

keep making effort and each millisecond signals us to cease and desist with pushing so hard.

Traditionally, there is a signal dharma event that goes along with this reversal of effort. It is called "Recognition" ("Kensho" in Zen) and it signals the recognition (for the first time) by the practitioner of the true nature of the mind. This is the point-of-no-return as far as making effort. It's like that with "recognition" we take deep breath and let go -- sigh. We know that we are OK. The effort is done and at last we are just where we want to be, right here, in the moment. That's where we were always trying so hard to get to, the here and now. What do we do when we get there?

It's as if we no longer need to make an effort, not because it because it failed us, but because we are already where we were trying to get to all this time. We "recognize" that we are where we should be and at last are capable of dealing with our own situation. Further forced effort at that point would only cloud and obscure our mind, much like wincing and a furrowed brow does with our vision. There is no point, so effort is provisionally abandoned, but our habitual history of making effort takes time to deconstruct. It's like taking down the scaffolding on a finished building. We have rounded the nadir, but have to remove the damage we made getting there. LOL.

ZEN AND THE ART OF ...

February 17, 2018

The word “art” relates to the perfecting of skill and craft of one kind or another -- craftsmanship. What does “perfecting” mean? I see perfection as transparency, creating a window that sees beyond or through itself.

Art is not restricted to the visual arts, to “fine art,” or to anything at all; witness one of the classic books, “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.”

Everything is a potential window through which we can see out of or beyond the cycles of Samsara in which we find ourselves. How many false starts do we have to have before we follow any one of them to perfection? The window we look for will never be found simply by searching because it’s something that each of us has to create for ourselves. That is a key point.

So the exits from this samsaric world are everywhere; there are nothing but exits, but each has to be taken all the way to the end of perfection and transparency in order to function. So, where do we start and what do we do?

To the degree that we are stumble-drunk from our own distractions, we have to, so to speak, sober up. This is why most beginning dharma practices are purification-oriented. If we are too distracted by past and future worries, we can’t be in the present. So, to start off, we have to pull ourselves into shape before much can happen as far as increased clarity is concerned.

Purification of distractions and obstacles is what most preliminary dharma practices are all about. Without that we are simply remain, well, distracted. Purifying our distractions automatically brings with it increased awareness, which is what we need and why we do those purification practices in the first place.

When we are purified from distractions enough so that we can undistractedly see through them, then it’s time for us to stop trying, relax, and with the help of the “realization” dharma

practices (like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra), allow the nature of our own mind to arise into view for us and be realized.

That's a quick overview of how dharma practice works, in my experience.

SURFING THE MOMENT

February 18, 2018

“Surfs up!” refers to the present moment and not the past or the future. We are naturally in the present moment or are we? That’s a question we can best answer for ourselves, just by observing where our attention is most of the time. Are we present? Or, are we lost in reminiscing and worrying about our past or hoping and speculating about the future. Check it out. How much of the time are we actually present? You might be surprised how little we actually are in the present.

Obviously, it varies. I find it sobering to take a look. The present is not always the obvious choice as to where we put our attention. The tip-of-the-top of the present moment is a slippery slope to balance on and much of the time we slide off into the past or find ourselves trying to invoke the future.

In other words, this very moment is not an obvious pocket that we just fall into and then remain. When we realize this, we are at least getting somewhere. In a nutshell, much of the more advanced dharma practice is not so much learning to balance on the tip of the present as it is relaxing and allowing the present moment to support and raise us up. It’s like learning to float in the water; we have to let go and then we float. Trying to float is an oxymoron. We tend to sink. And there is no point in “trying” to keep our edge; instead, we gradually learn to allow the edge to keep us, which it will if we stop struggling and just allow ourselves to relax and rest “as it is.”

This whole process is one of the great mudras or seals.

FAMILIARITY

February 20, 2018

A typical definition of the word “familiar” is “well known from long or close association.” This is why family and friends are considered familiar. After all, the word family comes from the Latin “familia,” so there you have it. Especially, old friends are considered family.

On the other hand, “trying” to be familiar is not being familiar. “Brown nosing” or “sucking up” does not result in true familiarity because the intent is not right. True familiarity is somehow natural; it just happens through association. After a while, through being together, those around us become familiar, unless something “unfriendly” prevents it.

I’m a good example. I naturally become familiar when I spend time around someone. No need to “try” to be close at all. With me, time brings familiarity. If someone presumes to know me before time-together permits it, I can’t help but notice that and it usually is counter-productive and sends me in the opposite direction from familiarity.

If you actually know me, I’ll know. If you “presume” to know me and don’t, I will know that too, but I can’t encourage you to assume that you know me. I may not want to discourage you from being friendly, either, and I will just let it go – ignore it. But I am not unaware of the transaction. Be friendly, but don’t try to be friendly.

It’s just like the rinpoche with whom I have worked closely for some 35 years. There is a lot of mutual trust there, but I don’t attempt to be familiar with Rinpoche. It never even occurred to me. I don’t need Rinpoche as a personal friend. I need him to be Rinpoche and I hope to receive his blessing. With dharma teachers, at least in my case, I don’t joke or make small talk. I don’t presume. I respect my dharma teacher and am grateful to be receiving the teachings that I am and would not like the situation to end.

As Americans, it’s natural for us to want to be “friendly” and familiar with those we look up to. Signs of being familiar to us may be joking or making small talk, etc. I find that this may or

may not be part of working with a dharma teacher; in my case not. Trying to get close to our dharma teacher is not the same as getting close to the dharma they share. It's like the old razor and the shave analogy. It's not the razor that we are after, but the shave. In this case, the razor is the teacher and the dharma is the shave.

I had another teacher years ago that I respected who once said this to me: "If you need me, call me. If you don't need me, don't call me." That was hard to understand, but that was the correct message I needed to hear.

And I have learned that Rinpoche is not there just to be my friend. He has friends and so do I. What he values in his students is not pleasantries and familiarity, but that they grasp the teachings. That is what pleases him. I have seen this. The reason we have lineage is to make sure that nothing less than the same realization is certain from generation to generation. If we don't understand that, we miss the whole point.

Rinpoche, as a person, is very friendly, but that does not mean I am his personal friend. What I am is his student and I'm very grateful for that. Over the years, I have seen all kinds of teachers and students, so what I am explaining here is just how it is with me. I have taken teachings from many dharma teachers and I learn something, but Khenpo Rinpoche (along with the 17th Karmapa) is the only dharma teacher that first introduced me to my own mind,

With both of my main dharma teachers I have had in this life, I have had the particular relationship of being a student. I seldom volunteered anything with either of them, but instead just listened. I have plenty of family and enough friends for hanging out with. I don't hang out with Rinpoche, although perhaps others do, like members of his actual family.

With me, the old slogan "Familiarity breeds contempt" is never a problem, because I don't presume to be familiar with my teachers... or need to. I found out quite early on that struggling to be close to Rinpoche was inappropriate, at least for me. I didn't like the things I had to do in order to get closer. And Rinpoche does not require that (or encourage) that kind of closeness. His idea of closeness is closeness to the dharma teachings and that we can do from a distance. In fact,

when I began to learn to mix my mind with the mind of my teacher, I no longer felt the need for physical closeness. I was already close from a distance, if that makes any sense. The goal of dharma training is not dependence, but independence.

Although I am not “familiar” with Rinpoche, as a student for many years, I feel a closeness that is stronger than familiarity. Rinpoche is my Root Lama. A root lama is the one who first introduces us to the nature of the mind so that we recognize it. With our root dharma teacher, traditionally, we actually mix our mind with theirs. We can’t get closer than that!

IMO, the above thoughts are worth carefully considering.

THE FENG-SHUI OF MANDALAS

February 22, 2018

I've spent my life creating different mandalas and I was doing this many years before I even knew what a mandala was. My first true dharma teacher used to repeat to me, again and again "Michael, this is hell; we have to make our heaven out of one little corner of it."

The idea of creating our own heaven was new to me, but I got it. Even back then, in my own way I was becoming aware of a cardinal principle of Vajrayana Buddhism, which is: the inseparability of Samsara and Nirvana, this endless cyclic existence that our own karma powers (and in which we are caught) and the realization of how to transform it. What a fierce concept! It turns the idea of heaven on its head.

That "little piece of heaven" we each strive for, is a mandala of our own making and I would imagine most of us are working toward creating one kind of mandala or another as best we can. A mandala involves working with and stretching the relentlessness of time, like pizza dough, enough to give us just a little more room to live – living room.

At first, I found it shocking to see a carefully made Tibetan sand mala swept away and tossed in a river. I can't speak for the Tibetans as to why they do that, but my take-away from it is that we all return to dust in the river of time and that fact is no reason not to make creative gestures or mudras, each the celebration of transformation. This is a mudra that we all can make.

I have done dharma practice for many years, decades, including the Ngondro, what I call dharma boot camp, but it's traditionally known as the Extraordinary Preliminaries; and I did them twice. Of those (indeed!) extraordinary practices, my favorite practice was mandala-practice. In that practice, a mandala is carefully creating by placing small piles of rice and precious jewels on a round copper plate in a precise order and then brushing the piles off with the underside of our wrist and repeating the entire sequence... 100,000 times.

There is a resilience that comes from this practice that is profound, an ability to painstakingly repeat the creation of mandalas in our life despite impermanence and other obstacles. Here we each are, caught in the veil of an impermanent life, carefully making mandalas and mudras, like sending smoke signals to ourselves describing our future incarnations.

When I stop and look around me, everywhere the people I know are each offering mandalas of beauty that they revere. We are shaping space which has no shape. It is kind of beautiful, IMO.

In my book, creating mandalas and Feng-Shui go hand in hand; they are the same thing IMO. Each of us takes our situation, the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, and do what we can to make the best of it. If its lemons we're given, we offer that as lemonade, and so forth. The Tibetan sand mandalas are indeed marvelous, but the masters of mandalas, IMO, are the mothers (and fathers) of this world, who endlessly create and offer a mandala of love and the space in which to be a family.

LOSS, UPSETS, AND PATIENCE

February 23, 2018

How I get upset has changed over the years, certainly from when I was just a kid. I know that dharma training has helped, but when I think back over my life, the key to moderating my tendency to get upset came from years of computer programming and a single untoward event.

I learned to program computers long before home computers were even available, back in the days when those little 4-function calculators (add, subtract, multiply, and divide) turned into programmable calculators and one could save the program. Yet, of course this came to real fruition when home computers arrived, which for me was in 1977.

I taught myself to program. Since math was always my worst subject, my interest in the math involved with programming solely came from my need to use what computers do best, which was to calculate stuff. And, in my case, the calculations I needed were not trivial. As an astrologer (and since astrology is cultural astronomy), it was astronomical calculations that I was after, like calculating the exact positions and movement of the Moon, all the planets, and a great number of other celestial factors. These were not simple equations.

In the early home computers, there were no hard drives yet. That came later. The programs that I wrote had to be saved to a little cassette tape-recorder, the same kind we all used to play music cassettes on. When I managed to program some astronomical routine on the computer, I then had to save it to tape cassette and then rewind and verify the tape. This was a slow and somewhat tedious process and one, unfortunately, that was prone to error.

Sometimes (always too often for me), I would save a program, thought I had verified it and turn off my computer, only to find out that when I turned the computer back on and tried to load the program back in, it was not there or had errors in loading. I was new to all this, so I was very volatile

when I had lost a program that I had spent an entire day... or more writing and testing. I would get very upset.

And the same was originally true later on, when floppy disk drives became available, and still later yet when hard drives came out. And then there is what is called the dreaded "operator error," when something I did myself was the cause of the problem, like accidentally pressing the delete key only to find my entire program deleted and no way I knew to restore it. And this could be a program I had worked on for weeks! Yes, I would jump up and down while cursing my fate.

I have been a programmer for going on 50 years, so over time, jumping up and down and yelling actually never did any good. Sooner or later, I just had to start over and begin again to write the program I lost from scratch. Then, after probably too many years, I gradually stopped getting upset when this happened and just dropped all the theatrics and started over again.

Well, all of these disappointing experiences gradually merged with reality and today, if something like that happens, I don't spend more than a millisecond on ruing my fate (not even that much) and simply begin again, but this training was hard-earned, to say the least.

And the cherry-on-top, so to speak, was when many years ago I did not just lose a program or two, but lost some 20 years of work and all the money it had garnered. And that was a lot. I am still too sensitive about it to go into detail, so don't even ask, but it was very, very, very painful. It certainly was a turning point in my patience training, the kind of point where I could easily spend the rest of my life whining and complaining of my fate, like: until death do us part. And in this case, it was not even my fault; there was no "operator error" on my end.

In fact, the event was so humongous, such a stab at the heart, that upon reflection (and it took a while), I realized that I had a choice to make. In other words, I had no choice but to make a choice. I could either spend, as mentioned, the rest of my life (until my dying day) crying at the universe for what it had done to me or I could suck it up and just keep on walking.

In the end, I was not about to let this singularity of a sorry event mar or ruin what had otherwise been a pretty good life. I would be only hurting myself more and, as I mentioned earlier, throwing the rest of my life away too, adding insult to injury. So, I made a decision to not-do-that, but to just let it go and live on, despite it.

Anyway, that is how I learned patience and to curb my upset, so to speak. And when something untoward happens today, I just drop the upset and take the next step to repair the damage done, whatever it may be. I start over.

Now, I have looked as hard as I can at my accrued patience to see how much I'm sublimating any upset I just suffered and, when I do look, I can't see much. There might be a distant sigh or two, but not much more.

Obviously, I'm not happy I just broke that precious vase (or whatever it is), yet apparently I have learned not to throw good money after bad or, as I like to tell myself, add insult to injury.

Yes, these unwanted life events to some degree injure me (set me back), but I'll be damned if I am going to insult my own intelligence by wasting good energy on a lost cause, on water that is already over the dam.

And I write this for those readers who, like me, have suffered some climactic event, lost something of great value, one from which there is no return to regular life, but instead a new sense of normal is required of us.

And what happened is not going to change, so it is we who have to change. We drew the short straw.

This is where we develop a sense of humor.

IMPROVISING DHARMA

February 23, 2018

Much of the music I like is improvised, especially blues and jazz, which, aside from having introductory themes, is largely improvisational. What is it about the immediacy of the present moment that can be so captivating and satisfying? And improvisation is not restricted to music. It can take place almost everywhere and does. There is such a thing as word-jazz and I practice it.

And it's not like the world copied jazz and succumbed to improvisation. Jazz is just one of many disciplines that are built around the present moment. It seems that, sooner or later, we all verge on the immediate, if only because there is no getting around it. It's the ring-pass-not that the occultists speak of.

The dharma clearly points out that the past is a wasteland of memories and the future still nascent, which leaves us with the present moment; and that's what I'm talking about here. How can we get closer to and inside the present moment? How can we best use it? Like moths to a flame, it seems that anyone with any realization gathers around the slipstream of the "Now" and learns to surf it as best they can.

It's true that I probably learned about improvisation from music, especially (as mentioned) blues and jazz, from which, once tasted, there seems to be no going back to anything more static. The present moment is the firehose from which we all can drink, if we will just learn how.

For me, it's the same with word-jazz, language and words, like the words I write for these blogs. More and more they are true improvisation and, if not improvised, just don't feel rightly-aligned and hardly worth writing. The juxtaposition of words is improvisation, IMO. Most of the time, I have no idea what I am going to write about here tomorrow, unless an insight just occurs to me. I find this an important practice all by itself. For instance, how does improvisation relate to practicing dharma?

I can hear John Coltrane's music getting farther and farther out as his life progresses. And, while I have been to the far

end of Coltrane, I tend to ratchet back to some earlier time periods like “A Love Supreme” or “Giant Steps,” and, of course, “My Favorite Things,” an album which won’t be denied. I can’t help but ask myself what part of dharma practice is improvised.

And the answer is that in the beginning practices, it’s not improvised. The purification practices like the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries are very much “straight-ahead-till-morning” kind of things. We do them until they purify and burn off some of our obscurations, however long that takes. And in my case it has been long. The purification practices are for karmic off-gassing.

However, once burnt-off, so to speak, we are ready for the more advanced phoenix-like realization practices such as Insight Meditation and Mahamudra practice. And this is where dharma improvisation comes into play, even if it is at first only improvising how we can rest and relax in the present moment. That too takes improvisation, the freedom to spontaneously let go, opening ourselves to the immediate, and seeing if anything bobs up.

Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is pure improvisation and it resembles the freedom of improvised jazz. If improvisation in jazz is addictive, which it is, how is it like meditation? That is something I would like to explore in a blog or two with any of you interested.

Improvisation takes trust on our part that it will arise; we have to wait and be open to it. And we can’t even “try” to wait; we literally just have to wait. “Trying” to improvise won’t cut it. Improvising in and with the moment is what is required and, as mentioned, we can’t try for it. However, we can open ourselves to it. For that, we have to let go, abandon ourselves to the universe, and learn to float free in the moment. And that’s when improvisation comes into play.

The freedom (and necessity) to improvise is what is being pointed at here. If any readers are into this topic, let’s talk about it some.

IMPROVISING IN THE MOMENT

February 25, 2018

For me, perhaps the most important dharma text, one that I practice every morning when I open my shrine, is the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer. It contains everything I need to be reminded of and is a marvel of conciseness. It is a privilege to recite something so profound.

And, tucked away in that prayer are the following lines:

“Unwavering attention is the body of meditation, it is taught.
Whatever arises is the fresh nature of thought.
To the meditator who rests there in naturalness,
Grant your blessing that meditation be free from
intellectualization.”

The phrase “unwavering attention” can also be translated as “non-distraction,” if that helps. And I call your attention to the line “Whatever arises is the fresh nature of thought.” In fact, the whole section contrasts the immediacy of the moment as the cure for conceptual intellectualization, which brings me back to talking about improvisation.

The immediacy of the moment is obviously always present, but that is no guarantee that we are aware of it; in fact, usually we are far from it. Our endless distractions keep us from presently-living, so to speak. We tend to put our attention anywhere else but in the present. Perhaps the present is just too bright a light and we prefer the dim light of the past or the twilight of the future.

Settling into the present is almost like opposing magnets. Our attention goes anywhere but there. When we have exhausted every possible distraction, our attention just naturally rests in the immediacy of the present moment. That is why we do the purification practices. When our distractions are exhausted, our attention has no choice but to just snap into place. Until then, however (and that’s a long time), our attention is elsewhere, anywhere but here and now.

How is that situation ever reversed, so that we are naturally just present with no effort? Well, that’s what dharma practice

is all about, especially the preliminaries or purification practices – exhausting our distractions. I seem to have to try every door but the one in front of me. There has to be some humor in that somewhere.

Not dwelling on the past or imagining the future covers most of what is required. Remaining aware of the present moment is a technique most of us just don't have yet. You would think it would be easy, because the present is so fresh and inspiring, but our habit seems to want to avoid it. As mentioned, our ingrained habit is to place our attention everywhere and anywhere but the present. Reversing that habit is no small task.

How quickly our thoughts become stale and slide into the past. You would think we would abandon thoughts as quickly as they fade and, like treading water, stay in the present. But no, mostly we get on any train of thought that arises and just ride. Somehow, it is too tiring to remain present. We give up and float downstream into contemplating the past or fall to dreaming the future.

“Unwavering thought is the body of meditation.” That “unwavering” for most of us is pretty wavy. Through constant distraction, we fail to reach the point of incandescence which, like the tip of a blowtorch, is what we need to cut through our obscurations.

MEDITATION: TURNING IT AROUND

February 26, 2018

As mentioned previously, the following lines are from the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer and they address what is considered to be the main component that makes up the body of our meditation, attention.

“Unwavering attention is the body of meditation, it is taught.
Whatever arises is the fresh nature of thought.
To the meditator who rests there in naturalness,
Grant your blessing that meditation be free from
intellectualization.”

“Unwavering attention” is also translated as “non-distraction,” which might make it clearer what we are looking at here. And it is important to note that if we cannot yet manage to hold our attention so that it is unwavering, there is another, ultimately easier, and more effective approach. Instead of “trying” to hold our attention in the moment, it is much easier (and traditional) to work on removing our tendency to be distracted. As I endlessly say in many posts, this is what the purification practices are all about.

There comes a point in our dharma practice when further attempts to concentrate our attention bring less and less results. It reminds me of those pairs of little Scottish-Terrier magnets we used to have as kids. When you tried to force them together the wrong way, they're just repelled. However, if you simply turn your magnet around, they come together perfectly. It's the same with trying to concentrate our attention in mind training.

In the beginning of meditation practice, we try to concentrate our attention on the object of meditation. We gather our attention, so to speak. However, as mentioned, there comes a point when our attention is “gathered” as much as that approach will allow. From that point onward, instead of concentrating “real hard,” we do just the opposite. We relax.

We flip it, so to speak, and begin to deconcentrate by starting to remove the hindrances, whatever in our mind obscures our full attention -- distractions. Again: this is what the purification

practices accomplish, however onerous they may seem. In other words, instead of concentrating outward on an object, as we have been, we concentrate inwardly on removing whatever is obscuring our mind.

As we remove obscurations (what obstructs our view) through purification practices, what remains is the essence of the present moment, what is just naturally there. And, instead of pushing two magnets together (and having them repel one another), we reverse our approach and allow them to just naturally attract and... there we are: focused.

Now, of course it is easier to rattle off this prescription on purification than it is to actually remove obscurations, but you get the idea. When I first encountered the dharma purification practices, they seemed to me like a giant step backward. I didn't want to deal with my obscurations; I wanted to leave them behind and get on with learning how to meditate.

Anyway, after looking for every back door I could find, I didn't find any, so there I was, once again considering doing some of the purification practices. Something had to give. As it turned out, it was much easier (and quicker) to just do the purification practices than it was to find a way around my obscurations. I just wanted to see clearly.

It's a little like cleaning my office. I don't feel like cleaning my office and always seem to put it off. However, finally the pressures of my delinquency get so strong that it is easier to just clean the damn office, after which I feel totally better and as if I am moving forward again. So, go figure.

As they say: choose your poison. Pay it now or pay it later. We can look for the back door until the cows come home, but ultimately we will find ourselves walking through the front door, which has been staring us in the face all this time. It may look difficult (and it is), but it is LESS difficult than the alternatives.

“ROUNDING THE NADIR” IN DHARMA

February 26, 2018

I was originally trained in Western occultism and hermetics and then I found that, for me, the Eastern approach (especially Buddhism) was more inclusive and had methods and a clear path. I have always looked for where East and West meet; what have they in common?

Western esotericism makes a big deal of the concept of the involutory and evolutionary arcs of life experience. And where involution turns into evolution, that transformation point is often referred to as the ‘Nadir,’ our point of greatest descent into matter, thus the phrase “rounding the nadir.”

Just as we take in a breath until our lungs are full and then let it out, that point when our lungs are most expanded and the breath most “in” is analogically similar to the nadir in esotericism. We inspire and we expire, literally. As they say, “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.” Yes, they may never meet, but they each have a point where one turns into or toward the other. They do bow. That point of greatest “density” is similar here to the concept of the nadir. I will do my best to explain.

Correspondingly, our younger years, until we reach our majority (prime) is similar to involution (coming in) and when the worm turns at the Prime of Life (and after) can be called evolution. We go in and we come out. And we each have a point of no return, the point after which we are “all in” and turn from further involvement with matter and begin to, instead, evolve – go out.

I will cut to the chase here and simply say that is the point in life where our physical body is no longer growing and begins (through a long trajectory) to decline, however minutely at first. That’s the beginning of the outbreath.

Any Western school of occultism worth its salt teaches this. There is an enormous amount of literature (books, pamphlets, and articles) on the topic of rounding the nadir. Society’s obsession with youth (and Mr. and Mrs. Goodbody) testifies to this.

OK. Here is my jumping-off point in this discussion: in the Western esoteric tradition, much (very much!) is made of students who mistakenly try to round the nadir before it has physically and experientially been reached. It's like trying to leave the body before it's formed, so to speak. Or, it's like eating a fruit before it's ripe.

The implication is that such fruit gives us a stomach ache or simply rots on the vine, if I can be direct. The tradition says that we don't work on leaving the body (evolution) until we have reached our descent into matter completely, until we are ripe; then we evolve. And, any attempt to pre-empt that process is pretty much the bane of the Western esoteric traditions. It is dangerous (self-defeating) to attempt to round the nadir before we are fully descended into matter. Yet, in any spiritual discipline West or East, there are those who do.

I'm not going to go too much into the Western approach here (but feel free to ask questions); my concern in this article is to see how this Western esoteric concept is reflected in Eastern spirituality and I have pondered this question over the years. Needless to say, Asian spirituality has its differences from its Western counterpart.

In this post, I would like to focus on the Western esoteric concept of rounding the nadir too early. Is that in any way reflected in the Eastern tradition and, if so, just where?

Actually, it IS reflected (and powerfully), but there is a shift in emphasis that I find useful, if clarified. It has to do with the difference between what are called the preliminary dharma practices (the Common Preliminaries and the Extraordinary Preliminaries) and the more advanced Realization Practices like Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and Mahamudra Meditation.

When we are starting out in the Vajrayana dharma tradition, there is a host of books, texts, and teachings available to us and we can read pretty-much willy-nilly some of this, some of that, and so forth. It can't be expected that everything we read will immediately line up and organize itself. We have to do that through our own understanding, experience, and especially through actually practicing the dharma.

On the one hand, if we read about the preliminaries (which are mainly purification practices), the idea of effort and persistence is paramount. We have to keep at it; we have to do them. However, if we read texts and teachings about the more advanced practices like Insight Meditation (Vipassana), just the opposite is expounded; the idea there is to relax and allow the mind to be, just as it naturally is.

In brief, through the purification practices we first learn (and are told) to concentrate our attention and then, later, in the realization practices, we are told (and must learn) to relax and let go of that same effort. The very real danger in these two conflicting extremes is if the student attempts to relax his attention before it is properly concentrated. We can't lose what we never had. LOL.

In other words, if the student is busy making great efforts to purify the mind through practices like the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro) and Lojong, but becomes enamored of the more advanced meditation instructions as detailed in the profound pith teachings (where we are extolled to just relax and let things flow), there is the very real temptation to stop the purification practices before they have done their work of purifying our mind enough so that we can see beyond our obscurations.

This happens all the time, when sincere beginning dharma students try to adopt the manner and techniques of the realization practices before they have finished the work of the purification practices. And it is this point that is similar IMO to the problem the Western esotericists describe with their concept of "rounding the nadir."

And it is easy to understand how this can happen. We are busying doing the 100,000-this or 100,000-that dharma exercises (which can be very taxing) and we read ahead in the curriculum about some of the methods used for the more advanced realization practices. And that sounds good! So, we simply adopt those methods earlier than helpful because, why not? We are going to get there someday anyway, so why not today? Why not use those relaxing methods now?

The "Why Not," aside from the fact that they won't (and can't) work yet is that doing these advanced practices (going

through the motions anyway) before we have reached what is technically call “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind, will bring our purification practices to a grinding halt (or at least slow us way down) and we will still be obscured as in: not properly purified. Our mental obstacles and obscurations will remain just as they were, so to speak, unclarified.

In other words, here we are emulating and trying to perform the ways and means of the realization practices before we are ready for them. The result will simply be a standstill and we will pretty-much stop progressing. And we only are fooling ourselves, but that’s not new and this is exactly what the purification practices are intended to remove, our obscurations, but in their own time and with considerable effort.

You see, premature appropriation of the realization practices too early in our development is ultimately self-defeating. Sooner or later, we will wake up to the fact that we are once-again going nowhere and have to go back to the purification practices and pick up on them, but how much time is lost?

IMO, this is where an authentic and qualified teacher is so important, one we respect. And this is why the bond between teacher and student has to be so strong. Perhaps they alone can tell us (so that we can hear it) that we have put the cart before the horse and need to complete the preliminaries before any recognition of the true nature of the mind can take place. We are blithely sailing along thinking we are special enough to have placed out of (or have been grandfathered) as far as completing the purification practices, when we have not. We are not a special case! That fact can be painful to accept.

What we HAVE done is to place our dharma progress on hold in favor of dreaming on about our future. It’s easier. Who will wake us up? Who can tell us that we are dreaming so that we believe it? Even our best friend would not touch it with a ten-foot pole. And how can we wake up by ourselves when we are asleep? An authentic teacher that we can accept things from is our alarm clock.

These are questions worth considering, worth thinking about and taking seriously. My point here is obvious. The

purification practices are long and tedious; they are (by design) exhausting and break us down. That's their whole function! If we try to place out of them, we are only fooling ourselves, which apparently is what many of us can't help but do anyway.

So, I am not saying, as Shakespeare said "To a nunnery, go, and quickly too." What I am saying is that we must find an authentic dharma teacher, a person we can trust to point out to us if we are just dreaming and help us to wake up. How else will we know?

The dharma world is rife with practitioners who are using the lingo of advanced teachings before they have finished the purification practices. It is a truism, IMO, that what we ignore we will only come back around to doing later on. In other words, trying to get ahead, we fall behind and have to start over. I have found this to be true. I'm one of those who had to start over, and THANKS to my teacher for telling me to!

So, the moral of this story is that we continue with the preliminary purification practices UNTIL we have achieved recognition of the true nature of the mind. That is how we know we have completed them. THEN, we will automatically find ourselves doing (and able to do) the realization practices. This may sound like a hard truth, but there is a good reason why it is hard and it should be taken to heart.

THE PERFECT STORM

February 27, 2018

A thought and concept that troubles me a lot is the question: what does it take to tear us away from our ingrained distractions and set us on another course? How DO we reach some kind of realization? The various preliminary dharma practices are pretty much straightforward, one step in front of the other. If we do all the practices and take all the steps, is realization and enlightenment at the end of our journey?

The great rinpoches make it clear that dharma practice cannot be measured merely by time spent or by the number of practices executed. These kinds of measurements are just guidelines, something to get us in the ballpark of realization or close to it. But we still have to connect with the actual nature of the mind. In other words, we can do all of these many practices or do them for a set amount of time and still come up empty of any realization.

It's a sad truth, but a truth nevertheless. What then does it take to attain realization? Sorry for the tautology, but "Realization" unfortunately takes realization; nothing else will do, not time spent or numbers counted. In the end, for the small bit of realization I have tasted, it took more like an act of god to attain it, basically a perfect storm that I had very little conscious control of. And this last statement I find very informative, but also a little disheartening. In other words, plodding may not get us there! Period. End of story.

It seems to me that along with doing what we are told or by the textbook, a little magic is also required. And magic, in my world, is sometimes in short supply. Yes, there is the magic of springtime and the magic of a sunny day, etc. I get and appreciate it. Yet, it seems to take something of a shock or surprise to break the mold and free us up from our ingrained habit of following distractions. Yes, lightning can strike, but it's hard to count on or plan for.

However, there is one thing that is certain and that we can count on, the realization of an authentic teacher and their ability to know not only what we are looking for, but how to

get us there. And this means they are not going to take any of our wooden nickels, no matter how much we believe they are real. And that is a precious blessing!

There are many spiritual paths and even many forms of Buddhism, each with their own precise path, some longer, some shorter, and some very fast. Like passing the baton in an Olympic relay race, the Tibetan Buddhist lineage I belong to cares about one thing only, trying to make sure that true realization is certain and that the lineage continues in that purity.

However, my understanding is that the basic dharma practices are not an a la carte menu, in particular with the Ngondro, which is called the Extraordinary Preliminaries. We can't pick and choose which of those five practices we like and leave the rest behind. We have to do them all, each of them, from beginning to end, in the order our dharma teacher suggests.

We can't just do Ngondro. We have to have permission from an authentic teacher to do them and then have the "lung," the entire practice read to us. When I first asked to do Ngondro, I was turned down. Only later was I allowed to do it. And even then, when I finished I the entire things, Rinpoche suggested that I do it a second time. I did.

THE LITTLE SUICIDES

February 28, 2018

This is kind of a touchy topic, one that probably not all of us are sensitive to, but some are, including me. Just to be clear, I am not talking about committing suicide with a capital “S,” but rather a tendency that many of us have to work against our own best interests. We are not opting to leave this world, but rather it’s that we manage to work against the grain and consciously suffer “1,000 razor cuts” from our bad behavior.

In other words, I am not going out and jumping off a bridge, but I am being delinquent enough to consistently set myself back incrementally, one micro-slight at a time. That’s what am I pointing at here.

I’m talking about pushing the envelope of our own bad behavior by willingly, knowingly, and consciously doing something against our own best interests. There are myriad examples I am sure that most of us would admit to, none of them earth-shaking, but they all add up to a bit of a major impediment that further obscures our already obscured vision.

Food is a great example. For me, it could be as simple as knowingly eating too much, piling on the plate when I know it’s more than I should eat and I will regret is soon enough. Perhaps it is some kind of statement or protest. I can’t say, but on that day (or in that moment) I have switched from eating to live to living to eat. I just want to pig out.

Or, it’s eating something I know I should not be eating (for health reasons) and that I will regret later, like using too much oil making popcorn or using the microwave (which never helps the nutritional value of food) instead of heating food up on the stove, which takes more time. I always can rationalize any of this, but not fully. It seems I am always aware that I am betraying myself. It’s like trying to sneak up on a mirror.

Or, it may be refusing to brush my teeth or take a shower or empty the dishwasher or take the trash out, etc., some mundane protest or another against the linearity of life, the things I supposedly “have to” or “must do.” I know, these are tempests in a teapot, as they say, but the sum of my

delinquencies amount to more than nothing and are the sign of a bad attitude on my part.

It seems that I just can't behave like an adult and just look after myself properly. Instead, there is a thread in my behavior that runs counter to my own best interests. I call them my "little suicides" which, while not deciding events, color my attitude and dim out the light of my own mind. Why would I do this when, it would seem, that for the same "money" (time and effort) I could fly right and just behave better than that.

This habit must harken back to when I was a child and balked against what? It may have been the educational system, which I hated, being forced to go to school when I had, to my mind, better things to do. LOL. I can't think of much else as an original cause.

Yet, whatever the reasons, this bit of bad attitude on my part, while almost funny, stains what could just as easily be a clean slate. Instead, it amounts to a little jadedness sprinkled on what otherwise is reasonable behavior. And this thread of resistance, although small and sometimes subtle, manages to run through all manner of my behavior like a bad taste.

When I have control of it and, instead of submitting, refuse to follow that bent, I feel better, cleaner and clearer. When I give into it, it stains (however lightly) what otherwise is a clear day. Perhaps it is just the "rascal" in me, a hangover from my teenage years, where cynicism was a badge and a way of being different -- not going along with what adults wanted me to do. It's hard to say, but there it is.

However, behavior of this kind from a seventy-six year old does not ring right. Here I am, still protesting like an eighteen-year old something I don't even believe in or need to do anymore. I am totally committed to the Zen-like approach of living each moment carefully and consciously, except for these little omissions or, I guess a better word is "commissions."

To me, this is suicide-lite behavior. After all these years, I am still not acting like an adult. As they say, "Go figure."

REVVING-UP SAMBARA

March 2, 2018

Samsara is the Sanskrit word for this cyclic existence we are caught up in, what we call "life," these cycles of up, down, and on around -- over and over. When we are up, feeling good and riding high, we are happy. It is then that we desire or ask for more of life. "I could do this forever!" In a very real way, the attachment to our desire for more of everything insures that we will be going around in our lives again and again. It's simple; we ask for it!

However, when we are down and out, crawling in the mud of life, tortured by these very same attachments, we often rue our fate and cry out "Enough. No more!" So, we alternately step on the gas and slam on the brakes of desires and our attachment to them. It is not far-fetched to assert that we, ourselves, create the endless series of lives that the Buddhists point out we live. In the Tibetan view, as non-theists, there is no higher power or god up there torturing us. We can do that all by ourselves, literally creating "god" in our own image through our attachments. In we ever wondered what the phrase "vicious cycle" refers to, Samsara has to be it.

I am reminded of a quote by the Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche in his brilliant book "Karma," where he points out:

"Buddhism does not necessarily teach us to rid ourselves of needs and desires, but to cultivate, progressively, a freedom from fixation. As fixations diminish, we are ultimately letting go of karma altogether."

So, it is not our desires that are the problem; it is our attachment to these desires that trip us up. Think about that for a moment. The dharma is not some form of fundamentalism, suggesting that we should deny our senses. It is not a form of puritanism. The dharma teaches that it's not WHAT we love and feel that is obscuring and somehow "forbidden," but rather our attachment to our desires (what we love) that limits and obscures us.

This distinction has to be grasped and kept clear. Buddhists are not trying to eliminate the enjoyment of life or the senses, but rather undue attachment on our part to them. It is stated that there is a natural state of mind, just as it is, so to speak, with no attachment. And while over-attachment to things is usually highlighted, there is such a thing as under-attachment too, fear of the senses and enjoyment. I would guess that most fundamentalists may fall into this category.

So, it's like the three bears and their porridge. Our degree of attachment can be either too hot, too cold, or just right. It's the "just right" that's natural for us, not being overly or under attached. That is the result of dharma training.

REBIRTH: SQUEEZING A STONE

March 3, 2018

Having grown up in the 1960s and the 1970s, the wave of New Age concepts engulfed my entire generation. The flow of ideas from the East, especially from India (and later Tibet), were everywhere. As a young adult back then, I had little trouble sorting through it all and becoming attached to the Indian concept of an “eternal soul,” the idea of an eternal “Me” exchanging bodies and living on as me, myself, and I. That would work, thought I. And it came out of what I would call a light reading of the Indian classic epic the Bhagavad Gita. Certainly, that was preferable to the imprint of the American classic Schlitz Beer commercial slogan “You only go around once in life!” At least I thought so.

For reasons perhaps too hard to explain here, I was never attracted to the Indian mandala or gestalt. Perhaps it was due to actually traveling in India and not being impressed positively by the garish popularization of spiritual ideas that I saw displayed there. Much earlier on, in the late 1950s and onward, I was much more in-tune with the Zen (and Japanese) approach to visuals, you know: teak floors, rice-paper walls, sand gardens, and minimalism. India was anything but minimalistic.

Yet, as it turned out, I ended up in Tibetan Buddhism, with its ornate colorful display, which never seemed garish to me. Perhaps that is because it resembled the Catholic Church I was raised in, which visually was very similar. Tibetan Buddhism was even intoned in a language I did not understand, like the Latin mass I was used to as a child.

Anyway, I was taken with Buddhism and it took me a while to find out that the dharma did not support the very comfortable concept of an eternal soul that I was fond of, one in which I personally would reincarnate in my next life as me and continue on with my spiritual journey. Instead of reincarnation, the Tibetan Buddhists spoke of rebirth, but not of reincarnation, at least for the likes of me. Very high lamas, tulkus, are said to reincarnate, but not ordinary folks. High lamas can keep their credentials, but not me.

It took quite a bit of nit-picking for me to figure out that according to the dharma everything I knew as me would NOT be leaving this world, but was simply cast off at death and left behind. Whoa! Wait a minute; run that past me again, thought I. And it's not like an explanation was easily forthcoming. I really had to dig for it and what I found was not easy for me to understand or, for that matter, all that comforting.

What we call here in America the "Self," in the Buddhist approach, does not go with us through the doors of death, but is cast off along with all the rest of our belongings when we die. Mmmm. OK, well then, just what does persevere after death and how will I recognize it if my "I" is being left behind, so that I have nothing to compare it to? For me, that puzzle was better than any koan I might have been given.

And, at least in my opinion, the answer to all this was not that obvious or easy-to-find, IMO, and I looked. Yes, it is easy to find Buddhists statements that the Self as we know it does not exist, as in: it is not permanent. That is readily available in the Buddhist literature (like neon signs), but the reasoning behind it was not, at least as far as I could tell. Anyway, that reasoning certainly was not being shouted from the rooftops; and I was listening!

Who or what would I "be" after I died and how would I even know if the "I" that I know now is not there to witness it? You have to admit, this is a puzzler; at least it was for me. You may be immune to these questions, but I was not.

And the journey to find an answer took me a long time, and I looked all over for it. The reasoning, at least one I could understand, finally turned up in a school of Mahayana Buddhism called Yogachara, which in Sanskrit means "Practice or Union of Yoga," a doctrine of consciousness. Perhaps I took to it because it was similar to the Western philosophy of Phenomenology, which I already identified with, because it involved studying consciousness from the first-person point of view which, as it turned out, was all I knew. LOL.

It would take a lot longer than this blog can be to lay it all out and I have partially done this in a little e-book called "Karma

and the Alaya Consciousness,” which can be found here for those interested.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Karma%20Blogs%20V1.pdf>

In the space of here, I will cut to the chase (as best I can) and just say that the things that we are attached to in life, physical, emotional, and spiritual do not accompany us into the bardo when we die and pass on. Everything we can put our hands on is left behind at death. What does continue on, as I understand it, is our karma, but what is that? It is our NEED and urge to attach, our graspingness, so to speak, our desires or “desire-body,” if we can use that term. Karma that accrues to our detriment is where we go against and fail to realize the true nature of the mind. That has to be rectified, thus karma is created and remains to be satisfied.

The need to grab hold of things (or attach ourselves) is what does transmigrate or whatever you want to call it. Given a new birth, time, and circumstances, the desire to be attached proceeds to attach itself anew. That’s what rebirth is for us, that need (and style) for attachment that continues on.

What we attach to at rebirth and how similar that might be to what we attach to now, I can’t say. But apparently there are similarities or tendencies that persist into our next life. In fact, that is ALL that does persist or continue, our particular need and style of attachment. In essence, we are our need to attach, our desires.

And so, at rebirth our desires in karmic traces persist and we set about attaching ourselves all over again and, apparently, there are similarities to our previous life, if not in the specifics of personality, but in approach -- attachment. We resurrect (carry on with) the form of our attachment (our graspingness), which like some kind of karmic desire body proceeds to build a new personality out of the specific circumstances into the new life in which we are born.

So, at rebirth we become a different person, unrecognizable from our previous persona, but perhaps recognizable in the way we attach, if that makes sense. You wouldn’t see Michael Erlewine or any personal part of him, but you might see a new person driven by the same kind of desires to attach that I have now. At least, that is how I understand it on March 3,

2018 at 3:48 AM. Ask me in a few days, and I might see it differently, but I doubt it will be THAT much different.

I once asked a great rinpoche: if our person does not persist through death, what does persist in our rebirth and he replied "If we like hot sauce, we might like hot sauce in our next life too." And the way I understand this is that whatever attachment we have now that drove us to love hot sauce might still be there and we end up liking hot sauce again. As for me, I don't like hot sauce that's too hot. LOL.

And I wonder if it is a blessing to leave our old attachments and "Self" behind? That is a question we might discuss. If there is interest in this topic, I would be glad to share tomorrow with readers the results of my search and the takeaway as to what in fact does survive death and takes rebirth. Let me know.

WHAT TAKES REBIRTH?

March 4, 2018

All of our actions (good, bad, and indifferent) are said to be stored as karmic traces in the Alayavijnana, what is called the Storehouse Consciousness. While our persona or Self does not last beyond this lifetime, it is these karmic traces that proceed from life to life like a great barge pulled by time floating downstream; and subsequently these karmic traces arise or are accessed in our next life or lives.

Countless actions are stored there each day, with the more commonly repeated actions digging the deepest grooves in our mindstream. And while each one of them, each action we make, has some effect, together they arise and are available to create the mass of combined karma that represents what drives our subsequent rebirths. In other words, together they form a conglomerate of karmic traces that determines our future attachments. They are not a Self, but they are the combined force of our desire for attachment that creates a new self and persona at rebirth. Let's call them for sake of a better word our Body of Attachments or Attachment Body.

These karmic traces are said to be stored "randomly" in the Storehouse Consciousness and are not personalized (as we might like); they don't inscribe our face on Mt. Rushmore. However, working together they act as what I describe here, the body of our attachments which make up consciousness at rebirth. I know; it's complicated. It just is.

This Attachment Body is not a Self, but rather our combined desires-to-attach serves to create a new Self or persona at rebirth by virtue of their graspingness and thirst for attachment or re-attachment. In other words, this Attachment Body represents the force of karma that dictates at rebirth what we will tend to be attached to and by that they thus dictate the shape of our new persona and Self.

What's my takeaway from all of this? Perhaps I can save you some years of research (and wondering) by summing up what I have gathered from these teachings. Our current persona or Self is like looking in a mirror at the reflection of our urges and

desires. We are used to always looking at the reflection of what we desire or don't desire (our attachments) and this amounts to and results in our persona or Self. And we never seem to look the "reflector," the Attachment Body itself that is reflected in our attachments. In other words, the things that make up our persona or Self define our Attachment Body, if we will but look. In other words, our personality perfectly defines or points at our Attachment Body.

We are used to measuring our Self by what we love or don't love, i.e. by our attachments, literally our person or persona. And these specific attachments are everything that we will NOT be taking with us into our next rebirth. In other words, we habitually look at what is now (or has been) and not at what they define or point to; and they point to the aggregate of our desires, the Attachment Body, which is what transmigrates.

And it's probably just as well, since what would we do with our persona or Self (which is the sum total of our current attachments) in another rebirth and lifetime, where we will have different parents, different circumstances, life, situations, etc. We will have a chance to start anew, but to a degree determined by the habits of attachment we bring with us to rebirth.

In other words, our ongoing desires and urge to attach (and be attached) will simply attach themselves to whatever we like or dislike in our new situation, just as they have and do in our current life now, thus creating a new self or persona. After all, attachment is the glue that holds the Self together.

And we might ask: what (or who) is it that creates our persona or Self? This who or what (our desires or unfinished karma) is, at heart, what will transmigrate to a rebirth. Focusing only on our persona in this life (me, myself, and I), our current attachments, is like looking in a rear-view mirror and trying to back into the future. Instead, we can begin to learn to become more aware of our Attachment Body, the ongoing mass of desires that attach at rebirth, rather than the things that desire body is (or will be) attached to.

The concept of an "Eternal soul" (as traditional in India) is in reality simply a map of our persona, our current attachments,

what we are attached to now, rather than a description of the ongoing drive for attachment in us. And that persona (Self) is what belongs to this life and is exactly what will be left behind at death's door, rather than what will be present at any rebirth, which will be our combined desire for attachment, the Attachment Body.

Personally, leaving our attachments and mistakes behind is probably more of a blessing than a loss, not that we have a choice. After all, they are what I am attached to here and now and, as a consciousness (Attachment Body), I am able to do that all over again at rebirth. Our combined karmic traces have the ability and desire to attach/detach to whatever is around us at rebirth. Attachment is one thing we are good at.

I am sure that the Tibetans have a name for it, but I would call it the "desire-to-attach" body or just, as mentioned, the "Attachment Body," provided that we remember that it refers to our ability/desire to become attached that is moving forward in rebirth and not anything like a persona or Self, much less an eternal soul. This Attachment Body is what drives us forward to rebirth, that desire to be attached to things, love or hate them, as we will. We can call it karma, karmic traces, or whatever, but it is nothing but positive and negative (or indifferent) attachments and their ongoing urge that results.

Our reborn Attachment Body of desires draws around itself a new persona of attachments, which we once again call our Self. This new Self is the reflection of our desires, not the reflector. When our Body of Attachments is plunged or immersed into rebirth in a new situation, it immediately sets about attaching itself based on the urges and desires we represent – our karmic traces.

And a new persona is formed, arises, and we become conscious of it – self-consciousness. There really is no further use for our previous self or persona, although like a comfort blanket, we may be loath to let go of attachments like our Self. The fact is that our persona and Self are erased for us at death whether we like it or not.

So, it is fear to be without what we are now attached to that is the issue, not who or what we are as an Attachment Body.

That's the nature of attachment! And we have no fear of losing our Body of Attachment, because that is who/what we are at heart when we die and yet we tend to have about zero awareness of it. It's like going to sleep and gradually waking up in a new body, one we have to build from scratch with nothing but our attachments and desires. We can't help but do it.

And it is the Attachment Body (and that alone) that moves from life to life, driven by our karmic traces and desires. Anyway, that's the general idea, a moving force of desire that at rebirth gloms on to whatever is around us that we like, dislike, or are neutral to. And there we are again, but completely different except for our urges.

So, there you have it, a very rough idea of what is reborn at rebirth. And no, it's not our Self or persona from this life; not at all. And even our Attachment Body is not permanent. It is said to dissolve when we have exhausted the Alayavijnana at enlightenment and realization. Then we are enlightened, whatever that state might be like. I wish I knew.

THE MOTHER OF ALL ATTACHMENTS

March 5, 2018

The series of our various attachments that arise are what define what we call our persona and self, whether they are positive or negative attachments. And the resulting personality and self is very definite and represents how we appear in the world, at least to ourselves. It seems that the literature does not focus on (and we are unaware of) the mass of karmic traces in our Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana) that we carry with us from previous lives, the total conglomerate of which determines our persona, etc.

We all know how we treasure our self and person, but yet don't seem to care (or be aware) of the creator of that person, where it comes from and how it is formed. It's like the goose that laid the golden egg. We are obsessed with the golden egg rather than the goose, even though it is the goose that can easily lay another and another egg and does.

Our karmic desires find their terminus (and termini) as they appear in the world as our personality and self. And that personality and self (as created from the Storehouse Consciousness) are not permanent or eternal, but just the living end or results of our attachments. The Self and our persona are abandoned and lost when we die.

However, the aggregate of our karmic traces and desires, our "attach-ability," while also impermanent, is said to last through all our previous lives until we attain enlightenment. And much like the cells in our physical body are replaced, the components of our karmic traces and desires are also constantly changing and being replaced, yet the sum total of our karmic traces and attachments live on for innumerable lifetimes, as needed.

I feel there needs to be more attention on the Alayajinana (Storehouse Consciousness) since it does repeatedly survive death. In other words, we are looking for immortality in all the wrong places, like in the personal self and persona (which is abandoned at death), while the creator of our every person is well and transmigrates from birth to birth. As mentioned, I

would like to know more about the Storehouse-Consciousness and how it is used to create the self and persona of each of our rebirths.

The texts say that the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness is not stored in such a way that we could recognize our person in it, not to mention it has been storing our personas for as many lives as we have had to date – said to be innumerable. The way the Storehouse Consciousness is usually presented is as a kind of random database of karmic traces, like a karma toolbox out of which any number of personas or selves can and have been created. We could call it a make-up kit from which we assemble our personal selves and personas over many lifetimes.

The point that I find interesting is that the Storehouse Consciousness contains all of our karmic traces and yet, when we are plunged into a new life through rebirth, what is in the storehouse (called Vasanas) respond to the conditions and circumstances of our new life and draw around us a new personality, self, persona, and mask. It's not totally clear to me how that all happens, but we can all attest that it does, because here we are!

There has to be some humor in that fact that all this time we have been fretting and worrying about the impermanence of our personality, Self or "Eternal Soul," when any "Self" is just the outer appearance or termini of what we draw upon from the Storehouse Consciousness. It's what we draw by way of attachment from the circumstances of our rebirth that fits our need for this attachment in each life. And it's almost like the misdirection by a magician or the old-style photographer when he says "Watch the birdie!" and snaps our photo. We have been looking in the wrong direction.

All this time, we have been concentrating and focusing on our external and impermanent personality while what does survive the transmigration from life to rebirth (and serves as the creator of any new person we are) gets hardly a nod. And yet, what arises from the Storehouse Consciousness at each rebirth (our will to attach) is far more permanent than the persona and self that result from any one lifetime. And, while the mandala of our person is dissolved at each death, the karmic traces and "Attachment Body" from which it was

created moves on down the river of our lives like some anonymous barge. It may remain anonymous, but that does not mean it is insignificant.

And, although we cannot recognize or find our particular self or person in the storehouse, it contains enough karma to empower innumerable personas, lifetime after lifetime. The Storehouse Consciousness is said to be exhausted or emptied only at the moment of enlightenment; until that enlightenment it seems to be resilient and very much with and capable of determining us.

What better-understanding this concept does is play down the importance of our personal self, which is just a one-off anyway, and put the focus on the sustainability of the Alayavijnana to endure through time and precipitate countless personas or masks.

In other words, from the Storehouse Consciousness, a cornucopia of persons, all bearing our essential drive and stamp emerge. No matter the many names (Michael, Tom, Robert, etc.), the driving force behind the names, the creator of all our persons we have been or will be, is the essence of the karma as to who and what we are. To say that these are just “karmic traces” (or whatever) is IMO not really doing justice to the whole process of rebirth. It seems to be profound!

Is the personal self of each persona equivalent to an “eternal soul? No. It’s like a snowflake in a blizzard, but the enduring Storehouse Consciousness for each of us, while also finally impermanent, is as old now as the time we have been being reborn, and that is apparently eons and eons. The ball of fire we call the Sun is also impermanent, but it lasts long enough to base a history on. It’s the same with the Alayavijnana, the Storehouse Consciousness. It is impermanent, but it endures for a very long time, ending only in our enlightenment.

So, it’s not just who is Michael Erlewine? Seemingly, it has to be who or what is the approximately endless force of attachments that in this life has produced someone I know as Michael. And it is that same force that transmigrates and precipitates my seeming endless personas, lifetime after lifetime.

The “Me, myself, and I” of each of us is not anonymous, but the force that defines our endless personas, the Storehouse Consciousness (rebirth after rebirth) would seem like it is, except, from that amorphous anonymity arise all the specific selves that we treasure and yet cannot hang onto. They evaporate at death.

From the relatively endless palate of our attachments (the Alayavijnana) is painted the mandala of our personal Self in each successive rebirth. Our persona arises and is dissolved in the river of time, one after the other.

What do you think of this approach?

CALLING AFTER THE DEAD

March 6, 2018

Calling after the dead may not be universal, but certainly here in the West, we are into it. That is what much of spiritualism, séances, message services, and the like are about. It's what I call the sideshow of dying, the various forms of spiritualism that abound. I know, it takes all kinds and I support that.

You might find it fascinating (and refreshing) how the Tibetan Buddhists approach this. IMO, I find the Tibetan approach more convincing. Let's start with reincarnation, which is different from rebirth.

Reincarnation would mean the same person is reborn and continues on, but who do you know who remembers their past life fluently enough to be convincing? Yes, Yes. I know. There is a whole genre of folks who claim to remember who they were before this life, but IMO I have never been very convinced by their stories or, for that matter, that whole approach. As mentioned, it takes all kinds and I allow for that, but unfortunately I have never learned much from those folks other than they would like me to depend on them for intuitive or spiritual messages. Thank you very much, but I have my own mind and inner contacts.

As for those who claim to be Cleopatra or someone famous in a past life, well, all I can say is "What happened?" What a comedown. I've yet to meet anyone who claims they used to be Hitler. LOL. And I'm even bored by those who dabble in séances and various forms of spiritual-isms and I have looked into all that myself.

A great rinpoche once explained to me in a teaching that after death, in the bardo, we move quite quickly onward toward a rebirth and anything left behind from this life that is contactable by those still living is not contact with the one who died, but probably just the flickering remains of what is called our "La," our decomposing etheric double or something like that.

The Tibetan word "La" usually means higher or above (it is part of the word "Lama," but it is also a (pre-Buddhist) Bön

word for “soul” or life-force, sometimes described as an “energy body.” And this word is often misunderstood and incorrectly spelled as “Lha,” which means deity or divine. “Lha” is incorrect. In the context here, I am using the Bön word “La,” our personal doppelgänger.

Traditionally, the “La” is a subtle body, often claimed to be an ethereal body-double to the physical, a kind of go-between or interface between the physical (and emotional) body and our mind or consciousness. The point of mentioning the La here is that in the Tibetan tradition, when the body dies our consciousness moves on, but the La remains here and, as with the Self, eventually evaporates.

Some say the La hangs around until the body is completely decayed or decomposed, but I have heard the term La used despite the body being cremated, or undergoing sky-burial, etc., so I note that. This is why Tibetans cremate or have sky burials, to cut short the time the La can remain around “ghosting” us.

Speaking of which, in the high mountains of Tibet, on a daylong climb to one of Guru Rinpoche’s main caves called Shel-Drak (Crystal Cave), we passed through a sky burial at a stupa on a bluff, where a body after death is dismembered and offered to vultures who come to claim it. There were bones and hands scattered around. It was through provoking. Anyone interested in that story, here is the link (with lots of photos)

“The Crystal Cave of Guru Rinpoche”

http://traffic.libsyn.com/spiritgroo.../Guru_Rinpoche_Cave.pdf

And, in Samye Monastery, said to be the oldest monastery in Tibet (where I spent a day and night in 1997) before climbing to another Guru Rinpoche cave (Chim-Puk), there is a special spirit temple (Samye Uqkhang) called the “House of Breath” of dead beings, where it is said that the La is brought when people reach a terminal stage, but details here that would be a sidetrack.

As mentioned, the ‘La’ is an energy-body we each have that is superimposed between the physical body and our mind or mental body. It is often described as a shadow of the physical body, a complete mirror-reflection of our physical and

psychological makeup. The La appears to be something like what western theosophists and psychics call the etheric body, which term itself originated from Tibetan texts.

What is interesting about the La is that when we die, our mind body or consciousness (in some form) goes on into the bardo (and perhaps is reborn), while our physical body decays and dies; and the La remains with the physical body as a kind of body-double, a psychic duplicate. It lives on as an etheric mirror-image and decays as the body decays. It does not migrate to the next lifetime. Like the Self, it is not immortal and belongs to this particular persona and life.

In other words, the La is somehow useful when we are alive (and as long as we have life) as a support to the physical body and our psychological self. It is tempting to think of the La as being a mirror-reflection of the image of our self, if not the self itself. Remember, the Tibetan Buddhists point out again and again that what we call the 'self' is nothing more than a collection of our attachments (likes and dislikes) and does not have any permanent existence beyond this life. It remains and collapses when we die.

In general, our sense of self changes with every new desire and craving, so what made up our self when we were a kid (a new bike, etc.) may not be anything like what makes up our self as an adult (a wife, a new child, new car, etc.). It is not clear to me how the La relates to the 'self' image. Is the La the same as the self or is it different? In any case, neither have any permanent existence. They dissolve when we die.

When we feel good and are healthy, the La and our physical body coincide or are somehow in synch, and we feel like ourselves. We feel energetic. But we are not always in equilibrium. Each of us sometimes gets, as I like to say, 'beside ourselves', out-of-synch, and out-of-sorts. We can be separated from our La when our connection to it becomes weakened. According to the Tibetans, if we become too separated, it can result in physical sickness and psychological upset and in extreme cases even death of the physical body. So, somehow we all need our La to stay with us and not wander off or get separated. It acts as some kind of lifeline.

The La can be disturbed by sudden shocks in life to the system, accidents, emotional disturbances, and so on, at which time it can separate and wander away from the body leaving the physical body depressed, out-of-sorts, and subject to illness and anxiety. Perhaps we all know something about how this feels. I know I do.

The La is said to be a direct copy of our physical and psychological self. In fact, the Tibetans say that what western mediums and psychics claim to be contacts (as in séances, etc.) with departed spirits is not the actual consciousness of the departed (which has already gone into the bardo and perhaps to another rebirth), but rather their La. It is the La that is channeled in every case and never the consciousness of the deceased. The dead person's consciousness has already gone beyond and has other fish to fry. The La remains, but only for an indeterminate time. This point distinguishes the approach in the East from ours here in the West.

As pointed out, after death our consciousness and La separate, with the consciousness going beyond death into the bardo and the La staying here with our body. The La hangs around the body as long as it takes the body to decay or until the body is destroyed. As mentioned earlier, this is why Buddhists tend to cremate the body or tear it up so that vultures can eat it. In that way, the La or energy reflection of our self is completely destroyed and does not wander around in some kind of Limbo creeping people out.

It is said that it's not easy to become aware of our own La, except by its absence. In fact, Tibetan doctors take a pulse reading for a person's La from a different point of the body, the ulnar artery, than they do for the usual medical pulse. The La meridian or channel goes from the heart to the ring finger along the ulnar artery.

As mentioned, the La can be weakened by accident or when we are in shock, very sad, or depressed. It can also go away for a time. One account I read likens it to a radio and a transmitter; if the radio gets too far away from the transmitter, there is signal loss. The connection weakens or is lost. The same is true if the La gets too far out of the body. Not only can you feel out of sorts, but if it continues, you can become ill, disassociated, and so on.

And it is apparently possible to permanently lose our La, which Tibetans consider very unfortunate and they have rituals for restoring the La to a particular body. This is kind of a scary thought and some people have been said to lose their La and never be reunited, in which case they gradually wither and die. However, this is said not to be common.

I am not sure how much personal awareness of or conscious experience I have had with my own La. There have been times when I have not felt fully present in my own life (you know: “beside myself”) and have had to consciously work on getting back into my body, pulling myself together and getting centered. I can remember one specific time when I was at a monastery that I had to go into a room, lie down, and really work hard to get back into my body. It took a while until I finally felt like myself again.

So, there is a very brief glimpse at how the Tibetan Buddhists approach what we could call the twilight-zone surrounding death.

THE WORSENING COSMIC RAY SITUATION

March 7, 2018

The above title from an article by scientists on cosmic rays and their impending increase. I will paraphrase it as best I can.

There is a recent paper published in the research journal "Space Weather" that shows that cosmic rays from deep space are reaching dangerous levels and intensifying faster than predicted or seen before. To appreciate what is happening, let's back up a bit and describe the general situation.

Earth is protected from cosmic radiation by radiation of the Sun itself, in particular by the solar wind and other radiation. The Sun's radiation provides an envelope of protection around Earth, which keeps the cosmic rays and similar radiation out or at least at a minimum. All that is good.

However, the cycle of solar activity is on an 11-year cycle, with a maximum of solar activity like sunspots at one end and a minimum of solar activity at the other. Well, right now we are heading for solar minimum which will arrive around 2019-2020, after which the cycle begins to build toward stronger solar activity.

This cycle has been going on (from our point of view) forever. Well, recent research shows that Earth and the Sun's ability to protect us from cosmic radiation is weakening. In fact, this worsening condition is greater than anticipated and continues to degrade.

The net result of this is to expose Earth (and those living here) to higher levels of radiation than we are used to. The so-called cosmic rays are a mixture of high-energy photons and sub-atomic particulars accelerated toward Earth produced by supernova explosions and other violent events in the cosmos. We are receiving this information like never before and it has effects.

The Sun is our first line of defense against these rays, but as the Sun's activity is weakening, we are seeing a 13%

increase in X-rays and gamma-rays that are penetrating our atmosphere. And predictions suggest this is only going to get worse.

Cosmic rays penetrate commercial airlines, giving passengers an increased dose of radiation. Cosmic radiation can also seed clouds and trigger lightning, potentially altering weather and climate. And cosmic rays are linked to cardiac arrhythmias in the world's population. Scientists are saying that we are plunging toward the deepest Solar Minimum in more than a century.

What does this all mean is kind of up to us to figure out. My thoughts are the following. Mostly we are inseminated by solar radiation from the Sun, which very much affects us with its cycles. With high intensity like strong solar flares we can struggle with change coming at us faster than we can digest and absorb it. Huge CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) can target Earth with massive geomagnetic storms, storms capable of blowing out power grids, not to mention overwhelming us emotionally. Yet, we are pretty much used to this input.

IMO, we are less use to the influx of cosmic rays coming from deep space, carrying with them information of another kind that we must absorb. This cosmic ray information may be much different than the solar radiation we are used to and perhaps changes us in change of a different kind or even order of magnitude. Scientists are trying to figure it all out. So, this news from the scientists of increasing cosmic ray exposure may well bring with it change we all will have to deal with, internally as well as externally.

I have done my best to make astrologers aware of solar flux and change for years, but there has been little acceptance or feedback. I find it humorous that astrologers struggle to monitor energy from very distant planets and events, while paying little to no attention to the daily flood of solar light and energy that inundates us, even though it waxes and wanes to a remarkable degree.

For those who would like to read more about this or watch some videos I put together, here are some links:

“Solar Flares: Their Inner and Outer Effects”
http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Solar_Flares.pdf

“Sun Storms”

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

And some videos:

“Solar Storms and the Psyche”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mu56w87oVE&t=1s>

“Solar Eruptions and Creativity”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6HF_g71x6c

“Multiple Flares and their Effect on the Psyche”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4e3tHZmbwIM>

“Solar Flares: Somewhere in Time”

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

“Spirit Grooves: Solar Flares and the Mystic Sun”

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

[Illustration Credit: Simon Swordy, NASA]

Main Browsing Site:

<http://SpiritGrooves.net/>

Organized Article Archive:

<http://MichaelErlewine.com/>

YouTube Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/user/merlewine>

Note: Want to Friend me on Facebook? If my list is full, an alternative is simply to Facebook “Follow” my page, and it amounts to being “Friended.” It’s easy.

SPIRITUALITY OR RELIGION?

March 9, 2018

I find that I distinguish religion from spirituality. I am “spiritual,” yes, but I don’t (and never did) consider myself particularly religious. I resented the religion I was raised in and found it confining, even cruel. Unfortunately, that was my experience. I was just a kid.

And I also distinguish between Dharma and Buddhism. I have total respect for the historical Buddha and the dharma he taught. However, IMO, there is only one dharma, but many kinds of Buddhism, some of which don’t particularly interest me. I am interested in what is called Vajrayana Buddhism and a particular form of it, the Karma Kagyu Lineage. That’s mostly what I know and write about. I am sometimes asked why I write so much about dharma, so perhaps I should explain that a bit.

Unlike the faith I was raised in, I don’t find the dharma confining or cruel, but just the reverse: I find the dharma liberating and I can’t help but write about it. The emotional urge to share deeply is what drives my writing. My interest in dharma is not just conceptual, but rather is based on insights that empower me emotionally and those deep feelings fuel most of my writing.

So, I’m not just driven by concepts or a plan as to what I might write about, but rather by a singular urge to express and share dharma with clarity. And whatever I turn my mind toward, if it feels right and there is insight, is what I write about. The operative point here is that the way I write is not conceptual, but emotional at heart, an urge to express verisimilitude or truth, especially, when it comes to the dharma. It is like a musical score that too many of us can’t read; it needs to be conducted and I’m conducting it as best as I can. For what it is worth, my writing is meant to be read aloud. I read it aloud to myself. LOL.

And once I’m carefully balanced on that emotional bloom, words and phrases just rain from the mind and are juggled until they fall into place, interlock, and sentences appear. I do

this until the words fit together so precisely that I know they can't be tinkered with any further. And I'm done.

My sentences leave little room for imagination. I like them that way because I write to communicate and for no other reason. I want to share dharma with anyone interested because I feel it is so remarkable and potentially so needed and helpful. And it's shocking (even to me) how compulsive I am in sharing dharma through words. You would think that I have other things to do; I do, but nothing IMO is as interesting.

Writing, for me, is part of my daily Insight Meditation practice and even when I am doing other stuff, the powerful clarity of dharma language beckons to me. The dharma is like a light in a high window that is always on and waiting for me when I can manage to get past all my distractions and let it shine. There is nothing in this world I would rather be doing than Insight Meditation and writing. Nothing.

I hope I'm making it clear that the message here is that there is nothing intellectual that urges me to write, but rather a desire to share with others what has been so helpful to me. I am so blown away by the integrity of the dharma and what it has done for my life that I can't help but believe that others (that's you, folks) would have the same experience if I could just describe it well enough. I'm hoping that my words will make enough sense that you will feel the dharma and respond.

WHEN NOT-ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

March 9, 2018

“Enough or too much,” a familiar quote from mystic-poet William Blake in his “The Marriage of Heaven or Hell,” a poem I devoutly read in my early twenties. These days, what sticks in my mind is more like “When what’s not enough is enough.” How is that so?

It reminds me of the old story of the soup of the soup of the soup. Each day, the soup was further watered down. Sometimes I feel that in this human race through time, each successive generation is weaker than the last. My point in bringing this up is that we may be surprised at what we, as just normal folks, can accomplish by working with our own lives; it’s more than I had imagined.

And it is easy to fall into believing that we as individuals are just a snowflake in a worldwide blizzard and what we do will never be noticed, much less be meaningful, even to us. It’s tantamount to the old image of Earth being a lonely speck in an alien universe, when we are, if nothing else, a normal example of the intelligence in the cosmos -- children of the stars. We can think of ourselves as just one in a million, but if we are a “1” in a million zeros, we may be all there is and that is enough to actually count.

I would bet that many (or most) of us struggle (as I do) to make progress with what weighs us down and to be free of what obscures us. Years ago, when I had a meeting with the famous economist Kenneth E. Boulding (and we read poems to each other), he had one line that most stuck in my mind. “Michael,” he said, “We each must learn to fail successfully.”

Fail we all do, at least physically, yet we can learn to fail successfully. That is one of my daily mantras. Although we may think that we fail in what we set out or hoped to do, the progress we do make can be significant. My first dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, a Scottish initiator for a Rosicrucian order, used to say to me (and many times), “Touch one, touch all.” And by this, he meant if we can touch

or move ourselves, deeply, that is felt by all humanity and throughout all time.

Not all battles are won on the battlefield of some far-off foreign war. What we do right here in our daily mundane-struggles right now can be as significant as anywhere else if it exists in the world as opposed to not existing at all. This is especially true in spiritual efforts, where any actual realization gained is irrevocable and can never be walked back.

The point of this blog is that while we may feel that what we have attained is not near enough, it may indeed be enough to make a difference. For all we know, it could be all the difference in the world, the "1" in front of a million of zeros. Let's not discredit what credit we may have, however little it may seem. Looking back, it may make all the difference.

At least that's how I look at it.