

Dharma Blogs

2019 Summer



by Michael Erlewine

Dharma Blogs

2019 FALL

By Michael Erlewine

INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Fall of 2019 posted on Facebook.

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THE GOLD STANDARD

October 1, 2019

Samsara is not just a wooden nickel. It is as perfectly made and as sound as is Nirvana. That is a discovery well worth having, IMO, that both Samsara and Nirvana are connate (co-emergent) i.e. two sides of the same coin.

I discovered that the depth of my dependence on Samsaric entertainment was shocking. Up until recently, my working assumption had always been that underneath a layer of Samsara was the basic truth and reality of the dharma, overlaid, gilded, or veneered with whatever attachments and fixations I had. In other words, I mistakenly thought that Samsara was just a film or layer hiding the true nature of the mind. This was a wrong assumption.

It never had occurred to me that Samsara itself was anything but a superficial obscuration covering over the “true” dharma underneath. And I imagined that our job as dharma practitioners was to purify that layer of attachment and get down to the nitty-gritty beneath.

And so, it was a total surprise for me to discover that Samsara, rather than just being a veneer, was solid through and through. And that, like my favorite cable channel, I was fully subscribed to it, till death do us part.

I never imagined that my entertainment, which I had previously viewed as the frosting on the cake of life, was in fact the frosting and the entire cake as well. And, as I explored these entertainments by their absence, like a pebble dropped in a still pond, the expanding series of circular ripples embraced more and more of the entire pond until it seemed that the whole of everything in this Samsaric world was nothing but entertainment. That was shocking!

In other words, Samsara is genuine entertainment/attachment (through-and-through) and not just some imagined reified “reality” that was an entertainment veneer I was busy layering. Samsara is as deep down as deep does! The proof

is that Samsara is connate (identical in nature) with Nirvana! How could it be connate and not equal?

In other words, Samsara didn't stop at the end of my fingers and skin, but extended to include more and more of my reality until there was virtually nothing that remained which was not included. And in the middle of it all, there I was, embracing the entire thing and quite content to do so. It was like one vast theatrical production, which is why I am fond of the image of an empty stage, empty of the entire production, actors, crew, backdrops, and props. I experienced that empty stages for weeks and months.

As the texts say, Samsara and Nirvana are connate (co-emergent), meaning Samsara is not fake and Nirvana real, or Samsara is not a veneer under which is the pure gold of Nirvana. It does not work that way. Samsara is 100% Samsara just as Nirvana is 100% Nirvana, two sides of the identically same coin. The process of dharma realization is to realize Samsara as Nirvana. And to prove that is not easy; who have you ever met that has done this? I can name but a few and most of them are passed masters.

In words, as Shakespeare put it in "As You Like It," "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Equally, as practitioners of the dharma, we might say that what keeps us here in this world is karma that, when exhausted or transformed, results in our Enlightenment or achieving Nirvana.

And so, karma is, in some sense, our entertainment personified, what we are immersed in, what makes up for each of us the world we live in.

Let me reiterate and summarize:

What blows my mind and stays with me is the depth and throughout-ness of Samsara. It should be helpful to remember that the nature of Samsara is the same as the nature of Nirvana.

My thinking that Samsara was just a veneer covering over Nirvana was not only ignorant, but just silly. Samsara is through and through of the same nature as Nirvana and not a veneer or reified gilding that I have somehow accumulated. Those are just conceptual mistakes.

What impacted me at depth was the realization that, like the old saying “In for a penny, in for a pound,” I was from birth already pound-deep in Samsara, like with 100% continuity.

I not only had dipped my big toe into ignorance, but I was (and always have been) completely immersed in Samsara, with only my nose (if that) still sticking out. Meaning that we have bought into this ignorance, hook, line, and sinker. This ignorance of Nirvana has become almost the sole filter through which we view our life. That last sentence is worth reading a time or two.

In other words, to turn this around would not be as simple as taking off the mask of Samsara and revealing Nirvana, but rather totally reversing everything we know, much like we would turn a glove completely inside out. We have had it ALL wrong; it is not just a surface layer or two.

A NEW GRANDSON FROM OUR DEAR FRIENDS

October 2, 2019

My close friend Larma Karma and his wonderful wife Cherry Qu are part of our family and they feel the same about us. Today, this morning October 1st, they had a six-and-a-half pound baby boy “Norbu,” who is so handsome. Here is a photo of daddy, mommy, and baby Norbu. They look so happy and so lovely. What a photo!

I am going to tell a story I believe I have seldom told in writing. It is about Lama Karma, who as a young monk managed to get out of Tibet and into Nepal. This is how my family and I helped to get Lama Karma out of Nepal and into the United States. It was high drama, and there was a time when I felt that I had to keep the following story about Lama Karma’s exodus from Nepal quiet, but since he is now a U.S. citizen, there is no reason that I can think of not to tell it, and it is an exciting tale.

Lama Karma was born and raised in Kham in eastern Tibet. I have been to his home in the high Tibetan plateau and met his wonderful family. Their simple house is at the end of a road that turns into what here in Michigan we call a two-track, which two-track then becomes just some slick grass with a little wear, hardly a road at all. When you finally get to their home, you see a small cinder-block style house and a large herd of yaks. I will write more on that trip another time.

The year was 1997 and Margaret, myself, and three of our kids were in Kathmandu, Nepal on our way home from our first pilgrimage to Tibet, the trip where we met His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa (Orgen Trinley Dorje) at Tsurphu Monastery, his ancestral home in Tibet, at some 15,000 feet of altitude. That too would be another story.

I had heard about Lama Karma sometime before I ever met him. We were staying in Boudenath, a section of Kathmandu where there is the large Bouda Stupa (perhaps a block wide), a Buddhist monument around which pilgrims and practitioners would circumambulate. Folks said that there was this young

monk who would appear early in the morning and prostrate himself (a body-length at a time) around the stupa, even in the rain. The monk was obviously a very dedicated practitioner, because if you have ever been to Kathmandu, the streets and sidewalks are covered with everything you would not want to lie down on, to put it mildly. Back then there was no such thing as trash pick-up in that city, and at street corners you could find six-foot high mounds of garbage. Need I say more?

As it turned out, this dedicated monk who was doing the prostrations turned out to be Lama Karma, only back then he was not a lama, but just a monk, and his name was Karma Drodhul.

Anyway, my family and I were back in Kathmandu, wrapping up our Tibet trip after an additional week spent in Sikkim, India visiting monasteries and rinpoches. We were staying in the Happy Valley Guest House right across from Thrangu Rinpoche's school for orphans when I received a note from my dharma teacher (Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche) asking would we please escort his nephew Karma Drodhul (a Tibetan Buddhist monk) from Kathmandu back to the United States. And sure enough, before we knew it there was this young monk waiting for us outside our hotel. He was perhaps twenty-years old and all smiles. Karma Drodhul and our kids bonded at once. But there is more to this story.

Karma Drodhul had escaped or somehow gotten across the border from Tibet into Nepal. He was an illegal and had a fake Nepalese passport that indicated he had been born in Nepal. The problem was that he spoke hardly a word of Nepalese, not what you might expect from someone born and bred in Nepal.

And the trick was to get him through customs and onto the plane to the U.S. It was certain that the officials would inspect his passport, grill him in Nepalese, and expect him to respond in what was supposed to be his native language. Hmmm. How could he do that when he knew no Nepalese?

If I remember right, there was some talk of his claiming he was born in "Namo Buddha" near Thrangu Tashi Yangtse Monastery, a sacred pilgrimage spot and home to some 250

Tibetan monks. It might be plausible that he grew up there speaking only Tibetan and never learned Nepalese. Well, it might be.... and again, it might not be plausible. Our blue-sky wishes started to fade.

As the day for our departure drew nearer, we got more and more nervous about getting Karma Drodhul through customs and out of the country. All of our more ethereal hopes about his passing for Nepalese had kind of evaporated as we faced the reality of passing this monk off as a native-born Nepalese citizen to the authorities. It appeared that there was no simple way out.

When the day to fly out of Kathmandu finally arrived, I went to the local airport with Karma Drodhul and my family, followed by a considerable entourage of the young monk's friends and well-wishers who tried to stay out of sight so as not to draw undue attention to our guise. And at the airport we waited.

When it finally came time to board the plane, there were two lines, one for locals (like Karma Drodhul), and one for (I guess) VIPs and westerners. My family checked through customs and boarded the plane via the VIP line, but I chose to accompany the young monk in the "local" line, where I stood out like a sore thumb, an older Caucasian in a line of Asians.

Meanwhile, standing behind and peering through a nearby iron gate were all of the friends who had come to see Karma Drodhul off, and who wondered if he would actually be allowed to leave the country. They kept a low profile, to be sure, a bevy of faces peering through holes in the grating.

The line of locals moved slowly, but finally there we were, the young monk and I standing before several officials. And of course, the first thing they did was to address Karma Drodhul in Nepalese. I sure didn't know a word of Nepalese and the officials must have known that, because they spoke directly to Lama Karma, pretty much ignoring me, but probably wondering what on earth I was doing in this line.

And that was my chance to play the "Ugly American." Every time they spoke to Karma Drodhul (and before he could answer), I opened my mouth and started speaking. I would reach into my travel vest and pull out all the papers of

invitation by our monastery in New York requesting the monk to visit and lay them out on the table before me. The officials (one who understood some English) did their best to be polite to this loud American, but obviously they were trying to bypass me and access Karma Drodhul directly.

Meanwhile, out on the tarmac, the plane had been boarded and the propellers were running. There was no jetway, but just a plane sitting out there in the sun, some distance from the terminal. We were the last two passengers booked for that plane.

And so it went. Every time the custom officials would address Karma Drodhul, I would answer. And I would drag out all my papers and loudly announce that I was here to take this monk to visit America. And each time the officials would try to be polite, but my welcome was wearing thin and the plane was already delayed. Meanwhile, the crowd of friends behind the iron gate holding their breath, were wide-eyed, waiting. This was the deciding moment.

Finally, the senior official had enough of me. He just raised his hands and with a single motion waved us off. "Go, just go" he said, and so we went, hurrying across the tarmac, daring not to look back lest they change their mind. And we did not breathe easily until we were on the plane and the hatch was sealed.

And then we were airborne, hugging and laughing with one another. Later, on another and larger plane, we headed for the U.S., everyone looking at the strange young monk who put his robes over his head while he tried to get some sleep. When we finally arrived in the San Francisco Airport, the first words out of Karma Drodhul's mouth were "Where are the monks?" He was used to being in a society where everywhere there were monks in maroon robes, and here there were was only one, himself.

We flew on to Big Rapids, Michigan and Karma Drodhul stayed with us for some days, getting used to America. Certainly his eyes were opened the first time we walked him through a large supermarket. He had never seen anything like what even a small town like ours has. He has forever since been like a son to Margaret and me and a "brother from

another mother” to the kids, just family. From Big Rapids he flew to New York and the rest is history.

Karma Drodhul went on to do two traditional 3-year closed retreats (back-to-back), emerging as Lama Karma, actually two times a lama, and has since travelled the world teaching and giving empowerments. Today he is the president of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD) on Mt. Guardian above Woodstock, NY. Ever since, Lama karma and his wife Cherry have been like family to us. And now, we have another grandson in your Norbu. **Congratulations** Lama Karma and Cherry.

BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

October 2, 2019

“Looking at the mind,
It’s not what I’d expect.

“Expectations can’t define,
And you can’t expect to find.

“That’s the nature of the mind.”

The above poem I wrote years ago is not what this blog is about, but rather this article is about expectations as to the results of our dharma practice.

We are talking here about the difference between what dharma teachings tell us in books and intensives and how they manifest in our life and are personally experienced. It is generally easy to talk about “The Preliminaries” in dharma practice (Ngondro, Lojong, etc.), what are sometimes called the purification practices. They can more easily be put into words.

Much more difficult, IMO, is finding words to describe the non-dual or realization practices that attend Recognition and beyond. It quickly becomes a slippery slope, if only because the form of dharma-realization for each of us varies and can shape-shift like a chameleon changes colors. I will make an effort to find words for this, but it is kind of a thankless task. Nevertheless, some understanding of this concept is important, IMO.

Watching for dharma practice results is a lot like focusing a pair of binoculars. Two fuzzy images, as they are focused, become one, meaning here that we gradually realize that the description of the result in the books and what is happening to us in real-life are perceived as the same thing, even though (in almost every case) the result is NOT what we imagined. That’s the nature of realization. We realize! You can’t anticipate it or you already would have done so.

While the dharma itself is pure, our filter or take on the dharma always will be very individual. It reminds me of the statements about the historical Buddha who, when teaching,

was heard (and even interpreted) differently by each individual present. The transmission was of one piece, but the reception (and the receiver) varied from individual to individual.

This of course reminds me of and reflects on the concept of a “yidam,” and why that concept can be so difficult (even mysterious) to understand. And this is because our yidam (as the doorway to the realization practices) is totally tailored to our individual filter on the world. A yidam is personal, which is why there is no point in talking about our particular yidam with someone else, not because it is a secret, but because it is personal to us.

A yidam is the one dharma path that actually works for us, and that by definition. Like phone numbers, each personal yidam is different and works for one and only one individual. That’s the general theme of this article, this tailoring of dharma to our ability to see the world -- our filter on it all.

And the facet of this concept that I am isolating here for reflection is how very different dharma can be as interpreted by each one of us from what the texts seem to promise us. English translations of Tibetan are locked in words or print, but when heard by ten different people, may be interpreted differently by all ten individuals. Even that last statement is more general than my intention here. Dharma results are VERY personal, meaning personal to us as opposed to secret, as mentioned.

Of course, I only have my own experience to draw on, but in my case, what is stated in a teaching as the takeaway is often far from what I am actually able to take away. The teaching may describe the results of a dharma practice as this, that, or the other thing, yet instead of that result appearing as written or spoken of, I don’t get that.

However, quite often, instead of grasping the point exactly as described in a text, something somewhat similar (but quite different) begins to appear in my mind over there or wherever. I have had trouble recognizing the results I am looking for, although they are right before my eyes. That’s how general these teachings can be, while their results are very personal.

And it's not that the dharma is unclear, but rather that my filter or situation takes it in and interprets it differently than the textbook states. So, like with a sundog (if you have ever seen one), the Sun appears where it is, but at some distance to the right or left of the sun is another bright patch of light that resembles the Sun. I often initially fail to recognize the result of dharma instructions! Or, to be a little negative, it can be like me seeing through a glass darkly.

That's not a great analogy, but rather the idea is that instead of where the teachings and texts say to look for a result is not where we may end having to look. This has happened so many times in my dharma practice that it is practically routine by now. The teachings say to look here for this or that result and I look or see and experience nothing; yet, if I relax and trust myself, the desired effect of the teachings comes to me as filtered by my persona or individual equation. Ultimately, I recognize what they were talking about, but in my own fashion and understanding. "Ah!" Say I, "that's what they are talking about." Yet, it is often so different than I expected.

In other words, this result is hard to describe, but in reality, quite easy to determine IF I don't panic and allow the accompanying result to arise naturally, in my own speak, so to speak. And it will, but it can take time and not look like the picture in the magazine, so to speak. This is OUR result.

In other words, the dharma will always arise from inside us, as filtered by whatever filters we have acquired up to that time. It is always MY dharma, dharma tailored for MY equation and not often just "by the book." So, as I say to myself, "Wait for it" and don't be surprised if it is not what you imagined or expected. However, it will always be more than familiar and make the most sense, as it is being experienced through our personal filter and experience.

And you are not a heretic or a "problem-child" just because your take on the dharma is individual and "not normal" as the teaching may describe. I have never known it any other way. "Not normal" is normal. The pure dharma is stepped-down or crafts itself to fit our personal filter as best it can and always in our own-speak. It's a bit like direct-voice. LOL. In other words, this is how and why WE discover the dharma in our

own way. There is no cookie-cutter result. We filter everything down to what we know!

And we have no choice but to absorb the dharma through what filters are operational within us, which is why we go through all the purification practices, to trim those filters down to an opaqueness that is clear enough to actually be seen through and absorbed. It will always be our dharma, our take on the dharma, and never just what the book says or describes. That is my point.

Sure, the more purified our vehicle becomes, the more it may resemble the textbook description, but to imagine that early-on is futile. We can get our filter down to fighting weight by continued purification practices. But realization can start to occur before we are all purified and does. That's why we continue various purification practices even after Recognition.

The moral of this story is: don't look to have happen what this teaching or that book describes, except in a very general fashion. Instead, observe how you are changing from the ideas or teachings and how the results of those teachings are arising within you. And I find that it is best not to be afraid to be different from the mob, so to speak, because the results will be individually different, whether as described by me or from any other input.

I know this goes without saying, or you can say it again. I am saying it again.

KHENPO RINPOCHE'S PASSING

October 6, 2019

Our beloved teacher Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche passed away peacefully at 3:35 AM this morning October 6, 2019 at his home at Karma Ling Retreat. He was 96 years old.

Like the same Moon that appears in countless ponds or lakes, Rinpoche is reflected in all of us who have come to know him or of him.

RINPOCHE

October 6, 2019

“We can’t replace,
What there is,
Only one of.”

A little poem I wrote. How is this true for me, when there are so many other fine rinpoches and dharma teachers in the world today to study with. The answer is very simple. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche is my Root Guru, what is known in Tibetan as the Tsawi Lama.

Of course, I have met and studied (and taken empowerments) with many fine lamas, including all the four eminences, not to mention the 17th Karma Ogyen Trinley Dorje and the 16th Karma Rigpe Dorje before that. And on and on.

The difference, as mentioned, is that Khenpo Rinpoche is my Root Guru and in the Karma Kagyu Lineage to which I belong, that term has a very special meaning. Your Root Guru is the one (and only) dharma teacher that first points out to us the true nature of the mind so that we realize the true nature of the mind. Because it is a realization, it can only happen once.

If you tell me you have had it pointed out two or more times, you never realized the nature the first time. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche is my Root Guru and will always be so. I will just say a few more words for now.

With all of his (probably) thousands of students around the world, I never saw quite enough of Rinpoche on the personal level, but the closeness I had was just right. Like the Earth circling the Sun, I was not too close and never too far. I never was familiar with Rinpoche on a social level and always had complete devotion and confidence in him.

He came to our center many times, traveling all that way, giving teachings, and often empowerments. I have told the story many times, that Rinpoche first appeared to both my wife and myself in a dream, so I never saw Rinpoche as an

ordinary being, but always someone I was devoted to and thankful for his being the ground we could base our lives on.

And he blessed my entire family. All of my kids knew Rinpoche, some of them all of their lives and up close and personal. He treated everyone the same way. I keep being asked how I feel now that he is gone and my answer is:

Not much different, because I mixed my mind with Rinpoche many years ago and, as mentioned, the nature of the mind is, well, the nature of the mind. Rinpoche introduced me to the nature of the mind and, even though Rinpoche was far advanced in practice to someone like me, the nature of the mind is the same for all of us, once it is realized.

Rinpoche opened a window for me into the nature of the mind, through which I gazed. While Rinpoche's window was vast and mine small, through that window we each saw the same sky.

As for a personal level? I feel that Rinpoche's personal passing leaves me walking point to a greater degree, with him no longer physically here to guide me. Yet, he is always by my side because, as I pointed out, I mixed my mind with his. Now for some little bit of housekeeping:

Rinpoche passed away on the 8th lunar day in the 9th lunar month in the Tibetan astrological calendar in the Tsurphu tradition.

Using the Tropical Zodiac, at the time of his death Rinpoche had:

The Sun at 12° Libra 46'

The Moon at 19° Capricorn 47'

The angular separation of the two is 97.0214°

There are thirty 12° Lunar Days in a month, so the calculation is $360/12 = 12$ degrees of angular separation.

$97.0214/12 =$ the 8.085117 lunar day, thus the 8th lunar day when Rinpoche passed on.

The 8th lunar day is according to a published teaching on "Tibetan Festivals" by KKR given at our center (I believe because he knew I wanted to know more about Tibetan astrology) and transcribed and edited by me, I quote from his words:

“The 8th day of the lunar month, or what is called Half Moon or First Quarter, is observed mainly as a special day connected with White Tara. And, in accordance with the teachings on White Tara, it is on this day – the 8th day –when white Tara would manifest Buddhahood and display or demonstrate the experience of complete Buddhahood. Also, any practice which is directed toward longevity should be done on this day. White Tara relates to longevity as well. Although this can be done on any day, more traditionally, if you are doing special longevity practice, then it is best to do it on the 8th day.”

Rinpoche Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3tPl8WwqIw>

[This short video was created and edited by me. It was done years ago and was mostly for internal use by our sangha, but there is no point in not sharing it with anyone interested, although everything is not labeled and spelled out because viewers already knew the players. It will give folks a chance to see some photos of Rinpoche, many of which I originally took.]

MAY ERLEWINE REMEMBERS RINPOCHE

October 8, 2019

I don't have a lot more to add. I am taking it a day at a time and trying to relax. One thing I will share comes from my daughter May Erlewine, who has always been close to Khenpo Rinpoche. May has been out on tour and had this to say about Khenpo Rinpoche at her performance at the Wealthy Theater in Grand Rapids. This is a very touching song May wrote and she sang it last night. I videoed it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCPZI8M2NvQ>

If you have time, please give it a listen.

Rinpoche's death, despite his advanced age and everything, is still somewhat of a shock to the system. Like the shock that comes with strokes or any untoward event in our life, the shock itself creates a gap that pops us out of our comfort zone and takes the fun out of our normal entertainments. They don't work.

I find myself trying this and trying that today, watch a movie, listen to music, and abandoning it moments later in favor of not knowing what to do. It's like I have lost my moorings and direction. I am not secure. LOL.

Shock (gaps in our continuum) deny us the ability to lose ourselves in our daily entertainments. I end up popping out of what normally is enough to entertain me and there I find myself, just staring at the void. The term "void" carries with it an onus and obscures the reality that beyond our habitual entertainments is the mind itself.

It is the void that marks the other side of entertainment, much like the image I like of an empty theater stage stripped of its production, props, scenery, and actors. Gazing at the void is an age-old pastime for those (like shamans) pushed out of conventional reality (in which it is convenient to hide) and exposed to the harsh sunburn of the emptiness-of-entertainment.

I experienced this in spades during my stroke, and the passing of Rinpoche has many similarities. When the busyness of time

wanes and I lose interest in it all, I am exposed to the non-entertainment that shocks like deaths bring on; at these times, we have an opportunity to experience the nature of the mind without the trappings of our usual mindless entertainment.

There is that these days. And, for me, at the heart of Rinpoche's passing (what makes me sad) is that I can't think of anyone else on the planet who knew me like Rinpoche and the fact that he accepted me just as I am and never blinked. I know others who know "OF" me, but who don't know me. Many of you here on FB know me better than most folks I know in person do.

These days I am trying to just relax and enjoy the ride, so to speak.

IMPERMANENCE IS THE SMELLING SALTS OF THE DHARMA

October 8, 2019

These are the three days following Rinpoche's passing, a time in the Tibetan tradition to leave the body in meditation. People are feeling close to their teacher. As for me, I already feel close to Rinpoche; that came years ago by mixing of my mind with his, just as he had mixed his with nature of the mind itself. Not much happening to me, other than perhaps greater certainty and increased clarity.

However, I have had no visions, no gossamer visits by Rinpoche, no direct voice or anything else. About all I can attest to is, in the gap created by the shock of his passing, as mentioned, I am a little sharper or more acute as regards the same things I always study. That's the idea with me, as many of you know.

I did have one very small event. I have carried a little pendant on a protection cord around my neck since 1997; that pendant was given to me by the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche at his monastery in the tiny town of Mirik in West Bengal, India.

Aside for Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (and this is just me and not meant to be disparaging of any other rinpoches), the only rinpoche I ever met that I felt was as "pure" as my teacher (Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche) was Bokar Rinpoche. Bokar Rinpoche is gone now some years. His last words for me back then, when we said goodbye were "Tomorrow or next life, whichever comes first."

Early Sunday morning, quite before dawn, around the time of Rinpoche's death, I woke up to find that little pendant from Bokar Rinpoche had separated itself from the rest of my protection cord and was laying there all by itself by my head on the bed. I have had it around my neck for some 22 years. I took it as a sign of something, I don't know just what, and reattached it. LOL. And so, what am I thinking these days? Well, the usual stuff I write about. LOL. Here is a sample:

I am asking myself what is the nature of the mind as compared to Samsara? Samsara has us like a bug in a rug; embedded and immersed purely in our ongoing entertainment; what is waiting for us outside of that? I don't think we know unless we remove the obscuration of entertainment long enough to be aware of what is beyond fixation.

Rinpoche has told us for years to be aware of any shock that's outbreaking in our life, whether it be the backfire of a nearby automobile or the shock of losing someone very dear to us forces a gap in the otherwise sealed continuum of our attachments, i.e. being totally entertained 24x7. These kind of shocks can be an opportunity to realize the true nature of the mind.

Turning the entertainment off, even if only for these momentary shocks or gaps, leaves us free to become familiar with the nature of our own mind beyond the theatrical production of perpetual entertainment.

Certainly, in those moments of clarity, there is nothing to be seen. LOL. That's the whole point: the emptiness of the entertainment that we fill our time with as a way of ignoring the true nature of the mind.

Compared to the rich tapestry of entertainment that we fill each second with, the lack of that entertainment is empty indeed. Our fear of that sense of vulnerability to the unknown keeps us confined within Samsara for all of our days.

Normally, there are no gaps. It is only once in a great while, for instance when impermanence strikes, that holes in the fabric of our entertainment may appear. It's no wonder that, being free of entertainment for even moments (or days) finds us touching into or wandering beyond Samsara. Look for that.

The hard truth to take is that life, stripped of its entertainment, is an awareness that is naked, raw, and perhaps initially boring compared to the rich texture of busyness in life as we have known it up to now.

Unfortunately, it does not take long for the Self and its entertainment-shroud to reanimate and reestablish itself once again, so that we fall back asleep in Samsara's arms, comfortable in our ignorance of the true nature of the mind.

We seem to prefer entertainment to the true nature of the mind.

This situation, which I have come to study, is pretty-much completely unknown in conventional society. It's a struggle for me to get my arms around it and no one to talk to as well. It might not even be there, but for the fact that it is and that I have experienced it directly.

As a dharma student, awareness is what I study and practice. Awareness of what? There doesn't seem to be anything to be aware of. And so, what we have is awareness that there is nothing (no thing) to be aware of other than the awareness itself.

THE TWO ARE LEFT AT THE DOOR OF THE ONE

October 9, 2019

[These are strange times. The shock or interruption of Rinpoche's death to my life is broader than I imagined. Words can't suffice, which is what I am saying in this little ramble, which you will please excuse.]

Weaving words together, even words as fine as frog's hair, as they say, are still a veil cast upon the mind. Words are a construct that I keep driving myself up against, although I know that, by definition, words can but point and not define. Nevertheless, I use them. Words.

Words are indirect and indirect is a middleman that never can be direct. Yet, just what is caught in this web of the words we weave? Words are like a hologram, a dim reflection of the actual nature of the mind. Words are an image cast over the face of the mind so that we can but feel (yet not realize) reality, much like a blind man reads braille.

Why bother with words at all, except that without words, coming events could not ever cast their shadow, much like the old quote "When you said wait, you meant a long time, didn't you?" And if there are no words at all, it is like the flight of a bird across a clear sky that leaves no trace.

"A-Tisket, A-Tasket
A green and yellow basket
I sent a letter to my love
And on the way I dropped it."

Words are graffiti written on the doorway of the mind (and its Recognition), the point of no return from which there is no return.

"Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here" might well be a Buddhist slogan, as "hope" and "fear" are never our friends.

THUKDAM AND PUBLIC CREMATION

October 11, 2019

[What follows is a brief discussion of the three days following the death of a great lama, a time period called “Thukdam,” during which the lama is allowed to rest in samadhi. As for me, I am entering three days of babysitting 5-year-old Iris, my granddaughter and I probably will not be in samadhi, but doing things with Iris. LOL.]

High lamas in the Tibetan tradition often don't simply die; they remain in meditation (samadhi) after death in what is called (as mentioned) “thukdam.” Their body is left undisturbed in a quiet place for three days to see if they persists in mediation or not, while during those three days prayers are said, in the case of my teacher, readings from “The Rain of Wisdom,” a collection of realization songs by masters of the Karma Kagyu lineage. Great care is taken that the body is not disturbed.

This took place with our much-loved teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. After three days of remaining undisturbed (usually in traditional sitting posture), Vajra Master Lama Tobden visited Rinpoche's room and emerged saying that Rinpoche was still resting in thukdam (in samadhi) and that the signs of success were there and so these three days should be extended. Typically, these include a warmth that remains in the heart region after several days, continued pliability of skin, the body does not grow stiff, a certain glow to the skin, and many other signs.

As for his students (of which I am one), how are our lives affected by his death and thukdam? Traditionally, disciples or close dharma students have been said to share in the samadhi generated by thukdam. If nothing else, we have the heightened awareness that any untoward shock brings. Rinpoche will remain in thukdam for yet several more days, perhaps, and then there will be an outdoor public cremation at the Karme Ling Retreat center near Delhi, NY on October 20, 2019.

In my case, these recent days are not typical. Although I go through my normal day, filling the offering bowls, practicing on

the cushion, Mahamudra Meditation, etc., this time period now is not ordinary. The shock of the death of my dharma teacher reverberates, with standing waves, that demand heightened attention on my part. It just happens. If nothing else, I'm aware of this awareness.

Like the proverbial tar-baby, seemingly, it is impossible to extract oneself quickly from Samsara, and certainly not by any sudden moves on our part. Lately, life has become a sidebar to what else is going on inside, which is a pronounced nothing. What happens when life itself becomes ineffable – unspeakable?

THE STATE OF THE SAMAYA

October 12, 2019

I am knee-deep in three days of babysitting our 5-year-old granddaughter Iris and am on the clock, so I have very little time to write blogs like these just now. Margaret is leaving Monday for the Karme Ling Retreat Center for the leadup to the public cremation of our beloved teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

As for me, I am staying home and doing a little private retreat, plus I locked in months ago to filming an interview here at our center for a forthcoming documentary on modern astrology, with plane tickets bought, and so on.

I also came down with a chest code thanks to my own shenanigans, which is not a good idea, having been diagnosed with COPD, had a recent stroke, etc. I am good with being at home and doing a bit of a retreat. I feel and have felt for years that Rinpoche is right here, in my heart.

Over the years, some parts of my daily sitting dharma practice I did for Rinpoche, in particular for his health and long life. And, I don't mean just wishing him well and saying a prayer, which of course I did, but rather adding whole practices as a discipline and a sign that I am committed and then doing them going forward. For Rinpoche (and his health), I did these practices myself, if that makes sense.

Part of me has felt free for some years, free to do whatever I want as far as practice is concerned, because in one very real sense, I am practicing all the time anyway. Yet, I have been very careful not to abandon any of my sit-down practices, but rather to even add to them, as mentioned, in the way of a discipline and a further commitment to Rinpoche. Our sitting practice is the touchstone itself.

Well, my commitment to Rinpoche has not changed just because he has passed on, yet nevertheless, something has shifted or is shifting within me. In some sense, I feel empowered (by default) from his physical absence. There is a difference when someone we love and respect dies and passes on. And it's not a simple realization, but seemingly

more complex. Rinpoche is there within me, but he is not there in this world to physically comfort me any longer. I reach with my mind toward him, but I can no longer sit there with him in his room, have him touch my forehead with his forehead, and receive his blessing in that manner.

What a comfort that was to have a physical place on this earth where I could go and where there Rinpoche existed. How wonderful that was! It was an 800-mile trip, but at the end of all that driving, there was Rinpoche smiling at me, inviting me to sit down with him once again. This went on for decades. Simply amazing!

What a blessing it was to have the karma to have a real-life teacher like Khenpo Rinpoche appear in my life? And he first came to me in a dream I had and then there he was, living as part of this greater dream I call life, right there beside me in this bardo of life between birth and death. It's not like he was always there. I had a father who never could talk personally with his sons. I had no teachers that I felt close to, except perhaps one, in the fourth grade, Mrs Althouse. And I never had any grandfather on either side. I hungered for direction.

So, Rinpoche actually was for me a dream come true and not just a dream that was never realized. I may not have a lot of money in this world, but I am wealthy beyond imagining to be able to afford the karma of a teacher like Khenpo Rinpoche to appear in this life and in the flesh.

Yet, these days I must say that I'm a little like a ship without a shore. Alone and more on my own, I have no fear, but I'm now forced to lead and not just follow. Yes, Rinpoche is still within me, but that just makes my point. There is no longer any place in this world that I physically have available to go for guidance, other than within myself. Rinpoche is still within me; I feel that, yet suddenly, by default, I'm also now walking point. LOL.

Of course, you know I know there are many great lamas and rinpoches out there in the world. Yet, you should also know, there is, for me, only one Root Guru. I just saw Rinpoche a few weeks ago in person, sat with him, received his blessing, and confirmed with him where I am in my practice.

And so, sorting all this out is what I'm doing. LOL.

“DON’T PROLONG THE PAST”

October 14, 2019

The first of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa’s words of advice to folks like us. Oh, the words in it all! They simply fail to communicate their message to the heart, much like rain beats against my windowpane these days as winter draws near. And of course, nothing much gets through the veil of words, except conceptually.

There must be other ways, yet I have never found them. All I can hear is this silence, that great noise that speaks louder than words; however, I don’t speak silence, as you all know, although it speaks to me more and more of the time.

I turn and look and turn and look, yet find no other way. The Polestar in the night sky still points out north. Nothing has changed, except everything. I am more certain than ever. This sense of urgency that has (for years) driven me to write blogs such as these is itself an obscuration that I must let go of, the “hurry.” Relax. We cannot (at least I cannot) hurry the dharma. “Ripeness is all,” as Shakespeare put it.

In this precious time of change, I find myself stepping back to take a wider view, embracing still more, and waiting ... not jumping to conclusions, but rather slowly backing out of the future until it becomes as fresh as this present moment. Tilopa said it so clearly: “Don’t Invite the Future.” And yet, this is so hard not to do!

And then Tilopa said in his next word of advice something that, to my mind, is even more profound and practically impossible to achieve:

“Don’t Alter the Present.”

Let it be, and then this, Tilopa’s final word of advice:

“Relax, as It Is.”

UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

October 17, 2019

[I have not been writing lately or feeling much like it. I find that I more like being quiet these days. A bit of levity is the gift of this large toad (on the left) from my five-year-old granddaughter Iris to Grandpa. She knows I like frogs and toads and she makes her mom buy every second-hand-store amphibian she comes across. I told Iris the toad is too large to stay on the kitchen table, but will have to go next door with the other frogs that have been exiled. LOL.]

Life without Rinpoche being here with us in the flesh is still very new. I have felt close to Rinpoche, irrespective of distance, for many years, but coming face to face with no-physical-Rinpoche around gives me pause nevertheless.

I ask myself, who in this wide world knows me well enough to accept me, just as I am, warts and all, and makes me feel that my situation is always workable. Of course, the answer is Rinpoche. Not having Rinpoche at the end of an 800-mile drive or email or phone (through a translator) is a little unsettling. I find myself treading through life a little more carefully.

Almost like a gag-reflex, I find myself, without thinking, realizing again and again that I have no where to turn. When I get to the point where I usually refer something to Rinpoche, pay-it-forward, so to speak, I am left holding my own bag. "Address unknown" comes to mind. Yes, I have Rinpoche with me, here inside, yet it is odd to have only one recourse, instead of an option to contact him personally, which I seldom used, yet it was always there.

I am reminded of when I first went to Tibet and traveled to Tsurphu Monastery, the ancestral home of the Karmapa's, to visit the 17th Karmapa. We arrived, Margaret and myself, along with three of our kids. As we laid out our papers in front of some of the officials at the monastery, there came the point where they saw from the papers that we were students of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. With that realization, the ice melted, and I remember hearing something like, "They are

Khenpo Karthar's." And that said it all or was all that had to be said. We were, as they say, "in like Flynn."

Now, these days, as I look around for the tie that binds, so to speak, I come up with the lack of the physical connection. There is no panic, but there is (at least on the outside) a reaching for and not finding.

OM AMI DEWA HRI

October 20, 2019

Today is the cremation of my beloved teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at the Karmé Ling Retreat Center near Delhi, New York. The public cremation, much as is done in India, is literally a funeral pyre, set just outside Karmé Ling's Columbarium, where the ashes of deceased members of our sangha are interred.

My wife Margaret is up at the retreat center, keeping me posted on the goings on. Why am I not there? A number of reasons, one of which is the difficulty of my traveling due to my first stroke in 2016 and the effects on my eyes. And that, I just got back from there, and came down with a heavy chest cold on top of that, which is still going on. Many people will be at the cremation and I chose to just quietly stay at home and practice here. I feel close to Rinpoche, regardless of distance. Yet, if I could just magically be there for the ceremony, I would. But driving 800 miles (one-way) and then being probably unable to rest anywhere during the day is a recipe for a challenge to my health, so here I be.

I have had one other true dharma teacher, but Khenpo rinpoche is my Root Guru, the one person who introduced me to the nature of the mind so that I actually grasped it. And while I have received teachings and blessings from many great dharma teachers (including two Karmapas), only Khenpo Rinpoche was my Root Teacher (Tsawi Lama). That is just how it was.

I first met Rinpoche in a dream, before I actually met him personally and I followed up on that and was his student for some 36 years. I never saw Rinpoche as much as I would have liked to, yet my devotion to him was never marred by familiarity. He was, to me, a pristine teacher and what time we did have together was always precious and enlightening.

In 1989, Rinpoche was sharing with us how his Holiness the 16th Karmapa (Rigpe Dorje) has requested that he built a 3-year retreat center to train students in the traditional 3-year, 3-month, and 3-day closed retreat. Rinpoche poured his heart

out to us that this wish could come true and there was not a dry eye in the room.

As I listened, I realized that perhaps only someone like myself could actually help to see that such a retreat becomes a reality and not just a dream. I sent a message to Rinpoche, and his response was to invite me privately to his room, with no translator present, whereupon he placed a mala (rosary of beads) into my hands and holding them said, "My mala, my mala." He had given me his own mala that he had used from before he came to America and from his arrival up to this date in 1989.

I was shocked at receiving the mala (and so later was his translator), yet I undertook (along with my wife Margaret) to do everything I could to make Karme Ling a reality, which was mostly to organize Rinpoche's western students. We did our best, and our western Chinese community came to our rescue, and knowing very much more about "giving" than we here in America, were of crucial importance in making this dream real. But that dream did become a reality and has produced dozens of trained lamas over the years.

Living without Rinpoche present in my life is all new to me. It was 36 years since I have had no living teacher. While I have always kept Rinpoche in my mind, and still do, that physical link at least once a year for his yearly ten day Mahamudra Intensive was very important. Margaret and I attended it for the last 31 years, religiously, so to speak.

Motherless child? No. Rinpoche was my spiritual mother, father, and guide, and I don't even know where to reach now that he is gone. Those who say there are many great dharma teachers out there, just don't understand. I have had more teachings than I know how to use, and the same with empowerments, practices, and the like. I am good to go, as far as all that goes.

What I miss is Rinpoche, his kindness, and the fact that he was always happy to see me! I can't even say that about my own family. LOL. I have done a whole series of practices each day (for many years) for Rinpoche's long life. What about those? I haven't stopped doing them and probably

won't. They suddenly have become one of my main links to Rinpoche!

OM AMI DEWA HRI

“THE DEWDROP SLIPS INTO THE SHINING SEA”

October 23, 2019

It's time and I'm doing my best to pick up my bed and walk onward. LOL.

I've had a lot of time to think, lately. Unfortunately, the way I think best is not just sitting down and thinking, but doing other things, like watching a movie, writing, studying, etc. And then, so to speak, out of the corner of my eye, I think. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that, rather than “I think,” instead, that thoughts come or arise. I note them and by a sort of attrition, some thoughts come up that persist more than others, which others are lost to memory. Anyway, the job of “thinking” gets done, even if the form is unusual. LOL.

I often marvel at how life habituates us to whatever or wherever we have a glimpse of realization. It could be purely accidental where we first poked our nose through duality and tasted non-duality, yet we then venerate that glimpse as well as the particular hole we peeked through. It is very, very rare that any of us see the nature of the mind entirely and all at once. It is imperative in dharma training that ANY actual realization we do have has to be followed by expanding and extending it to be more inclusive. Realization is like a drop of water in a still pond. The expanding rings embrace more and more as they spread over time. In other words, most of us are not “all-at-oncers,” but rather “slow-walkers.”

I have been concerned for years in doing my best to help those practitioners who are on the verge of recognizing the true nature of the mind to make that connection. I'm not saying I am any good at it or have been successful in being of that much help, but my heart and intent is in it.

And, as the loss of my beloved teacher calms down and comes to rest, I find that I am more certain than ever (and confirmed) that this is the only thing I want to do and I will continue to do this as best I can, using whatever abilities I have to help dharma students realize the nature of their own mind. As I keep saying: I don't consider myself a dharma

teacher, but more of a dharma sharer. I share whatever I can that I feel might be helpful or useful to those who are working on recognizing the nature of their own mind. IMO, “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind is SO important.

And, of late, as I look back over my own history and what started me in the direction of Vajrayana Buddhism, it was back in 1964 that I first had a breakthrough as to the nature of the mind. The deep imprint of that event separated and segued my life into two distinct periods, before that event and after it.

Our dualistic habit of separation, that between ourselves and the outside world, is long-standing and has never been violated up to now. I remember only too well. Growing up in the conventional social environment of the 1950s, with crew-cuts and cookie-cutter habits was stifling. The shroud of science over everything didn’t help either. It only served to reify what was then called “scientific.” I was, to myself, very much an island in the sea of hard-science that was all around me.

What sensitivity I had within was contrasted with the hard-edged world surrounding me. It did not know me or I it. To my mind, myself and the world around me were entirely separate from one another and did not overlap – a duality. I tried to sort out my inner feelings while attempting to keep the world that confronted me at bay. We had almost nothing in common and there was no love lost between the harshness of the world and me. I was all of 23 years old.

This is, practically speaking, an impossible situation for practicing dharma. It was then that my exclusive deer-in-the-headlights fixation and pure immersion in Samsara ended. It was May 6, 1964 in Berkeley, California somewhere between 10:30 PM until dawn. It happened to be my first acid trip, but that particular means did not affect the result. It has been my experience that hallucinogens are different than other types of drugs in that they are capable of permanently altering how we look at life, and that is a form of realization. It was true in my case.

The result of taking LSD was mind altering, meaning it altered my view and amounted to my first glimpse of “realization.” It

has never faded or been walked back, although it was not at the level of what we call Recognition as to the nature of the mind prior to entering Mahamudra meditation or the other realization practices.

That night was when I first realized that this samsaric world, this duality that had held me riveted and in constant fear all my life up to that moment, began to dissolve as I realized that much of what I had always thought of as “Other,” foreign, and outside my body was very much just my own inner projections projected outward on the world. Acid can do this.

In that night and realization, the two (me against the world) collapsed (converged) and for the first time in my life there was a ray of light that showed me that this outer world that appeared so menacing at times was, rather than two (Me and everything/everyone else,) just one (and not two) and that the “One” that I realized that night was workable and (even more important), it is workable by me, just as I was. That single night changed my life forever. That is what is called a Realization and realizations, as mentioned, are one-way-only. You can’t walk them back. They never go away. From that moment on, I was a committed student of phenomenology and had found a differential through which I could transform Samsara into Nirvana and proceeded to begin to do so from that moment (and day) onward.

Of course, it took me a couple decades to work “it” and it was not until I met my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, that I found enough outside guidance to organize my progress so that I had a more natural path, yet it was that single event in May of 1964, when the two (subject and object) collapsed and first were seen as one. i.e. that what up to then appeared as two united and were experienced as one whole. And this was not a conceptual intellectual event, but a full-bodied experience, in the flesh. No, it was not Recognition of the true nature of the mind, but it was realization nevertheless.

As mentioned, it was another twenty years before I found my Root Guru in Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, yet all of that was possible because of that breaking through that took place that night in 1964 in Berkeley, California. Without that realization, I would still be like the deer-in-the-headlights,

totally fixated and adrift in a cold, dualistic universe in which I was embedded, me struggling against the outside world.

[Photo by me yesterday. I am trying to get back

TIME-FOLDING DHARMA

October 24, 2019

[This is a long and tough read, yet I hope some few of you have time and can help me understand what I am seeing here. Thank you!]

“It’s a silent world I live in and a silent sea on which I sail, one with few reflections, yet many waves. Of course, it is all water, waves and ocean, yet it is those mirror-like reflections that I am pointing out and waiting for. The folding and refolding of time is the origami of the dharma.”

I am still pondering and writing about the aftermath of my stroke earlier this year. It’s not about the medical event anymore, but rather the realization that came after and through my stroke. It was a mindbender and opened doors that there is scant mention of, even in the pith dharma texts. If this has become tiresome to you, I understand, so please tune me out and look elsewhere for information. However, if you could put aside that fact that what I write about emerged from a stroke, the realization that came out of that is so much more important than the stroke itself. Let me take a run at it again, please.

I am intrigued by how much I immerse myself in the entertainment-body of life itself, even just watching a movie, and especially if I get hung up on a TV series. I noticed that after my recent three days of babysitting, which takes concerted effort and awareness, that I found myself binge-watching a cable series called “Homeland.” Some of you will laugh, since you know how addictive it is. As for me, I got right down and deep into it. “Lost” on purpose would be a better word. Yet, that is simply not what I mean here by entertainment.

I can’t help but realize how very much like Samsara this binge-watching on my part is! I yearn to get lost in entertainment (or some kind of busyness) as a relief from the challenge or the hum-drum of life. Or, perhaps it is just that I like the feeling of being thoroughly involved. Perhaps immersion in entertainment is a surrogate for a sense of

actually “being.” By doing so, being intensely involved, what is it that I am avoiding, if anything? What’s wrong with losing ourselves in entertainment? This is what fascinates me and what I intend to look into very carefully.

Is extreme busyness an escape? If so, what are we avoiding? Yet, my dharma teacher of 36 years was busy most all of the time, filling rupas, sewing robes, and a myriad of other tasks. Is being busy on dharma tasks an exception or is gainful busyness of any kind a good way to spend our time?

My reaction and the resulting vision (or realization) from my stroke took many weeks before it began to erode and the memory of it is vivid even now. What was that whole event about, aside from the obvious medical event? Or, do you insist on linking the two to the exclusion of this realization I am trying to get my arms around? Please don’t. Hear me out.

Rinpoche’s response to a detailed account of my stroke-state of mind, as explained through a translator, was that, and these are Rinpoche’s own words, “The recognition and deepened experiences you had were a result of years of meditation.” Rinpoche then went on to explain that he had some eleven small strokes himself.

The key takeaway from the stroke, which I have blogged on so many times, is that from that stroke came an awareness of an “Awareness” I never had before. It was an awareness of a light too brilliant to look directly at. And, making it more questionable to believe, is the fact that I can’t find mention of the type of my realization of this awareness much of anywhere. Is it an anomaly limited just to me? I don’t believe there is anything under the Sun that is unique, including my recent experience. LOL.

I know. Life always wants to move on and, as mentioned, folks may be tired of hearing about my stroke and this issue. Fair enough, but that does not change my view of it one iota. The actual realization that came from the stroke is still staring me right in the face, even though the reanimation of my fixations and attachments increasingly grows back like ivy on a wall; and it gradually obscures the experience. Life marches on. However, I have yet to place this event in my mind properly where it belongs. It is still percolating and alerted me

to something I never had experienced and I seek to confirm it. And, if confirmed by me, it dictates a massive shift in direction as far as my approach to dharma is concerned. That's already taking place.

It is hard enough explaining why the image of a brilliant light (that I could not stand) is a perfect analogy, except that in actuality it was not so much a light as (and please consider my words here), rather, the brilliance that one is aware of in the absence of any form of entertainment, when our fixations and attachments are entirely stripped away. Take away every escape, diversion, and distraction and you have this brilliant "light." But, "light" is perhaps a misleading word.

And here is where it gets more difficult to grasp: That too-bright "light" is nothing more than the boredom or tedium (or Realization!) that results from our NOT being entertained so constantly. In other words, the light that is too bright to endure is identical to the naked boredom of not being able to hide in the shadows of busyness, where keeping so involved (busy) results in that stark light of boredom not being seen or experienced -- anything, but looking directly at that "tedium." I had never been so cleaned out of entertainment than I was from the stroke. I was totally exposed and had not even a shadow to hide under.

You might think that this is an overstatement on my part, since entertainment (as we generally know it) does not hold THAT high a level of interest for most folks, at least not enough to warrant the strength of my description.

And my response to that question is not that I overstated the brilliant image as a "light," but that we (as humans) in Samsara understate (by several orders of magnitude) the concept of entertainment in our lives. I am not talking about entertainment like the movies we watch in the evening or the books we read, but rather entertainment (basically) as our entire life itself, everything we know, are, and ever have been.

We might THINK that this constant entertainment we hide in is like a turtle's hard carapace, a hermit crab's shell, the barnacles that eventually cover a rock, or the cocoon that shrouds a caterpillar, yet we would miss the truth. This entertainment I describe is not a veneer or layer as the above

suggestions offer, but rather: everything in life itself is entertainment, but one that is solid straight through (as much as emptiness can be solid), with no veneer. Samsara is not a veneer over Nirvana, but simply Nirvana unrealized.

I've spent a long time trying to prune this description down to what could appear "considered-enough" to get your attention without seeming "crazy", but I have yet to find that as truthful. And so, this is a kind of dilemma for me. I can tone it back until perhaps it seems more reasonable to readers. However, if I tell the truth as I know it, then it is hard to imagine, much less to accept. For me, it was a COMPLETELY new realization that I am sharing with you here, one that is painful to recall, much less to endure.

For example, the following question is me, mimicking your possible response: "You mean to tell me that life itself, everything we know, is simply a construct, all of it nothing but a form of entertainment?" And, my answer to you seems to be, "Yes, something like that." There is no "suchness" or inner center (no "bone" or skeleton) to life, which is why so much is made of "suchness" by folks who wish there were. Or, this "awareness" defines the concept of "emptiness," yet with a new twist.

I try my best to make what I experience fit into something you and I know from past experiences, but when I do, it's not what I experienced. So, as they say, "Color me crazy." Well, of course, making me (and the experience I describe here) unique or simply an anomaly by Michael Erlewine works to sideline my thoughts. LOL. I don't believe what I experienced is unique or can be blamed on a medical event. There is no convenient misdirection to this, IMO.

However, when I tell you that this life, the whole thing (lock, stock, and barrel) is a construct, a dream we are having, one in which we are deeply, deeply immersed in, then (so it seems) such a thought beggars' credulity. We are not so much immersed in it (a duality); rather, we are also creating with it – a co-creator. And what is the hardest point in this fog of imagination to take? That would be the idea that the dharma itself is also part of a dream we are having. That's the line, on the other side of which, is nothing at all, at least that I had ever seen mentioned.

If realization (and our eventual enlightenment itself) is our goal, as so many of our dharma prayers request, and then, when we eventually become enlightened, we choose to remain in Samsara (as Bodhisattvas) helping others until every last sentient being is also enlightened... THEN, it seems that this same process of "realization" (by all other sentient beings in the innumerable worlds they are each in) is NOT going to cease for innumerable kalpas, which is a very, very long time (if not an infinite process itself), then... practically speaking, this seemingly-infinite process lasts virtually forever. And this is true, whether Samsaric beings are attached (and unrealized) or as fully-realized beings in Nirvana. There is just one ball of wax and all sentient beings, realized or not, are in it. The co-emergence of Samsara and Nirvana is clearly stated in the teachings. There is nothing beyond that, as I read the texts.

And why use the term "sentient Beings," if there is no permanent "being" anyway, but only a being that is, at best, "becoming," but yet never fully "is" or will be? So, we "beings," whether in Samsara or Nirvana, have no permanent existence, but instead are part of one enclosed and constructed dream we all share. What is beyond that? And the answer has to be: nothing we know (or could know of) at all. Nothing whatsoever.

I am familiar with hallucinogens, from LSD, Mescaline (and the like), back in my youth. While drugs, in general (pot, speed, opium, etc.), had little point for me, LSD revealed the nature of the mind itself, IMO, if only partially – a kind of patchwork quilt. We can't expect the truth of the dharma (let's say the true nature of the mind) to be something like a stone that like the scientists, we can stand on – some kind of "rock bottom." There is no rock bottom. It's all in flux. Or, as the dharma teachings clearly say: it is all an illusion that we find credible in its emptiness.

The nature of the mind is that there is no permanent self-existing soul, but rather a series of karmic threads or strands that, woven together, make up the rope of what we call life and rebirth, strand on strand, bound together, extending lives until the karmic traces of each are exhausted.

And so, here we are in an illusionary state, one that comprises Samsara AND Nirvana. There is nothing said to be outside or beyond Samsara and Nirvana. These two are connate, co-emergent, and function like the reciprocal of one another. These two are one process, the sum total of our awareness, what we can be aware of. That's what the pith teachings point out and there is nothing beyond that to be found.

The seriousness of dharma, the solemnity, dignity, and sheer beauty and power of it... came from where? Why does the dharma have any more substance or depth to it than does the mind itself? Is not the dharma as much a part of an illusion (or lack thereof) as the mind itself? The dharma is the path to enlightenment, but that path has no more permanent substance than the enlightenment itself that it leads us to

In other words, this whole realm or sphere of Samsara and Nirvana has one nature and one substance (or the lack thereof). This has to be why the Zen Masters have such a great sense of humor. They laugh a lot. If this is all true, I can see why.

I have some other questions, but for another time. I would appreciate anyone able to read this far weighing in here and risking your opinion of the above. You can always private-message me.

RENDING THE VEIL

October 26, 2019

Just as my computer hunts for WI-FI, these days I find myself hunting for the words to lay my mind to rest. Words, which used to most often work, now don't cut it. I'm not exactly sure why. No sooner found, then lost, words these days expire and evaporate; their freshness (like sand through my fingers) is no longer fresh.

I realize that it is not so much that the words don't work as that I am restless, unable to be satisfied where I used to find rest. Thus, I wander on from place to place in the mind like a plane with nowhere to land.

What used to work fine now comes up short and my best guess is that I have lost faith and confidence in the security of the obvious. I now pop out of where I used to be able to rest, and find myself turning elsewhere, like turning around, or more probably feel a sense that there is no resting, like the old song:

"I ran to the rock to hide my face,
The rock cried out, "No resting place!"
The rock cried out, "I'm burning too!"
"And want to go to heaven,
The same as you."

Over the years, I have found that this particular state of mind is encountered when any shock to the system takes place and I have had a couple in the last few months. I can't get back into what no longer satisfies or holds my attention. I am free-floating, like a hummingbird that cannot land, but (although very tired) has to find the strength to fly on rather than rest.

This usually goes away after a while, but this time, the shock came with a realization or two, and realizations have nowhere to go but here and now. Realizations never reach our past. They are permanently etched or imprinted into our consciousness and manage to block access to the more distant past and beyond. It's as if time is now measured from the event of the realization rather than some earlier time.

To reverse course and head exactly in the other way seems beyond my strength, but I keep coming up against that option repeatedly. It would be like turning an ocean liner around. Is that but my seeing (or sensing) the illusory nature of appearances? Is Samsara no longer a place where I can lose myself and just get some rest and entertainment?

I'm sure this is only temporary and that I will soon find my way back into the ignorance of matter as I always have. Or, is this the avalanche that, roaring down the mountain of Samsara, marks the breakup of appearances and the thinning of the veil and vale of illusion?

I can't say, but I can say it is difficult to fit myself back into what I popped out of. We can't put the toothpaste back in the tube.

PITH ADVICE

October 27, 2019

I would like to write a long essay trying to find words for the dharma. Instead, I will share four slogans by the great Mahasiddha Tilopa that strike to the heart. I hold them close to me each day.

Trying to feel comfortable in the moment means feeling “right” with whatever presents itself, good or bad. Feeling out-of-sorts (and beside ourselves) can also feel right if we accept it exactly as it is. In my life, some of the most sacred and practical dharma slogans are these “words of advice” from the peerless Mahasiddha Tilopa:

DON'T PROLONG THE PAST. It's no help trying to rejigger the past, which is an ever-moving target and declining asset. Just be aware and let it pass.

DON'T INVITE THE FUTURE. Don't wait for something better or more comfortable to come along. Accept what is here right now, in this moment. We can't change what we refuse to accept unconditionally.

DON'T ALTER THE PRESENT. Don't fiddle with the present, trying to get comfortable. Rest in the present moment exactly as it is, warts, and all.

RELAX, AS IT IS. A kind of summary. Rest in the immediacy of the present, exactly as it is each moment.

This advice, fully unpacked, is probably the best and most potent dharma teaching I have ever taken to heart – pointing out that I adjust to what IS rather than wait for sunny weather to come along.

“TURNING AND TURNING IN THE WIDENING GYRE”

October 29, 2019

The above line is from a poem by W.B. Yeats. The text that follows is too convoluted to ask all but hardliners to read, but it might interest those who can follow the relation of our being ensconced in matter/entertainment (Samsara) at the expense of the awareness of that fact (Realization). We are habitually myopic in this regard.

That being said, I have to confess that I am (and have been for some time) actively exploring the realm of non-entertainment while sitting here safely in my Samsaric cocoon of entertainment, so to speak. I'm laying back in the cush of my habitual entertainments (where I have always been), thinking about how I can cut back on endlessly entertaining myself and break that habit. This is easier said than done because it means learning to live with some tougher love. LOL. Because of this difficulty, this has (so far) been a kind of a non-starter, IMO. I hate to leave the comfort of my habits, yet I realize that I have had it (until recently) all backward. I'm looking at the problem, but have not taken the leap away from it. I have to do better than I have so far.

The best excuse I can come up with is the old slogan “One Step at a Time,” or something like that. I guess I should be happy that I am (at last) aware of the problem, even if I don't (or can't stand) to have a working solution. My excuse, which is getting old already, is that I'm still taking it all in, while I figure out a path forward that is viable. Unfortunately, “viable” smacks of the same old entertainment I admit that I am addicted to, so we have here a “Catch-22.”

The truth is that I find doing without constant entertainment, like the wings of Icarus, is taking me too close to the sun to fly. And I can't seem to find a way to just turn away and cold-turkey all this habitual comfort, at least as it stands now. At the same time, I grasp the irony of cuddling up to entertainment while I figure out how to avoid it. It's like looking around for my eyeglasses when I'm wearing them. It seems

that I need some entertainment from which to see and contemplate the non-entertainment of realization. It's like reading a book about what I already am experiencing, rather than just looking around. In other words, it's a tough call for me to contemplate giving up Samsara. It's such a comforting bad habit. LOL.

My way of treading water (and not backsliding) is to do my best to remain aware of this present moment. It's about all I can do on short notice, and it always seems that I'm on short notice due to the sheer immediacy of the present moment. There IS such a thing as too many irons in the fire. And it's a little like the finale at the fireworks, small bombs going off all around me. At the very least, I can feel that something is happening within that may eventually change me, but it is going to be a long climb. As of now, I can barely move on this.

And I remind myself that at this point I am only aware of the "Awareness" that comes from not being lost in Samsaric entertainment, and I'm not yet one with that Awareness, per se. That's just another way of saying that I am one step removed from the reality and that this one step seems like a bridge too far for me to cross at this time. It seems, that despite lip service to the contrary, I hate to give up the safety and habits of Samsara.

It's like that I can only be aware of that "Awareness" from a distance and with my being shielded by entertainment. I realize that Samsara is not like a layer or veneer over truth (or dharma), but more like the crystal that forms in the middle of a saturated salt or sugar solution. Samsara has as solid a center as exists.

Can you see the diabolical factor in all this? It's like having your cake and eating it too, only in this case I need the haptics of entertainment to even think about doing without the entertainment – a circular argument. I sure don't want to remain on this merry-go-round for long. It's embarrassing, if nothing else, which comment itself is embarrassing, like a hall of mirrors. LOL. Samara is WAY stronger than I ever thought it was.

I'm sure that all of this sounds so conceptual, yet the reality is quite immediate and on the spot. That's the sign that it's a realization. Take away the perks of entertainment and I'm vulnerable, at a total loss. And the required loss is simply the entertainment itself. However, I'm still figuring out how to give it up. I fear I don't want to. It reminds me of those old Zen-like images of standing with one foot on the ground and the other stepping off into empty space. For me, this dilemma is like a physical koan.

CYCLES OR CIRCLES, CENTERS, AND CIRCULATION

October 30, 2019

[I got a request from a friend to send him a copy of an article on Deep Space astrology that I wrote back in the 1970s. I include it here to help show that astrology, which is cultural astronomy, offers food for thought and is not just entertainment.]

I have been working with the structure of deep-space for nearly 50 years. My good friend Charles Jayne and I were about the only people I am aware of who were interested in the subject back in the '70s. Of course, there was Theodor Landscheidt, whose every word on the subject is worth reading.

Many astrologers have asked me what is the meaning of points like the galactic and supergalactic centers. Of course, I could rattle off their coordinates and a few other particulars. But if you are actually interested in understanding the nature of cosmic structure from an astrological point of view, see if you can get through the following. Take it slow and think it through.

A central idea for understanding recent cosmic research is the use and value of various astrological coordinate systems (geocentric, heliocentric, galactic, supergalactic, etc) as best representing the different levels of our experience. Each system has a center and the word CENTER can mean both the same and yet something different to individuals. Take your own center, for example.

The center about which our life appears to revolve is sacred to us in its ability to reveal or communicate to us the essence or identity of ourselves. The center for each of us always refers inward to our essence, and yet the center or lifeline of one individual may be a new car at one point in his life, a new wife/husband, or a child at another point. At each point, the "meaning" of center is inviolate, although the outward form of

what we take for our lifeline to the center constantly is changing.

The different kinds of center may be conveniently expressed in the various coordinate systems of astronomy and their meanings as defined by astrology, which basically is cultural astronomy. The origin or center chosen should most correspond to the center of gravity, the "kind" of question or inquiry or level being considered. Thus, for a study of the personal differences, circumstances, and the specific terms of our life, we traditionally use the horizon coordinate system in relation to the zodiac with its familiar Midheaven, Ascendant, Houses, etc.

Studies of the general terms of mankind (Mundane Astrology) involve consideration from the center of the earth or geocentric astrology. This is traditional. For a study of the motion and relation of the bodies in our Solar System considered as a functioning whole, the Heliocentric Ecliptic System with the origin at the sun center would be appropriate. In this coordinate system, we could examine the archetypes of life and consciousness, and in general questions traditionally referred to religion, perhaps more recently also considered by some as psychological. As for me, I call the heliocentric chart, the Dharma Chart.

In like manner, galactocentric and super galactocentric coordinates are appropriate for dynamical studies of the larger or more cosmic structure of our reality. For each of us, there are moments and even days when our awareness is truly of or in synch with cosmic dimensions.

There are different levels of truth or reality. What is essential as the kernel of truth to one may appear to another as one example among many of a larger ordering or structure. When we each refer to our center, around which we revolve, we share in the idea of centers and yet different ones among us revolve around or consider what is central or essential differently. We can agree on that. All reference to different centers simply points out the lack of Identity or that these seemingly different levels or centers (in fact) form a continuum -- a continuing experience or identification. The following may help clarify this:

All of these larger systems such as the solar system, galaxy, and so forth include us within their reaches like a mother holds a child within her womb. We are the children and particular representatives of the earth, and the solar system, but ALSO of the galaxy and beyond. Their nature, identity, and self is identical with our own. In fact, we have come through this "outer space" through all the time there is and has been to BE HERE NOW: ourselves.

Our day-to-day consciousness continually circulates from more particular awareness to more "cosmic" awareness and back again. We do this all the time. From an astrological perspective, the exercise of various astrological coordinate systems, like exercising our muscles, can serve to remind us that ALL reference to centers (in fact, all referral) indicates an attempt to achieve circulation (circle or cycle) of identity -- to RE-MEMBER, put back together, or remind ourselves of who we already are and have always been.

ALL IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION

In other words: all discovery is self discovery and what we call "identification" is in fact circulation! Cosmic events and structure are a very consistent and most stable reference frame through which to come to know ourselves. The use of these inclusive meta-coordinate systems is not the symbolic process some suggest, but the symbol in fact is real. We are not working with analogies or, if we are, the analogy is complete down to the specific example through which we discover the virtual process itself -- our Life.

Life, "God, or Spirit is no beggar, creating a symbolically true but specifically disappointing creation, such that we should have to "touch up" this creation or somehow make the ends meet. The ends already meet! It is we who will change first our attitude and then gradually our approach to this creation, this Samsara.

And these changes in attitude on our part, this reorientation in approach to what is unchanging or everlasting in life, represent the specific areas where the exercise and use of various astronomical coordinate systems of understanding our life become important to present day astrologers. To discover our own orientation and inclination -- that we are

already perfect representatives of all space and all time, acting out in detail through our persons events of a so called "cosmic" nature that occur in space at remote distance and times. How could that be?

Supernovae and black holes are not simply some ever-distant cataclysmic events, but are (rather) part of our own everyday experience acted out in fact by persons within the galaxy of our own experience. The goal of our study and our inquiry into astrology is to re-present and re-veal the nature of ourselves and our intimate circulation, connection, and identity in the heart of the earth, heart of the Sun, heart of the Galaxy, heart of the Supergalaxy, etc.

In a word, that ALL IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION (a continuing or circle) and all Inquiry, questioning, and search can but end in the discovery of our Self whether "writ small" in the corners of our personal struggle or "writ large" across the very heavens itself. Again: all self-discovery, all Identification is re-discovery and simple CIRCULATION.

LOCAL ATTRACTION

As we look into the Sun during the course of a year and describe the qualities of those who are born in the various signs, we succeed in defining NOT the position of the sun, but rather that of the earth in relation to the sun. As astrologers, this should be second nature to us. This illustrates an important axiom:

All inquiry into greater centers does not reveal the nature of that center (in itself), but rather reveals our relationship to that center. This is the alchemy of identity.

In other words, centers serve to mirror or reflect. Their nature is to reveal to us not THEIR intrinsic nature, but our own. REVELATION of any kind is the sign of communication with greater centers or planes -- revelation, not of some far-off distant entity or "God," but always revelation of ourselves and the spirit in us.

In a discussion as to the qualities of the centers of the galaxy and super galaxy, we can understand that inquiry into the direction of the Sun will reveal the nature of the earth; inquiry into the nature of the galaxy will serve to reveal the nature of our own Sun; and inquiry into the Super Galaxy will serve to

reveal the nature of our galaxy. The idea presented here is that it is the very nature of Higher Centers to reflect and respond to more particular or local centers. That could be us.

At this point, another very significant axiom emerges:

The experience of physical attraction (traction = to draw across or towards) or gravity is primarily a LOCAL phenomenon. For instance, we directly respond to the attraction we call gravity of the center of the earth. Our earth responds to the center of the Sun, the Sun to the Galaxy, and so forth. Yet as individuals, we are not aware of the pull of the Sun on the entire earth, or again:

ATTRACTION OR GRAVITY IS A SIGN OF A LOCAL PHENOMENON

Think about it.

This perhaps will make more sense in our practical affairs if we put it this way: a sign of our communication with higher or "vaster" centers (or Spirit or "God") is not a physical gravity (graviness) or attraction, but always an ENLIGHTENMENT, releasing, and accepting of the nature of the particular terms (terminals) of OUR existence. Knowledge of so-called inner-planes exhibits itself to us through a process of reflection or mirroring of our self rather than through the presentation to us of something new or somehow "Other." "Mirroring" means we see our essential nature, the traditional word is "reflection." When we ourselves begin to reflect, our life changes. And by "Reflect," don't think about "thinking," but rather about mirroring – reflection.

In other words, higher-centers mirror or reveal to us (reflect our own self) and do not exhibit in themselves a greater intrinsic attractiveness or gravity than we already have. To make this more obvious, we each meet in life individuals who have a great impact on us. Following the above rule, those to whom we feel a great attraction toward and who hold great power over us are only a LOCAL phenomenon; they are not really teachers for us. TRUE teachers affect us with their presence by making us realize our own attractiveness and essential nature, not theirs. Please: you need to consider and think about this.

In other words, inquiry into real centers reveal to us our own essential sense of attractiveness. In fact, it is the nature of higher-centers to be non-material or non-physical, by definition. Our inquiry into this realm is limited only by our fear of and reluctance to see our self in their mirror, and seeing through the back of the mirror has always been a sign of Initiation. To sum this up: Greater centers mirror or reflect our own self and nature, revealing to us our essential identity as already a part of a larger whole, and enlightening us of (or from) our "grave-ness" and the burden of an apparent loneliness or separation from that whole. This is key!

With this idea in mind, let us resume our investigation as to the nature of the Galactic Center (26 degrees Sagittarius) and Supergalactic (1 degrees Libra) centers, etc. We can expect the Galactic Center to exercise considerably greater physical attraction than that of the local Super Galactic center. In fact, one of the identifying features of the galactic center (GC) at work, as revealed in chart analysis (in research by Charles Harvey, Reinhold Ebertin, and many others) is a certain "macho-like" quality, a sense of strength and power perhaps typified in the zeal and self-righteousness of certain extreme religious factions. Or, more simply: the tendency in the qualities of Sagittarius and Capricorn of sternness and physical action or "power." Look for it.

Another way to put this is the great ability and power of the GC as represented (when strongly aspected) in the natal chart to move and attract others. We find this feature in the charts of great political and religious leaders who possess the power to move nations to action. The GC figures in these charts in the traditional astrological ways -- by conjunctions and other aspects to the galactic center.

We may contrast this "macho-like" quality found in the GC to the qualities that indicate the presence of Super Galactic Center (SGC) in natal charts. Here we look to the traditional qualities of Virgo and Libra -- that of care, service, reflection, and love. Perhaps the best representative of the Supergalactic nature occurs in Eastern Buddhism in the idea of compassion and especially in the beloved figure of the Bodhisattva, a being who is literally devoted to the service of

all life until ignorance vanishes in every one in complete realization. Bodhisattvas are awake.

We do not find the SGC as physically powerful and moving as we do the GC. In the west, the traditional god figures are more fierce and full of the "fire and brimstone" approach than of the endless care and service as typified in some of the eastern traditions.

In fact, only in these times we are now living are the "servile" qualities associated with Virgo sun-sign coming to be appreciated as a power in themselves. In other words, the SGC represents a non-material or essentially a passive power rather than the more active kind of power as seen in the galactic center Idea.

In the Bible it repeatedly says "This came to pass; that came to pass" The passive genius, not active in the "doing of things," but rather is active in the "undoing of things" that is: helping things to pass from this world. This is a non-material or spiritual task and genius equally to be valued along with the more active one-who-does-things or brings-things-to-be in this world. We may see these two archetypes at work in the world, and they may be conveniently studied in their local representatives: the Galactic and Super Galactic centers and planes.

WE ARE "SO INCLINED"

"As Above, So Below ... but After another Manner," familiar as an occult maxim, might be the perfect description of what is involved in the various astrological coordinate systems and their transformations.

It is easy to communicate the concept of "wheels within wheels" (larger systems containing within them smaller systems), and this has resulted in the popular idea of the chakras or planes (planets) of our experience and self as an ascending hierarchy of levels, each inclusive of the preceding level. What is NOT generally appreciated, but becomes increasingly clear when we examine the actual structure of the various cosmic systems, is not only the idea of larger systems embracing the small systems within them (levels), but that each larger system is also differently INCLINED to the preceding one. It should be understood that aside from

the often-tedious mathematics involved in coordinate transformations, there is an accompanying philosophical or psychological adjustment to be made (and empowerment), a shift in viewpoint, a change in the approach or attitude to the subject. This transformation of coordinates merits our attention.

And so, there is not only an expansion in perspective when we move to a larger coordinate system, but also a reordering of our sense of direction. This is what makes it so difficult for an individual to see beyond their present dimension and get a feel for what is perhaps his or her inevitable future. There exists what are termed "event horizons," beyond which we cannot understand how life can go on. An example of some event horizons: puberty, marriage, child birth, and death, to name a few of the classics. We cannot see beyond our present sphere into what our future might be like in these other dimensions because we cannot help but conceive of these events in terms of our present line of thought - linear. To pass through these event horizons involves total change and that means reorientation. We do not watch our own change, for we are what is in fact in transition or change. "WE" are changing.

The idea presented here should be obvious: the crossing of an event horizon involves simple reorientation on our part, call it a change of approach, view, or attitude. The new dimension or sphere we enter turns out (after our adjustment or change) to reveal our previous or past life in new light. We see our old behavior and opinions differently with our new approach to life. It is very difficult to communicate the difference to one who has not yet had that experience. This is called "initiation." Or as my first teacher used to spell it "In It I Ate."

What has changed perhaps most is our INCLINATION. We do not want the same things we did want or want them in a different manner. We are no longer "inclined" such that we feel the way we used to. Our life now revolves around a different center than before -- a wife or child, for instance.

Many of these principles are graphically revealed through the study and exercise of the various astronomical/astrological coordinate systems. For instance: what appears in one

system as isolated and singular entities that are apparently unconnected, when viewed in the perspective of another system, define the basic shape of the system itself. How often in our lives does some singularity appear as if an “other” and foreign entity, but later, when we have experienced several of this type, they are recognized as representatives of a kind of group at first unfamiliar (and even scary) to us. This same event becomes recognizable to us and loses its threatening quality.

I cannot (apparently) recommend strongly enough the exercise of these various ways or systems for understanding our universe to astrologers practicing today. Here is a list of some of the systems. When you study a coordinate system like the heliocentric coordinate system or the equatorial coordinate system, keep in mind that these systems are more than just numbers. They offer an insight into different areas of life and each can be charted astrological and interpreted. It is amazing that we can do this!

COSMIC SYSTEMS AND THEIR CENTERS – A List

1. Earth/Moon System
2. SOLAR SYSTEM center: sun
3. LOCAL SYSTEM (Gould's Belt) This is a group of some 10.8 stars of which the sun is a member. The Local System, originally thought to be a minute galaxy embedded with the Milky Way, is considered to be an ellipsoid of 700x200 parsecs with the long axis parallel to the New Galactic Longitudes 160 deg/340 and located in the Orion-Cygnus spiral arm. The centroid of the Local System is in Virgo at about 15 degrees 25' minutes, with nodes to the Ecliptic at 10 deg 22' of Sagittarius (North node) and Gemini. The system is inclined to the ecliptic by about 66 degrees. Note – positions are of the Epoch 1950.0.
4. LOCAL GALAXY...The Milky Way. Estimated to contain 10 to the 11th stars, The galaxy is a disc-like structure with a diameter of some 30,000 parsecs, a central ellipsoidal nucleus of about 4000 parsecs, and an average disc thickness of several hundred parsecs. The nodes and center (about 26-degree of Sagittarius) in relation to the ecliptic are

given elsewhere. The sun is located some 10,000 parsecs from the galactic center.

5. LOCAL GROUP OF GALAXIES The local group includes about a score of member galaxies...the largest of which is the Andromeda galaxy (M 31). Our galaxy (Milky way) and M-31 revolve around a common center of mass roughly in the direction of 27-degree in the Sign Aries.

6. LOCAL SUPERGALAXY. Our galaxy is part of a vast flattened super system of galaxies some 40 megaparsecs in diameter, with the center (1 degrees of Libra) in the great Virgo Cluster some 12-16 megaparsecs from our sun.

This article just touches upon the value of astrology as a form of cultural astronomy. I published an entire book ("Astrophysical Directions" on these topics in 1976, the result of years of research on my part into astrophysics. That book is available as a free e-book at this link.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-boo.../The-Astrology-of-Space.pdf>

MOTHER AND CHILD REUNION

October 30, 2019

I have been told that my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, once remarked that after the death of his guru, His Holiness the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje), that His Holiness was much more accessible to him. Not sure what that means, yet hearing about this was meaningful to me.

And I had a good thought as well.

Finally, weeks after the passing of my dharma teacher of the last 36 years, something moved inside me and a realization came into my mind.

Of late, my mind had been twisting in the wind. Little has interested me. And the good insight that came this morning was very simple and went through me like a lightning! Tears just flowed from my eyes.

IMO, as is appropriate with the traditional guru/disciple bond, my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, was for me like the Buddha himself, as far as I am concerned. And as for that glad thought that I had:

It was very early this morning and I was just sitting down on my meditation cushion after filling the offering bowls. I had opened my pecha-holder and was ready to begin my morning practice, when I had this very simple realization.

Over the years, I have read the spiritual biographies (Namtars) of many great dharma teachers that have lived in centuries past and taught their students. As the accounts go, most of these great teachers have succeeded in introducing their disciples to the true nature of the mind, Recognition. That's all that any Root Guru can do. The rest is up to us.

Tears just began to flow as I realized how lucky I have been to have Rinpoche as a dharma teacher and that, more than likely, Rinpoche has already seeded his students (including me) with all that we need to steer ourselves toward enlightenment. That Rinpoche is one of these great teachers of yore, I have no doubt.

And I realized that this has already happened and is still happening to all who came to know him or ever heard his name. I'm one of those most fortunate students (one of many) who have had the good karma to meet Rinpoche (face-to-face) in this life and who have received from him what blessings we can absorb toward our own eventual enlightenment. I am grateful beyond words.

Rinpoche first came to me in a dream. Margaret had a similar dream. When we woke up from that dream, Margaret and I (and our kids, tooth brushes in hand) jumped in the car and drove 180 miles to where Rinpoche was. From the very first moment of seeing Rinpoche and meeting him, I, who was like a wild Mustang, unteachable and untrainable, was tamed by his unconditional acceptance. That was it!

While I have no idea how many lifetimes it will take, I have no doubt as to the eventual outcome. With that thought this morning, the realization overcame me that my karma was enough so that I met Rinpoche in this very life and spent some 36 years with him as my teacher. I was one of those disciples! Margaret, who feels the same way, remarked that she has spent more of her life with Rinpoche guiding her than with her own mother and father.

That same early morning (this morning!) I also had a dream that my father appeared before me, looked right at me, and smiled. I have never had such a dream, so these two events must be related. I have been wondering when this "kind" of event following Rinpoche's passing would arise, and here it is.

THE ONE IN THE TWO

October 31, 2019

[First snow, sloppy and wet, but there it is. And thus, begins the long winter of being shut up in a box until spring. LOL.]

As long as we feel that we are alone against the world, very little dharma progress is possible, IMO. This is what is called relative truth, the dualistic situation of the two that are not (and have never been) one. It seems that almost every young person feels separated, insular, isolated and alone in a world that yet knows them not, the “boy in the bubble” syndrome, keeping the outside world at bay so the world inside can survive.

That separating bubble, like the sac when a mother’s water breaks, has to be opened, so that, spiritually, the dewdrop can slip into the shining sea. This article is about that removal of that veil, which is also the heart of dharma.

As long as we are struggling against a world outside of ourselves, we are locked in that struggle. The moment that we realize that what we see as “other” is but our own hopes and fears projected on the movie screen of the outside world, that link of separateness is broken and the two are first seen as one. That is an essential event that has to happen before dharma practice is very effective.

The “Self” and “Other” are the archetypes of dualistic thinking, the relative mind. The Self is distinct and separate from the world that stands in opposition to it, much like the old Kipling poem that reads “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”

I certainly felt this way as a young adult; I was an island lost in the storm of the outside world. To be a little more graphic about this state, I was struggling to grow up, in my early twenties, and spending a lot of my energy trying not to be intimidated and cowed by the harshness and indifference of the outside world. I wrote poems like this:

“Ah,
Who could let such a bargain pass,

As this poor century will allow.
On coming in, I'm asked to leave,
And, asked to leave, I bow."

The dichotomy of me and the outside world dominated my situation, the sheer duality of it, leaving me little time for anything else. It had always been this way since I was a small child, that there was me, myself, and I on the one hand and a threatening world of "Others" on the outside.

I wonder why, LOL. Could it be that in grade school, children like I was then, had air drills, and we had to cower under our desks, lest we be annihilated by soviet atom-bombs from the cold war. And to make it worse, the effects of modern psychology (then, in its heyday) were to paint us with labels like paranoid, schizophrenic, manic-depressive and on down the line. It's no wonder that I sought to shield myself from the outside world. If nothing else, there was something inside me that I felt I had to offer (and was protecting) that was NOT whatever that outside world was all about.

And I was in lockstep with this duality of me here and the "Other" out there. Given this dualistic struggle, it's a wonder I could get anything done at all. I was like a country at war with itself. And this state of mind would have continued (as it always had), if I had not happened to take a dose of LSD in May of 1964. Trust me, that was a desperate act because the rumors as to the effect of LSD were dire, mostly that it was capable of permanently altering our mind forever (and not in a good way). For me to dare to take LSD showed me how alienated I was to my life situation. IMO, the 1950s were, for me, like being encased in concrete. There was no wiggle room for creativity. It was all crewcut and white suede shoes.

And certainly, acid did alter my mind forever, LOL. However, the alteration, instead of being something chemical or physical that harmed me, was an alteration as to how I viewed the world. What LSD did do was to break down the separation between me and the outside world, so that I realized ("Realized" in the true dharma sense!) that much of what I saw and feared in the outside world were my own projections projected on the silver-screen of the world outside me, a movie which I had falling into watching like a deer in the headlights with rapt attention.

And then, in one momentous night, that vicious duality was shattered, as I realized that my world was in fact One and not Two, and that in fact my insides were plastered like billboards on the wall of the outside world. Although I did not know it then, such a realization is exactly (in general) what the goal of the pointing-out instructions are in Vajrayana Buddhism, i.e. LSD was pointing out the actual nature of the mind and how it works, and I was realizing it for the first time.

I know, folks do not like me saying anything positive about drugs and I apologize, but the truth trumps convention and I have to tell it like it was, IMO.

And, although it was perhaps sloppy and raw, once that separating wall between myself and the “Other” broke down and was removed, I realized (and for the first time) that I was watching my own horror movie, so to speak, and with that, the spell that had held me in lock step all my life was broken forever. Yes, it took me a long while to put the pieces together (like a jigsaw puzzle) from that night, but I was free from being spellbound by the duality of the mind. Instead, I finally saw the unity of it all, that much of what I feared were my own fears projected on the outside world that I then watched and reacted to. And the upside of that is that I also realized there was wiggle room for me to do something about my situation. That had never occurred before to me, that I had any say in the matter of my own life.

And while it perhaps lacked the precision and elegance of the Vajrayana tradition that I learned about decades later, nevertheless, on that night in May of 1964 I discovered the basic nature of my own mind, such that the TWO were seen by me as ONE, and, indeed, the dewdrop finally slipped into the shining sea. That happened back then in a single night, but took decades to sort out.

This is what the Recognition of true nature of the mind is all about, at least at heart, the realization that relative truth (subject and object) is, as they say, an ass-backward way of looking at life. When, at Recognition, we realize fully (actually) that it is not we against the other-world out there, but that we are already (and have always been) indissolubly one, at that same instant, we also realize that our situation is totally workable and that we, just as we are (warts and all) can

ourselves work it. We have everything we need at hand. This is the ground for liberation, plain and simple.

Well, since hindsight is 20/20, I now see that I recognized that actual nature of the mind and how it really works way back then, but it took decades for me to sort it all out, to expand and extend my realization. And it was not until I came to work with my Tibetan teacher that the confusions I had from that early Recognition were smoothed out and that a more complete Recognition was possible.

Nevertheless, the heart of Recognition as to how the mind works, was revealed on that night in May of 1964, which freed me forever from duality and introduced me to what is called non-dual or the Absolute Truth as to the nature of the mind. It is all one and not two. That realization made changing myself and my situation possible.

The difference between my realization in 1964 and my later introduction to the nature of the mind by my dharma teacher, is that I needed the help of an outside person to help me let go of the stickiness of the duality that remained from my realization. Duality is like the image of a tar baby, where the more you touch the tar, the more stuck you are. That is the danger of not having an authentic dharma teacher to guide us: we can't unstick ourselves.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you run out and take LSD, because the dharmic way to achieve this is much cleaner and easier than the decades I had to spend before I could unstick myself from the stickiness of my own duality, if that makes sense.

However, acid did amount to an authentic realization, meaning I never, ever, ever forgot one iota of that realization, even today; however, the problem was that the preciousness of that realization itself became something I could not let go of, thus the stickiness that I describe that is almost impossible to get away from. An analogy would be that if a newborn infant were to take their first breath and try to hold and hang on to it, the doctor has to spank the baby until it lets go of that breath, takes another, and learns to breathe.

That realization was so important, so life giving to me that it was all I could think of and my mind would go back to that

moment of realization rather than just move on. That is, IMO, the danger of having these spiritual experiences and why my dharma teacher used to say to me, every time I told him of a spiritual experience I had had, to not think anything of it, but to just keep practicing and moving forward. Stay away from that tar baby.

Now, my 1964 acid experience was also a realization that separated my life forever into a "Before" and an "After." And it took a long time before I could find the dharma training needed to get out of my tar-baby experience and leave that first realization alone long another to perhaps have another.

The simple takeaway from all this is that if you have a spiritual experience that is profound, but don't still have it two weeks later, then that is NOT a realization, but just a profound experience, which does not demean it. An actual realization shatters the mold of the mind so you are free forever, while an experience, no matter how important to us, remains just one experience that we remember fondly, but no longer have.

It's like trying to get over the top of the hill, so that we are going down the other side. We are either over the top or still climbing toward the top. If we are honest, we know the difference, because with a realization we don't look back because we still have it with us. There is nothing to look back at. That's the way you can tell. If we are thinking fondly of an experience we had, it's not realization. LOL.

THE YIDAM: FINDING OUR MEANS

November 2, 2019

I've been reviewing many things in these last weeks. Something that I have (and continue to have) some worry about is that, if it is true that we live in a degenerate age (as far as the dharma is concerned), what kind of handicap do we need to have in order to achieve Recognition as to the true nature of the mind? A lot depends on the concept of a yidam, a term that, IMO, is not well understood.

In a word, a "yidam" is the particular means we need to accomplish "Recognition" of the nature of the mind. The various sadhanas (practice texts) serve to put us in touch with our yidam, a sort of a guided meditation intensive in text form. Our yidam is, when all is said and done, what at heart we find most sacred. It could be anything, including your precious dharma teacher, various Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, etc. – anything at all that strikes us at the heart, that is heartfelt.

Coming up through dharma training, at first, I used to tell myself that if I had any yidam, it would have to be the great Mahasiddha Tilopa. As I understand it, a yidam is essentially the particular focus or means that actually allows us to recognize the true nature of the mind, whatever means that takes or might be. It could be anything, but it always is something, because it is a "means," the means to an end, and in this case "Recognition" of the actual nature of the mind and how it works.

Over time, I imagined that my yidam was several things, none of which actually ended up being my yidam. LOL. For many years I thought my yidam was a wrathful form of Vajrapani. I even travelled all the way to India to take the empowerment of my yidam from His Eminence, Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche. I had the empowerment for Vajrapani also from my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, completed the practice (formally), the 1,200,000 mantras involved, and was even asked to teach it to a group of students at our monastery.

However, as time passed, I realized that part of why I liked the wrathful Vajrapani was I like the seriousness and

fierceness, and all that, too much. Rinpoche and I laughed about it one year. My true yidam was deeper than just what I thought I liked. When it came right down to it, I would have to say that my yidam was (and this may sound corny) “Mother Nature” herself. And there is a reason.

Ever since I was a young child, stuck living in the country (the only house between two large farms), I had nothing to do but be in nature, not that it was a hardship. I had no choice, so it was essentially choiceless, yet nevertheless, it was my choice and I thrived on it.

And this intense (intent) for nature study lasted all through my childhood and even until my late teens – one track. Well yes, girls appeared along in there somewhere, but I did not know near as much about working with girls as I did with nature, but I was keen to learn. LOL.

So, while it surprised me when Mother Nature turned out to be my yidam, it did not surprise me either. Who or what else was I as close with or knew the most about than I did Mother Nature? No one else.

And so, when one of those life-shocks came along and threw me for a loop, where did I end up for solace? Right back out there in nature, getting reacquainted (after some 40 years or so being absent) with good-old Mother Nature.

So (and this is where I WAS surprised), instead of on my trusty meditation cushion and personal shrine, when it came time for me to realize the actual nature of my mind, it took place out in nature, crawling around just before dawn in the wet grass, soaked to the skin, looking at small critters through very fine lenses and taking photos. As they say, “Who woulda’ thunk it?” Certainly not me. It’s like when one of our dogs, who got pregnant, surprised us by finding some really odd place to have her puppies that we would never have imagined. It was the same for me with Recognition. It was VERY organic. It is so easy to forget that books and concepts are miles away from the reality.

And best (or worst) of all, at the time, I was not even very aware of what was happening, so intent on (and caught up in) the realization was I. In fact, I was not thinking at all. LOL. That’s the point.

And so, in hindsight, what do I feel were the main contributing factors to enabling my introduction to the true nature of the mind, NOT that you will have the same points or have them in the same order?

(1) SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM – I need to be jolted out of my everyday routine. In my case, I had just lost my job and the only way I had to support my family. As a fierce provider by nature, that threw me right out the window. So, we hard cases, need to be punched in the gut by life to get our attention.

(2) SOLITUDE – In my shock, there was no comforting me, and so I ended up outside in the woods and meadows by myself for an entire summer. In fact, I was out in the wet grass, before dawn, watching the sun come up, from late May until it got too cold to be outside in the autumn. When was the last time you watched the sun rise, much less for months in a row? LOL. That should give you a hint.

(3) SOMETHING I KNEW AND LOVED. And, while out there in solitude, I immersed myself in the one thing that, at least early-on as a kid, I loved the most in life, “Mother Nature” and natural beauty, especially little critters and micro-sized worlds as seen through refined lenses. For me, this was just natural. I would spend time carrying earthworms to the grass on the other side of the road, as the fierce sun came up, about to fry them to a crisp.

(4) INTENSE PRACTICE. And, although I did not think about it at the time, I was combining intense focus (literally) with going all-in (so to speak), not just with what I was seeing through the macro lenses, the critters, but with the process of “Seeing” itself. In fact, in the long run, it was this seeing the “Seeing” itself (and becoming one with it), rather than what was seen, that turned the corner and jump-started Mahamudra-style Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

(5) EXTENDED TIME. I was out there, alone in nature, for something like six months. In fact, I was so far into all of this that it took a visit from my dear friend Lama Karma (who has completed two closed 3-year meditation retreats) to point out to me what I was doing and what had happened while I was

doing it. I was too involved in the doing of it to care to analyze it. LOL.

Now, as my favorite poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins, once penned “Suck any sense from that who can.” In other words, I am laying it out as best as I know how to, and it’s totally up to you whether any of the above information is useful in your practice.

My goal in even writing all this is to express that we don’t (and I guess we “can’t”) know how and when Recognition as to the true nature of the mind will occur. The pith texts (repeatedly) say “In the midst of experience, realization can arise.”

I was not expecting it. In fact, it was one of the farthest things from my mind at the time, “Recognition.” I could have cared less, so out there was I. And I had, during that time, stopped even filling my offering bowls or sitting on the cushion of my small shrine. I didn’t care what people thought, and certainly they thought why was I not practicing? Or, the neighbors seeing me along the side of the road in the tall grass with a camera may have wondered if I didn’t work anymore. And so on.

However, I should also point out that prior to this all the preliminary work had been logged, two rounds of Ngondro (dharma boot camp), a number of deity practices done for years, including their reading-transmissions, empowerments, mantras, and so on.

I had received the pointing-out instructions several times, and finally grasped what I had previously missed about the process. And this was followed by several years of intense practice, not just morning and evening sessions, but to the best of my ability, all through the day, as well. In other words, I had done some homework.

However, to repeat myself: at the time of fruition, I was not formally doing any dharma practice whatsoever and not sorry about it either. As mentioned, I could have cared less. Why? Because, I was totally busy realizing something that was all inclusive and beyond any considerations. And that realization included finally knowing just how the mind works and, most amazing, that I could work it, just as I am, warts and all.

And so, my dear friends, my suggestion is to think out-of-the-box. Of course, prepare for Recognition, but don't "prepare" for Recognition, if you follow me. Don't get too bookish. Recognition and your yidam are the most organic and natural part of you there is, where at heart you live. I suggest looking there. Think with your heart!

Ask me questions, if this is too vague.

THE UPSIDE OF BOREDOM

November 2, 2019

[The following is provisional, meaning I am still putting it together and you may have to help tie the ends one to the other. I will be more coherent down the line. It is worth understanding, IMO.]

Recently, I got a good look at what is called “Boredom,” which I imagine is pretty much the same for each of us. “Boredom” is not just doing nothing, but rather is quite something in itself, when realized. This is still forming in my mind, so please bear with me, but here is my take on boredom:

Just as physical pain is a warning sign of danger to our body, so feeling bored is a symptom (and a sign) of spiritual or psychological malaise. Boredom is our psyche’s way or telling us that we are attached and fixated on Samsara and, in those moments of boredom, are feeling denied from our habitual entertainment. When we find ourselves feeling bored, we have been unsuccessful in keeping busy, occupied, losing ourselves in entertainment, or what-have-you, but not usually in the best or healthiest of ways. However, given some understanding, boredom can become a trusted friend.

And, by being bored, I don’t just mean “feeling a little bored,” but rather those moments when we have to choose between sitting there bored (but not tired), as opposed to going and lying down, for example. In other words, we are not actually tired, but we choose to go lie down just to end the boredom, perhaps because we can’t think of anything else to do; we sleep the boredom off, so to speak, like a hangover. If not that, then we quickly find a way back into busyness. Busyness for me is unending, or so it seems.

I should know. I have spent a lifetime, being more than eager to get involved in busyness, lest I be exposed to the excruciating desert of what I used to call boredom, with its total lack of entertainment. Anything, but that emptiness of entertainment. Grade school and high school seemed interminable for me.

When we can't stand the boredom and, instead, must make work or busyness, we are passing up the ONE SIGN or signal we are going to get from our mind that points to true spiritual unrest, the inability to simply be still and rest in the present moment, that is, rest without entertainment. It is as if simple rest is not natural or enjoyable. This is Samsaric.

We put off that rest in favor of the endless distractions of busyness and even make-work to keep our head down and ourselves involved. We refuse (or don't know how) to allow our mind to simply rest in the present and, as Ram Das pointed out, to "Be Here Now."

I have been one of the busiest guys you will ever come across. When I worked as a senior consultant for NBC, if I remember right, my boss said I did what it would take six people to do or something like that. And, it was true. I did. Here on Facebook, many of you know how active I am in doing things, producing things -- endlessly. These things might be good for the community, but there is a reasonable question how that much of it is good for me, personally. LOL.

And all of that time, those many years, I prided myself in the ability to get things done and, for me, the end game (executing things) was my specialty. I was the executioner. LOL.

However, I have learned a little too late (but not exactly too late) that much of my busyness was little more than the avoidance of boredom, which boredom was the refusal to look emptiness in the face and simply rest in that emptiness. Like putting in the last few pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, I now can see the picture that I have painted in this puzzle we call life, and it is a bit of tough love.

My tendency for conclusions and for finishing things, ironically, is not so handy when the conclusion to life begins to appear on the horizon. I'm not so quick to jump to that conclusion. LOL.

What I am pointing at here is my refusal to entertain "no entertainment," to be caught out and away from being involved, from being busy as I usually am. Finding myself with time on my hands, looking around with nothing to do, treading on boredom, finds me unable to just "not do" something and

instead rest in that emptiness that I used to call boredom. It's not!

Of course, I understand that there are many things we do that are worthy of our involvement. And I have done my best to choose what I consider worthy efforts. That is not my point.

Samsara is something we all are involved in to one degree or another. And if we jump in and pull the covers over our head, it is in some strange way comforting to lose ourselves in being busy. I am expert at this. However, thanks to my recent stroke this year, I just happened to realize a different reality.

And in that waking vision in which I have wandered for months, it was clear to me that either I never had looked beyond busyness as a way of life or I could not bring myself to look at what life is beyond simple (and constant) entertainment. And just to bring you onto the same page, what I am calling here entertainment is called (in all dharma texts and books) "fixation" and the attachment that all fixation brings by definition. Therefore, you dharma folks should know exactly what I am pointing to here.

And what was most shocking to me was to be forced to realize that what I always thought was utter boredom was, in fact, a vast Awareness that shines in the firmament of the Mind like the North Star in the night sky. It was so bright that I dared not ever peek at it, much less look at it directly.

And, for some time now, I am (very slowly, mind you) slightly glancing its way and allowing myself to rest in this emptiness of Samsara (boredom) and free from the habitual busyness Samsara demands. It astounds me that this emptiness of entertainment and fixations is 180-degrees opposite to where I have been going (and what I have been doing) all my life up until now. The very thought of turning this ship around boggles my mind, yet I feel it will be done.

NO SPARE CHANGE

November 3, 2019

[Snow on the ground, gray, and cold. What can I say? It's time to get on the elliptical and listen to dharma teachings while I work out on it. For me, so much is in flux just now, that all I have are a few words about change itself, which I am trying to keep in mind.]

It is traditional that the conservative in us resists change and the liberal in us welcomes it. Either way, change happens.

We can accept change or resist it. If we accept it, we change with it as best we can. If we resist change, we find ourselves opposing it, making an "Other" of it, thus separating us from ourselves, so to speak. And like casinos, where the house always wins in the long run, change wins out. Instead, the wise advice is to embrace change, i.e. incorporate and include the present moment and all that happens in it. Identify with it 100%.

Whatever the change happens to be, it is best not to avoid it, but use it; put change to use or at least accept it as a fact, which it is. We can use change, or it will use us. That's the idea, not to allow change to arise as a specter or "Other."

We can stay ahead of change by identifying with it rather than allowing ourselves to be husked off into the past by what is happening. Identification with change (as the fact it is) insures continued circulation.

We are each only in this moment. As Shakespeare's 13th Sonnet says clearly:

"O that you were yourself!
But, love,
You are no longer yours,
Than you now here live."

Or, as a fun poem I wrote years ago states:

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 were or who you will be.

So, who are you?”

All this poem says is that we are a creature of this moment, rather than something in itself. As I used to say to myself: attachments are the glue that holds our Self together. And all that phrase is meant to mean is that we are an interdependent montag

THE THREE INVOLUNTARIES

November 4, 2019

[If you have no (or little) time for formal dharma practice on a cushion and keep neglecting your practice or staining it by delinquency, consider these three effortless practices that depend on involuntary events in life that can be turned into valuable practice time.]

The ability to remember to stop searching the Samsaric mind for involvement (and a place to hide) and just rest in the not-doing of anything, is what I used to think of as boredom – no entertainment. I hated not being busy.

I don't tolerate boredom well, never have. However, armed with my recent inner-realizations, I no longer want to avoid boredom at all costs. Instead, I want to learn to rest in the boredom when it comes up and I experience it directly, and that is quite on point. Boredom, although it first appeared to me as a blind alley is, upon relaxing in it, the gateway to resting in the great Awareness itself.

I have come, instead to realize that, boredom is a clear sign that we stand at the door of realization, yet cannot seem to go beyond. If, every time we find ourselves bored, we just rest in the boredom, that itself is a valuable dharma practice. The pith teachings clearly say to rest on top of our innate Awareness. Boredom is the ring-pass-not and marks the threshold beyond which we will find pure awareness if we can learn to stand it. I can attest to this from my own recent experience. It was a revelation.

However, relaxing and embracing that boredom is anything but simple. Yet, it can be done, degree by degree, becoming familiar with what we have purposely shunned up until now. That boredom opens like a flower and reveals the wisdom inside it.

And so, we have at least three natural gates to realization that we cannot avoid experiencing, the FIRST being any sudden sound or shock to the system, after which there is always a chance we will pop out of the train of our thought (and fixations) and have an opportunity for realization.

And SECOND, a sister to these shocks, are the constant reactions that occur to us throughout each day. Learning to be aware of these reactions (and owning them as our own and then dropping them) offers endless opportunities to replace knee-jerk reactions with appropriate responses and regain all that lost energy from reacting.

And THIRD is what is being described here, to take advantage of every time we feel bored, recognize it as the gateway and entrance to awareness with a capital "A", and then rest in that moment as best we can.

Scheduling and enacting daily dharma practice may or may not work out for us on any given day. However, the three involuntary interruptions described above are already paid for by us with the energy they take to have them. These three happen whether we like it or not. Taking advantage of each of these three, again and again and again, can turn a day with little time for formal dharma practice into one filled with valuable dharma practice.

And so, SHOCKS-TO-THE-SYSTEM, REACTION TONG-LEN, AND UNIVITED-BOREDOM are choice opportunities for meaningful dharma practice each and every day.

Questions?

INTELLECT'S DESIRE

November 5, 2019

[It's not that the intellect is wrong in what it understands, but rather that it does not know what it is talking about. With that said, let's have a little intellectual sidebar. This is not a rant, but it is a going over (intellectually) the path to what is called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind and familiarity with how the mind works. LOL.]

The continued ignorance of a closed-mind is the lock on Samsara that keeps us circling in it. This is ignorance, plain and simple, whether it is life-long ignorance, purposeful ignorance, or both, it is hard to say. The point is that our ignorance (of not looking at the nature of emptiness) is a Catch-22 in which we are stuck, cycling around and around, with no obvious way out. And, as of yet, we have never found the key.

We are lost in a movie of our own projections, one that we are watching like a deer in the headlights, always one step removed from reality. Words are wasted because, as we can see, words alone can't free us. If they could, they would have freed us by now, yet they haven't. LOL.

The dualism innate in Samsara keeps realization at arm's length and always will, by definition. The relative truth of subject and object are separative of one another. That separation of the two, separates, and the duality of the two is painful because it is not the absolute truth. Realizing that the TWO are in fact ONE, their elision, is what non-duality is all about. How to realize that the two are one is the question that dharma is here to solve.

We have libraries of books filled with words and concepts that point out over and over that the one contains the two and, as Sir Edwin Arnold put it, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea," yet intellectualization alone apparently solves nothing if we have not yet slipped into that sea.

As Samsaric beings, endowed with the relative truth of the duality of subject and object, we yearn for the opposite, non-duality, that the two are in fact one. Of course, we can see it

both ways. Yet, here in Samsara, we beings (as a rule) yearn to realize that the two are actually one and not forever just two, which is isolating.

And in dharma, we Samsaric beings are engaged in trying to gain the "Recognition" that the two are one, not as an intellectual understanding, not as an experience that comes and goes, but as a realization of the experience on a permanent basis. Just as we can't snap out of our dualism, once the two are realized as one ("Recognition"), in a similar fashion, we can't revert to seeing the one as two again; however, we can understand how those who have not recognized the nature of the mind might think so, and with that, compassion arises.

"Recognition" as to the true nature of the mind is also what converts Relative Bodhicitta to Absolute Bodhicitta, IMO.

THE FLY WHO WENT TO COLLEGE

November 6, 2019

Well, that's a stretch, but not as far as you think. The Buddhist view of sentient life is that all sentient beings each have consciousness just as humans do, and the same level of consciousness! The only difference between us and them is not in the consciousness itself, but rather in the KIND of body of the animal or creature they inhabit and how it can be animated.

In other words, the dharma view is that any consciousness (like our own) can be born as an animal or a worm, just as we can now be born as a human. And that same consciousness we have now can animate and articulate the body of a fly, a worm, a microbe, and on down the line. Certainly, this is the stuff of science-fiction, yet, according to the Buddhists, it's not.

During the times I have been to Tibet, I can remember watching folks very carefully brushing off mosquitoes from their arms or gently blowing them off, or painstakingly tiptoeing along a path, lest they step on an ant. We don't do this here in America, to say the least.

In the bardo teachings of the dharma, in particular the bardos between death and rebirth, depending on the awareness that we bring to it at the moment at death, we can either take another human rebirth or wander into taking rebirth as another sentient being, an animal or even an insect, like a house fly.

How this happens we won't go into here but suffice it to say that its quite due to our own merits (or lack thereof); we can end up in a higher rebirth, something similar to what we have now, or end up in a lower rebirth. This whole topic is complex, but the takeaway-idea is pretty simple, and I have presented it here.

If we are born into the animal realm (and there are six realms possible), regardless of the kind of body (animal or human), the consciousness we bring to the birth is the same Karma as we have now but looking out through the eyes of an animal or

sentient being. And a given kind or level of animal (sentient being), while being animated by our consciousness, is limited by ability of that animal's vehicle to express itself. It is hard to avoid the idea of a consciousness trapped in the body of a bug, unable to communicate. I don't know about that because I don't know about that. LOL.

So, there you have the general idea. Give it some thought. I had to. It kind of turns rebirth into a kind of crap shoot, one based on our karma. That's the whole point.

ATTACHMENT TO ATTACHMENTS

November 7, 2019

It's like I come up for air, don't know what to do with that air, and dive back into one busyness or another. And I do this until I am exhausted enough to sleep. These times, when I am too tired to be busy, but uncomfortable with doing nothing, are like road signs that I should take to heart.

These are pointers that point out quite clearly where I am at a loss. I can ignore them (and have for years), but if I examine them, they are telltale signs of pain. I am at home in matters where I can be involved and I'm uncomfortable when I am not busy doing something or other.

Those uncomfortable or awkward moments are breadcrumbs that, if followed, help to lead me out of Samsara. I believe that, but still tend to be like a deer in the headlights when these moments happen. At those times, I just need to rest in the moment and not be a hurry to pick up on the first train of thought that comes along or involve myself in some busyness I can find to do.

It's like Uncle Scrooge in his money bin, only instead of money, I have a life full of busyness that I dive and thrive in. Anything, but face the music of emptiness and inaction. And, to make matters worse, I have always been proud of keeping endlessly busy. LOL. However, thanks to the revelations I went through from my stroke, I have begun to see the downside of busyness. And it has all the subtlety of a hammer.

Busyness makes the time go by. It's also a way to feather our Samsaric nest and further lose ourselves in the matters at hand. However, the realization I had in this last year is far from a simple adjustment on my part. It amounts to a complete reversal, like turning a massive ocean liner around in a bathtub or perhaps more like turning a glove completely inside out.

Certainly, I underestimated the strength of Samsara and its hold on me. I was not even close. I tend to think of Zen Buddhists as minimalists, able to pare down activity to the

essentials – spiritual aerodynamics. At the same time, missing the mark by a little or a lot is still missing the mark. It remains unclear to me what we are supposed to do with this Samsara we find ourselves wallowing in other than get out of it by the process of realizing Samsara as Nirvana. That's what the texts say. And that process seems like a one-way hourglass, IMO, very gradual.

And, as I learned the dharma, I mistakenly assumed that our Buddha Nature (underneath) was all gold, overlaid with perhaps a veneer of our obscurations, when the reality is that our obscurations are also totally solid, through and through, just as gold is, and that through some kind of spiritual alchemy, we can eventually realize these solid obscurations as gold. That's a different equation, IMO. We are not just polishing the silver, so to speak.

And so, there not only are no free lunches, but there are EXACTLY no free lunches. And to further muddy the waters, our attachment and fixation to Samsara is nothing more than our attachment to attachment itself, for its own sake. Attachment is not a thing, but a process, a habit. And that "habit" is, well, habitual to the nth degree. We are totally stuck in it, with the only the tiniest of wiggle-room.

And so, realizing Samsara as Nirvana is not like just brushing some snow off our jacket and getting on with it. We have our finger on the scale of keeping Samsara close to us. IMO, it has NEVER even seriously occurred to us to actually remove our attachments because: we are actually ATTACHED to our attachments.

We take joy and have spent our life in the body of our attachments. Attachments are where we are stuck or attached, by definition. Attachments are the glue that holds our Self together as we know it. Start to remove our attachments and our Self literally falls apart.

My point here is to suggest that becoming unattached is not easy or likely. It's an uphill march on an almost vertical climb.

RITUAL MAGIC

November 8, 2019

I was asked recently about ritual magic. Did I do it or know anything about it. Ritual magic is so close and so a part of my life that I had to stop and think. The answer is, yeah, I do ritual magic. Life is filled with rituals and the ones that magically work are, you got it, “ritual magic.” Let me unpack that.

“Trial and error” are the name of the game. Darwin proved that, and we prove it every day in all that we do. If you mean by “ritual magic” drawing great circles on the floor and reciting incantations, I did that too, with little result. LOL. I had all of Aleister Crowley’s works on microfilm, studied it, and came up with nothing. Crowley was one of those remarkable figures (like M.C. Escher and Erik Satie) that I see as bridge figures, almost an archetype that straddles a modern problem and is a typical example of it.

The dharma (and learning it) is, IMO, a perfect laboratory for experimenting with ritual magic. There are scores of practices, mandalas, mantras, and so on that, if practiced correctly, actually bring results. In fact, like all rituals, unless you can practice them perfectly, there is no “magic.”

For me cooking, with its recipes, is a ritual and quite magical at that, yet one I have never mastered. LOL. I am not a magician in the kitchen. Martin Wolf, one of my Facebook friends who used to work with me, is very much a kitchen magician, as I well can remember.

They say that a good definition of “insanity” is (as Einstein put it) performing the same action again and again and expecting a different result. Yet, rituals of all kinds are repeated until results are achieved. The practice of dharma is proof of that. For example, the various meditation practices are just that, “practices” and we have to practice them until perfect, or nothing much happens. Heaven knows I know this is true. LOL.

The magic of the dharma “Realization” practices is all about “practice makes perfect,” in my experience. This world itself is

“magical,” or at least admits to magic if we can “work it.” If you mean “Black Magic,” then I don’t know much (if anything) about it. It’s hard enough working up regular magic, much less trying to figure out Black Magic. What would it be good for? And why would I use it?

We are surrounded by rituals that we do each day and some of them are magical. They work magic. Less useful are those techniques that we do by rote, hoping for a magical result. Most rituals or techniques are the residue of a realization by their original author. Without the empowerment, repeating a technique we ourselves have not realized (or been shown properly), good results, in my experience, cannot be expected. It is the same with Vajrayana dharma. One does not intellectually grasp a particular dharma practice and be done with it. One has to have the empowerment, the reading transmission, and precise instructions.

It really is no different with any technique. As mentioned, techniques are the residue, like the freeze-dried result, of a realization by the original author of the technique. Anyone using that technique would do well to become empowered in the technique until they fully realize the technique for themselves before attempting to practice or use the technique.

IMO, Unrealized techniques are like millstones tied to the mind.

BEYOND THE EDGE OF ATTENTION

November 9, 2019

[This is a hard read because I am not going to compromise the message here with relief from the point. I try NOT to do this, but getting little to no response on this issue leads me down this road, from time to time. Forgive me please, but know that I am trying to communicate something I feel SHOULD be of interest to our awareness.]

The doorway to the mind is as close to us as opening our eyes to boredom and closing our eyes to constantly being always entertained. It's all gainful enjoyment, so to speak, entertaining ourselves until we come up (once in a while) with being bored. Boredom is a chink in the armor of always losing ourselves in whatever busyness we prefer. Boredom is a non-sequitur to the usual, a short-circuit in our entertainment-prerogative, that leaves us standing out at the edge of the verge of emptiness-of-entertainment.

Albeit, the awkwardness and vulnerability of boredom exposes us to an opportunity that is otherwise closed to us through our back-to-back busyness being signed, sealed, and delivered 24x7. Boredom, as much as we may not like it, is a glitch in the system that finds us suddenly barefoot and pregnant, standing naked in eternity on an empty stage devoid of any production whatsoever. Here, "emptiness" simply means emptiness of entertainment, emptiness of our endless busyness.

Our instinct is to duck out of the boredom (not to look at it) and escape back into something entertaining, and not to look back at whatever we experienced as boredom. If, however, we don't bolt and snuff out whatever awareness the boredom brought (that we found so hard to endure), a new world may open for us.

It's true that boredom is tight-shut against everything we know and are used to, yet, if we can endure it, that is, if we allow our mind to rest in the awareness of the boredom and lack of entertainment, simple boredom can give way to seeing

everything differently. “Boredom” is a ring-pass-not or threshold event, if we can stand it.

It’s a bit like Alice in Wonderland and falling down a rabbit hole or, perhaps more modern, a wormhole, where we come out the other side with an altered view, a view almost 180-degrees different from what we are used to. In truth, it seems that we never get beyond boredom to the other side, before we turn tail and lose ourselves in our particular version of Samsara once again. We are stuck in Samsara. It is like the air we breathe.

The closed door of boredom looks just like it is shut to us, but that sense of “shut” is nothing more than our own eyes shutting out what we find so hard to endure. We turn away before we see anything in boredom, just as we turn from the sun when it appears too bright. We can’t stand to look directly into the sun.

In the same way, simple boredom is something we shun in favor of the comfort of Samsara when, if we can learn to relax and endure the boredom (of our being without entertainment all the time), a diaphragm will gradually open and we can see beyond the boredom to an awareness we never knew existed, an awareness of the nature of Samsara.

Of course, I sit here writing about boredom and not actually looking at boredom directly this minute. I would rather write about it then endure it, although I have endured it and not voluntarily. And I can report that the light beyond boredom was so bright that it reflected the whole of Samsara as in a perfectly-clear mirror.

And in that reflection, armed with that new awareness, I saw for the first time what a slave I am and have been to the comfort of sustained-entertainment at the expense of reality. And Samsara is nothing else but the perfect entertainment, tailored by and just for me. And I never leave my home in Samsara without my full regalia of entertainment. I never do and never have. Samsara, we are stuck in.

I wonder if any of my readers are brave enough to check out whether what I present here has any reality for you or not?

“BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE” AND LIVING IN THEM

November 10, 2019

In a previous post, we looked at our indwelling consciousness that, after death, driven by karma and desires, searches for a rebirth, a body and situation to live in. The Buddhists point out that the consciousness in all creatures, all sentient beings from a fly to a human, etc., is identical in nature. The difference between sentient beings is that the mechanics of a fly differ from those of a human. In other words, there is a consciousness in the housefly that is the same nature as the consciousness we have but is restricted by the body and movements possible for a fly to express itself. That is one concept, yet not the actual subject of this article. I would like to talk about alternate bodies we use other than our physical body.

That same consciousness that indwells our body also wants to indwell not only in our body, but also in Samsara itself. Samsara is like a body, a sheath or vehicle in its own right, one that we take refuge in and always have. We make our life and the body of our surroundings in Samsara as comfortable as possible. In other words, we make our bed and then sleep in it too, even though it smacks of that old chestnut, “it’s like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic” – futility. It’s all we know.

Getting comfortable in impermanence is not a slam dunk for any of us, although we are told that we have had innumerable lifetimes to experience it. As comfortable as we can get, sooner later, particularly as we age, that comfort will wear out as our bodies do. Then, being asked, what was the point of it all, we may be hard-pressed to answer. How much better if we could realize the nature of Samsara as actually Nirvana and adjust our life accordingly?

What I’m concerned about here is how we use our Samsaric habits as almost a vehicle, call it a body of knowledge or a comfort body, but a body of some kind, nevertheless, in which we also live or spend most of our life in. We have all kinds of

bodies that we have created aside from our physical body, bodies of knowledge, psychological bodies, interests, hobbies, etc. that we live with, in, and get enjoyment from. My opinion is that very few of us realize that our attachments, fixations, desires, etc. are for us places of refuge, where we spend an inordinate amount of our time. They obviously can be very dear to us and are.

All of this is what I term attachment or “entertainment,” and by that I mean something more than just casual entertainment like reading a book or watching a movie. We invest in the body of our interests that we build, in an intellectual or psychological body, and then very much use and live in it.

However, we can reach a point where, instead of taking entertainment (samsara) as our primary refuge (which we have done from time immemorial), we choose to take refuge in the dharma, in particular (as tradition states) in the Buddha, his teachings (the Dharma), and the Sangha (those who have realized his teachings.)

And what are called the Common Preliminaries, often the first bit of dharma we encounter, are “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma.” When we turn to the dharma, we simultaneously have begun to turn away from our refuge in entertainments (the face of Samsara), which up to that point have been quite exclusive for most of us.

Instead of continuing to cast our lot and life with Samsara and taking refuge there, we can raise our heads from our Samsaric feast (so to speak) and look beyond just trying to make ourselves comfortable in our attachments and begin to undertake the voyage of recognizing the true nature of the mind itself.

If you consider it, we have many different bodies in which we live and enjoy. It is true that our physical body is the one that allows us to enjoy most of the various other bodies, yet even our physical body gives way to the body of our consciousness (and karma) that travels from rebirth to rebirth.

THE GAPS IN CONTINUITY

November 10, 2019

Caught myself in midair today, so to speak, between diversions, meaning between whatever busyness I have at hand. It's hard to do, because I have very few gaps between entertainments. I stay entertained. Also, no sooner than does a gap appear, but I turn away from it, back into my next engagement, which engagement is even manufactured if needs be, just to avoid a near-boredom encounter of the worst kind.

It reminds me of those dog collars that prevent the dog from going outside the yard, however that works. I've been watching these gaps ever since my stroke earlier in the year, trying to come up with a plan to work with them rather than avoid them. That I'm addicted to busyness and pure entertainment, I have no doubt at this point. What's wrong with that?

I'm not sure exactly what's wrong, but at the very least it is very suspicious behavior. LOL. What's wrong with a lacuna, interval, or gap that I would avoid it? And, if I add "... avoid it at all costs," then this really is something for me to at least look into, if not actually venture by design.

To my eye, the key variable is "awareness," and whether my endless busyness is "with awareness" or "without awareness." Obviously, both states of mind exist. If my busyness is just like the ostrich, who puts his head in the sand, then that is not preferable, not if "unwavering attention" is the goal, as stated in the short Mahamudra Lineage Prayer.

In other words, don't go into the caverns of Samsara without the light of Awareness. Why not? And the answer seems to be, because such busyness can be mindless and not mindful, and mindful is where we want to be, if only because, chances are, our history is more from the mindless side, rather than from mindfulness. I would rather be aware, than not. And the pith dharma texts support this option.

Certainly, if I go for a walk for the exercise or work out on the elliptical machine, then I welcome diversions that make the

time pass quickly. That's why walking with a friend is helpful. The exercise time passes without the sense of time dragging it out. Is that all right? Or, should our every moment be one of awareness, lest we sleep through life like a zombie. Good question. Constant "Awareness" makes sense.

Certainly, with Insight Meditation, where awareness accompanies us each step of the way because there is no subject or object, there is no problem. And, Insight Meditation is my chosen occupation, as often as I can manage it. And, I neither feel guilty or as if I am missing something if I am fully there, although that time too is something that passes as if in a clear and lucid dream. Yet, it passes with clarity rather than as a zombie. So, tread lightly in examining all this, is my advice to myself.

And, when examining these gaps in my busyness, certainly they smack of awareness and not zombie-land. They are like smelling salts, one whiff of which is enough to wake me right up. In that way, these gaps in my busyness are to be valued, even treasured.

So, to be corny, don't go anywhere without the light of awareness as company. Just as cycles go from nanoseconds in length to a straight line without an obvious curve, our being is out in those cycles right now, with no closure for who knows how long? We don't know if these cycles have returned until they do. However, my guess is that all cycles eventually resolve or return.

So, with these cycles endlessly closing or completing themselves, that is "awareness," even though some odysseys have not yet returned. Perhaps the length of Samsara is measured by how many cycles are still outstanding with our karma. There has yet been no closure, no returns. It reminds me of the old Kingston Trio tune about the MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) in Boston with their 1959 hit song "The Man Who Never Returned."

"Well, did he ever return?

No, he never returned, and his fate is still unlearned. He may ride forever beneath the streets of Boston, He's the man who never returned."

I will leave you with this: My teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche would stress over and over to be aware of gaps that appear, often even by way of loud noises, surprises, whatever.

Rinpoche responded to a question about the value of these sudden shocks or events:

“You have been distracted, and for that moment you are incapable of altering your mind. Therefore, you see your mind’s nature as it is, genuinely. Then the alteration or the fabrication comes back, and that is why it stops.”

“SOMEWHERE IN TIME,” TALKING WITH THE PAST

November 11, 2019

[Full Moon on Tuesday November 12, 2019 at 8:34 AM EST on a bitter cold day where hundreds of low-temperature records are said to be broken. I am always somewhat restless on Full-Moon Day. As for me, I'm on strike from doing what I usually do or am supposed to do. It happens. Everything gets just too routine and cookie-cutter to go along with. I am spending the day out of the box.]

Here is a bit of cosmic humor for me, a little history that I discovered only yesterday. Trying to find someone to talk with about my stroke experience from the dharmic side has not been easy. Then Ironically, I came across a conversation I had with my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche from 2005, when Rinpoche gave the pointing out instructions as to the true nature of the mind. Talking with myself and Rinpoche? I couldn't ask for more.

A question that I put to Rinpoche in the Q&A session of Day Two (page 31 of the written transcript) of the "2005 10-Day Teaching "The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen."

Michael:

"...It was like when two strong magnets in the wrong polarity have a very strong resistance to one another. When I did succeed to a degree to actually try to look at who was looking, it was always just like that. It was painful in the sense that it did not work. The two did not go together. It was exactly the opposite. There was a strong resistance. I wonder if you have any comment?"

Rinpoche:

"That is not an uncommon experience, and it indicates that you are confronting some of our deepest habits. **OUR DEEPEST HABIT IS TO, AT ALL COSTS, AVOID SEEING OUR MIND AS IT REALLY IS.** This resistance is kind of like a doubtful unwillingness to actually see the absence of a nature or the absence of an essence that characterizes one's mind. The resistance that you describe is often how people

experience that habit. The solution in that case is simply to look at the unpleasant sensation of the resistance, the feeling of repulsion of the two things. Look at that, because that has the same nature.”

That message speaks to me. In a conversation shortly before Rinpoche’s passing, Rinpoche said he has had some eleven small strokes in his life.

GAPS: “EYELESS IN GAZA”

November 11, 2019

“Eyeless in Gaza” is a book by Aldous Huxley, based on the biblical story of Samson who, captured by the Philistines, had his eyes burned out, was taken to Gaza, and forced to work grinding grain in a mill. This article is about “gaps” in a world that otherwise has no eyes, the world of Samsara.

“Gaps” are the windows of Samsara, so to speak, that through which we can see the sky of the mind. If there were no gaps, there would be no realization of what we are committed to by the cycle of death and rebirth. Gaps are a break in continuity, an unfilled space or interval between two objects. The concept of a “break in continuity” is what strikes me as to what a gap is. There is this continuing continuity and then there is the occasional gap in continuity, without which we would not be aware of the continuity existing.

If the gap becomes continuous, then it is no longer a gap, but a continuity. In other words, “gaps” are no respecter of persons or privilege. They are always the way out or beyond what they are “gaping.” In the practice of dharma, gaps are essential. Without them, Samsara would be continuous and Nirvana (enlightenment) impossible.

If gaps are enlarged overmuch, as mentioned, they become the continuity in which we will then look for gaps from that. They are like the aperture on a camera. If the aperture becomes too wide, the image is overexposed and burns out. For dharma development, the gap has to be just right.

Since a situation without gaps is continuous and unbroken, gaps are devoutly to be wished. This is why, in Mahamudra Meditation training in general, and the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind in particular, it is said that any kind of shock or loud noise may be enough to pop us out of our continuity and create a gap through which we can see or glimpse the continuity and, eventually, even pass through.

I quoted this before, but it is important enough to re-quote here. My teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche would

stress over and over to be aware of gaps that appear, often just by way of loud noises, surprises, shocks, -- whatever. Rinpoche responded to a question about the value of these sudden shocks or events:

“You have been distracted, and for that moment you are incapable of altering your mind. Therefore, you see your mind’s nature as it is, genuinely. Then the alteration or the fabrication comes back, and that is why it stops.”

I find that comment by Rinpoche very important, in particular the reference that without those sudden shocks, we are left to our habitual embroidering and altering of reality, something (so it is said) we have done for innumerable lives. It is more than just a habit. It is Samsara itself!

DRAWING TO AN INSIDE-STRAIGHT

November 13, 2019

Betting against Samsara is like trying to draw to an “inside straight” in poker, when Samsara is the House. Our options are few. As dharma students, we are familiar that the purification dharma-practices (The Preliminaries) are the process of removing obstacles and attachments. We know this. Yet, we are in for a pause when we realize that it is not as simple as that we only need to remove the veils of attachment and fixation. In addition, and here is the point, we also have to overcome our tendency to ignore, purposefully ignore, the actual nature of the mind itself.

I quoted this before, but it is important enough to re-quote here. My teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche would stress over and over to be aware of gaps that appear, often just by way of loud noises, surprises, shocks, -- whatever. Rinpoche responded to a question about the value of these sudden shocks or events:

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche:

“You have been distracted, and for that moment you are incapable of altering your mind. Therefore, you see your mind’s nature as it is, genuinely. Then the alteration or the fabrication comes back, and that is why it stops.”

I find that this comment by Rinpoche is very important, in particular the reference that without those sudden shocks, we are left to our habitual embroidering and altering of reality, something (so it is said) we have done for innumerable lives. It is more than just a habit. It is Samsara itself! And the sudden surprise or shock apparently freezes our ability to alter the mind (meaning that we always insert our filter) and we may get a glimpse of the mind’s actual nature. Of course, depending on the degree of the shock, our Self works overtime to close back up whatever gap or openness that appears from the shock (and the Self’s inability to control it).

In another part of the teaching Rinpoche made this statement:

“OUR DEEPEST HABIT IS TO, AT ALL COSTS, AVOID SEEING OUR MIND AS IT REALLY IS.”

It's not that we have in the past seen the nature of our mind and don't want to see it again, but rather that we have never seen it, yet the process of seeing it is difficult because of our habituation to Samsara and its entertainments..

We might want to keep in mind that our Self, our personality, is traditionally said to be comprised of our attachments and fixations. If that mass of attachments is in any way the controlling factor of “us,” then the scale might well be tipped in the direction of Samsara and not in the direction of realization and enlightenment. It may be an uphill climb to realization rather than (as is our habit) to simply find comfort in our habitual entertainments (Samsara) in the middle of which we sit stuck like a pig in mud. LOL.

I don't believe there is equal time given by our Self for the other side of this, which would be the side and view of dharma. More likely, we are getting one side only and that for the side of the past (or so they say) innumerable lifetimes. I'm just sayin'...

The point here is that we need a plan for enlightenment and that plan has been carefully laid out by the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists for centuries. We have only to follow it and there do exist authentic guides or gurus for this. Yet, this is not an even-sided situation. Samsara is very much the devil we know rather than the dharma we don't (yet) know. After all, we live in Samsara. It is our home and has been since time immemorial. We are wearing a “Samsara” T-shirt, whether we realize it or not.

I have come to believe that almost everyone underestimates the power and habitual bind of Samsara.

MUSING ON THE FRONT PORCH

November 13, 2019

[The coldest day of the cold-snap that is supposed to break some 300 records for cold here in the Midwest. The heat in my little office is cranked up as high as it can go, and my hands are still cold. I am getting things done, but I do find myself rambling a bit.]

If I only HAD a front porch I could sit on and a rocking chair; that would fit the mood. And that's not the all of it. How different I look to myself in the mirror each day (if I even look), compared to current photographs taken of me. LOL. In the mirror, I still have that same 25-year-old intent I always have had. How can that be, other than it is? When are these two views supposed to agree with one another? This is just one of the many little anomalies I wrestle with.

What am I supposed to do in a day, these days? As mentioned, I don't have a rocking chair or even a front porch to retire to. I AM retired, which I am grateful for. The business world is inherently flawed and very difficult, IMO. For me, it got old for me before I did. So, what do I do?

For one, I keep going over the last words that Rinpoche ever said to me, which happened almost by accident at the end of this year's 10-Day Teaching. We were bringing to Rinpoche a set of special shrine vestments that had been made for the Karmapa, should he ever visit our center, and we wanted to offer them to Rinpoche, since a visit of His Holiness the Karmapa to our small town was not likely.

Rinpoche received them happily and responded that he was wondering where some shrine vestments were going to come from, and now here they were. He would use them at the new Karmé Ling Retreat Center's shrine room. He thanked us and then Rinpoche asked about my health and said a few things to questions we asked before we said goodbye, which were translated for us by Lama Karma.

Rinpoche said to me: "Margaret was a little concerned because your health was not so good and she wonders how that affects your practice. Rinpoche said that [sickness, etc.]

does not affect your practice because if someone is introduced to the nature of mind (“Recognition”), when you go into difficulties, when you go into sickness and such, that Recognition becomes more like a support, the meeting of the Mother and Child clear light. Like that, so it [the realization] doesn’t really disappear. Don’t worry, Rinpoche said, because the realization arises from inside.”

When I then mentioned to Rinpoche that for years I have been working to expand and extend the realization that came with “Recognition”, and asked him was there anything else I should be doing, Rinpoche said:

“Keep doing that; you don’t need anything else. You need nothing new in the way of practice, and he feels that you have been introduced to the true nature of your mind and to keep doing that practice. “

That was the last time we saw Rinpoche.

With my dharma teacher gone, I feel like a boat that has been cast off its mooring. I’m adrift and floating out I am, yet there is no fear. Rinpoche is still right here.

Is this an ever-expanding universe, where we are relatively at the same distance from each other as we always have been, yet actually always farther apart? It feels that way. Nothing has changed with Rinpoche’s passing, except everything. LOL.

Is this what I am supposed to sit on the porch in the rocking chair (that I don’t have) and ponder? I hope not. Indeed, I am at heart a phenomenologist. I measure what is near at hand, inside me, the local variables, so to speak, which then serve as a kind of differential, whose derivatives I then project as an image onto the screen of life, one that is for me as large as life itself.

Life is like a grand equation, where the two sides cancel each other out until all that is left is the dharma as a result worth considering. The rest is all equal. And just with whom am I to speak about the “unspeakable?” And, there is no point to starting some grand life-long project at my age. All that interests me anymore is the dharma, family, and friends.

And, as for those last directions of Rinpoche, for me to continue extending and expanding the realizations of the dharma that I already have... I do carry that realization with me as a constant companion, the awareness that comes from what small amount of realization that I do have. I can't say this is true for me every second of the day, yet given a little settling in with each emerging event, that awareness pops back up and prevents the mind from being ordinary as in "mindless." That mindfulness seems to make everything useful and workable.

Given that, what to do? I could say that it doesn't really matter what I do, but that might give the wrong idea that it doesn't really matter, while it does. It matters totally. Yet, it matters because the mindfulness makes it not ordinary in the sense of ordinary as escape or mindlessness. The mindfulness is not an EFFORT to be mindful, but rather the result of realization that, just like a bubble in a clear sealed tube, has nowhere to go, that sort of realization stays with us.

There is nothing that I HAVE to "think," which makes questions from others so useful to remind me. If asked a question, I can respond better than I can initiate questions. My first true dharma teacher used to say: "We spend the first 30 years of life being born, the second thirty years repairing the damage we made getting out of the womb, and the third thirty years (if we should live so long) participating as a co-creator of life itself.

I feel I have increasingly become one with the creative forces, which, while out of my hands, are now always present. The river of life flows and carries each of us with her tides.

Now, not to get so maudlin, I am reminded of those obnoxious messages on Facebook that pop up saying that somebody is waving at you. Why would they do that? What does it mean? LOL. I AM getting old.

Yet, it's way too early for me to wave back. Just as I used to hate the "thumbs up" gesture everywhere I looked, but then it became ubiquitous and now I find myself doing it, despite myself. I hate that. I guess th

THE MUSCLE OF THE MIND

November 14, 2019

Before the Pointing-Out Instructions (of the true nature of the mind) are given, there is what is called the Analysis of the Pandita that is undergone, where the Guru trains the student how to conceptually examine the mind using valid-inferential cognition. Questions are asked of many kinds, often the first (or one that is prominent) is about colors and the mind. The Guru asks the student if the mind is the color RED. And then, in Tibet, they used to send the student off to think about that one question for three days and nights, after which they told the Guru what they found.

Then the Guru would ask if the mind was the color BLUE, and the same three-day inquisition would take place, followed by reporting to the Guru. This (and related questions) would go on for many months in the same format.

The key to understanding this process, and a quintessential key at that, is that you CANNOT intellectually decide that just because you “think” that the mind is not the color RED, for example, that therefor the mind has NO color and by that thought, not search for the other colors in turn.

Now, this is tricky, so please take note. This Analysis of the Pandita is not conducted by intellectually jumping to the conclusion that the mind has no color and that there is no reason to go through all the colors. The analysis is concluded when you have physical and emotionally searched for each color to see if the mind is that color, day by day, color by color, and have exhausted that search with the certainty that the mind has no color. There is a HUGE difference between these two approaches.

We come from lifetimes (probably innumerable) of intellectually concluding this or that by the snap of a finger! Conceptuality is a surface examination that is conceptual instead of getting in and using the “body” of the mind. The key to this analysis, as mentioned, is “EXHAUSTION by certainty,” if that phrase can make sense to you. We must exhaust ourselves in search in order to find “nothing;” It’s just

like when removing a thin glove, turning it inside out, we must extend to the tip of the top of our longest finger before the glove is reversed. Think about that, please.

When I look back at my own experience with Rinpoche as he presented the Analysis of the Pandita, with these questions, my mistake was to instantly decide that the mind does not have a color and then either tune out until Rinpoche got past that part of the teaching or I would fail to follow up during the day and night by actually performing the examination. I had already concluded intellectually that the mind had no color. I was waiting for something more juicy that I might have had in mind to come along. BIG mistake.

It is easy to mistake what appears like an intellectual exercise for just that, and fail to grasp that what the Guru is asking here is not for us to “think,” but rather to physically search your own mind for the answer, much as you would do physical exercise to test your muscles; here the mind is like a muscle and must be used as a muscle until it is completely exhausted like we would be exhausted from running a brisk mile.

The failure to exercise the mind completely by going “all in” is, IMO, the principle cause for being unprepared to recognize the actual nature of the mind. The mind has to be grasped to feel it and our search of it must be exhaustive and exhausting. The nature of certainty is exhaustive.

When I was learning this, the following image kept coming to mind, which perhaps doesn't make sense. I felt what I had to do with the mind is to go in there, physically somehow, and erect and set up a large tent in the mind by pushing and stretching the mind to raise the tent poles within it until I had created an extended open space in there. The mind, as I am suggesting here, has to be pliant. It is like kneading dough or clay; the mind must be stretched and extended until it can respond to our search of it – reflexively.

INSIGHT MEDITATION

November 15, 2019

[The weather is still cold, no sun, snow on the ground, ice. It must be winter already. Usually snow comes around the 1st of December. This year, colder earlier. Hunting Season begins today, which means stay out of the woods because thousands of hunters converge in our area because we have a lot of deer. We sit on the actual edge of the 900,000 acre Manistee Natural Forest. As for the following, this is a follow-up on yesterday's blog.]

How is Insight Meditation, an integral part of Mahamudra, different from just examining our mind conceptually, much less different from losing ourselves in attachment and the enjoyments of Samsara?

In Mahamudra training, prior to the actual pointing-out instructions as to recognizing the true nature of our own mind, there are two styles analysis offered. One is the Analysis of the Pandita and the other is the Meditation of a Kusulu. Both lead to the recognition as to the nature of the mind, but they differ in terms of how long they each take.

The Analysis of the Pandita, which is termed Inferential Valid-Cognition, consists of using the mind-logic conceptually in examining the outer world. This approach is said to take an individual three periods of innumerable kalpas to achieve. A standard kalpa is approximately 16 million years long, so better pack your bags if you are taking that route.

The other approach to enlightenment, the Meditation of a Kusulu or yogi, instead of analyzing conceptually the outer world, uses the experience of directly looking at the mind itself. This route is said to be possible in a single body and single lifetime. I will let you decide which approach appeals to you. I am going with the later. LOL.

I assume that we all know by now that Samsara, which is dualistic, can absorb our attention just like a blotter; however, Insight Mahamudra, which is non-dualistic, liberates us from Samsara. These two may appear to be a lot the same, yet they are 180-degrees different from one another. One binds

us; the other frees us. One puts us further to sleep, while the other wakes us up with the awareness of insight.

Samsara, much like a giant magnet, weighs us down by aggregating all of our attractions and attachments, while Insight-Mahamudra is like turning that magnet off (and enabling non-duality) from the duality of the attraction of opposites. As mentioned, one path attracts and establishes Samsara, the other repels or liberates (Nirvana).

The elision, when opposites lose their attraction, is non-duality. "Second star to the right and straight on till' morning" is Peter Pan's pointing-out instructions to Never-Never Land. Turn off the attraction and the magnetism of duality and we are free to resolve Samsara as Nirvana, albeit perhaps a degree at a time.

It is imperative to understand that Samsara and Nirvana are connate (co-emergent), basically two sides of the same coin. Samsara is not a veneer of obscurations laid over a Nirvana that is underneath. By connate, it is meant that Samsara and Nirvana are one and the same, differentiated by their view rather than by their nature. Nirvana (enlightenment) is achieved by transforming Samsara into Nirvana through the process of realizing their common nature. Failure to recognize the nature and equal-strength of Samsara, to underestimate it, would amount to a grave mistake.

Let go of (or remove) the attachments, fixations, and escapist entertainment and we are free to realize Samsara for what it is, Nirvana unrealized. Intellectually, that concept slides off the tongue and goes in one ear and out the other, but the transformation of Samsara to Nirvana is anything but easy.

However, there is a slipstream that, when finally found, sees us free from what has bound us and slowed us down all the time up until now. We then slip through the ether, riding on the wings of Insight-Mahamudra, and are lost to doubt forever; certainty is found.

Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is a cornucopia and wellspring of certainty, an unbroken thread, that buffers us from the friction of worry and eases our path to dharma realization. And with that in effect, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

STEADYING THE MIND

November 16, 2019

Searching for one end of the thread that unravels Samsara (this Catch-22 world in which we find ourselves) can be like searching for a needle in a haystack, but such a thread does exist and can be found. In the dharma tradition in which I practice, it takes an authentic teacher to help us find that thread, someone who has themselves found the thread and realized the true nature of the mind and how it works. In general, only they can point out to us the actual nature of the mind.

However, before we can meaningfully look for that thread, we have to be able to steady our mind. And that takes practicing a form of meditation called Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). It's much like threading a needle. Tranquility Meditation helps to relax, stabilize and steady our hand that holds the needle so that our other hand can thread it. Threading the needle here (the other hand) is tantamount to the Insight Meditation (Vipassana) that results and is a byproduct from Recognizing the true nature of our mind and how it works.

Of course, all of the above are just a bunch of words that, at best, can but describe the problem at issue. We each still have to solve this equation for ourselves and I am dedicated to helping folks do that, if I can. Enlightenment is very much a do-it-yourself proposition and it starts with "Recognition" by us of the nature of the mind and how we can work it.

"Recognition" is not Enlightenment or anything close to it, but rather a realization, recognizing and becoming familiar with the mind and how it works.

And, so to speak, if your hands are shaky, it will be very difficult to thread the needle; therefore, practicing Tranquility Meditation can help a great deal. In fact, it is necessary. Nevertheless, the hands have to be relaxed and steady, so to speak, however we manage to do that. Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is the place to start preparing for Recognition, the gateway for success in Insight Meditation and Mahamudra.

In general, most of the beginning dharma practices (called the Preliminaries) are just that, the preliminary work that WE have to do (one way or the other) before success with “Recognition” is likely or even possible. If you already have a steady hand, so to speak, go ahead and thread the needle of Insight Meditation. If not, we all have to do the work to help the hand (and mind) become steadier.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

November 17, 2019

[Not really a ramble, but a bit of a sidebar on Samsara and how attached we are to it. We know little else, no matter what we like to imagine.]

My Teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said in one of the 10-Day Teachings, and I quote:

“OUR DEEPEST HABIT IS TO, AT ALL COSTS, AVOID SEEING OUR MIND AS IT REALLY IS.”

Why is that? Why would we want to avoid seeing our mind as it really is, since it really is? And, the only answer I can come up with is that our thumb is on the scale. We have no intention of giving up our attachments, the sum total of which make up our continual entertainment in what is called Samsara. Samsara has a death grip on us right now and always has.

We may talk dharma until we are blue in the face, but nevertheless we come back home to Samsara when words fail and words, by definition, always fail to some degree. It's like contained fusion. Samsara is contained by the magnetics of attraction sealing us from reality perfectly. Yes, there are gaps, but damn few and far between. I had no idea as to what a well-oiled machine Samsara is, until I did. And it came as a complete shock to realize that we are playing to a deck that Samsara holds and don't even realize it. I had NO idea and am still putting all the pieces together.

It immediately became not a question of WHEN I will realize the nature of Samsara, but IF I will realize it. I had not so far, not for as many lives as innumerable-lives count-up to be. It was as if my local Samsara focus-group on “enlightenment” meets once a month to pay lip service to the dharma.

“This advertisement for that dharma is paid for by “Samsara Enterprises.”

So, what's my point? My point is that it took a large stroke that hospitalized me to realize what I am communicating here and I don't recommend it. LOL. Yet, the upshot was that while

Samsara is a dualistic state, it does not appear to us as that. It's almost all we know. And, Samsara and Nirvana are not comparable, meaning you can't compare them side by side. Nirvana can only be compared to Samsara by the process of realizing the nature of Samsara as Nirvana. And by then, you don't have Samsara anymore to compare to Nirvana. It would have been realized.

Put aside the wordplay and the point is that for us it is pretty much all Samsara, all the time. And we can have no idea as to Nirvana without realizing Nirvana. And so, this discussion of Samsara and Nirvana is just more Samsaric jargon. We don't KNOW what we are talking about. We have never known Nirvana.

In other words, Samsara is the perfect Catch-22, one with almost no gaps or ways out.

ENLIGHTENMENT: THE STATE OF THE PROCESS

November 18, 2019

The goal of all the preliminary purification practices is “Recognition,” recognizing the true nature of the mind and how it works. We can’t help but want to put our foot in the door of Recognition, even if we have not found that door yet. Like the old song, “I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in,” we aspire of course and each want to be in that number. My only question is, how do we achieve that?

What if it’s like holding our breath? We had an experience that spiritually was precious to us and we can’t help but try to hang on to it. It’s like holding our breath. Obviously, there is a disconnect here. Unless we let go and breathe out, we can never take another breath. And it is the breathing we want, not just that first breath. Do you see the problem here?

The Ven, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche told me, year after year, when I shared this or that spiritual experience with him, to let it go, forget it, and move on. And he pointed out that those special experiences that come and then go were just that, “experiences.” He said to let them go and to just keep practicing.

If a baby is born and does not breathe, the doctor (at least they used to) spansks it on the bottom in an attempt to get it started breathing. And, it is my belief that life will spank us on the butt until we too learn to breathe. The question now becomes: are you holding your breath instead of breathing? Are you hanging on to whatever you are hanging on to, or can you risk letting those special experiences go and move on toward Recognition? Do we dare risk letting go of our spiritual experiences rather than cling to them, even if they may appear to be all that we have.

Attachment to our own spiritual experiences amount to one of the most serious obstacles to be overcome in dharma practice. Yet, these experiences can be so precious that it is very hard to let them go and move on. IMO, they are like

raindrops before the deluge, but only that. We have to risk letting them go, rather than dwell on them.

All dharma is a process, like breathing, and not a special state that we reach, and this includes Enlightenment. All along the path that dharma presents to us, there are no static states, but always only a continuing process. Recently, I heard on a dharma tape a question from a student that said “When I reach Recognition of the mind’s nature, will I stop having to do Tranquility Meditation (Shamata)? And Rinpoche’s answer was, no, we never stop with Tranquility Meditation. We continue to do Tranquility meditation, just as we continue to breath. Unwavering attention (Shamata) is foundational and part of the process of meditating, not a rocket stage to be jettisoned. Tranquility Meditation becomes a permanent habit, a habit that is necessary to establish in order to maintain a steady ground upon which to base the more advanced practices like, for example, Insight Meditation.

And so, the point here is simple. We don’t abandon the continuous process of exercising the dharma fundamentals in favor of imagining that “Enlightenment” is some state or place that you or I will ever get to, attain, and then stop. Keep breathing!

“JOHNNY, I HARDLY KNEW YE”

November 18, 2019

[Everyone has something they wish to share with others. When I started learning the dharma, it was many decades ago and there was very little dharma activity available to me, few books, few teachings, and even fewer teachers. So, forgive me for wanting to help provide others that which I had so much difficulty finding myself.]

Of course, just starting out in dharma practice, mostly by fits and starts, I had not only no idea where I was at with it, but also no idea what the scope of dharma entailed. In the VERY beginning, back in the late 1950s, in the all-night until early morning, sit-around and talk about the world, sessions with my friends, the dharma, which to our mind then was Zen Buddhism, was one of many topics that we drank instant coffee (with powdered creamer) to and smoked cigarettes.

Our topics were things like Buddhism, Existentialism, Ingmar Bergman movies, The Beats, and anything that felt to us like it was deep and intellectual. We were young adults and wanted nothing more than to be accepted by those older than ourselves, the particular group of college kids who were back then passing themselves off to us as Beatniks.

It probably never occurred to us then, that Buddhism was something that WE would ever practice. Yet, fast forward ten years and I would be sitting all-day Zazen with Roshi Phillip Kapleau... and another five years after that I would be acting as a chauffeur to the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa and meeting with H.H. the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje) in person. And with that impetus, it was less than ten years later that I met my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. And with that meeting, my search for a teacher ended. I was with Khenpo Rinpoche for 36 years until his recent passing. Spiritually, I was never happier.

For many years, as I studied and tried my best to practice the dharma, at the same time I did not know where I fit into this dharma, much less if I was doing my practice correctly. Back then, our personal dharma practice was very hush-hush. We

didn't talk about it, even though I had little idea what I was doing.

You might think I would just somehow know where I was at in my practice, yet I did not. For me, practice was a bit like rubbing my tummy and patting my forehead at the same time. In hindsight, I can see that one of the hardest things to figure out is just where I was in my dharma practice. I knew that I had all kinds of spiritual experiences, but were some of those realizations too? In those early years I had no one to ask.

You couldn't just ask someone if you had realization or whatever. We might think that what most needs to be talked about would be talked about, but it was not; hardly ever. And I can't believe that I was the only one who felt like this. I'm certain that I was not.

In other words, can we get a witness when it comes to our own dharma practice? I can ask you if you like my nature photos. Or, even if you like what I write. On that, I might get some feedback, but if I ask you how am I doing with my dharma practice or where do you think I am in terms of the realization of dharma, I doubt there will be anything coming back. LOL. We don't want to, dare to, or are unable to talk about our spiritual progress in any detail.

Since then, having been to Tibet a number of times and seen how the countless monks talk about little else but the dharma and their practice, I have come to understand that the lack of sharing any discussion about our own practice here in America was a local phenomenon, which was probably the result of lack of knowledge, lack of teachers, lack of experience, and on and on.

However, even if someone has achieved realization (and others have not), how would those others know where that person was at if they have not themselves realized it, any more than I can spot a Bodhisattva among all the people at my local shopping mall? If we lack the faculty, we can't see the phenomenon is an old saying. Equally, if we can see the phenomenon, then we have the faculty.

This "trying to get a witness" was for me a real problem, and that is a question that many dharma students have, i.e. getting some clear feedback on just where we are at. It

seems all is so hush-hush. Is it just that we don't know? Who then knows?

Sure, there was a lot of posing and pretending; I won't even go there. Yet, who is going to support whatever we wonder about in our own practice, as to whether we have achieved anything at all dharma-wise? Look around you. Right now, who out there is giving you a spiritual thumbs-up? The answer usually is that no one is, other than, perhaps, your own guru or a true dharma teacher. And even that can be difficult, because we may not have realized anything yet, but still wonder where we are with it all. How about even trying to get some encouragement? I do feel that we are all encouraging of one another. Yet, as to risking open discussion of our spirituality and where we are at with it, mum is the word. This is a western thing, IMO.

A lot of the problem is that we don't know ourselves where we are at. After all, we have powerful and even earth-shattering experiences and are sometimes riding high. For all we know, we may be on this Bhumi or that. And then, two weeks later we are perfectly ordinary once again or worse.

Of course, this all levelled out when I met Khenpo Rinpoche. I can't remember how many times I interviewed with Khenpo Rinpoche, year after year, and described spiritual experiences that were for me very significant, only to have Rinpoche gently say that these were not realizations, but just experiences and, at the best, good signs, yet that I should think nothing of them and just keep on practicing. LOL.

And this went on for something like 25 years straight, just like clockwork, before I heard anything different. I got plenty of encouragement from Rinpoche to practice, but no acknowledgement as to any realization, much less as to the recognition of the mind's nature. Nada. That's because I did not have any. LOL.

And so, not only did other folks not see anything in me that they would (or did) call realization, but, as mentioned, even Rinpoche did not suggest that my many dreams and spiritual experiences over the years, which meant so much to me, were some form of realization. So, that's a cry with no echo or response.

And finally, with the help of my dharma teacher, one person did step up, and that was no other than me, the only one, after all this time, who ultimately had to be certain. Otherwise, it's like trying to sneak up on a mirror. You will always see yourself when you look. Or, it's like this little poem I wrote years ago to remind myself of this point:

SEEK AND NOT FIND

"If you find yourself,
Then you are not looking.
You will never "not-find-yourself,"
Unless you look.

"In other words:
If you don't look,
You will find yourself.
If you look,
You will not find yourself.

"That is the nature of having no nature."

That's a bit of my personal story and why I do my best to help anyone who reaches out to get more comfortable with their dharma practice.

TRUE WEALTH

November 19, 2019

[As an aside, the 30-year cycle of Saturn to Pluto conjunct is happening now and for about a month or more. Of all the combinations, Saturn the Lord of Form is conjunct with Pluto, our most vulnerable and sensitive point. It is no wonder these impeachment processes are taking place. In the standard geocentric chart, that separating (applying) is some 5 degrees until exact, but in the heliocentric chart, which is the actual position of Saturn and Pluto, that applying separation is only slightly more than one degree.]

There was a time, when I was in my late teens and early twenties, when it was all inside. It was me in here and everyone else (and everything) out there. That was duality, me against the world, which is also called Samsara. I was coming out of 12 or so years of primary education, which I had not appreciated one bit. Well, maybe a little bit.

I had discovered that teachers, at least for me, were human beings and I had been wanting and needing something more than that. I had rejected my Catholic upbringing and the horse it rode in on years ago and was adrift spiritually.

I didn't trust other people anymore than I knew how to trust myself. As mentioned, it was me locked up tight in here and you (and other people) outside me in the world. And "never the twain shall meet" sort of thing. I can remember one high school friend that I later met after I more or less found myself, to whom I tried to explain how little self-confidence I had back when they first knew me. And their response, was that they thought that my insecurity was just my sense of humor. Hardly. Instead, I was just an island in a sea of people.

I could not afford a real friend, because I didn't really trust anyone all that much. All of this ended one fateful night when I first dropped acid on May 6, 1964 in Berkeley, California where I was living and studying at the time. I have told that story many times, so I won't repeat it here.

However, what came out of that acid trip was that the great dam of diffidence, the difference between me and the world,

collapsed on LSD, as I saw that much of what I most feared in life and the world came from my own inner projections. In other words, I realized (in the true dharma sense of that word) that the wall between myself and the world (and other people) was a fiction. With that, the cat was out of the bag.

In other words, the ever-present dam between me and the world suddenly, in a single night, collapsed, leaving me awash in a sea, with no clear distinction between what was me and what was out there. I saw for the first time that I already was very much out there, living in my own projections. This was a mundane form of what in the dharma is called Recognition, suddenly becoming familiar with my own mind to the point of mixing my all with everything. And, it already was a done deal. The dewdrop had slipped into the shining sea, albeit in a kind of homemade and sloppy version of what passes for Recognition in the world of dharma. Nevertheless, the water had broken.

From that night onward, I began (and was able) to groom and shape the external world, since there was no longer any clear and permanent division between my inner and outer life. Of course, for me, this shaping took decades of exploration. And it was not until I more fully discovered and integrated formal dharma-training that things became what I would call stable. Until then, it was a choppy sea and me but one wave on it, separate, yet constantly merging water with water and then not. And all of this is just a foreword for the following comment about true “wealth:”

As I became free to change the outside world (or at least my projections on it), I was also free to modify my desires, including my dreams and wishes. I did not view it as that I was Michelangelo painting my own Sistine Chapel on the outside world; I was not that aware. Rather, it was more like I could create my own wish list of what I wanted for Christmas. What did I want from life? Well, let me count the ways. LOL.

At the top of the list was a career doing something I loved, rather than be stuck in the carwash doing something that, for me, was no fun at all. And success in finding a way to make a living was essential for what was at the tip of the top of my life-wish list, finding my soul mate, a women that I could love and that loved me back. And also, right in there at the top of

that list was to find a true spiritual teacher who would work with me and guide me.

I had a father who never talked with me about anything meaningful and I did not have a grandfather on either side, so I was starved for a father figure that was profoundly wise and who recognized in me someone willing and able to learn. Anyway, that's my shopping list for what dreams I had that I wanted to help make come true.

These were the things in life that I considered of great value and that if I could find them would be more precious than just monetary wealth. And the real gist of this post may be a little subtle, so forgive me if I underline it so that it does not slip by. A lot of my growing up was working on being able to afford simple things like a partner or a career. Most everyone has these, so what's so special here? What is special is to have a life, within which we can AFFORD to have external things like a wife or career.

For example, it is one thing want to find a true spiritual teacher, and quite another to find one, to fashion and hold out for one that actually fulfills that need, rather than is some mail-order copy. To have the karma and desire within ourselves to externalize the need for a teacher to the point of one actually appearing in this dream we call life and teaching us, is an example of what I call "real wealth."

To have real friends, a real partner, real kids, teachers, and so on is not just a given or a slam-dunk, but rather to make our dreams to matter in life such that all of these signs appear in the flesh and interact, that they come to be known by us. That, again, is real wealth, IMO.

These things were important enough for me, that I was willing to forgo "something similar" and hold out for the real McCoy. Each one of these wishes was fashioned by me, my karma, my desires, hopes, and dreams. So, you get my point. Please take it to heart.

IMO, a sign of true value or wealth is what we can afford in life, not so much in monetary terms, but in terms of, as mentioned, a real partner, real teacher, real career, and things like that are permitted to appear authentically. In other words, our dreams must be made to matter.

THE VIRTUE OF EXHAUSTION IS CERTAINTY

November 21, 2019

[This article is not for the faint of heart and will put you to sleep or wake you up, depending on your need and interest in certainty. I may be able to say it more simply down the line, as I can manage it. For now, perhaps a few of you will understand how this concept, if grasped, can be of great use.]

This is about the fact that the virtue of exhaustion is the certainty that it confirms. Look for it every time. Let me back up. We live in a dualistic world that is divided against itself by subject and object. Samsara itself is dualistic, meaning that I am the subject in here and you are the object to me out there, and vice versa. We are not non-dual or one, but two.

If the wall that divides the subject from the object in any one of us collapses or is removed through dharma practice, the whole concept of dualism is voided, giving birth to a non-dual situation, including a “differential” or leverage where before there was always static dualism. Given that differential (and its derivatives), the mind is suddenly non-dual and quite workable. Incidentally, that’s also the goal of the event called “Recognition” in dharma practice, a familiar, non-dual, and workable mind.

What is missing for many of us is certainty and it has to be looked for. Who can we promise certainty to other than ourselves? We are uncertain on any issue until we are certain. Where each of us finds certainty may be where we differ, and we find our differences. The point where you are certain may be different from where I find certainty, but your certainty is the same as my certainty. Certain is certain.

There is a cardinal rule in the dharma preliminaries, that we must exhaust our search for certainty until we are certain. How far is that, depends on us. For any of us, there is nothing beyond certainty. And it is this exhaustion from searching the mind that brings the certainty.

When it comes to analyzing the mind, there is (and has been) nothing for us to find, ever. Yet, we still look for it. Why is that? If there is nothing to be found, yet we each must search for ourselves, then when are we certain of that? We are certain when we can search no further and have totally exhausted ourselves in that search. That's when.

This complete exhaustion is like our outbreath and our response to this total exhaustion is the certainty that makes the subsequent inbreath meaningful. Years ago, when the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was personally teaching me Shamata meditation, he made a huge point of the outbreath. He had me alone in a room with him, sitting on a chair, and told me to breathe out. And when I did, he pointed out that I was not breathing out far enough. When, in my nervousness, I said I was breathing out as hard as I could, Trungpa Rinpoche said. "Breathe out. Let the breath go ALL the way out. Don't worry, it will come back."

That's the benefit of totally exhausting the outbreath, not the fact that it is all the way out, but rather the certainty and the kind of return such complete exhaustion induces. The bigger the outbreath, the bigger the inbreath that results, like an underwater swimmer coming up for an overdue breath.

We are all looking for the turning point, the nadir, turn-around, the very end or densest part of the body or a cycle. In this world of emptiness of substantial existence, that nadir (even such as it is) is where things pivot and turn around, and at no other point.

It may be all we have as far as "suchness" is concerned, the "this" or "that." There is not all that much suchness available in this world, period, so do enunciate, articulate, and define. Make your mark, if you can. Or, like Trungpa Rinpoche said to me "Let the breath go out. Let it go all the way out. It will come back."

This blog pertains to what is called the "Analysis of a Pandita" in preparation for the pointing-out instructions for Recognition of the mind's nature. It involves searching the mind for different qualities: shapes, colors, location, etc. The mind is searched, not intellectually, but "manually," if you can grasp that, until exhaustion.

That point of exhaustion cannot be reached by shallow breathing, but by deep breathing and exhaustion in the outbreath or outreach. The point here is to underscore for those interested in achieving Recognition of the true nature of the mind how absolutely important it is to "physically" search our mind to the point of complete exhaustion and thus establish certainty on this or that issue. "Certainty" is the point of no return for each of us. It's where we have exhausted the search and turn back or inhale.

More than that we cannot do.

COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOW

November 21, 2019

[Since I have been an astrologer for going on 60 years, I am getting asked about this approaching Saturn-Pluto conjunction (once in a generation) and what it may mean to us. I don't do a lot of astrological analysis on this blog, but I will briefly say something about this event for my astrological friends.]

There is a lot of interest in this very powerful conjunction of the planet Saturn to Pluto that only happens once every 33-38 years. Saturn to Saturn takes place every 29.4 years heliocentrically, so to reach Pluto (which is also moving) takes a little longer.

The planet Saturn, the lord of form, coincides (conjuncts) the planet Pluto, which is often is said to represent our innermost vulnerability and insecurity, not to mention the subconscious, death, and rebirth. So, yes, this is considered one of the "heavy" aspects, sometimes also called "bad" aspects.

As for me, I am always more interested in the heliocentric planetary positions (and aspects) than the more standard geocentric positions (and aspects), which are Earth's view (geo) of what actually is taking place heliocentrically.

However, these two events take place within a day of each other.

The geocentric conjunction of Saturn to Pluto occurs on January 12, 2020 at 11:59 AM EST. Yet, I am more interested in the heliocentric conjunction between Saturn and Pluto AND Mercury, with the Earth (Sun) being at 20-degrees 48-minutes of Capricorn/Capricorn that occurs January 11th, 2020. Either way, this event takes place around the same time. This, then, is a date that from an astronomical point of view looks like we might want to be aware of.

It is also significant that, at the time of this conjunction, both Pluto and Saturn were on or close to their own southern nodes on the Ecliptic in their orbits around the Sun.

The North Node on the Ecliptic of PLUTO is $109.683462^\circ + 5400.0''T + 1.50000^\circ T$ of Ecliptic Longitude (19-Deg Cancer 41-min).

The South Node on the Ecliptic is 289.683462 of Ecliptic Longitude (19-Deg Capricorn 41-Min).

The North Node on the Ecliptic of SATURN is $112.783567^\circ + 3143.43''T + 0.87278^\circ T$ of Ecliptic Longitude (22-Deg Cancer 47').

The South Node on the Ecliptic is 292.783567 of Ecliptic Longitude (22-Deg Capricorn 47').

PLUTO on Jan 11, 2020 was at 292.8333 (22-Deg Capricorn 50-min) of Ecliptic Longitude.

For those interested in studying this nodal structure, please see my free downloadable e-book "Interface: Planetary Nodes," which was published in 1976.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Interface-Fin.pdf>

WHAT THIS ALL MEANS

A quick look at the archetype patterns (heliocentrically) at the time of this conjunction shows a quite exact T-Cross (an Opposition with a third planet Square) as the basic whole-chart pattern for that date, complemented (and working with) a "Wedge," which is an opposition with a Sextile and Trine, involving the Earth/Sun on one end of the Opposition and Mercury, Saturn and Pluto on the other, these two planets Sextile/Trine to Neptune.

In addition, there is another Wedge with Mars and Uranus as the two ends of an Opposition, both Sextile/Trine to Jupiter. This also is significant.

Now, that's the astronomy of it. It remains to look at what astrology might have to say about these configurations, keeping in mind that astrology is (in essence) cultural astronomy, trying to speculate what the astronomy means in terms of life on this planet.

From my view, and this is just my opinion, these patterns suggest to me primarily a two-pronged event, a mental realization on one hand, "getting the picture," yet also connected (pattern-wise) and in-synch to the physical (T-

Cross) on the other hand, these thoughts coordinating to allow for some physical impact.

In other words, these patterns result in a kind of a “think-and-do” event, a practical result of putting the mind and awareness in lock-step with the pedal-to-the-metal physical – a coordinated result. And the focus was the Saturn/Pluto conjunction (plus Mercury = Awareness), all impacting the Earth/Sun axis. That, and the second Wedge (Uranus, Mars, Jupiter) putting Mars-Opposition-Uranus) pressure on Jupiter (affecting a vocation or path.) Anyway, IMO, this coming event t should be a well configured, clear, and interesting point in time.

And so, Saturn (the creator of form) giving form or embodying Pluto by this conjunction, Pluto being some of our most vulnerable and deeply sensitive areas. And the presence of Mercury also exactly conjunct this conjunction brings awareness of this whole event. And finally, all of this then conjunct by a couple of degrees the Earth/Sun axis, which thus relates to us, our earth and situation.

Adding to that is the fact (and very important) that Venus, the appraiser of all things, is the focus point of the key Opposition in the T-Cross, so my interpretation is that we will be getting a true measure of this event.

And finally, look at the patterns in these two charts (geo and helio) of the same planets, the same moment in time, etc. See how much more focused and in synch the helio patterns are compared to those in the geo chart. The helio has a precise interplay between a T-Cross and two Wedges, while the geo is something like a loosely formed trapezoid. The Helio chart, being the more internal and exact of the two, is very precise and contains the classic aspect archetypes (T-Cross, Wedge) intertwined and working in synchronization. I didn't mention that Neptune is the point-guard for the whole major aspect pattern described above. This means we can take the high road or consider a loss.

This has been a short interpretation of the forthcoming cosmic weather for your information. I don't do this a lot, because I already did that a lot for many years. LOL. In fact, I remember a fun story about this type of interpretation that I used to do.

It was back in the early 1970s. I had a little radio program each morning on a local station called "StarTime," in which I would briefly discuss the astrology in the skies for the day. I would make up an audio tape once a week and take it to the radio station. And I was not above (on some days) listening in to hear my own work.

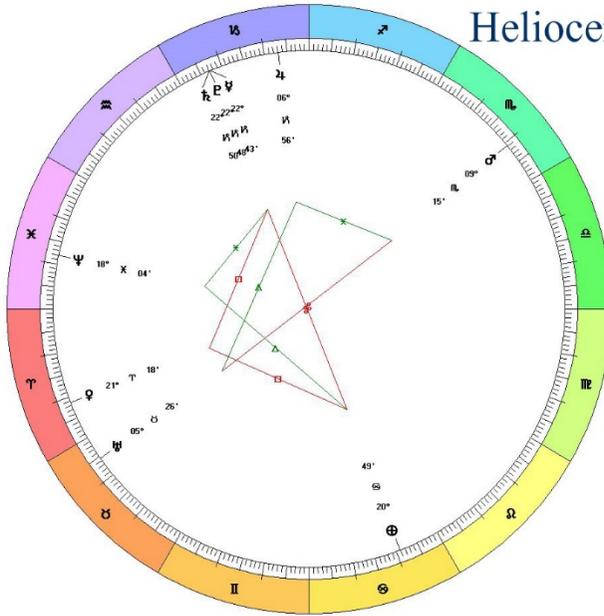
And I was doing that one day. I heard the theme music I had chosen come on and I was all set to hear my "golden" words. But the voice that came out from the radio was not me. It was someone else. And while I have a kind of high voice, this new astrologer spoke more slowly in a rich baritone voice. And even more upsetting, this guy was good! His astrology was at least as good as my own. I was crestfallen. Why did they not even tell me that they had found another astrologer to replace me?

After I consoled myself for a bit, I phoned the radio station to give them a piece of my mind, only to find that what had happened is that the station had played my tapes at the wrong speed. It was still me, only me with a lovely voice. IMO, that to me is very funny story.

[Heliocentric and geocentric chart patterns for the coming Saturn-Pluto conjunction, screen-grabs from a program my brother Stephen and I designed called "Blue*Star."]

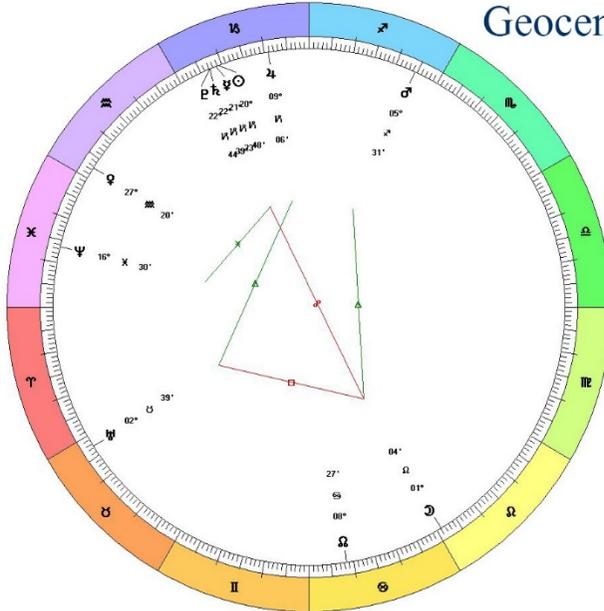
2020-01-11
Big Rapids, MI
Jan 11, 2020
09:04:56 AM EST

Heliocentric



2020-01-11
Big Rapids, MI
Jan 11, 2020
09:04:56 AM EST

Geocentric



THE DIFFERENTIAL DIFFERENCE

November 24, 2019

That realization I had on May 6, 1964 on LSD in Berkeley, California, when what had been my dualistic universe up to that point collapsed into one, changed my life forever. When they said that LSD could permanently alter the mind, they were not kidding, but it was not as we all feared back then (physically), but rather acid altered our attitude, how we saw the world, or at least that's what it did for me.

As powerful as it was and as new to me as it was, that event laid the groundwork for decades of work on myself from then onward. Before that point, I was deer-in-the-headlights locked into what only could be called a death-grip of myself on one side and the external world hovering outside of me on the other. I had to protect myself from this harsh world (and other people), so to speak. I couldn't move because there was no differential. I was locked in a wrestling-hold with the outside world.

It would be more convenient if I could simply tell you that this or that Rinpoche pointed out the nature of the mind to me, and that happened too, but about 45 years later. (ॐ).

However, the truth is that, as it so happened, it was LSD when, so to speak, my water broke that night in 1964, let some air in, and allowed me to gradually be born to my own first taste of non-dual awareness. No, it was not a full-blown recognition as to the nature of the mind, but it was a familiarization with that mind's nature that was so vivid that I turned away from Samsara to a marked degree.

Before that night in Berkeley in 1964, my awareness was missing as to how the mind actually works and after that night, as they say, "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea" and at that point there was no longer any difference between the first person (me) and the world itself. The "Me" that is "I," was suddenly also seen projected out in the world around me. That night in California, I saw my own projections on the screen of the outside world, saw through my original mistake, mixed my mind the Mind, inside with outside, and lost

much of my dualistic view of me-against-the-world, forever. That was not just an experience, but also a true realization. It never faded and became the Polestar of my life. It shines today as it did that first night.

This was a form of Recognition in the dharma sense of that word, only it was not a full recognition as to the mind's nature, but it was enough to destroy or very much weaken my dualistic habit that had been dominant my entire life up to that point. After that night, the scale was tipped in the favor of "Me (here inside) and also me seen as my own projections on the world outside, where before it was very much "Me against the world." I hope this is clear.

Those of you who may have experienced something similar might want to note that any realization that stays with us has to do one of two things. It will gradually fade away or it can be expanded and extended by our working with it each and every day. Even a partial realization can be broadened and enhanced by us, yet we would have to systematically work at it over time.

Again, my realization from that trip was not definitive or complete, but it was pervasive enough that after that night I had a working differential that I could use from then on to expand and extend my realization, and by that, to begin to collapse my habitual dualism into just one emerging non-dual view of life. I was able to gradually embrace and transform my previous dualistic views of the world, a day at a time.

Of course, it took me about 30 years or more to sort it all out and it took the dharma (and years of practice) to stabilize my realization, but it was possible. If I were doing it today, I would just find an authentic teacher (one that was for me authentic) and complete the preliminary dharma practices a time or two.

RINPOCHE'S SLIPSTREAM: "ENGULFED WITH BLESSINGS"

November 26, 2019

This phrase or something like it occurs throughout the dharma teachings, especially in daily prayers. In the pith teachings, it goes as far as to say, it is all blessing. That's all we can hope for, to be engulfed in the guru's blessing.

What does that mean? To me, it is like waves rolling up the shore at high tide, pushing us ever higher. Often in the teachings, it is emphasized that to be deserving of your guru's attention itself, even a look or coming up on the guru's radar screen is a very special blessing in itself. A very famous Dharma supplication "Calling the Gurus from Afar" says over and over "Kind root guru, think of me" or "Look upon me."

What I was not sufficiently aware of and something I am aware of more now that my dharma teacher has passed on, is that those waves up the beach continue to roll after he has passed on. I would even go so far as to say that, after Rinpoche's death the blessings are stronger than ever. I certainly have not done anything different to deserve it, so it seems.

The phrase "Grant your blessing" or "Engulf me with your blessings" says it plainly, but to be engulfed in a guru's blessing is an experience, not just words.

And my experience is that I am, and all Rinpoche's students are, engulfed in Rinpoche's wake, caught in his slipstream, so to speak. I can feel it, and it (as mentioned) is not something I deserved (to my knowledge). As students, we are in his mandala, and will be swept up and along with wherever Rinpoche goes or points.

And this is not unusual; throughout the dharma literature, great meditation masters shepherd their students toward realization. After all, that's what the dharma and gurus are all about. It's always difficult to realize that what we read about in the biographies of past masters is also taking place right now, as well.

Of course, Rinpoche's passing is a kind of shock. It galvanizes me and wakes me up, but I am not pointing to that. I mature from the whole experience as his student. Yet, I also experience that what I THINK of it is not the measure of what being Rinpoche's student is all about. His teachings have been placed within me and have taken root, more than I would have guessed or even imagined. That is my point here.

It's like I have been so busy climbing the mountain of dharma practice, that I never turned around and looked out or down at where I came from. And, when I do, it is breathtaking where Rinpoche has helped us to be. Just amazing!

I like the image of being pulled into and along in Rinpoche's slipstream, drawn by his grace and blessings. That's what I have been feeling and experiencing. I am reminded of my Christian background and the phrase, "Not my will, but thine be done." And my translation of that in dharma language, is not what I have done, but what Rinpoche has done for all of his students.

Of course, with an authentic guru, we each have rise to the level of being authentic students

REST ON TOP OF THE AWARENESS

November 27, 2019

Throughout the dharma as I know it, very much is made of taking whatever arises in our life that confronts us to the path. We don't even have to take it to the path; what arises should be treated AS the path, especially since it is what is happening in the moment. There it is; we can't avoid it. ☺

Whatever arises, is there a choice? The alternative would be to not take whatever arises to the path, i.e. ignore it. As for ignoring the nature of the mind, I've "Been there, done that," is my only comment, as the teachings say, and probably for innumerable lifetimes.

We know from the Mahasiddha Tilopa's classic "Six Words of Advice," that he suggests we "Don't Prolong the Past." On the other hand, Tilopa suggests that we also "Don't Invite the Future." And so, this pretty much limits us to this present moment; and Tilopa also has a suggestion there too, "Don't Alter the Present." Well, that pretty much ties our hands and he sums it all up with the next suggestion, just "Relax, as it is!"

In other words, don't dwell in the past, don't anticipate the future, and don't monkey with the present. Just let go and relax in the present moment. Don't spend time on any of these things. That's the heart of Tilopa's advice to those of us practicing dharma. It sounds simple enough, but obviously this is very difficult to do. Just try it, especially not altering the present. Good luck!

All told, it's a kind of straight jacket, unless...unless we have completed whatever preliminary practices that are required so that we can rest without distraction in the present moment as Tilopa points out. And, we cannot rest in this way without having first recognized the actual nature of our mind and thereby collapsed our dualistic way of thinking. Otherwise, we will be looking this way, that way, and every which way. What is it that would interest us enough such that we are not interested in the nostalgia of the past, the anticipation of the

future, and the restlessness of the present? That's a question each of us must ask ourselves.

Well, one thing is for sure. It would not be our normal conceptual, dualistic thought. It would have to be some of the non-dual realization practices, Vipassana (Insight Meditation) and beyond, in general Mahamudra or Dzogchen style meditation.

And so, it seems to me that a lot of the preliminary dharma practices amount to some version of "Hurry Up and Wait." We have to get busy enough to learn to focus our mind to be "mindful." Once, Mindful, we then have to remove all the busy scaffolding we had to use to become mindful, and just relax in and on top of our innate Awareness, the same awareness that allows you to read this sentence. That is the roadmap.

"Your mission, should you choose to accept it is..."

“MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING”

November 27, 2019

[HAPPY THANKSGIVING! On the mundane front, I finished, for now, my short children’s story, the one I posted a part of before. For those young enough to read it, here is the completed text.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-books/FROG%20SWAMP%20ROSE%20ED...>

The story is “Frog Swamp and the Wild Pickles.” And now for the non-mundane.]

NOTHING IS SOMETHING

“Thank you, Rinpoche,
For pointing something out:
That there is nothing to be pointed out,
That nothing can be pointed out,
Including “Nothing.”

““Nothing” also cannot be pointed out.

“To me:
That is really something.”

The above fun poem-like verse was in response to the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche’s 10-Day Mahamudra intensive in 2005. It was then that Rinpoche was presenting what is called the “Analysis of the Pandita,” the introductory conceptual analysis that is prior to the actual pointing-out instructions for recognition of the true nature of the mind. This direct analysis is like exhausting the outbreath so that we have enough room for the inbreath.

Language is but a myriad of pointers, pointing every which way. Language, by definition, is all (and nothing but) pointers that point or “mean” something. And the irony (or humor) in this is that what these pointers point out or point at is nothing that has any permanent existence whatsoever. That nothing is what is being pointed out.

So, in other words, there is this endless pointing out (or at) nothing. If that’s true, why don’t we get the point of what is

being pointed out? And that point is that nothing can be pointed out, including nothing itself. Nothing also cannot be pointed out.

As mentioned above, we must exhaust our search for something, to make room for the nothing that is there. Getting started in dharma practice and all of what are called “The Preliminaries” is dualistic, a doer and something done, a subject and an object, the see-er and what is seen. There is an enormous amount of fabrication, concepts constructed, that are helpful, and even unavoidable because duality is where we come from and have to start with.

All of that construction, as with language, which we are so used to, has to, at some point, be completely deconstructed and unpacked until it is non-dualistic. How do we plan to do that?

Non-dualistic direct experience or realization is not a product of any planning we may have made or can make. It’s like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks or peeling an onion. When all is said and done there is nothing at the center of an onion and no sticks left in the game. Again: everything has to be deconstructed and de-fabricated. It all has to go, but how?

That is the job of the pointing-out instructions by an authentic guru, someone who has that realization and can point out to us successfully (so that we can realize it) the “nothing” that is at the heart of everything or, as Shakespeare said, “Much Ado about Nothing.”

If this were easy, we would all be enlightened by now. Yet, as my dharma teacher pointed out, in all the time there has been up to now, through innumerable lives, we have never recognized the nature of our own minds. As Rinpoche said, “We are the stragglers, the ones who never got it,” and indeed, in numbers we are innumerable.

And what an authentic guru has to do, using the very dualistic language we are so used to, is help us to deconstruct that language until it collapses of its own weight and cannot be reconstructed no matter how much our habits require it. That event is the Recognition of the mind’s true nature, after which we are left with clarity and lucidity, resting in (and on top of) that innate awareness that is the nature of the mind itself.

COMPOSTING SAMBARA

November 28, 2019

What is Samsara? Is it this whole world we live in?

The dharma teachings state that Nirvana (or the path to it) is Samsara as realized by someone who has recognized the true nature of the mind. It is clearly stated in the short Kagyu Lineage Prayer that Samsara and Nirvana are connate, co-emergent, two sides of the exact same coin. That tells us something important. i.e. that Samsara has the same nature as Nirvana.

I find that Americans (and westerners) have trouble letting go of the concept of Heaven as being some place other than right here. In other words, we like the idea of getting out of this world to a safe and peaceful spot somewhere else.

The idea people like to imagine is that when we become enlightened, we will go somewhere other than this world. We won't be enlightened and still have to be here, as: be enlightened here in this world. There must be a better place than here that we deserve to be rather than right where we are now. In other words, folks imagine that, for sure, they won't be enlightened here on this spot. Wishful thinking!

And even when it is explained to them that the dharma says that there is no escape from Samsara other than to realize it and that realizing Samsara is what is called Nirvana. They still have a fallback assumption that they will no longer be in this world, but in some spot similar to heaven, but perhaps Buddhist, a Buddhist heaven, so to speak.

And I guess that these same folks read right past all the vows and intentions of a Bodhisattva, where it explicitly says that a Bodhisattva's vow is to remain (be reborn) in this same Samsaric world until every last sentient being is enlightened. They don't read that small print, but it is there. So, unless you want to remain in a state of an exclusive bliss, like an arhat or Pratyekabuddha then, when we get enlightened, we will be hanging around right here, warts and all, for an incalculable period of time.

And so, fellow dharma students, it is best to make ourselves comfortable in the right-here and now, because it will continue to be both here and now. And the only thing that will (or can) change is how we view Samsara, there being nothing else that I am aware of.

I don't want to be a party-pooper or a bearer of bad news yet, at least according to the Buddhist teachings, that is what is taught. We had best get on with transforming Samsara through realization into Nirvana for ourselves. We have to realize Samsara and that realization itself is Nirvana. We are like the earthworm who eats dirt and produces a more fertile earth or something like that. In other words, we best get on with composting Samsara.

WE BECOME WHAT WE WANT OR LACK

November 29, 2019

[Thanksgiving is over and I did not eat too, too-much. In this blog, I look at the astrological element count in your natal chart and, after that, talk about the things I have to do each day that I may not want to do. 😊]

Years ago, when I was actively teaching astrology to students, I was often asked to explain the Four Elements, which are Fire, Water, Earth, and Air. Something simple to do was take the Sun, Moon, and planets Mercury through Pluto and determine what element each planet was in.

Fire: Aries, Leo, Sagittarius

Water: Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces

Air: Gemini, Libra, Aquarius

Earth: Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn

In my heliocentric natal chart, I end up with:

Fire: 1 (want)

Water: 1 (want)

Air: 2

Earth: 5 (have) --if I add the Moon [which is part of the Earth system], I would have 6 bodies in the element earth.

In my geocentric natal chart, I end up with:

Fire: 3

Water: 2

Air: 1 (want)

Earth: 4 (have) We don't count the lunar-node or we can.

And so, the way I taught the Four Elements, to make it easy to remember is this:

WE DO WHAT WE HAVE TO DO

WE BECOME WHAT WE WANT

Simply put, those elements which we HAVE a lot of (Earth in my case) are what we have to act out in our lives. And those elements which we lack or want (in my case, I only have one air in the geo), we try to acquire. We "want" or lack them. And if we

have zero planets in one element, we really, really want. I even go so far as to say, as mentioned above, that we become what we want. And here, I am using the meaning of the word “become,” as used in a sentence like this one. “Doesn’t that dress become her.” What we lack, we can only point toward.

And by that, I mean we cannot fill something we have none of, but we can try to, point toward, and attempt to fill that “empty” hole in our elements. Those things that we want in life, we try to get, and if we cannot get them, at the very least, we turn toward and “become” them.” Play with that concept and see if it is useful to you. It has been for me.

With that being said, I would like to change the subject somewhat and talk about the things I HAVE to do, and here I mean the things day-to-day that I must attend to and accomplish, like it or not. OK/

I spend a lot of time on the things I have to do. There are things that I want to do, including doing just nothing at all. Yet there are also things that I have to do, meaning I need to do them or have agreed to do them, but they stand between me and doing what I want to do, which as mentioned, includes doing nothing at all. I don’t like what is hanging over me, things that until I do them, I am not be able to be, as mentioned, free to do nothing.

What would be best or “nice” would be if I always felt like doing the things I have to do, you know, if wanted to do what I have to do in the timeframe that I should do them. Otherwise, I tend to do what I have to do, whether I want to do them or not, if only to get them out of the way.

I work and try to want to do these things I have to do, but for me it is difficult to synchronize and line up the have-to-do tasks with the wanting to do them on my part. These things I have to do should not require an effort to do them. It’s like they don’t even really count if I do them because they are just there and have to be done. It is hard to do those things I don’t want to do. I would like to organize my life so everything I have to do, I want to take the time to do. And by that, I mean wherever I turn my attention, what I do is effortless, and I feel it freeing to do them.

And, of course, “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.”

I'm working on this problem, each and every day, but approaching a solution is a bit like sneaking up on a mirror. Every time I look, there I am watching myself. I slow down; I even make delays, yet sooner or later, there I am with that which I have to do ready to be done. It's time to do them. So, how do I want to do it?

Do I just do it by rote and get it done? Do I stand around and wait until I "feel" like doing it? If I say wait, that could be a long time. If I do each thing with some awareness, slowly as a Zen monk might do, will that be enough? Or, do I just want to be delinquent and not do what I have to do at all. If I don't do them at all, that seems to compile problems rather exponentially, until everything is obscured. You tell me.

I have to do it, now or later. No matter how long I wait, there it is, outwaiting me, throwing me off schedule, if not derailing me completely. There are a lot of things I am happy to do, a few I don't care one way or the other about, and then there are those that I don't feel like doing at all. The dharma tells me that it makes sense to want to do the things I have to do anyway. Right?

In general, I do those things that I have to do that I don't want or feel like doing with as much grace as I can manage, but nevertheless, these usually get short service. I march or step through them and when I am finished, I am always relieved and glad they are done. That should tell me something right there.

Exercising on the elliptical machine is a good example. I always feel better if I exercise, but getting me to the insertion point where I just say, OK, and just go for it is always no fun at all. Some days I don't do it and on other days I just do it. And there are even days where I almost want to do it anyway.

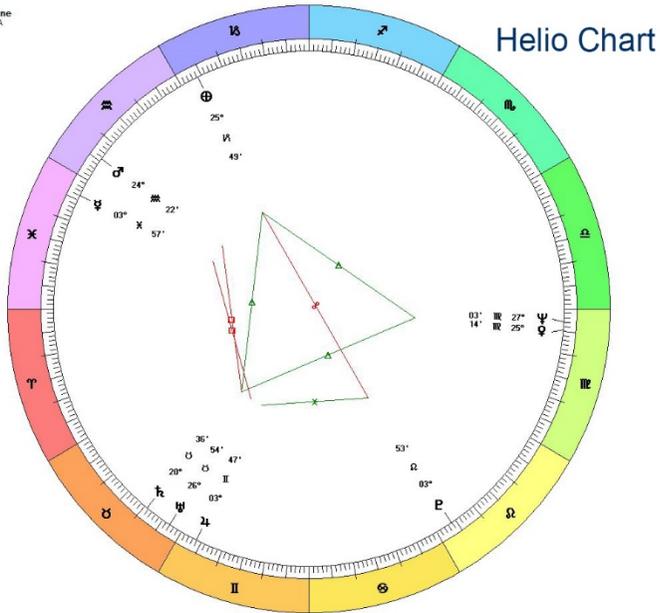
However, too often it is like jumping off a high building, and I hate heights. 😊 Today, I have to go to the hospital and get some lab work done. It's not a problem, except that I want to get it behind me, so I will go at the crack of dawn that they open.

TIME FOR NOTHING

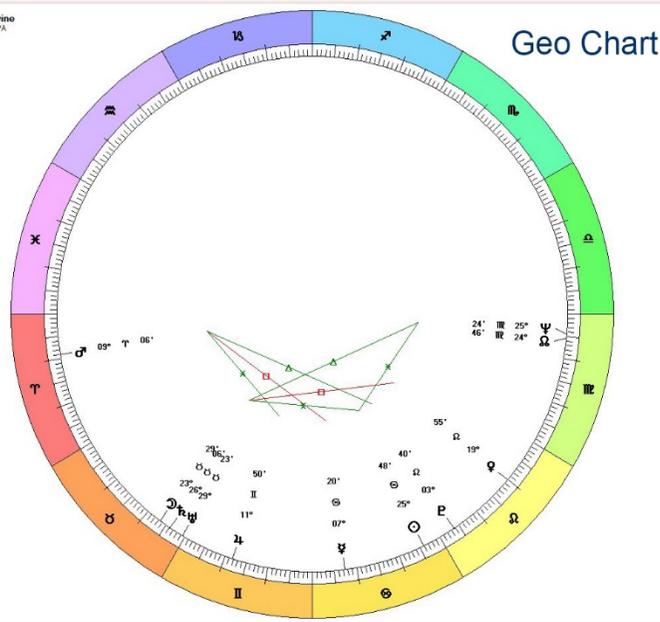
Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,

I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky.

Michael Erlewine
Lancaster, General, PA
Jul 18, 1941
05:03:00 PM EDT



Michael Erlewine
Lancaster, General, PA
Jul 18, 1941
05:03:00 PM EDT



WHY WORDS DON'T WORK

November 29, 2019

[Snowstorms moving in, something that often happens as December descends here in Michigan. As for me, I'm just happy that we have only one more month until the Sun starts to move northward toward spring. Each day will be longer. Until, then it is a race to the winter solstice.]

Moving indoors from out, and then inside the mind, there are few inner storms raging at the moment. As usual, I have done my best to clear my schedule in order to do exactly nothing. Something, of course, will arise, but that's how I like it. I don't like schedules, appointments, duties, and anything pre-planned or prescribed. I am at my best when I ad-lib and am free. I have done my practice, my exercise, showered, and even went to the hospital for bloodwork at 7:00 AM and I am back home. Now what? Now, "Nothing" ... and this blog.]

Well, words do work pretty well. The key thing to remember with words is that they are just pointers and are nothing in themselves, not what they are pointing to. If they pointed at themselves they would say: "The is the," and things like that. Even if they point at other words, those words are also just pointers, so we fall into a Catch-22 pretty quickly.

The problem with language is that it is only useful if it makes sense, meaning that it gives us a sensual feeling for something, a feel for it. If language does not do that, then it is nonsense, meaning not-sensing anything. And, if you follow me, you should be able to see right away the problem with talking about the realization practices like Vipassana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and so on. They have nothing to sense, because there is nothing existential there to see, feel, touch, smell, hear, and so on.

It's not word's fault. They work as they should, dualistically, with subject and object, like I see the color of the mind. The mind has no color, so there is no color to see other than that there is no color, which is not something, and that's the point.

And so, while we cannot see, feel, smell, touch, etc. the nature of the mind, we can realize that there is nothing for the

senses to grasp or sense whatsoever. We can REALIZE that and that is the process of realization.

And so, the important takeaway, IMO, is that all language can but point to an experience which involves the five senses. Our words have to make sense. If there is anything to see, hear, smell, feel, or taste, we will sense it. However, if there is nothing to sense, then obviously we can't sense it, no matter how nice or fancy our words are.

The realization practices are non-dual, meaning they embrace duality itself as a unit. When we perform practices like Vipassana (Insight Meditation), Mahamudra, or Dzogchen, etc. we forfeit our familiar subject and object duality, and cannot reconstruct it without falling out of non-duality.

I hope that you can see the problem. When we venture into the non-dual practices, intellectually we go all-out, meaning we are all-in, with no monitor or ability to witness ourselves other than the process of realization itself, which is a realization and not only an experience we can have.

This kind of non-dualistic realization is an enormous relief and deconstructs all our "constructions," like scattering a jig-saw puzzle in the wind. It can never be put back together again the same way. By realizing in this way, again and again and again, in short sessions, we ignore further karma, gradually remove the karma we have accrued, and gain the certainty of realization.

A SENSE FOR NON-SENSE

November 30, 2019

I “Liked” my own post on FB from yesterday, something I have never done before (except perhaps by mistake), because I have never seen a better description of the weakness of words than what I happened to write; I know; I am patting myself on the back. 😊

I was trying to get a sense or feel for what cannot make sense, what is non-sensual -- non-sense. It's not the fault of the dharma scholars that no matter how many words they use, they cannot grasp in words the essence of Recognition or realization as to the nature of the mind. And the reason is that there is nothing whatsoever to grasp. We cannot measure what is measureless, what is beyond measure. We cannot put into words what cannot be put into words. It's not that I don't know that. I do.

Writing blogs here has been my pleasure and I write them for myself, yet also to communicate. However, every once in a long while, what I write is “right enough” that what I am writing about is, to me, especially clearly seen. Yesterday's blog on “Why Words Don't Work,” is one of those, IMO. Obviously, this is only in my own opinion, because it does not appear to me that what I wrote was that clear or made much of an impact to many others. Perhaps a few, which just goes to show that words indeed don't work. And that has to be funny. Otherwise, Oh well ...

I have been here before. It used to be that taking photos of micro worlds and critters out in nature was the only way I could achieve Vipassana (Insight Meditation). And then, after almost three years of very hard dharma practice, I managed to be able to achieve Vipassana through writing as well. And that is true now. And as I continue to practice, I probably could do this with almost anything I do if I continue, as Rinpoche has directed me, to expand and extend what little realization I have. The irony is that perhaps only I am that impacted by what I write. LOL. But that's enough.

ESCAPE FROM DISTRACTION

December 1, 2019

[As for news, snowstorm dumps heavy load of snow, brings down a number of branches, taking out phone line, and our electric line just hit by another branch and its hanging there.

Snow still coming down. Looks pretty, though. 😊]

This blog could just as easily be called any of the following:

TV: THE MOST COMMON FORM OF MEDITATION

DISTRACTION FROM DISTRACTION

“WHAT, ME WORRY?” BEADS

All of the above titles fit. This blog is about escaping, but from what? I first want to point toward the fact that we often escape from the reality of whatever is being presented to or confronting us. And, I will put aside (for the moment) the fact that this “reality” in which we are living (Samsara) is pretty much nothing but itself an escape or an ignoring. We can discuss escape from escaping later in this blog.

For now, let’s talk about what we do at the end of a long day in order to escape and this may be as simple as just relaxing and watching a movie in the evening. Yes, I am often watching a movie, or part of me is. After all, focusing on a single point or object on the video screen is about as close to meditation as most Americans get. It is not far-fetched to say that watching TV is the most common form of meditation there is, certainly something that is practiced by innumerable folks, thoroughly practiced.

What else is going on when we focus our mind and rest on a video image on the screen? For me, there is the holding the mind steady on the movie and that concentration seems to allow me the freedom to roam with the mind elsewhere.

That’s what I do, for sure.

Things get done while I watch the movie, the day processed if nothing else, and all this while the movie ticks away. If I am watching a movie with Margaret, she often asks me about this or that happening on the screen or a bit of language as to what’s said. I have no idea, because I am somewhere else,

like a kite in the sky, with the movie as my kite-tail and ballast. The movie takes place of a stick, stone, or breath as in Tranquility Meditation. And, most often, the relaxation is there, which is not always so easy when sitting on a cushion and trying to calm the mind. With video, relaxation is easy for most people. ☺

Does anyone else do that? The essence of basic Tranquility Meditation is allowing the mind to come rest on an object or no object at all. That is the first and crucial step, the resting. After that, it is up to each of us what the mind, as tethered by entertainment, can do. However, the resting, for each of us is more or less the same.

Let the mind rest, as it may. And what awareness or insight may come to light or point the way toward insight is individual. I get some of my best insights from being distracted from the distraction of watching a movie. They just pop up. Having created one of the two largest movie databases on the planet (allmovie.com), I am no stranger to this type of distraction, and I used to be a shark on every movie detail. And, in those days, don't talk to me while I am watching a movie.

However, those days are gone. You can talk to me now or whatever. I may or may not know what is going on in the movie or care. ☺ Yes, I am escaping, relaxing, and more. Sometimes what is going on in the corner of my eye is writ large in my mind, thanks to the ballast of whatever movie or event I am watching. And now, as to escaping from distraction, it is similar:

It is not much different than using my beads or mala as a touchstone or tail-of-the-kite to satisfy my mind with activity, rather than be distracted. Mantra is the same thing, only it also includes intoning dharma-phrases. Of course, there is a difference between saying mantra and watching a movie, yet, in my opinion, not so much as I used to think.

I can remember, years ago, while I was in a personal interview with my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Rinpoche, when, kind of out of the blue, Rinpoche said to me that "You might want to try some mantra," by which he pointed out to me the beads and mantra as a stabilizing factor, a distraction to take my mind off all the other distractions. And of course, we are to

take each word directed at us from our root dharma teacher, as a command, and I did.

I don't always have my larger mala (beads) with me, but I always carry a little ring of worry beads with me at all times. And I use them, without thinking (and to prevent thinking) at those odd times when I am just there with nothing particular to do. I do that and it has been very focusing for me. If nothing else, it allows me to escape from the escape and remain aware.

Thank you, Rinpoche!

DON'T MAKE A HABIT OF PRACTICE

December 2, 2019

Being aware in this moment of this moment is indeed a gift or a true “present,” and for me it is like the traditional monk’s begging bowl, taking what is offered to me by the present moment, good, bad, or indifferent.

By not trying to dwell on memories of past experiences or attempting to dream of or anticipate the impending future, we can restrict ourselves to this present moment; it’s like drinking from a pure undefiled spring; and we must be careful not to alter (by our personal filter) that pure water of realization.

For me, right now, this instant is the begging bowl of the purest present moment. We take only what arises or is given as our path and live that. Yes, this is something we may have to learn how to do, yet whatever effort to accept this present moment just as it is without altering it is worth it, provided that effort itself does not become a habit. I wrote a little poem on this years ago, about distinguishing dharma “practice” from actual meditation. There is a huge difference. The words are a little tricky, so read with care.

PRACTICE A HABIT

Meditation,
While not practice,
Is a habit,
That can be practiced.

Practice builds habits,
But should not itself,
Become a habit.

In other words:

Practice,
To form a habit,
But don’t make,
A habit of it.

“RECOGNITION” IS RECOGNITION

December 3, 2019

When asked what “Recognition of the True Nature of the Mind” is like, the great Pakmo Drupa wrote:

“First, ‘The meeting of old friends’ refers to when two close friends bump into each other on the road: they recognize each other immediately.”

The point is that, although you have never recognized the true nature of your own mind, “Recognition of the True Nature of the Mind” is not like something you have never seen or don’t instinctively know. On the contrary, the whole point is that Recognition is a “recognition.”

With “Recognition,” we don’t see someone or something we don’t know, but always that which we know most intimately. It is never a look outward at the unknown, but rather always a look inward to what is intuitively known and most familiar, like going home. What a pleasant surprise!

Not uncomfortable, but comforting. Not tense, but relaxed. Not a question, but a certainty beyond a doubt. Not distracting, but seamless. What a relief!

WINTER RAMBLE

December 3, 2019

[Well, winter has not officially started, but to steal a line from Gertrude Stein: “Before winter started, winter started.” Phone line down, huge limb down, electric line down, etc. Otherwise, all is good. Black-Friday is over, Cyber-Weekend is over, Cyber-Monday is over, and, my guess, is that Cyber-Year is launched. 😊]

And I am in the mood for a (hopefully-clear) ramble, so those of you looking for a scholarly approach today or with a train to catch, please forgive me.

The intense interest (I mean we are totally interested) of Insight Meditation focuses the mind and that insight also brings increased stability to Tranquility Meditation. Seeing beyond subject and object to the “Seeing” of both as one, breaks the stalemate. Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation work together, hand and glove, much like merit and wisdom (the two accumulations).

In the wake of Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation as reciprocal functions of Mahamudra Meditation, karma is ignored and no longer accumulated. We are protected by our own intense and natural interest (like magnetic fusion tunnels) and kept from looking to the right or the left at conceptual thought, and instead, seeing the Seeing itself (rather than what is seen -- subject and object). Karma itself is foregone from accumulating when duality is not present. If we realize experience as it immediately occurs, it is like the flame on a butter lamp of Samsara, a flame that systematically consumes Samsara.

Insight Meditation is like an express train that makes no stops in Samsara. We are protected by the flame of realization that consumes duality with consummate certainty. Everything is revealed, much like Atlantis rising, and gradually comes into view. Our only limitation are our own limitations, the purity (or lack) of our own filter. The hallmark of Insight Meditation is total certainty, subject (as mentioned) to our limitations. Insight Meditation is without a doubt, the unveiling or

realization of Samsara for what it is, the certainty of wisdom-Nirvana.

Insight Meditation is a leap over duality that turns into a glide that is faster than the speed of conceptual thought. Or, it is a Black Hole into which everything grave or with gravity succumbs and passes into, through, and is found to be nothing.

When the subject also becomes the object and the object a subject, the two mix and become one. The corners and edges of duality dissolve and, as they say, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea." All that is left is the elision of the two into one and the resulting freedom from duality through realizing the nature of the "Two and the One."

This scope of realization is free and includes duality. This is the result of realization, the process of realization, and realizing. Realization is a process, a journey one is on and not a state with a subject and an object. Realization is entering a stream that you enter entirely and cannot observe or be observed from outside.

We give up our objective viewpoint when we become a subject and we ourselves jump into the experience. Then, the best we can do is to realize the actual nature of what we are experiencing, but not from outside or by sitting on the bank of the river of life, but rather by jumping in and swimming for our lives.

When nothing can be objectified, we can only realize just that, that nothing CAN be objectified. It is this Realization that I am pointing at here and nothing more than that "nothing." Nothing also cannot be objectified. That leaves us exactly in the present moment.

BODHICITTA AND THE ALCHEMY OF INSIGHT

December 4, 2019

[Still winter here. They tell me that the loss of trees due to very heavy snow was greater than any in many, many years. And the snow still hangs as it fell. There has been no thaw. Here is a photo I took with my iPhone of what it looks like around here. Lovely, yes.]

Our normal dualistic thinking is like running a three-legged race between the subject, the object, and reality. It can be contrasted with realization practices like Mahamudra, with its special form of Insight Meditation and Tranquility Meditation. While “The Preliminaries” of dharma practice are dualistic and much like going to school, Mahamudra realization starts with our realization as to the nature of the mind and is a progressive path of realization until Enlightenment itself is eventually attained.

Dharma “Realization” has no chapters and verse, but rather is a process that embraces the nature of Samsara itself in its entirety. However, unlike the dualistic practices, the process of realization is smoother than slick and totally interesting, because we are completely immersed in it, hook, line, and sinker. Nothing, IMO, could be more fascinating and is. It’s like watching the sun come up as we realize that the hidden wisdom of Samsara is being realized on the spot, degree by degree.

With Insight Meditation, it seems as if we are never confronted or faced with our own ignorance in a shaming fashion. Instead, one is completely familiar with everything that is being realized, as if the dharma takes us by the hand and personally leads us through realization a step or degree at a time -- a walk through reality just as it is.

And what is realized is always of one piece, like sucking a piece of hard candy in its entirety. There is not one part here to understand and another part over there to understand until they all fit together. The pieces already fit perfectly to one another and we realize the perfect unity of the dharma as a

whole for the first time. Along with this, Samsara is simultaneously revealed or realized as a unity, a degree at a time.

Insight Meditation has none of the distractions of doubt and not-knowing that we are all so used to. Unlike the bad clutch of duality and conceptual understanding, realization is as smooth as silk and buffered so that we are, as mentioned, not interrupted by indecision and doubt. It is all of one piece.

IMO, Insight Meditation is the most addictive process that I could ever imagine, if we can be addicted to clarity and lucidity, and we can. After what we have experienced for innumerable lifetimes as obscurations, the effortlessness of Insight Meditation is pure alchemy.

THE ALCHEMY OF INSIGHT

December 5, 2019

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A SOUND WITHOUT AN ECHO

December 6, 2019

[An update on my state of mind, which is probably more than you want to know. Nevertheless, there it is. I may take a break from posting as often or post on less personal issues until I resolve some issues, which takes time and space.

Thanks for the support. 😊]

My major stroke was a vacation, literally, a vacating, and I lost all sense of my Self for many weeks (and then months) at that. That event only opened new doors through which the wind now blows, doors I cannot close because my eyes are still open and, as of yet, there has been no closure. I am still looking for a response, for an answer, or even an echo. Right now it remains a singularity.

One thing I am finding is that I need time for this change I am going through, not just a little time, but enough time to not worry about it. There are cycles and then there are cycles. Some of them are longer and some much longer than that. Not all circles or cycles return in the time we each have to live them in this lifetime. The straighter the line, the finer the curve. There are sounds that, although distinctly heard, seemingly have no echo, at least not yet. It's like waiting for that thunderclap after lightning strikes.

In other words, there are times when I have to stop monitoring my own changes and, instead, just submit myself to change. When that happens, I can monitor change only until such time as I, myself, am what is changing. And that apparently is happening. It's like an hourglass with the sands of life running through my fingers, yet still there are questions without answers.

It feels like there are not enough hours in the day for me to reformat before I have to sleep again. I weave during the day what seemingly gets unraveled during the night. And, it often seems like one step forward and two steps back, as if there are two trains running, and sometimes it seems that the "I in me" is retrograde. I have pared down and even make time, but is it enough? It has to be, but is it enough?

My reach is only so far and no farther, my grip only so strong,
after which I too am swept away. What will be lost?

As William Blake wrote "None of equal value was lost."

I try to not fight change, but like a rollercoaster, I find myself
hanging on. And there is letting go of that final handhold, my
last finger on the scale. I've pared life down to the least
obligations I can manage, yet even those few chafe at the bit.
Sooner or later, I will have to just let go and revolve, complete
a revolution with no guarantees of remaining the same. How
would I ever know? It's like rebirth, but in the here and now.

I am reminded of this poem, which I have posted from time to
time, because it is so accurate as to my condition, a condition
I am adjusting to:

TIME FOR NOTHING

Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,
I just need more time to do nothing,

THE AERODYNAMICS OF PRACTICE

December 7, 2019

[I'm on a semi-retreat until after the New Year. I will continue to post things like this as they occur to me. I am also doing things like cleaning the basement, etc. You can always message me and ask questions or post questions here and I will try to respond.]

I will spend (and have spent all my life) almost any amount of time looking at how best (most enjoyable) to do something that I have to do anyway, no matter what. I don't just draw a line and say to myself that I just have to do this. I scope the problem out and try to find an approach to doing it that would be the least damaging to my spirit. I started at kindergarten and school in general, which I found very hard to enjoy. I like teaching myself or working with a life-teacher, one-on-one.

This is especially true for any kind of dharma practice. And, this is because dharma rote-practices are particularly easy to damage yourself on or, the term that is commonly used, "stain." We don't want to stain our practice because once stained, we don't feel as much like doing it. This is why in the dharma teachings, the advice almost always is: stop the daily practice on an upbeat and not when you are already tired of doing it. Quit for the day while you are ahead, and not when you already are rebelling.

Delinquency in dharma (or anything else) is an easy habit to acquire and a hard one to remove. If we have stained our dharma practice by pushing or trying too hard, feeling like doing it once again can be difficult to come by. I can remember back in the 1960s and early 1970s, when both Zen and Tibetan approaches to sitting meditation were extreme, IMO. It almost was like brute force was encouraged, that we sit, sit, and still sit, long after we had any feeling for it or not. A lot of this came from a Zen ethic, but the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche only encouraged it. To make matters worse, everyone was sitting on those rectangular cushions (Gomdens), with a sharp-edged piece of hard foam in a cover. The edges cut into your legs and made sitting for long periods not easy.

It took me years to become smart enough to just reject these cushions and that was when I began to notice that all the rinpoches and lamas almost never sat on a cushion like that. Instead, they had cushions made of a soft cover filled with a little kapok or loose filler so that the cushion conformed to your behind, rather than vice-versa. In fact, I spent some years developing different approaches to a sitting cushion, including layers of carpet stacked like a ramp, cushions filled with hulls and grain, square, round, kidney shaped, and so on. The idea is not to make it difficult for yourself to sit, but rather to make your cushion or meditation seat reasonably comfortable so that you can rest. I can sit for hours on the one I use today, which is just an old gomden cloth-cover filled with a smaller amount of Kapok so that it kind of molds to your fanny.

The photo here is what I use to sit on, which basically is an old Gomden cover, filled loosely with Kapok. It sits on a Tibetan prayer rug covering a Japanese-style Zabuton. Or, I just sit on the Zabuton and the cushion, and skip the rug.

In short, I have spent years on finding ways to enjoy those things I have to do anyway. Time well spent, IMO.

This is true of most everything I do. Another important area is that of exercise. During the summer months, where I can get outside and walk hills, not so much of a problem. However, in winter, when I'm facing the elliptical trainer, my approach takes some finessing. In the beginning, I would just get on the trainer and ride. And, if I got bored, I would just tough it out. However, I found out that made it harder for me to feel like doing it this day or that.

Oh yeah, I had some nice rock concert-poster art on the walls in front of me, but that got old fast. Next, I mounted a small old laptop in front of me and hooked it up to the Internet. I tried to watch news and YouTube, and so on. I watched almost all of Anthony Bourdain on YouTube until he committed suicide, after which not so much. He disappointed me.

And so, I switched to dharma teachings on YouTube, and that went on for a while. Interesting? Yes, but too eclectic, with teachings from all over the place. I kept experimenting and

finally settled on (which I do to this day) audio teachings by my own root-guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, mostly teachings that I have heard before. For example, I have the Ten-Day Teaching intensives on Mahamudra, which I attended religiously for 31 years. That alone is almost 1,000 hours of teachings, and so on.

And so, I listen to those tapes and exercise at the same time. That is, for me, the least painful way (by far) of getting my daily exercise in the winter months. In every case, my goal is to find an approach or attitude where I enjoy and want to do the practice, although even this has its difficulties.

Of course, not mentioned here is the fact that all of my businesses were based on my personal hobbies, something I loved to do. That would be another blog, but that took the most time and care to arrange, but made working a joy, except perhaps to my family, since I hated to have to take a vacation away from my work. True. 😊

I will post an article on meditation cushions tomorrow if, as they say, “The good god is willing, and the creek don’t rise.”

THE EASIEST WAY TO PRACTICE DHARMA

December 14, 2019

[Margaret and I had a visit from our dear old friend Martin Wolf and his partner Joanna Brunson. Martin and I worked together for a number of years. He is an executive chef who now teaches at some university or technical complex. Martin is also a long-time dharma practitioner, so we shared that topic as well. As for me, I am still on retreat, yet I can't help but write a little. And one thing I have confirmed once again is that a little dharma practice each day, while helpful, will never get the job of getting us realized done in this lifetime. We need more than "some" time on the cushion per day. This article is about that for those interested.]

What's enough dharma practice for a day? This depends on where you are in dharma practice right now and where you want to get to in this particular lifetime. I was raised Catholic and found early-on that going to church for an hour once a week was probably not going to get a scamp like me to heaven, not to mention that I didn't like being forced to go to church.

If we want to be a great guitar player or a great "anything," practicing once a week (or even a half hour a day) will probably not get the job done. In my experience, it is no different when it comes to dharma practice, practicing the dharma. A little dharma practice may keep your foot in the door, but it probably is not going to get you enlightened or, perhaps, even fit for what we all face after death in the bardo. If you think what I just wrote through, which I have, this should be obvious or we are just whistling in the dark, IMO.

Dharma practice, which is new to most westerners takes at least as much practice as anything mentioned above, and probably more. Where is this time for practice going to come from? Where are we going to fit any lengthy practice into our day, especially if we are a householder (with a family) and not a monk? That's what is being discussed here.

I am retired at this point, but for many decades I had to work, run a business, raise a family, and on and on. About all I

could do, in the best of times, was perhaps two hours of dharma practice a day, often an hour (or thereabouts) in the morning and another hour in the evening, if other emerging issues did not distract me.

It was difficult for me to carve two hours a day for dharma practice from my schedule. And often it was less, even much less, than that. I can remember crawling into bed at night, totally tired from a day's work, and remembering that I forgot to do any practice that day whatsoever. I would sit up in bed and do five minutes of practice right there, but that was obviously an afterthought and nothing more than a goodwill gesture.

My point here is simple. It can be difficult (if we are not a monk) in keeping more than the least practice going on a regular basis. With that in mind, I want to share with you what I eventually did about this, in case it might prove useful to anyone. And the key point here involves taking advantage of what is called "post-meditation," what we can do in the way of dharma practice off-the-cushion, as we go on about the rest of the day.

Let me be clear that I am NOT suggesting you give up your formal on-the-cushion dharma practice, however small it is, and instead just do post-meditation practices, which is why they call it "post-meditation" practice. It comes AFTER we do our daily practice on-the-cushion. On-the-cushion practice is like the tail on a kite. Without a tail, a kite cannot fly. Our formal on-the-cushion practice is the tail of the kite, so to speak. It grounds us from just blowing in the wind.

That being said, are there any post-meditation practices that we can do off-the-cushion so that instead of perhaps 10-30-minutes of dharma practice on-the-cushion a day, we have in addition many hours of significant dharma practice each day, enough to actually move the meter toward enlightenment or at least Recognition of the actual nature of our own mind? And the short answer is: there are such practices, and I will describe one here that anyone can do, one that even provides its own energy, takes no extra time, and one we can do while we do whatever else we have to do during the day.

The following would be considered a part of the Lojong practices, which are preliminary practices to purify our consciousness in preparation for Recognition of the true nature of the mind. This technique, called “Reactivity Tong-Len” is as simple (or difficult) as simply noting your reactions throughout the day. There is not much effort involved, because our reactions are not voluntary, but spontaneous, so that when we react to something, we have already spent whatever energy that reaction required. Plus, with a little awareness, our reactions are easy to spot because we find ourselves “reacting.” And finally, what is required of us upon being aware that we have reacted is simply noting that reaction, realizing that it is our (and only our) reaction, regardless of what provoked it, and then just dropping it. That’s all, but this practice has powerful rewards dharmically.

In my experience, through examining my own reactions throughout the day, looking to reduce them, I found that since reactions on our part are just that, involuntary reactions, they were perfect to work with. With reactions, which just happen, and when they do, we have already spent our energy by reacting, I find that there is no benefit to scolding myself over-examining what was involuntary on my part. Don’t waste time doing that. It just makes it more conceptual and distractive.

And there was no use in schooling myself against reacting. Any “effort” to control my reactions just compounds the effort. What does work, instead of scolding myself, is simply to note when I react and then drop it. When I note it, I can’t help but observe something about the context, but following that out or thinking about the context was, as mentioned, not helpful. Simply noting the reaction and then dropping it is all that was needed.

With practices like the traditional Tong-Len, one of the main preliminary practices in dharma training (exchanging ourselves for others), although beneficial, tend to be (at least at first) very conceptual and certainly dualistic in nature. This form of “Reaction Tong-Len” that I find so useful does not require another person, but can be practiced by our self and with our self and without trying to gin up some compassion or whatever for others. It is just our own reaction.

I found that since our involuntary reactions to things throughout the day were just that, involuntary, although not non-dual, they were about as close to non-dual as we are going to get. They require no effort on our part, and in each case, the energy of a reaction is already spent in the reaction itself. The toothpaste is out of the tube, so to speak.

In fact, when I presented this “Reaction Tonglen” technique to my guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, during a Q&A session at one of the 10-Day Mahamudra intensives, Rinpoche remarked that this working with reactions was a legitimate technique.

I find that the advantage in monitoring our reactions is that there is no question that the reaction is non-conceptual and in-the-flesh-immediate for each of us. There is no argument about that. They just happen.

And all we need do is to note the reaction, recognize that it is OUR reaction (and no one else’s), no matter what provoked it, and having noted it, just drop it. We have to OWN it and it is not useful to spend time thinking about what caused it, other than to note it and drop it.

These reactions can be like a firecracker going off or a car suddenly honking, but there are also reactions like the phone or doorbell ringing, or coming around the corner and finding ourselves face-to-face with someone who does not like us (or we believe so), and so on. In fact, with a little awareness, you will find that we react thousands of times a day to the least little thing. We may not like someone’s dress or tie, or their new shoes, big nose, or how they wear their hair. All reactions, large or small, are grist for the mill.

After a very short time, we become very skilled at recognizing our own reactions. Again: the important thing is to recognize that we react, note the reaction, and be aware of the context (but don’t examine it), own that this is our reaction and only ours, and then simply drop it and move on. You will find that after even a few repetitions and our reaction to a given stimulus will start to subside and, eventually, instead of reacting, we learn to respond accordingly to whatever caused the reaction.

Over time, all that energy that we spent (and was wasted) in our reaction is liberated and we are free to use that energy as we wish. We regain an enormous amount of life energy that was previously wasted in reactions. And, best of all, removing all these distractions for reactions clears and calms our mind. This is an exquisite dharma practice and also easy to perform.

And so, at the end of the day, aside from our brief time on-the-cushion, we have an entire day of off-the-cushion reaction-awareness that is legit, very useful, and a dharma practice. And all of this can be done without interrupting or disturbing whatever job or work we have to do. Yes, we have the interruption of our own reactions, which you already have now, and with this practice, they will begin to subside.

I don't intend to be rude, but if a practice as natural and easy as this is more than you can manage, then I can't think of anything easier. Here are some free articles and a book on Reaction Tong-Len.

Some Articles on Reactivity Dharma Practice:

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

A Free Book on this and standard Tong-Len

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition...>

REALIZING THE PROCESS OF NIRVANA

December 17, 2019

[I am still off-the-blog, so to speak, but thoughts below came along and I will post them. The storms of winter and its winds, ice, and cold are heading for the winter solstice on December 21 at 11:19 PM EST, after which the Sun turns northward and the days get longer and the nights shorter. Right now, the nights are still getting longer. Of course, although the corner of the solstice will soon be rounded, the inertia of the southward forces will impact us for months to come, even as the daylight lengthens. Now, for a little blog.]

Samsara and Nirvana are said to be connate, meaning they are two sides of the same coin. This is a seminal concept in understanding the dharma. In other words, Nirvana is simply the realization of Samsara. Remove the filter of attachment and fixation that comprises karma from Samsara and we are left with Nirvana as a result.

And so, the sum total of our karma is the fuel that is consumed in the process of realizing Nirvana. And that fuel has to be the conversion or transformation through the realization of Samsara as Nirvana, degree by degree. It seems to me that there has to be fuel for the alchemy of realization. In other words, something has to be realized that was never realized before, and that realization is through the purification of our karma-fuel.

The meaning of Nirvana is said to come from a word translated as “to blow out,” like we would blow out a candle, but etymologists say a more correct translation is “a fire going out for lack of fuel.” That last translation makes a lot of sense to me because, to my thinking, if Nirvana is the full realization of Samsara (i.e. that they are connate), then Samsara is the fuel for our realization, and that realization apparently (unless we realize Nirvana all at once) usually takes a long time, perhaps many lifetimes. That is the time it takes to use up the fuel of Samsara by degrees in order to realize Nirvana. Also, it is frequently taught that when our “karma” is exhausted, that’s when we will stop the cycle of rebirth.

IMO, understanding the relationship of Samsara to Nirvana is not just a scholarly exercise in Buddhist logic, but imperative for dharma students to understand at the root level.

THE VISION OF THE ECLIPSE

December 18, 2019

There is an eclipse coming. I took time off recently for a semi-retreat and ended up on something more like a vision-quest, although I had no intention of one. Either way, I had a little vision or some insight. And, of course, in myopia, I neglected to note that we have an eclipse coming up on December 26th at 00:14 AM EST. And with an eclipse comes what I have termed the "Vision of the Eclipse." I should know, LOL; I wrote a book on just that topic, called:

"Vision of the Eclipse"

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

And sure enough, here it is; I had a little vision. As to what exactly a vision is, I would say this:

A vision is not so much a picture in the sky or direct-voice, like a comic-book text-blurb, but rather a vision is a moment or time of intense, well, "vision," an intensity that only afterward do we realize we had a vision, as the ordinary mind reestablishes itself once again, as we come out of it. We could call it a deeper imprint than our ordinary events, one that serves as a marker from which we can measure time from and look back to. I certainly will measure from this recent life-articulation point.

Anyway, that happened to me and I was certainly not expecting anything like a vision, much less was I out looking for one. As to exactly what that vision was, I can't yet say because I am still making sense out of it. As to putting it into language, about all I can say is that I got it, but I can't express it until I can find the right words. Suffice it to say, it removed a veiling effect that I was under the impression of. If I had to say it in a word, this "vision" took away a certain veil of didacticism from my manner. That sounds fancy and, as mentioned, I am still working on an understanding of it and the ripples from the event have yet to reach the banks of my little pond, so to speak. Yet, I am increasingly aware of it.

So, am I done with my time out from blogging? I can't say, because I don't yet know; as usual, I have a lot to consider for the moment. And this note here is already a blog. 😊

This whole time (until January 11-12, 2020), as the planet Saturn transits to a conjunction with the planet Pluto in the heavens, is something to be aware of for all of us. Why I have undergone some insight by way of an insight or vision, I have no idea. Certainly, I was at the very end of a long pendulum swing and (apparently) I had nowhere to go but back the way I came, by entering the start of a return swing of the pendulum.

Certainly, this is one of the vicissitudes (or blessings) of Samsara and Nirvana.

MY RECENT INSIGHT

December 19, 2019

I mentioned that I would attempt to find words for my recent sudden insight, so here goes. And this is very preliminary, because I am still trying to unpack the whole realization and its many rays or implications. And so, in general:

First, it involves the unboxing of the “me-in-a-box,” whatever sense you can make of that. I will try to explain. I took some time off for a short semi-retreat, to kind of get my mind sorted or more clear. That timeout is not up, yet before it will be, I have already changed course enough that I no longer see the necessity of my original impulse for clarification. I am clarified. In other words, that balloon has already popped, leaving me here and now. And where is that?

Throughout all of my life, I can clearly see now that the threads of my interests can be traced, And, that thread is the dharma, perhaps just my own personal dharma-thread, but that is what weaves through it all and knits my life together. I’m finding that thread of dharma, of course, in the official dharma teachings themselves, but in a similar way, I now see that the same thread is in (or is) everything that has ever interested me.

In other words, everything of interest up to now in my life is, obviously, what has caught my attention or interested me. And, yes, it masses in the dharma teachings themselves, but it also runs through everything I have ever known to have an interest in: astrology, music, film, poetry, photography, nature, philosophy, and so on. To me, that is quite similar to the concept of the Yidam, in that all those threads eventually weave themselves into a rope or path that leads each of us to realization and our eventual enlightenment. It is unique to us, our personal dharma path to realization.

And here, I’m not exactly reversing the process, but I am looking back and suddenly able to see the many threads that have led me to the here and the now. These threads too should be honored. It’s all dharma, all the time. This concept makes sense to me. Just as we can’t salt the salt, so to

speak, we can't "dharma" the dharma. And so, my advice to myself is "Don't try and make the dharma more special than it is." It does not need our help. Reifying the dharma is still just more reification.

If we can't lead the horse to water, perhaps we can bring some water to the horse, meaning, if the dharma is all around us, it can help ourselves to see the dharma in all that we do each day and not just what we have formally labelled as "dharma" or as the final goal of dharma. And we can work with that.

In my history, I would have to label my recent insight as somehow very Zen, this seeing the proliferation of the dharma everywhere I look and in everything that I do. Either way, there it is. For me, this means that my concentration on whatever I had labelled as "dharma" up to now was, if not a bit of reification, perhaps a little too formal, not organic enough, and even somewhat sterile.

What am I going to do about it? I'm working on it. Perhaps, for starters I might relax, not try so hard, even with the dharma, and let my feet touch the ground. It's OK.

THE HEART OF IT

Let me rephrase, please. In a single moment and sign, I realized that I am not by nature and don't even want to be a dharma pundit. And most strikingly, I realized that the threads of dharma run through all of Samsara and that we each follow them out with our interest. That's what "interest" is.

Dharma that is concise or condensed to the level of what are called the "pith instructions" are often not always easily understood by everyone. In my little vision (or sudden awareness), I realized that I am going the wrong way. Instead of becoming more and more distant and exclusive, I would rather (and more naturally) go in the other direction, helping to reveal the dharma that is all around us in what each of us all already know or have available to us.

The threads of our truest innate interest lead to the realization of the dharma and those threads exist (and always have existed) right now in everything we do. The Buddha Nature within us is already present, just not realized. There is no point in my cloistering myself in an ivory tower or getting on

some high horse, when I feel more naturally with my feet placed firmly on the ground.

I have done my best to share the highest form of dharma I know, when that could only be useful to the very few except for perhaps helping folks to gain some familiarity with the more advanced terms and concepts.

I have run my own limited knowledge of dharna-realization about as far as it can go. I can't seem to find any advanced dharma students interested in discussing my questions with and younger students may well feel the same about me. I don't and we don't need that.

Anyway, that is about as clear as I can state my change of view in words. It's still early. 😊

INSCAPE: THE EARLY AARON NEVILLE

December 20, 2019

[Things seldom go as my conscious mind plans for them to and trying harder won't help me. Instead of a deepening "dharma time," I find myself examining my music background which stretches back to the 1960s and even the late 1950s. Go figure. Or, is this the dharma-of-music in me that I am finding. Suddenly, to my mind, dharma seems to be everywhere. Perhaps I am just letting go of being so formal and may find myself walking right through that door of formality and outside the box.]

For example, consider the effect on me of the music of Aaron Neville.

When you see the name "Neville" you think of the Neville Brothers, Art, Cyril, Charles, and Aaron, and perhaps you think of New Orleans and Creole music. And just maybe a few of you might remember Aaron Neville's hit single "Tell It Like It Is," which reached #2 on the Top 10 Pop list and topped Billboard's R&B charts for five weeks in 1967. And Aaron Neville has been active in music and film ever since.

Yet, chances are you don't know his early records on the Minit and Parlo labels, which for me are some of his best work. I consider it very precious music. Let's see if you like it too.

Almost all of it can be found on his album "Tell It Like It Is," which came out in 1966. It is on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) for something like \$5, but the tunes are on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and elsewhere, so you can still hear them. And you can get that album in used condition on eBay.

First, let's hear his big hit "Tell It Like It Is," IMO one of the most beautiful R&B/Soul tunes that I have ever heard.

"Tell It Like It Is"

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

This next tune is incredible. Listen to the words very carefully and think out of the box. This is as close to a definition of the

illusory nature of reality and the clarity embedded in Samsara as I have ever heard in song. Can you hear it?

"She Took You for a Ride"

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

Here is another complete show-stopper, sung so gently, yet communicating so much.

"You Think You're So Smart"

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

And, so it goes. Let your mind relax and listen to what Neville put out so many years ago, as fresh today as it was then. There are not many artists of this caliber.

"Over You"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ln1Q0gz6aQ>

"Since You're Gone"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrhLNnYi7kI>

"Why Worry"

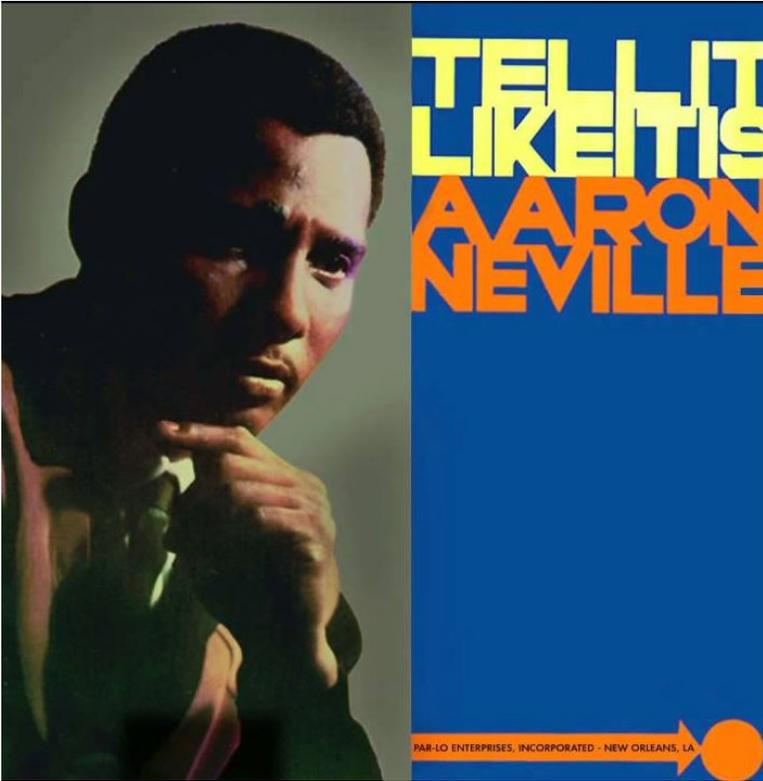
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ju0f3HABMfY>

"Jailhouse"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2giap0Yyh4>

Well there you have the early Aaron Neville, for me always a special treat to listen to, even after almost fifty some years.

[Album cover for "Tell It Like It Is."]



INSCAPE: SOUL QUEEN of NEW ORLEANS, IRMA THOMAS

December 20, 2019

[Tomorrow Saturday, the 21st of December, 2019 at 11:19 PM is the Winter Solstice. It's all headed toward spring and increasing light from that point onward.]

While I'm still in a New Orleans mood, here is another of my most favorite women singers. Everyone has favorites. Three of my most-favorite women singers are Billie Holiday, Irma Thomas, and Barbara Lewis. Billie Holiday, IMO, is hands-down the best singer I have ever heard. Her microtones, nuances, and ambiance are just the best for my taste. She is so good that I seldom play her records because she takes so much out of me that I have to get-up to even listen to her.

And I love soul music, especially of a certain kind, and my kind of soul is exemplified by the Queen of New Orleans Soul Music, Irma Thomas. She just kills me! What talent!

The first time I went to New Orleans, which I believe was in 1980, the city had such an effect on me that literally the train (we took) had to carry me away from that city. I might have stayed there forever. It is the most sensuous city I have ever been to. I was there for an astrology conference and sharing adjoining rooms with my dear friends Charles A. Jayne, Jr. and John Townley, two of the best astrologers I know of. I could tell some stories, but I won't.

I had my whole family with me in New Orleans and I can remember that my two (at the time) older girls Lotis and Anne spent their time catching lizards (anoles) in the gardens around the hotel. I also remember when one night we all ate at a restaurant down on Bourbon Street called "Anything Goes," where each room in the restaurant has a different theme. If I remember, the brilliant astrologer Jim Eshelman was with us. Well, as it turns out, we ate in the "Bordello Room" and we chose to order something called the "Bacchanalian Feast," which had to be carried in by two servers (on one giant tray) dressed in Roman togas. But I digress!

The last time I saw Irma Thomas was in 2000 (with Mavis Staples) at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor. It was part of the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival and, as a two-term board member (and official historian) for that group; I got to invite Irma Thomas to the festival and was in charge of taking care of her stay, which for me was like a dream come true. For one, Irma and I are the same age and we got to have dinner together, at which, of course, I told her (song by song) how much I loved her music, and I do. She also has been a real influence on my daughter May, who can also sing soul music "real good" too. May grew up hearing Irma Thomas around the house.

As it turned out, Irma was not planning on singing her old stuff that I love so much (i.e. the tunes that are linked below) at her concert that night, yet after our dinner she put aside her planned program and sang all those old ones just for me. I was in, as they say, some kind of heaven that night. I heard just yesterday from a friend who has spent years in New Orleans that Irma Thomas is still doing well.

So, here are some Irma Thomas songs for you to take in. I envy you if this is your first time with them. They are so beautiful.

I'm Gonna' Cry 'Til My Tears Run

Dry" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqvgyp910>

"Two Winters

Long" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avfBh4Xv7tQ>

"The Hurt's All

Gone" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npzp5SDdp1s>

"It's Raining" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-Ofyo24Uzc>

"Ruler of My

Heart" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqkVqEEl8jU>

"Girl Needs

Boy" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgRI8xdBHQ8>

Perhaps the most well-known song by Irma Thomas is "Time Is On My Side," covered by the Rolling Stones long ago. Just to prove why I don't listen to covers much when the original source is available, give a listen to the original tune itself.

"Time Is On My

Side" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_ArDnZrmi0

If you have not listened, and I mean really listened, to Irma Thomas, you have missed something for which there is no substitute. There is a piece of your heart that has yet to be touched. So, do complete your education by falling in love with the tunes of the Soul Queen of New Orleans, Irma Thomas.



INSCAPE: COUNTRY MUSIC'S HANK LOCKLIN

December 21, 2019

I've been watching Ken Burn's ten-disk series on country music. Like most of Burn's work, it can get a little tedious, and some of my favorite country singers were left out or got short shrift. One of my favorite country tenors is Hank Locklin; not his most popular tunes (which charted), but his early material, which is not known well.

Each of these "Inscape" series is meant to introduce those interested into an area of music that they might never find otherwise. Let me know if you like these, and if you don't want to read the history part, just listen to the tunes. When I founded the All-Music Guide many years ago, the idea was to show folks where the best music is for a particular artist, so that you could know if you like that style. If you don't like the "best," then you at least have heard the right tunes for that artist.

Country music is an acquired taste for many people, in particular in areas of the country where about all you can get on the radio is country. I live in one of those areas. And we have all heard the joke: what happens when you play a country-record backward? "You get your house back, your wife back, your dog back, and your truck back," etc.

I happen to love country music but, like walking in a cow pasture, I have learned where to step. And one safe place is early country music. Perhaps my favorite country tenor is Hank Locklin, but it is not his chartbusting tunes that interest me, although, of course, they are nice too. It is his early work that I consider some of the best in country music, and I am going to play you some. First, for those who don't want to know more about Locklin (some history), if you want to get right to listening, jump to the link area below if you wish.

Hank Locklin (Lawrence Hankins Locklin), one of country music's great tenors, was born February 15, 1918 in the small town of McLellan located in the lumbering district of the Florida Panhandle. The youngest son of four children, he went to a one-room schoolhouse and was musical even as a

young child. Hank was injured at the age of eight in an accident and the long recovery process was the time when he first began to learn music.

Although interested in the guitar early on, it was not until his mid-teens that he really began to master that instrument. Hank was active in music in high school (which he never finished) and at eighteen won first prize in a talent show. He went on to do spots on the local radio station as he became more and more interested in entertaining. By the mid-1940s, he was playing on the radio and doing in-person performances in Florida and nearby states. For the next ten years or so, Locklin worked many jobs (musical and otherwise), played with a variety of groups, and, through a variety of trials, gradually worked his way up the country music ladder to recognition. A good account of these years can be found in the Bear Family box liner notes as written by Otto Kissinger.

His career did not really take off until he joined the RCA Victor label in the spring of 1955. Locklin's work with RCA has the added advantage that almost all of it was produced by Chet Atkins, often with Atkins himself on rhythm or lead guitar and with the added trills and fill-ins of Floyd Kramer on piano. The extreme simplicity of his early works makes this combination of his clear voice and these particular sidemen very effective.

Hank's big popular hits "Send me the Pillow that you Dream On" (written by Locklin), "Geisha Girl," and "Please Help Me I'm Falling" everyone knows, and I will list them at the end of this article, but they are not the ones I most want for you to hear.

True Locklin fans like me are in love with his very simple heartfelt tunes, so leave your cynicism at the door and give this listen:

"Shadows"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcEoXHBqFz0>

"A Good woman's Love"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgeIzg9kuwc>

"Sittin' Alone at a Table for Two"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuYAu0jczMc>

“Tired of Bummin’ Around”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDX_hfj5SB0

“Who Am I to Cast the First Stone.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPl6ZIoSxb8>

“Seven or Eleven”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t42aTP9vBn0>

“Lessons in Love”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Zh8Zng2TWk>

“Golden Wristwatch”

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

“The House of the Lord”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nF8e0peTriM>

And there are many others tunes like these. These early songs are characterized by Locklin's crystal clear tenor, the ultra-simplicity of the songs themselves, and their straight-to-the heart emotional plea. Kitty Wells has this same kind of gift. The result is a group of incredible songs that, first released as singles, later became available on Camden, RCA's budget label. Now, after many years of neglect, many of these songs are now available on the Bear family Box “Hank Locklin, Please Help Me I'm Falling” Locklin stayed with the RCA label until the mid 1960s.

Locklin helped pioneer the idea of concept albums; his albums; “Foreign Love” and “Irish Songs, Country Style” are examples. He also recorded an album tribute to Roy Acuff, “A Tribute to Roy Acuff, King of Country Music”. His Irish songs are pretty near definitive. As time goes by, the vocal chorus begins to creep into the Locklin albums a little more than purists might like, but his crystal clear tenor never deserts him.

Hank hit the top-ten charts again in the 1968 with "The Country Hall of Fame." In the 1970s he toured overseas often, was very popular in Ireland and Great Britain, and made at least one tour with Chet Atkins to the far East (Japan). After leaving RCA, he went on to record for a number of labels including MGM and Plantation. He retired and lived in Brewton, Alabama, only some 20 miles from his birth place. He died March 8, 2009 at his home.

If you like a tenor voice and want to hear one clear and purified, Hank Locklin is about as good as it gets.

And here are a couple of the more popular Locklin tunes that charted:

“Please Help Me I’m Falling”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ59ZZYKbVE>

“Geisha Girl”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8Ty8HbGuSk>

“Hank Locklin, Please Help Me I'm Falling”, Bear Family box BCD 15730

This is a four-disc retrospective of Locklin's years with RCA Victor from 1955 through the mid 1960s. Of course Hank's big popular hits "Send me the Pillow that you Dream On" (written by Locklin), "Geisha Girl," and "Please Help Me I'm Falling" are there. While a great many important early Locklin songs are missing from this collection ("I'm tired of Bummin' Around," "Sitting Alone at a Table for Two," and "Golden Wristwatch"), many fine songs are included that have been unavailable for many years. Songs like "Who Am I to Cast the First Stone," "A Good Woman's Love," "Seven or Eleven." It is this precious early material that has been unavailable, most produced by Chet Atkins, often with Atkins on guitar and almost all with the excellent piano accompaniment of Floyd Cramer. Also included are a number of Locklin's concept albums: “Foreign Love”, “Irish songs, Country Style”, plus his album tribute to Roy Acuff, “A Tribute to Roy Acuff, King of Country Music”.

Of course his early material on Four Star Records (pre RCA) and his later material on MGM and Plantation are not here.

Most of these songs in this box set are taken from albums that appeared on Camden and RCA. They are “My Kind of Country Blues” (Camden CAL 912), “Hank Locklin” (Camden CAL 905), “Please Help Me I'm Falling” (RCA LPM 2291), “Foreign Love” (RCA LPM 1673), “This Song Is Just For You” (Camden CAL 765), “Happy Journey” (RCA LSP 2464), “A Tribute to Roy Acuff King of Country Music” (RCA LSP 2597), “The Ways of Life” (RCA LSP 2680), and “Irish Songs, Country Style” (RCA LSP 2801).

Unless RCA decides to release all the early Camden material, this fine box set from Bear Family is what we have for now.

[Photo of Hank Locklin.]



INSCAPE: THE INCREDIBLE BARBARA LEWIS

December 22, 2019

[Here is another “inscape” in-depth listen to one of my favorite female singers, Barbara Lewis. I am also working on a series on Tibetan Astrology that some have asked for. Let me know if there is any interest out there to learn how the Tibetans view astrology. You can message me. Meanwhile, Barbara Lewis.]

If I want music that puts me right to the floor and moves me at my most sensitive, I always choose Barbara Lewis. Most folks only know her big hit (that she wrote) “Hello Stranger,” yet to me, on all of these tunes, her voice just kills me.

Lewis is from the Ann Arbor area where I grew up. She was born in Salem Township, part of Washtenaw County, and just outside Ann Arbor. Lewis was managed by Ollie McLaughlin, whom we all knew. McLaughlin not only produced Barbara Lewis, but also Dion Jackson, who was a friend of ours. And our one-time manager Hugh “Jeep” Holland and McLaughlin worked together in the same Ann Arbor scene. Pop- group manager Jeep Holland met his match in our group, the Prime Movers Blues Band.

Basically, we were unmanageable, but Holland tried. He had us all tricked out in suits and ties and positioned on the teen-circuit, but, as they say, that dog wouldn’t hunt. So, we languished in obscurity of our own making. Probably the highpoint-story of attempts to train us was when Motown took an interest in our band. They came in big black limousines and drove us around. For example, they set up a luncheon for my brother Dan and me with the Everly Brothers. And there we sat, eating lunch with Phil and Don Everly and happy as clams to be doing it. The Everly Brothers produced some of the greatest music I know.

Anyway, the long and the short of it is that finally, what Motown wanted, was a white band to do black music. Well, that would be us! However, they wanted to dictate the music we had to play. Well, that was not about to happen, probably mostly due to my preoccupation with playing and studying

black music, but the particular kind of Chicago blues I loved. As it turned out, I told them to take a hike and that was the end of the limousines and the luncheons. Oh well. We might have been the next big "something." Or it might be a blessing that we missed that!

Barbara Lewis was also a great songwriter, writing, for example, her big hit "Hello Stranger," and all of the songs on her debut album of the same name. Of course "Hello Stranger" is one of THE most beautiful soul tunes I have ever heard, probably my favorite soul song ever. It is crushing!

"Hello Stranger"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3Y1O9eVKRs>

"Baby, I'm

Yours" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKZ7o7EXHFM>

"Make Me Your

Baby" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0tKhxvCjDU>

"Someday We're Gonna' Love

Again" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvmEU1DDb_4

"Spend a Little Time"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kom2A9zDkxo>

"Think a Little

Sugar" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y67oQ_FoSjg

"On Bended

Knee" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfulYY3u0jo>

"Pushin' a Good Thing Too

Far" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW8UyiI-Yfs>

"Puppy

Love" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_RJEnNV43Q

"Oh, Be My Love" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zLLQ-DHBBk>

"How Can I Tell

You" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAIvwQnfv7I>

Let's hear it for Barbara Lewis! Can you hear the music?

[Photo of Barbara Lewis.]



TIBETAN ASTROLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION

December 23, 2019

[This is the first in a series on Tibetan Astrology that I will post from time to time if there is sufficient interest by astrologers who visit this page. It will be a long series and I can post a bit at a time. First, a little introductory material before we get specific.]

The Spiritual Roof of the World

Tibet, often called the spiritual and physical "roof of the world" has been the source of great inspiration to Westerners for over two centuries. Part of this attraction may be due to the fact that Tibetan astrology is inextricably bound to Tibetan Buddhism. With few exceptions, the primary practicing astrologers in Tibet have for centuries always been and are today Buddhist monks. The word for astrology in Tibetan is "Tsi," and astrologers are called Tsi-Pa, those who practice "Tsi." In Tibet, to learn something about astrology is to learn something about the dharma and Buddhism, and usually vice versa. Tibetan Buddhist monks typically use astrology calendars of one form or another.

I found out early-on that I could not just skim the astrology off the top of the Tibetan Buddhism. In order to understand Tibetan astrology, I had to learn something about the Buddhist psychology in which it is embedded. I am not alone in this.

In other words, it is impossible to separate Tibetan astrology from Tibetan Buddhism, so it is important for readers to understand at least something about the Dharma and how it relates to the astrology of Tibet.

To best prepare for what follows in this series, here are several concepts that you may need to better understand this material, so please bear with me. First, let's examine what it is to learn any astrological technique, Tibetan or otherwise.

What is Astrological Technique?

Most traditional astrological techniques are originally the residue of a particular insight or astrological realization that

someone, somewhere, had. After the initial fire of the original insight is gone (the realization passes), what remains is what we can remember led to the experience, whatever caused us to have the realization in the first place. This is what ritual is all about, trying to recreate a sacred experience – to realize it again and again – the formula, so to speak.

Therefore, most astrological technique amounts to a method to capture or recreate that realization experience, a method or technique to realize an experience or insight again, if possible. In our day-to-day work, many of us are given and use techniques for which we have never had realization and in which we have not been fully empowered. We are lucky if we get realization on even several of the many astrological techniques that we use. Unfortunately, that's just the way it is.

To realize a technique in the truest sense, we somehow have to do just that, make it real, re-member or actually recreate it. And to do that, ultimately, we must become empowered in that technique through having the actual experience that caused it to arise in the first place or through the guidance of someone who has that realization. This is why I like to study with master Tibetan astrologers, if I can find them. They have the experience and therefore the capacity to empower us.

In short, many of us hope that with the help of a good book or a teacher (and a lot of concentration) we will sooner or later find our way to the experience itself and actually have that experience, the one that originally gave rise to the astrological technique in the first place.

If we can manage that, we can begin to use the technique in something more than a rote or mechanical fashion, for we have ourselves "realized" it. It has become part of us; we understand what it is about and how it works. This is even truer when it comes to a whole new kind of astrology such as that which the Tibetans use. We need a guide.

Don't worry; I am not suggesting that I am a teacher in this subject. I am just a fellow traveler, but I am pointing out here that the best guide to Tibetan astrology I know is learning something about its root, the dharma. In the end, that is what I had to do. Since it may save you from making some of the

same mistakes I did, let me briefly tell you how I got into all of this.

The Swans and the Lake

In the 1970s the head of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu lineage, His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, was asked why he had come to visit America. His answer was: "If there were a lake, the swans would go there." And so, it has been. For the last 25 years or so, many of the great Tibetan teachers have come to America to visit and to teach the dharma.

My interest in all of this stretches back to the 1950s and the beat movement -- Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsburg, etc. These writers helped to introduce Buddhism to many of us at that time. Writers like Allan Watts and D.T. Suzuki (who wrote and spoke on Buddhism) educated a whole generation on the subject, but back then it was mostly theoretical (conceptual). In the late 50s and very early 60s, Buddhism appeared to me as one interesting philosophical view among many others such as Existentialism and the Beat movement itself.

Buddhism at that time (of the Allan Watts variety) was necessarily very intellectual and philosophical -- something to think about and have words over. After all, we were just hearing about it. We would sit up until late at night, smoke cigarettes (I am sorry to say), drink lots of terrible instant coffee, and talk about such things until the sun came up. It was all very heady.

Few of us made the connection that Buddhist thought was not just something else to think or philosophize about, but rather a path or dharma, a method, something to do -- a way of action. We knew little of methods. This came much later.

It is important to make clear that (as I understand it) Buddhism is not a religion in the ordinary sense of that word. Although I have worked with it for many years, I have never considered myself as particularly religious. Going to church once a week, as most Americans do, is not going to solve many of my problems. I need something I can do all week long and all day long, if possible.

What I was interested in back then was psychology -- the human psyche and the mind itself -- phenomenology. In fact, my interest in astrology itself can be traced to an interest in

the psyche -- how the mind and all of its experiences work. How does the mind work?

In the early 70s, Buddhism took the next step to being understood as a practical path when the work of a young Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche became available. His book "Cutting through Spiritual Materialism" is perhaps the best example of what I am pointing toward, a practical Buddhism – mind practice.

For me, with Trungpa came the end of Tibetan Buddhism of the through-a-glass-darkly and sit-and-talk-about-it variety. Previous to Trungpa's appearance, most insight into the inner or astrological side of the Buddhism of Tibet came through writers like Alexandra David-Neal, T. Lobsang Rampa, T. Evans-Wentz, and other early writers on what has been called "esoteric Buddhism," people like H.P. Blavatsky and C.W. Leadbeater. Even then, there was little or no mention of Tibetan astrology per se. These writers were Westerners who could not help but put their own spin on the subject of Buddhism. Trungpa helped end that.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche made it very clear to us that Buddhism was not only a philosophy to think about, but above all a life path to walk, something very practical to put into practice in day-to-day life. He pointed out that Buddhism was primarily a way of handling our experience in this world we live in -- a dharma path. I can remember that this came as almost total news to those of us brought up on the intellectual Buddhism of the late 50s and 60s.

I met Chögyam Trungpa early in 1974 when I helped to bring him to Ann Arbor, Michigan to speak. I designed the posters for his event and ended up as his chauffeur for the weekend, etc. From the moment I picked him up at the airport, suffice it to say that I quickly got a very different take on Buddhism, which leads me to the other main point that I must present before we can discuss Tibetan astrology, and that is meditation.

Prior to meeting Trungpa, I had flirted with Zen Buddhism, sat Zazen, and so on. Yet, I still had the (quite common) idea that meditation was a method to relax around, a way to get away from the chaos of day-to-day life -- a form of stress

management. I had never quite found the time nor interest for it. The whole idea of practicing meditation was boring to me. I was way too active to sit still.

No sooner had I brought Trungpa Rinpoche back from the airport than he took me into a room with him, closed the door behind us, and proceeded to introduce me to my own mind. Looking back, I realize he was showing me how to meditate, although he didn't call it that. In fact, he never named it. And there was no prologue. He did not announce what he was about to do. He just jumped in.

At the time I don't believe I was able to grasp all of what was going on. It was only years later that I realized what really happened on that day. What I experienced through his instruction (and in his presence) were some real answers to questions that had always tortured me – big questions, questions about death, about letting go, about actually living life - things like that. Most of all, Trungpa pointed out and demonstrated what real awareness looked and acted like. My response was a simple: "Oh, I get it now."

I watched Trungpa Rinpoche enjoying and using his mind in a multitude of ways that I had never considered as possibilities. It was a pure case of monkey see, monkey do, and I wanted to be like he was being. Where I was used to sitting around, twiddling my thumbs, and waiting for the next thing to happen, Trungpa Rinpoche was all over the place, peering, poking at, questioning, and mostly enjoying and investigating every moment and every thing. I wanted to kick myself that I had never thought to make use of my own time like this.

Trungpa demonstrated before my eyes that the mind and our awareness could be worked with - practiced. Intuition or true insight could be developed. All you had to do was to try and do it. The mind could be trained. What a thought!

My original idea of meditation as at best a way to relax, and at worst a big bore, was giving way to something much more active. I began to see that meditation had to do with my developing stability, insight, and intuition, learning to use my own mind to connect within myself and the taking possession or advantage of our current situation -- whatever that happens to be.

From that day in February 1974, I began to connect more with myself and to explore the so-called outer world in a somewhat different way. Once you see someone do something for real, you know that you can probably do that too. I had seen something done and I wanted to do that too.

What I am getting at here is that the primary tool for learning astrology in the Tibetan system is not a set of ephemerides, a series of calculations, and lots of research in books. Instead, it involves establishing this inner connectivity -- call it insight, intuition, meditation, mind practice, mind training, whatever you want to call it. When I first saw it, I had no words at the time, but I got the idea. It leapt inside me.

I had grown up here in the West where learning astrology is often centered on memorizing the various correspondences between terms, like: Aries relates to Mars, relates to the Ascendant, relates to the first house, and so on. If you can't get into learning about astrological correspondences, then you are going to have real difficulty grasping classic western astrology as it was taught in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In Tibetan astrology, the primary educational tool is your own mind and learning to use it and your intuition in a direct and practical way. Tibetans call this "mind practice" or most often just "meditation." Of course, they have a dozen or so words for meditation. My point here is that if you approach the Tibetan lamas, you may not find easy access to their astrological teachings without some very basic mind training, not because they won't share it with you, but because your mind (and probably your life) is a little too chaotic and rushed to get a handle on it. You don't yet have time for insight. You have to make time. Time is also something we make.

And this lack of access to the teachings is not because these matters are in any way secret, but rather because we may lack the one essential tool for grasping them – mental awareness and an active intuition. In this sense, many of these astrological concepts are what have been termed "self-secret." The sheer simplicity, openness, and directness of the subject is closed to us because of our own inherent confusion and complexity – our internal white noise. What to do?

I can well remember my first meeting with a Tibetan lama at which I asked about the Tibetan astrological tradition. I was just after Christmas and we had driven 800 miles during the coldest day of that year, and with my entire family. As we reached the top of a mountain in upstate New York where the lama's monastery is located, we could only see out of the car by scraping a tiny spot on the frosted windshield. It was that cold.

Having arrived at the monastery in the dark of night, we were ushered into a small room for a very brief interview. We waited. In time, the rinpoche came in and welcomed us. He did not speak a word of English, but he did have a translator. I then explained through the translator my interest in astrology and the fact that I had worked for so very many years in this field and was even somewhat known for my astrological work.

Secretly, I was hoping somehow to be able to skip a few rungs, perhaps like that boring "Meditation 101," and enter one of the more interesting advanced practices that I had imagined must exist or had read about.

The lama listened patiently to me and then began to speak very slowly. Very kindly, he said that although he could see that I had never harmed anyone with my astrology, still, in this area of working with the mind, it was best for me to start at the very beginning point with meditation. He explained what I should do. And then he was gone. I was deflated.

I left the monastery in somewhat of a daze and that night my family and I were sheltered nearby in a tiny motel room with one small electric wall heater. The night was bitter cold. We were 800 miles from home. And it was in that moment that I felt I had to decide to accept his advice and start at the very beginning or follow my pride and refuse to admit that, after all my years of spiritual work, I knew little to nothing about the mind and meditation, and would have to start at the beginning like anyone else.

I am forever grateful that I was able to admit to myself that I knew nothing about mind practice and would just have to begin at the beginning. When we got back home to Michigan, my wife and I went and got instruction on how to meditate

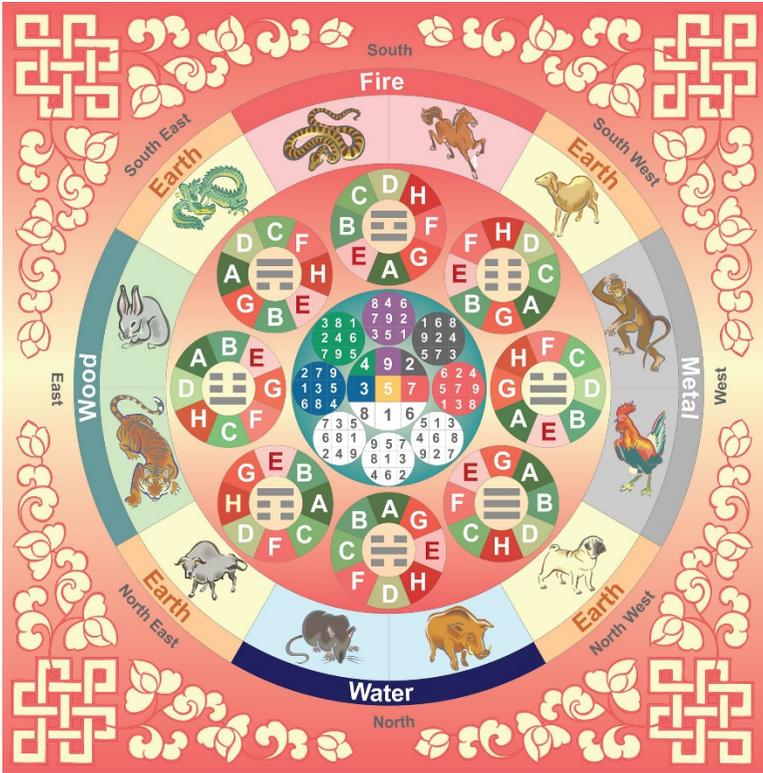
properly and, very slowly, began to learn about mind practice. That has to be one of the key decisions made in my life.

My point is that here in the West we have so much going for us technically and educationally, with so many tools at our fingertips, yet there is one topic that for the most part is not taught here and about which we know little to nothing, and that is about the nature of the mind itself. And I am not talking about philosophy or psychology. I am talking about our personal skill at looking at the mind itself. For example, look now at who is reading this page. Who is that? Where does that “who” reside? Is he or she in there somewhere? If so, just where? You get the idea. We seldom (if ever) inquire, much less set out to learn about the mind.

That is what mind training is all about and most of us in this culture have yet to begin that training. That being said, here is something a little more traditional on the topic of the astrology of Tibet.

This is not primarily a series about the history and culture of astrology in Tibet. My motivation for writing here is to share with you what I have learned on this subject over the last 45 years or so. Hopefully, you will come away with at least some idea what Tibetan astrology is actually all about and how it compares to Western astrology. From there, you can decide if you would like to learn more. However, some brief comments on the origin of Tibetan astrology are warranted. [to be continued]

[Diagram by me of what sometimes is called the Cosmic Tortoise, a chart containing some of the basic Tibetan astrological indicators/



INSCAPE: "OUT OF THE DARK" with JAMES MCCARTY OF THE YARDBIRDS -- 1960s REDUX

December 24, 2019

[This blog will introduce those interested to some music that made it out of the 1960s with some of the flavor from that time still intact, and artifact that is very rare. To be clear, this is NOT music OF or FROM the Sixties, but music written later that captures some of the essence of the Sixties.

Following that is my story from 2016 when I was invited the 50th Anniversary of the Grande Ballroom in Detroit, as a guest of the Yardbird's original drummer, James McCarty. It is a fun story, but a little long. And so, HEAR the music, and then read the story if you have that kind of time.]

Those of us who came up during the 1960s were exposed to a rare experience, one that apparently does not come along that often. When the 1970s came over us, like the waters of Lethe, much of the essence of the Sixties was soon lost and forgotten. Of course, some of that substance and experience endured into the future (here some of us still are!), but, as mentioned, much more was lost perhaps forever, never to be remembered again. Perhaps, we don't even know what we lost. Old timers like me agree to forget what we find just too painful to remember, or do we?

Imagine my surprise when I came across this album by James McCarty, the original drummer for the "Yardbirds," and the only member of the band to last through all of its incarnations. McCarty later appeared again in his group "Renaissance." He has not forgotten the 1960s.

This album called "Out of the Dark" was released in 1994, and it speaks clearly of all that has been forgotten from the Sixties, perhaps the last rose of that generation.

Like carrying water in his hands, James McCarty has somehow managed to reflect the spirit of the 1960s in this music, so that people like me can better remember again and those of you too young to know that time can at least have a

taste, if you can. It is palpable to me in this album, but younger folks have told me that it does little for them. Go figure. It just shows me how much time is willing to forget!

There are few modern albums that reflect the real spirit of the music in the 1960s, such as the haunting effect of something like Procul Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale." This kind of experience is hard to find today. James McCarty has survived a long musical journey through the 1960s and beyond to the 1990s with his (and our) message quite intact. The whole album has an other-or-future-world feel and yet no fussiness. There is real clarity here. The title cut is remarkable.

It may not be sharp (or cynical) enough for some or it may be too obviously nostalgic, but most of you were not there or, if so, not aware of what happened. Or perhaps you have already forgotten what I am pointing at here. I, fortunately, have those memories and this music revives them. Check it out, if only to better know those of us who are refugees from the 1960s.

I interviewed the Yardbird's drummer years ago and met him again in person in 2016 (see the story below).

Album 1994, "Out of the Dark," by James McCarty.

"Out of the Dark"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTdrANMD0cA>

We're Still

Dreamers" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFVs80TI5qU>

"Just a Breath

Away." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFlEQ8-12PE>

"Signs From an Age Gone

By" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2k9KnzVn1Y>

"What If Summer Never

Came" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFBAthc5dzk>

"Just Breaking

Through" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d4Rl90j3gl>

Oddly enough, the album "Out of the Dark" is still available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

WHAT IT WAS: A STORY

Well, what can I say folks. I am, or should be, speechless, humbled would be the better word, but you know I have to write about my time at the 50th Anniversary of the Grande Ballroom (2016) and my time with the Yardbirds. And this was WAY beyond any expectations I might have had. For those of you too young to remember, the Grande Ballroom, founded in 1966, was the Midwest's answer to the dance halls of the Sixties out in San Francisco. My band played there a number of times and the Grande was "the" place to hang out. Now, back to the 50th anniversary of the Grande Ballroom and my time there.

For one, it was an all-day affair and of course I arrived as early as I could. That's just me. I would rather stand around and wait than not be wherever I am going. The event was at the Ford Community and Performing Arts Center in Dearborn Michigan, which is a very large and elegant place. Margaret and I arrived around 10 AM and had been told to find our way to the VIP table, where we were supposed to have tickets and badges waiting for us.

Well, you know how those things go. Somehow, our names were not on the list, so there we stood wondering what to do. Then, someone arrived with the word that Jim McCarty of the Yardbirds had sent down word (or our names were found) that we were to be "Special Guests." And before we knew it, there we were with large badges on lanyards hanging around our necks that said in big letters "Special Guest." That was embarrassing, but we wore them, of course. What it meant was that as we walked around and people could read the badge, they had to asked us who we were. We must have been somebody famous to have to wear a tag that marked us as a "Special Guests. LOL.

And there I would be, trying to explain what on earth made us special, and I could of course come up with no reason other than the truth, that we were friends of Jim McCarty of the Yardbirds and he had greased the way for us. I must say that Michele and (poster-artist) Carl Lundgren who put this whole event together did an outstanding job. No thought was spared to make the event as meaningful and fun as possible. And even the people at the VIP table told me I might just as well

relax and enjoy being "special" because that is how we were going to be treated, and we were. It was those tags.

And, as a musician who had been there at the original opening of the Grande Ballroom on October 8th of 1966, and whose band (Prime Movers Blues Band) had played at the Grande a number of times, I ended up being interviewed on camera by CBS while I was standing around yesterday.

There was also a huge ballroom filled with vendors of memorabilia, mostly rock posters. The room also had a raised stage with bands playing throughout the day. However, the bands were so loud that when I tried to buy a reprint of a poster, neither myself nor the vendor could hear one another, so I had to come back later when the bands were taking a break. That must have been hard on the vendors.

They had a special room (where Margaret and I could hang out) for the VIPs and, of course, the Special Guests. It had food, drink, and comfortable couches, and this is where we went and talked with members of the other bands and generally just took a load off. And so it went.

We were told by the Yarbird's manager Henry Smith that we should meet him later in the afternoon and that we would be invited to sit in on the sound check. Well, it got way better than that.

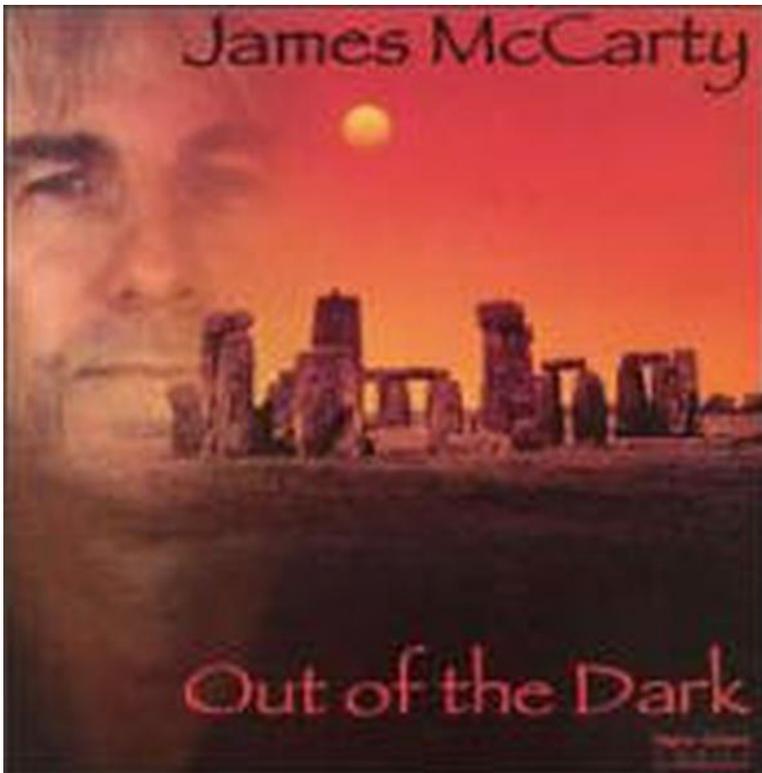
Henry met us and told us the band was waiting to meet us, so there we went, filing past the VIP room, and going into the area that said "Yarbirds Only." I felt sheepish. The VIP folks were eyeing us as we walked by them. And there was James McCarty and the whole band, who were so friendly and welcoming. Margaret laughed, because after introductions I apparently stammered out that I was at a loss for words, a mighty rare event for me.

Then Henry said that as for what we could do, Margaret and I could just be with them, do whatever they did, hangout, go to the sound check, eat dinner with them, and all of that, which we did. It was just too good, so much fun.

We went with them to their "Meet and Greet" session, where the VIPs got their albums signed and they gave out (and signed) a new poster by Carl Lundgren and things like that.

Did I mention that earlier we were given a whole bag of stuff, gifts, records, etc. That too.

We had dinner, Jim McCarty and I sitting together on a couch, talking about the Karmapa, and all kinds of things. Very definitely, it was like a waking dream. And that is how it was. This blog is getting too long, so I will have to save any account of the show until another time. Suffice it to say that the opening act was pure Detroit music from back in the day, literally an assault on the senses, which is how they like it. This, followed by a full show by the Yardbirds, with encores. So, this old guy had quite a day. Just thought you might like to know.



AS GO THE SUNSPOTS, SO GO WE

December 25, 2019

Little things can mean a lot. In the enclosed photo of the Sun, you can barely see the new sunspots, which are so tiny, but they are there, nevertheless. The good news is that there is NO “Maunder Minimum,” or so say the solar scientists. For me this is big news, very comforting and welcome. The solar sunspot cycle is an 11-years cycle, in which right now we are (and have been) near the Solar Minimum, which means that solar activity (sunspots in particular) have been at their lowest ebb, like almost nonexistent.

And, solar scientists tell us that this particular Solar Minimum is a deep one at that, according to the sunspot count. In fact, the sunspot count has been so very low that scientists feared that this declining cycle may be what is called an “extended minimum,” and that might point to something like the famous Maunder Minimum that occurred in the 17th Century, when sunspots went away entirely for decades! Such a minimum can wreak havoc for the Earth’s climate and inundate us with non-stop cosmic radiation from distant cataclysmic celestial events like supernovae and black holes, etc., with no protection for the Earth by the shielding solar wind so needed from sunspot activity.

As of yesterday, two new sunspots appeared on the surface of the sun, and they both were obviously from the new sunspot cycle that is now forthcoming, since their polarity is opposite of the last sunspot cycle, which is a certain way to tell they belong to the new Solar Cycle 25, which will peak in July of 2025.

This may be a blip on the daily news cycle, yet for a solar-astrologer like me, this is big news and a huge relief.

It’s almost like this news is reflected for me in my own internal changes, about which I also have been VERY quiet of late on these blogs and not something that I can say much about even now, either. As you may note, I am posting different types of blogs while I do a little internal housekeeping, both literally and figuratively.

I have not been going there (sharing my changes), of late, and I remind myself of one of those devices, like an iPhone, that goes out-of-commission while a new firmware upgrade is being installed. I feel very much like that.

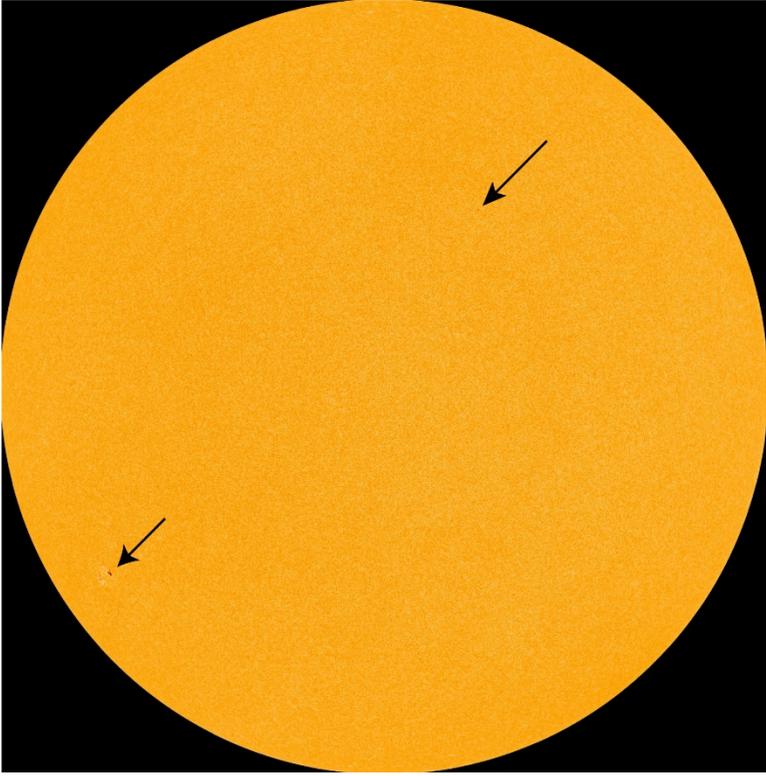
My internal script seems to be being rewritten or, more correctly, over-written by a refreshed code. In other words, as a phenomenologist by nature, I have had to refrain from monitoring my own internal changes these weeks while the “changing” itself is being changed, so to speak.

Actually, it’s quite a relief and very refreshing to be mute on my internal chatter. It’s like turning the radio off (or removing the white noise) and getting some quiet. 😊.

Much like the sunspot reversal I described above, my own internal polarity has been reversing, finding me backtracking in the opposite direction to where I was so obviously going. Imagine a great circle like all the celestial circles. Sometimes the shortest route to the place on that great circle we need to be is not to continue on around 360-degrees, but to reverse direction and take a shorter arc back the way we came to the designated spot we need to arrive at. That analogy is, IMO, particularly apt, for those of you who want to know how and what I am about lately.

For me, these sunspots are a Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays gift. **Best wishes** to all.

[Photo of the Sun yesterday with the two sunspots from the new solar cycle number 25 pointed out. Very hard to see, but there they are.]



DOUBLE ECLIPSE: THE RING OF FIRE

December 26, 2019

[There is a New Moon at 12:13 AM EST today (December 26, 2019), as part of an Annular Solar Eclipse, sometimes called the “Ring of Fire.” This is one of two eclipses, two-weeks apart, so we are in a very special intra-eclipse time – double eclipses, back-to-back. These double-eclipses can be times of waking vision, and this is combined with the generational Saturn-Conjunct-Pluto celestial event coming January 11-12, 2019. For those interested in becoming sensitive to this visionary intra-eclipse time, I will share this.]

Eclipses are perhaps the most important Earthly astrological event we experience. Yes, New and Full Moons are important, but if they are accompanied by an eclipse, they are even more important. And when two eclipses happen in a two-week period, one after the other, then the whole time surrounding those eclipses is special.

Double eclipses do not happen each year, but every once in a while they do and we happen to have double eclipses coming, one today and one in two weeks. This will be a very special time.

DOUBLE ECLIPSE VISIONS

Since many of you have shown interest in how visions work, let's go a little deeper. Visions, whether around eclipse times or whenever they occur to us, and they do arise, are seldom recognized by us when they first appear. Since they are times of great vividness of experience, we naturally kind of fall into them because they are more intense and alive than the time just previous to their onset. We are happy to live more vividly and so welcome any experience that brings more life to us. We often fail to recognize them right off as the seminal truth-bringers which they are. There is a tendency to think that “This is the way life always should be” and let it go at that. Visions are mostly subtle and we have to be subtle enough to recognize them when they arise.

It is when the vision passes or starts to pass that we tend to become aware that something has happened within us. It is kind of like when we are at a fun party and gradually realize that the party is over or getting near over. We kind of wake up to normality again, and realize our experience was more meaningful or vivid perhaps an hour ago. The poet Gertrude Stein had a line “Before friendship faded, friendship faded.” That is the idea.

In books and movies, visions are often portrayed as pictures or graphic images in the mind, much like the little text balloons in cartoons. While this can happen, much more often visions are just very intense times of living that stand out like islands of truth in the sea of our day-to-day normality. Visions are clear times when we can see our own truth vividly and this intense truth imprints itself on our mindstream by its sheer reality and intensity. In fact, visions are so vivid that, while we may not understand what we see, we cannot forget them either. They stick in our mind and remain embedded there.

It is a hallmark of eclipse-visions that the intensity of the experience is somewhat overwhelming, more than we can take in at one glance or moment. And although we cannot quite get our mind around a vision, we somehow totally “get it” and willingly take it in or internalize it. Then, in the hours, days, months, etc. that follow, we gradually are able to bring this vision to mind, again and again, until we suck any sense from it we can. This takes time.

Like an all-day sucker, we often can only grasp a little meaning at a time, but the allure, gravity, or truth of the vision kind of haunts us, floating in there, embedded deep in our mind, just out of reach of our conscious efforts to grasp it all at once. But we savor it like we savor an old love song from our teenage years that we can never tire of listening to. We get something from it every time we bring it to mind, and we do that again and again until the vision holds no further interest for us. Visions are something like that.

We are deeply nourished by the truth of our inner visions. As mentioned above, visions hold or point out the truth for us, and the truth will outlast all else, and truth, by definition,

becomes the future. The truth will last until then. That is why visions are visions of the future.

As mentioned, it can take months or even more to empty a single vision of meaning for us, but eventually we raise all of it to consciousness, a bit at a time, until it is fully present and complete to our mind. We rehearse it again and again until it is exhausted of any new meaning for us, and finally fully present.

In this blog I have tried my very best to put into words something about what visions are actually like, so that you can begin to become more aware of them in your life. As I keep pointing out, it is all about awareness. Everyone in the world experiences the tone, pulse, and the visions of the New and Full Moons, eclipses and so on. But everyone is not aware of what is taking place, so it really is a question of awareness of what is happening right now, and it can be developed.

In my opinion and in my own experience, being aware of these visions or deep experiences is more than just worthwhile. It makes life constantly meaningful and brings continuity to my experiences that was never there before I began to develop some awareness. Hope this makes sense. Let me know if you are still getting anything from this please.

The Double Eclipse

This will be the last blog for now on the nature of visions. I could go on forever, but either you get it by now or it does not interest you. So, I will close with saying just a bit about the astrology involved, should some of you wish to explore this. And what I have to say is geared to those of you who do not know much astrology. I may have to get a little didactic here and spell it out, so please forgive me if it sounds too wordy and intellectual. I am doing the best I can to explain it.

Before I begin, some of you have mentioned equating “visions” with dreams and daydreams. Not similar. Daydreams are just what they are, and the same with dreams while we sleep. While, once in a very great sleep dreams can also be visions, this is not common. Visions are times of intense living wide-awake, islands of reality in the sea of time. Enough said. Now for an overview:

There is no reason why we cannot learn just enough astrology for these ideas to be useful in day-to-day life. After all, many of you like to read about the meaning of eclipses, and so on. Why not incorporate this into your lives? Let me know if the following makes sense:

There are milestones or mile markers in our lives, events that are so significant to us that they immediately become markers by which we measure time from that moment forward and before which we can't quite even remember who we were. These events imprint us.

In life, what is really important? And how do we know it is important? Of course, everything can seem important sometimes, but there are moments or even days in our lives that stand out as islands or pointers for us as to who we are, why we are here, and what we have to do. Astrology is all about pinpointing these times.

Think of the astrology chart with the planets moving in the heavens around us like a giant kaleidoscope, ever changing. And although time seems continuous, all time is not equal. The intensity or meaning of time for us rises and falls, has peaks and valleys. Some times are intense and meaningful, while others are empty of events, perhaps even a little boring. Are meaningful events just random or can we search ahead through time for these more meaningful and intense moments?

One way to do this is through astrology. Astrology is all about showing us where and when the physically significant events in the heavens occur and we can do this ahead of time. Astrology tells us about the future, not in a psychic manner, but in a measurable fashion, like pointing out when significant heavenly events happen. And let's not forget that we measure our day- to-day time by the astronomical cycles, the day, the month, the year, etc. These cycles in time are so much with us that we take them for granted and tend to ignore them, but they mark time for us, nonetheless, these angular patterns or aspects in the sky; these are events.

We can chart the times when these aspect- events occur and they offer a good (perhaps the only!) guide we have to

important celestial moments. We could do worse than to (at the very least) take note of them.

As a society, we have the idea of what celebration is all about, because we already celebrate birthdays and other social events. Yet many of us wish that our entire life was somewhat more of a celebration than it is. What if our existence could be more of a perpetual celebration? Astrology at least points to how that might be enabled.

New and Full Moons are two important events that happen each month. We can learn to take advantage of them and use them. I try to do this whenever I can remember to observe them. And the monthly lunar cycle can be broken down in much more detail than just the New and Full Moons. For example, the Tibetan Buddhists divide the month into 30 distinct lunar days (not calendar days), each of which marks a time for a particular type of activity, and the Buddhists are aware of these events and how to best use them. Just like birthdays, celebrating distinct events like these can make life more meaningful.

Taking advantage of the natural articulation of time as indicated by Full and New Moons, eclipses, and the many other planetary events can bring increased meaning into our lives. We might as well get in-tune with the natural heavenly cycles going on around us all of the time. We can synch-up. These cycles are happening anyway, so why not take advantage of them? Astrology charts the flow of significant astronomical events which, like stations on a cosmic radio, we can tune in to.

In my experience, there are just two requirements to make use of astrological cycles in life in order to tune in the natural set of astrological indicators happening around us. First, you have to know when these events occur, like the moment (or at least the day) of the New or the Full Moon, planetary aspects, and so on. There are many books and programs that can provide you with a list of what astrological factors are occurring and when. The second requirement, however, is a little more difficult.

Even if we have a list or know when the Full or New Moon is taking place, we still have to tune in or get in synch with these

cycles. This is done by gradually becoming aware of them. Reading about them, like you are here, is a first step. If we know when the Full Moon is happening, we can attempt to be aware of that and at least be open to examining our mindstream at these times.

Trying or wanting to be aware is not the same as being aware, but it is a start. We can practice being aware, which is what sitting meditation is all about – practicing. It is just like learning to dance. We go through the motions of a new dance step by rote until we can get a feel for it, get into the swing of it. Then we dance.

Fluency does not happen all at once, but gradually we get into the rhythm of the cycles always going on around us. We learn to resonate to and with them. Might as well dance ‘with’ the cycles as against them. Reading blogs like this and then learning to be aware when the New or Full Moon rolls around is how we begin. And for many of you, that may be enough. For those of you who (like me) really love this kind of thing, then we can be a little more pro-active about our participation. We can practice developing awareness, so that whatever rolls in from the heavens, we can be more aware of.

As for me, I have increasingly worked to become more and more aware of what is going on around me, but it takes practice. I have done that practice and please don’t imagine it was easy or always fun either. It is practice, like any other practice such as learning to play a musical instrument, and so on.

There are signs everywhere in the life around us and I have made a point of trying to learn to read them. I kind of live by reading the signs in my life and acting on them. It became clear to me years ago that I personally needed to become more aware in order to be really be sensitive to these natural signs, and that is when I became pro-active in all of this. I actively started to practice meditation under a qualified teacher. It may have been the best decision I ever made. It takes time, but the wonderful thing is that it actually works!

The significance of eclipses goes way back and exists in the literature of almost all countries. The Tibetans are very clear about the auspiciousness of eclipses and in their practice

calendars are careful to set time aside on eclipse days for what they call “observation,” just looking at our own mindstream. The high lamas point out that on eclipse days, the various winds and channels within us (up and down the spine) naturally come into alignment more perfectly than at other times. Those who have developed some sensitivity and awareness can take advantage of these alignments.

I won't belabor you with the benefits of developing such an awareness here; I have done that in many other blogs, but I will simply say that practices that make us more aware of the present moment, like certain forms of meditation, are really worthwhile. I mean, they pay off. Keep in mind that the very word “Buddha” simply means awareness. It is all about awareness. Enough said.

And I have written many times before about the “Vision of the Eclipse,” the various visions that accompany eclipses. Eclipses are key and seminal times and they emit a pulse or tone that vibrates deep within us and at times in our life we can experience them consciously.

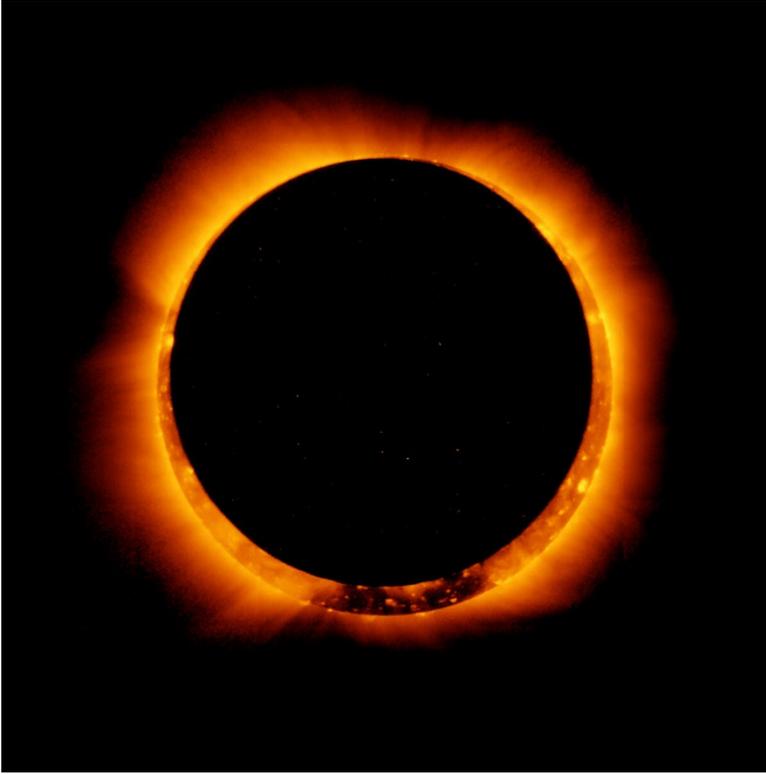
Again, it depends on our awareness, but even the least-aware-of-us have breakthrough moments sometimes in life when we are tuned in and living large the life of our own mind. We can experience these visions consciously and remember them. But without some kind of mind practice, these personal events would be rare.

“Visions,” as noted, are not pictures in the sky of our mind that we have been taught to associate with having a vision. They can be, but most often visions are super-intense moments, days, or a part of a day when we are imprinted by (resonating with) the tone of the eclipse; we are vibrating alive with what is present.

Only later, when we come down or out of these intense living experiences, do we realize that they are not permanent, but rather were an intense experience that we had that is now passing. Visions are intense times that are like islands of imprinting information in our mindstream. They stand out. We remember them or measure time from when they occurred for us.

Visions are differentiated from our day-to-day flow of events. The visions at eclipse times are like that. Here is another way to phrase this: You might call visions at these eclipse times intense experiences of the truth for us, the truth of our life. And truth (by definition) lasts into the future. In other words, what is true will last longer than ephemeral events and so truth is a vision of the future, because it will still be there then. Get it? I just pointed out a secret of how astrology works.

So, don't look for visions on the outside, like pictures in the sky above you. Feel them inside, deeply, as the truth that you are, when you get the chance. This is how visions communicate their message to us, from inside. They bubble up into our consciousness. What is placed inside at the time of an eclipse can take weeks and months to percolate upward until we can grasp it with our conscious mind. A little bit of vision can go a long way in guiding us because it is a premonition of the truth, and truth will last until then.



A DHARMA TEACHING BY RINPOCHE ON ECLIPSES

December 27, 2019

I am impressed by the response to yesterday's blog on eclipses and the visions that always are available at these times. Not all of us can see these visions (that is: remember them), but perhaps a few times in our lives, we will be aware of the vision of a particular eclipse and ride with it.

When I was coming up in learning Buddhism, and especially back in the 1980s, when almost all the great rinpoches were traveling in America, perhaps because, not having their traditional monasteries (having fled Tibet), if we invited them to our center (since we were one of their centers), they would come and teach. This went on for years.

As an astrologer for many years already (at that time), I would (I am sorry to report) ask every rinpoche I met, about Tibetan astrology. I wanted to learn about Tibetan astrology so persistently that my own root teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche decided to give a special teaching at our center, perhaps just to shut me up. 😊

And Rinpoche gave this teaching out by some lake cottages where we would hold what was called "Family Dharma Weekends," a two-or-three day event held for a number of years, where Rinpoche, his students, and their families all gathered. There were activities both for the parents and the kids, boat rides, swimming, and sitting around by the fire.

Anyway, here is part of a teaching that Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gave on observing the Moon in our life. Because there was interest there, I will share this very special teaching here, which I transcribed from that original teaching in Tibetan.

LUNAR OBSERVATIONS

[These are now Rinpoche's words.]

“There are specific events that pertain to specific sects which are of course observed by these particular lineages. One thing is different. In Tibet, there never was the system that we have in the West of having so many days of each week as holidays -- Saturday and Sundays off. There was not anything like that. There is no weekday that is a holiday, in that context. But, the Full Moon, which is the 15 day of the lunar month and the New Moon which is the 30th day (usually) of the month, these Full Moon and New Moon days are observed.

“In the teachings of the Buddha, specifically in the vinaya as regards to precepts and disciplines, Buddha had emphasized that, in the absence of the Buddha, during these full and new moon days, practitioners should reaffirm their vows and precepts. Any aspect, or element of their vows or precepts that may have been violated, contaminated, must be renewed and restored to completeness -- full and pure.

“In the different monasteries (in all four schools), every 15 days or half month (the day of the Full and New Moon), all the sangha get together to reaffirm and renew precepts or vows. This is known as Sojung practice. Sojung basically means whatever has been violated is restored to completeness (purified), and whatever has been maintained is further reaffirmed. Lay practitioners who are informed of these occasions (meaning everyone who in name is a practitioner) also participate. They do not necessarily have the knowledge of the different practices and important events in the Buddhist calendar, but they, in their own way, observe these occasions by doing mainly Nungne practice or by dedicating themselves to different other practices of purification.

“These days are not only important within the vinaya context, but from the vajrayana view, they are even more important. From the vajrayana (tantric) teachings point of view, the change of the sun and the moon produce a change of the elements, and thus a shift or change in the elements/planets. While there is a shift in the more physical sort of gross level (the physical elements of the body), there is also a shift on a more subtle level, a shift in the wisdom mind -- potential enlightened mind.

“This is sometimes referred to as the wind energy. There is a shift. According to the vajrayana practice, as one will gradually and eventually learn as one progresses on the path, when all the different wind energies are channeled into what is known as the central and the life channel, this subtle system (not material, physical) which is related to the mind ... when all of these are channeled into the central or the life channel, these various wind energies, then there is experience of enlightened mind. You see or you experience enlightened mind, and that is how practitioners enter into the state of indestructible Samadhi and other meditative states.

“Related to that, on the occasion of the full moon, the 15th day, the right peripheral wind energy, also know as white element moves closest to the central channel. And, if one is a practitioner of the dharma, and if one is able to, on that occasion, engage in more serious or intensive practice, this would be a most right time for the practice to bring strong and highest benefit. It is very much possible that one can be aware of that kind of motion happening. There is a push that is in some sense taking place.

“This is aside from one's own efforts to put the Dharma into practice. Being able to engage in the practice of the Dharma is very, very important on such occasions. There is a shift. There is a change. What happens is that conflicting emotions in general have sort of increased activity at these times -- in particular the pattern of desire and lust have a stronger activity, stronger upheaval. If one were to know that this is Full Moon, that today is Full Moon, or today is New Moon, then one would be able to notice that change or activity (in some sense) in one's life.

“Generally, we know that on some days that conflicting emotions are more strong than other days, but we have no idea what caused it or what didn't cause it. We just sort of go along with them as a part of the activities and circumstances encountered in our lives. On the day of the new moon, the left peripheral channel, the wind energy of that (referred to also as red element) comes closest to the central channel.

“Again, for a practitioner who uses this time for practice, this kind of intense time for practice can be of the highest benefit, of greatest benefit. During these times, access to potent

qualities are at your disposal more than on regular occasions. If you put them to wholesome use, then greater benefit. If you put it to unwholesome use, then greater harm than normal will result, because the cause of your activity, the source of your participation would be stronger, enhanced and so understanding such and bearing in mind such situations, then a practitioner would try to take these days into account.

“The lunar calendar is based on the system of the Sun, Moon and planets, how these bodies work as well as how your internal system works. As regards practice at the times of the full and new moons, one begins on the day before the full moon, on the 14th day of the month. However, the main practice, or the more intensive practice happens on the actual day of the full moon (15th day) and ends on the morning of the 16th lunar day. And this same pattern is true with the new moon too. Beginning on the 29th day, intensifying on the 30th (which is the new moon) and then ending on the 1st day of the month.

“In addition, the times of eclipses are very potent times. The full moon and new moon are themselves important and then the eclipse is even more so. According to the Kalachakra teaching (wheel of time), the seed syllable of Kalachakra, the symbol of the mantra is also recognized as a very special protection and this seed syllable is a combination of ten letters put together. They are in essence the five outer elements and the five skandhas, making ten. Ten different parts of the seed syllable represent these ten -- five elements and five skandhas.

“According to the Kalachakra, outer changes take place because of inner changes and so the outer change (we talk about these different outer changes) are based on inner changes and when the moon or the sun is eclipsed, that is most potent in the sense that, then, both the two channels (the left and the right of the central channel) and the wind energies (the white and red elements) both come closest to the central channel. It is doubly intense, stronger with regard to practice as well as with unwholesome activities. It is a time to pay even greater attention.

“As far as multiple benefit is concerned, it's because it's the change or shift in the skandhas as well as outer elements.

Whether you are aware or not aware that there is a new or a full moon does not matter. It will equally harm or benefit you depending upon the action. The “multiples” applies whether you know or not. The only thing that would be to the advantage of the practitioner who knows, would be that one would be more joyous in doing the wholesome actions. One may rejoice and that, because of the occasion, one will make the extra effort to do good action.”

End of Teaching

As an astrologer of going on 60 years, what was just presented and explained is very profound and should interest any dharma student.

[Pen & Ink drawing of the Kalachakra seed syllable by Sange Wangchuk, color by Michael Erlewine. The Kalachakra (Wheel of time) is usually a week to ten-day empowerment and teaching, considered essential for astrologers. I took the Kalachakra Empowerment in Toronto in 1990, as given by His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche.]



OUR PILGRIMAGE TO TIBET: CHAPTER ONE

December 30, 2019

Preface by Michael Erlewine

Our first trip to Tibet, over 20 years ago, was a life-changing event for me and my family. I thought you might enjoy some of the stories of the trip.

Being asked by my dharma teacher of many years to stop what I was doing, take a leave from my business and go to Tibet—all within about a month—was mind boggling, to say the least. It turned my life upside down.

Of course, we would go. I had asked my teacher, for years, in every interview, if there was anything special he wanted me to do, and always he had responded that I should just keep on practicing meditation, and so on. It had become routine that there was nothing in particular he wanted me to do, and then this: go to Tibet, and soon.

And my wife and I could not just up and leave the kids. After all, we had never even had a babysitter in all those years—and we had four kids. That should tell you something. So, of course, we had to take the kids with us, at least three of them.

This is the story of our pilgrimage to Tibet to see the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the actual golden child that the movie “The Golden Child” was based on. In the process, we visited many of the sacred caves and monasteries in Western Tibet.

Margaret and I made a second trip to Tibet in 2004, this time accompanied by our teacher Ven. Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, but that is another story. I hope you enjoy this one.

Our Visit to Find the 17th Karmapa

Although today it seems like some far off dream, only a few short weeks ago I was high in the mountains of Tibet, at Tsurphu Monastery (the seat of the Karma Kagyu Lineage), where I met His Holiness Ugyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa. All of this is even more remarkable since my friends know that I hate airplanes and seldom travel far from my home in mid-Michigan. Although I had been

interested in Buddhism for many years, I had never seriously considered going to Tibet. Then, suddenly, in less than a month, I am in Tibet, along with my wife, my two daughters, and a young son. How does such an event happen to a middle-aged businessman? It happens when your lama tells you to go to Tibet as soon as you can manage it. Here is our story:

My wife and I are long-time students of Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, who was the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dhamachakra) Monastery.

Rinpoche was sent to the U.S. in the mid 1970s by His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, to represent the Karma Kagyu Lineage in the United States. Just as the Dalai Lama is the head of the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, so the Gyalwa Karmapa is the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And, incidentally, the Karmapa's lineage (stemming from Marpa and Milarepa) is the older lineage; His Holiness, the Karmapa, represents the first tulku (reincarnated lama) in the history of Tibet; all other incarnations of this sort are subsequent to the Karmapas.

The Karma Kagyu lineage comes from the Adi Buddha Vajradhara, who imparted teachings to the Indian saint Tilopa, who in turn taught his student Naropa (also in India). Marpa, a Tibetan translator, traveled to India and received these teachings from Naropa and brought them back to Tibet, where he then imparted them to his main student, Milarepa (considered Tibet's greatest yogi). Milarepa went on to teach his student, Gampopa, who taught the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa. The entire line of the Karmapas — all 17 incarnations — has been formed by successive reincarnations of that same essence. In fact, the lineage today represents an unbroken chain of students and teachers, culminating in the young 17th Karmapa, who resides in Tibet. This Karmapa is the reincarnation around which the movie "The Golden Child" was based.

Over the last 20 years, Khenpo Rinpoche and another Rinpoche, Bardor Tulku, Rinpoche, have worked to build an extensive monastery complex near Woodstock, in upstate New York, including a vast shrine hall, an 11-foot gold Buddha, and even a traditional 3-year retreat center (one for

men and another for women). A visit to the KTD monastery, high on Meads Mountain, is an unforgettable experience.

Each year we journey from our home in Michigan to KTD Monastery for a 10-day intensive teaching that Khenpo Rinpoche offers to senior students. We have done this for 31 years in a row. Now in something like its 32nd year, this is a chance for students to practice, spend time together, and to receive the Rinpoche's teaching. In recent years, Khenpo Rinpoche has been giving advanced Mahamudra teachings, not because we students are particularly ready for these teachings, but because, as Rinpoche puts it, if he is to teach this material it will have to be now (due to his age). [Khenpo Rinpoche passed on in October of 2019.]

During our stay at the monastery, in July of 1997, we had requested and received permission for a personal interview with Rinpoche. During that interview I outlined certain fairly severe business problems I had been going through over the last year or two. Working with a translator, I laid out my questions, and then Rinpoche began to answer.

But after less than a minute, he just stopped, looked at us, and declared that he, himself, was not going to answer these questions any further; instead, we should take the questions straight to His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, and ask them of him directly — Karmapa would be able to answer our questions.

We all looked at each other in amazement. His Holiness could only be found at Tsurphu Monastery, deep in the reaches of Tibet! I mumbled something to Rinpoche about, that I had the good intention of going, well, perhaps next year, next spring or something, but Rinpoche said, "No, this summer, as soon as you can arrange it." By this time, Khenpo Rinpoche had a great smile on his face, as if he was very, very happy for us. We were speechless. He then went on to speak about impermanence and about how short life is, how none of us know the time or manner of our death. He was directing us to go to Tibet soon — this very summer!

Talk about turning your world upside down! Me, go to Tibet? What a novel idea! I thought twice about even going to the grocery store and seldom to never traveled, and had never

seriously thought of going to Tibet. I had always said—a little smugly, I confess—that I was interested in the ‘Buddhism’ in Tibetan Buddhism and not particularly in the Tibetan culture. Anyway, I left that interview in a daze, my head spinning, but also knowing that I had better go home and pack my bags. “Rinpoche wants us to go to Tibet,” I mused.

For years I had worked with Khenpo Rinpoche, and each year, during our personal interview, I would always ask him if there was anything particular I should be doing. Aside from encouraging me to keep practicing, he never gave me any other specific directions. I was always a little disappointed there was never anything more he wanted me to do. And now this! Rinpoche had just told us to go to Tibet, this summer, and it was already mid-July! After the surprise cleared away, we knew we were pumped.

In fact, we were so charged that we went out and climbed to the top of the local mountain that same night, something we had never done in all the years we had been coming to the monastery. Starting out at about 7 PM, with the Sun already dimming, most of my family climbed to the top and surveyed the valley in the distance below us, with all of the twinkling lights. We came down later from the mountain in complete darkness. Our heads were ‘right’. We were good to go and, when we returned from the teaching to Michigan, we managed to prepare and take off within a month of this directive from Rinpoche, although, from that first day, we were already as good as gone—to Tibet!

Getting Ready to Go

What a busy time it was. Suddenly we had everything to do and little time to do it in. The first thing we did was attempt to book tickets within a month. In that same short time, we also had to get passports, visas, arrange a tour, receive inoculations, etc. And we were taking our kids too, at least three of them. Our eldest has other commitments.

Although we made expensive airline reservations right off, trying to book inexpensive tickets took weeks of finagling. What a lot of time was wasted waiting for those long-shot cheap tickets to clear! In the end, we gave up and just paid the going rate, which was about \$2000 per person from here

to Kathmandu. Passports were also available in either slow or expedited form, and here too we had to pay extra to expedite the process.

Even so, they came through only just in time. And, as far as passports go, you need up-to-date birth certificates to acquire them—the ones with an imprinted seal on them. It turns out that some of our certificates, while good years ago, no longer measured up to these specs. This precipitated a frantic search (and extra fees!) to get fresh copies of what we already had, and have these new ones over-nighted to us. The passport people just held everything up until they got exactly the birth certificates they required.

Inoculations were a mini-drama in themselves. What shots to get? What shots to ignore? What about the wisdom of getting shots at all? We pulled all the information we could from books, the internet, and local doctors, but the information did not agree. We began calling disease control centers and national experts. One thing is for certain: few people know the whole story about getting immunizations for traveling to other countries, although most local doctors firmly believe they know the facts. And we were on a tighter schedule as well because of the fact that our 11-year old had not gotten all of his shots as a child. Somehow, we all managed to get all of the shots we needed—I believe I got five or six in one fine day. Some of us got sick from them.

Passports, Visas, and Cash

Visas we left up to the tour guide in Kathmandu, although we poked around on the internet and scared ourselves good a couple of times. As for the itinerary, this was pretty much left up to me. Aside from the shelf of books I bought on Tibet, India, and Nepal, I had access to a couple of sangha members with experience in Tibet. Forget about watching the latest movies. Every night found me burning the midnight oil, trying to figure out a million angles. Let's see, there was the Tibetan language, the medical supplies, the trekking equipment, the pilgrimage spots, the maps to find, the clothing—the works.

Speaking of the Tibetan language, I used a few books and made some laminated cheat-sheets for each member of our

group. On a pocket- sized sheet, I listed all of the most important phrases we would need, everything from “Please help me” to, “Where is the bathroom?” Then, on a second double-sided laminate, I put all of the elements of Tibetan grammar, plus hundreds of major verbs and nouns— everything we might need to piece together sentences. This took a lot of time, because I had to digest it all in order to condense it.

As for a list of what to take, I collated what I thought would be necessary from the books I had and from what I heard of the experiences of several sangha members who had already been there.

In particular, Michael Doran, of KTD Monastery, who had just returned from his first Asian trip, provided us with the kind of practical advice we thirsted for. And, from those having even more experience—Andy Quintlin and Ward Holmes, both of whom had been Tibetan guides on occasion—we received invaluable and much needed help. It was Andy who helped us get the tour setup. And Gloria Jones, who lives in Kathmandu, helped us in so many ways, particularly once we were actually in Kathmandu. She was always ready to help us when we needed her.

Their notes included things like “You can’t bring enough Kleenex!” and “Don’t forget the Tuck’s pads.” I boiled all of these lists down into a master list of items for us to consider, a list promptly ridiculed by my 21-year old daughter who was coming along—she felt she would just bring what she wanted to bring. This list is posted elsewhere in the story.

I made many trips to K-Mart and Wal-Mart with this list in hand, snagging various items as they presented themselves to me in the aisles. My wife, who favors homeopathic and natural remedies, worked on that end, while I made sure we had all of the allopathic items that would at least address symptoms. I collected things like laxatives, diarrhea medicine, antihistamines—all those things we love to hate until we need them.

As for clothing, we soon discovered that most of the old standard mail-order catalogs which used to carry good outdoor wear had kind of ‘upscaled’ and now carried more

preppy clothes than clothes of real substance. Even old L.L. Bean was now selling dog beds and Christmas wreaths, looking more and more like a J.C.Penny's catalog. This forced us to turn, for some items, to hiking catalogs such as Patagonia and Marmot, and to whatever expedition or outfitter stores we could find. It was fun when the store cliff-jockey, who was telling us about the advantages of this or that sock combination, asked, "Where are you going to be hiking?" and we got to answer, "Tibet." Their eyes would bug out, despite their best efforts at self-control. Not that we were going to do that much climbing.

When it came to hiking and camping gear, we really got sidetracked. My wife, I believe, ordered some ten different pairs of hiking boots, nine of which she sent back. It took weeks to figure out the boot angle—and it turned out she only went hiking once. I settled for a pair of comfortable Nike hiking boots, rather than the more uncomfortable 'real thing'. They worked fine for the two times I really hiked. And socks—you know, everyone had to have those \$14-a-pair hiking socks (Thorlo Light Hiking Socks), which were, in fact, worth the money. I still wear them.

I had metal mirrors, mosquito head nets, Swiss-army knives, candles, flashlights, waterproof matches, hidden money pouches, Nalgene water bottles, and so on. About the only things we didn't take were decoder rings and Ovaltine labels.

But I mostly spent those late nights (as mentioned) working on the itinerary for our Tibetan journey. As I did not have a detailed map of Tibet available to me, I photocopied tiny section maps from Victor Chan's Tibet Handbook, piecing these together to create one large map of the areas we were planning to visit. Then, with books in hand, I read and plotted out a path that I hoped we could follow. Of course, the central point in the journey was our visit to Tsurphu Monastery, the ancestral home of the Karmapas. Everything else after that was gravy. It was a high-energy time—those weeks preparing for the trip—visions of Tibet danced through my head.

The reaction of my family to the trip was mixed, and changed with the weather. Most were against it right off, especially since they knew I wanted them to go and they weren't really being given a choice. I can't say I blamed them. Our 11-year

old was loathe to give up his friends and habits and 'have' to go anywhere. Pretty much the same response came from our 15-year old. My 21-year old daughter was more game, but she didn't really say "Yes!" until Khenpo Rinpoche looked her dead in the eye and said she should go. Then she said, "OK." As for my wife, she went back and forth from being "good to go" to declaring she just might not go at all. In the end, everyone happily got on board the plane. Not one of us ever regretted the decision to go.

The nightmare of tickets, passports, visas, airport taxes, immigration, customs—and the like—I will spare you from for now, although I am sure I could save any of you who are thinking of going some suffering by giving you these details. Suffice it to say that each of these many obstacles appeared formidable at times, but we sweated and clawed our way through each and every one—and there were many! For example, when we were dropped off at the airport at the beginning of our trip, with all our baggage, we found that our flight had been cancelled due to a large storm in Chicago. All flights were off. And our ride had already left! So, there we were, some 50 miles from home, among block-long lines of angry fliers, trying to chaperone our six-foot-high pile of baggage, and our ride long gone.

We tried everything to get to Chicago, where our overseas flight was scheduled from. We even tried to rent a car and drive to Chicago, but we had too much luggage for one car (for that long a drive) and the time was short.

In the end, there was nothing we could do but rent the largest car they had and stuff all our gear (and ourselves) into it and drive the hour back to our hometown to await a flight the following day. Talk about anticlimactic. We slunk back into town and didn't tell anyone we were back, pretending we were not home for 24-hours. We hardly spoke to one another, but just kind of held our breath and waited for the time to pass.

Up early the next day, we caught that plane to Chicago, and from there the one to Tokyo, and then to Hong Kong and on to Kathmandu, until we were finally on board the one-hour flight from Kathmandu to Lhasa, in Tibet. There we were, in

the sky over Tibet, gazing on Mt. Everest. But I am getting ahead of myself.

(To Be Continued)

Our Pilgrimage to Tibet



By
Michael
Erlewine



TIBETAN ASTROLOGY (PART TWO): SOME HISTORY

December 31, 2019

[This is the second in a series of blogs on Tibetan Astrology for those of my Facebook friends who have an interest.)

Although Tibetan history is ancient, its records are largely symbolic before somewhere around 600 A.D. The tradition states that the Tibetan civilization started somewhere in the fertile Yarlung Valley along the great Tsangpo River in the south-central part of Tibet. Tibet's cultural relationship with China over their long history has always been fairly constant and mostly somewhat difficult. Even though Tibet was small compared to China, this did not mean that Tibet always had little influence.

During one of the better periods (around the Yuan dynasty -13th century), the Chinese rulers actually adopted Tibetan Buddhism and there ensued a period of great cultural exchange. In particular the 8th Tai Situ Rinpoche, Chökyi Jungne, traveled extensively in China and was very active as an astrologer.

It is speculated that the Chinese Princess Wen-Ch'eng's move from China to Tibet in 641 A.D. involved bringing with her the Yi-Ching and other philosophical and perhaps geomantic texts. This was probably a watershed event intellectually. It is written that she brought with her 360 works on divination, although that number itself seems symbolic. The point here is that the geomantic and astrological roots of China were transmitted and mixed into Tibetan culture somewhere around that time, if they were not already present. I have done pilgrimage to the Yarlung Valley in central Tibet, crossed the Tsangpo River by small boat, and also have been to Princess Wen-Ch'ent's temple in eastern Tibet.

In particular, geomancy and astrology were important to the Bön-po, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet as part of their interest in the Lords of the Earth, the Sa-Dag, literally: Earth Lords. I have written a small book on the Tibetan Earth Lords for those interested.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Earth-Lords.pdf>

These same topics are spread throughout all the major lineages of Tibetan Buddhism today. Tibetan

Buddhism, astrology, and the geomantic practices are intertwined, although distinct.

Along with the Yi-Ching came the Lo-Shu or Magic square, and the eight Parkhas or trigrams. The Magic Square is a square made up of nine numbers arranged in a square, in which any three numbers add up to 15.

More about this in a later section or see my book on Feng-shui.

“The Art of Feng Shui”

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

Kar-Tsi and Jung-Tsi: The Two Streams

The astrology of the Tibetans stems largely from two sources, India and China, and this fact is clearly reflected in the Tibetan astrology system, by the words Kar-Tsi and Jung-Tsi, which translate to “white astrology” and “black astrology.” Kar-Tsi (white astrology) comes from India and represents the dharma, the actual teachings of the Buddha, and things mostly having to do with the calculation of ephemerides, and so forth, while Jung-Tsi (black astrology) comes from China and includes the

geomantic and divinatory aspects of the Tibetan tradition, the trigrams, the five elements, and so forth. Black and white here refers to colors only and carries no suggestion of good and evil.

The Chinese divinatory sciences, astrology in particular, are said to have arisen in an area in China called Wu-Tai Shan, which consists of five sacred mountains, four mountains arranged in the form of a square with a central mountain in the middle. From the area of these five mountains (so it is written) arose an emanation of the Buddhist bodhisattva Manjushri, the deity especially connected to astrology. Manjushri arose as a youth and from his head issued a golden tortoise, from which emanated a vast number of teachings (84,000) that relate to astrology.

Humankind, so it is written, soon took to the astrology, even to the point of ignoring the actual dharma teachings of Lord Buddha. Manjushri, who was displeased by this, is said to have then hidden the astrology teachings on the eastern side of the Wu-Tai Shan mountains as what is called terma or hidden dharma, and from that point astrology was lost to humankind. Without astrology, mankind was unable to guide itself through the obstacles of life, and so

suffered greatly.

However, after a time (and at the suggestion of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who pitied mankind's suffering) Guru Rinpoche (perhaps the greatest Tibetan saint) petitioned Manjushri to please restore the astrological teachings and to teach him the tradition, so that he could share them once again with the Tibetan people.

In his petition to Manjushri, Guru Rinpoche made it clear that although astrology and the divinatory practices are not a part of the dharma as taught by Buddha, nevertheless they are of great importance to mankind on a relative, if not an absolute, basis. I can testify to this view myself. When I approached by own teacher, a Tibetan rinpoche, as to the validity of astrology, he affirmed its usefulness, but said this: "Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root." The dharma teachings of Buddha are the root.

Margaret and I travelled with my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche to Wu-Tai Shan in China in 2004, spending around a week there, including traveling to the top of all five mountains and offering puja.

My point here is that until such time as we can develop full awareness, astrology can be useful to us *on a relative basis* in guiding us through life's obstacles. In other words, in the confused world we often find ourselves in, bewildered by our own ignorance of what is real, and stumbling around, astrology and the other divinatory practices can help to point the way through the confusion to greater clarity by improving our situation in Samsara. Beyond that, as I understand it, astrology has no particular merit. The dharma and its practice is the main practice that is required.

Astrology is one of the relative truths, but not the absolute truth. This explanation made immediate sense to me and is typical of the kind of wisdom I have come to expect from Tibetan dharma teachers.

SUMMARY

The Tibetan system of astrology is a combination of Indian and Chinese methods, the greater and most essential (meaning) part being taken from the

Chinese, and with the technical (calculation) element tending to come from the Indian system. Of course, the Buddhist dharma itself came from India. As mentioned, the Indian or technical part (ephemerides, lunar tables, etc.) is called Kar-Tsi and the Chinese or spiritual part, is called Jung-Tsi.

The Tibetans, who were short on calculation ability, originally borrowed whatever planetary tables they use from the Indians, and don't depend upon these planetary ephemerides for much of their system. They make great use of the 12-year cycle of the animal signs, plus the five-fold element sequence as used in the various forms of Chinese astrology (Jung-Tsi). The Kar-Tsi came from the Indian system along with the dharma and the Kalachakra Tantra. The quintessential portion of the Indian system of value to the Tibetans is the division of the lunar month into 30 equal parts, called "tithis" in the Indian system.

Tibetan astrology is lunar-based, with the Sun (and all the planets) taking a secondary position to the Moon. As proof of this, witness the fact that your Tibetan birthday is not your solar birthday (or yearly solar return), but the lunar phase-angle day on which you were born. Thus, you would celebrate your birthday on that

25th lunar day (Dakini Day, in my case)
day of the lunar month you were born in.
Note: not the 25th calendar date (which is
solar), but the 25th lunar day as
measured from the previous New Moon.

Astrologers in general seem to love
to manipulate cycles and numbers.
The Tibetans (even lacking
planetary calculations) make up for
it with the manipulation of the
various cycles they do use. In
Tibetan astrology, numbers are
counted forward, backward, and
around in many different
combinations. It is just complicated
enough so that not everyone can
do it. It requires an astrologer, a
Tsi-Pa. In fact, it is ironic that
astrology, East and West, seems to
be just complex enough that the
average person can't do it for
themselves and requires some
expert to do it for them. I guess
that is how some make a living. :)

Although my experience with the Tibetan
system is not that great, it is enough to
assure me that the net result of the
Tibetan calculation methods is quite
similar in effect or portent to Western
methods. After all, the point of any kind of
astrology is to provide some kind of
personal direction, perhaps to establish a

dialogue between the individual and the cosmos – an oracle. Astrology is a complex oracle. In other words, the amount of astrological information or life direction (if you will) in the Tibetan system is of the same caliber (and quantity) as similar material here in the West.

The chief exception to this generalization is the use of the lunar cycle in day-to-day life. It is here that the Tibetan system excels and has a great deal to offer Westerners. Here in the West, the awareness of the lunar cycle has been lost or trivialized. It is interesting to note that although few high lamas that I have met make that much use of the cycle of the animal signs, elements, Parkhas and Mewas that I shall present (some do), they all seem to depend upon the cycle of the lunar days for creating their practice and teaching calendars. In other words, much of Tibetan astrology is considered non-essential or of secondary (lesser) importance to the formal Buddhist practitioner. However, this opinion does not extend to the lunar cycle, which is accorded much attention.

To sum up this very, very brief discussion of how Tibetan astrology as we know it today originated, Tibet took from both India and China, but primarily (aside from the dharma teachings), in its heart

essence, it is the Chinese influence that governs the meaning of Tibetan astrology, the Jung-Tsi.

In other words, concepts like the Parkha (eight trigrams), Mewa (Lo-Shu numbers), animal zodiac, and so forth, were taken from China and are precious to Tibetans. Vedic (Indian) astrology and its meanings did not take root outside of the 30-day lunar cycle, which cycle is crucial to the Tibetan approach. Of course, the dharma and the Kalachakra Tantra came from India. Remember that the dharma is the root or heart of the astrology.

These two streams of influence mixed together historically and the Tibetans assimilated them, changing, modifying, and above all incorporating them. They made them their own and in many cases re-wrote history as if they originated these concepts. In some cases, perhaps they did. In particular, as a matter of course, Manjushri was considered the origin of all the astrological teachings, whether or not they originally came from China. Manjushri is the deity from whom these kinds of concepts are in essence born.

It is clear from writings from the 18th

century onward that Tibetans were skilled in all manner of the divinatory arts, not just astrology. This included divinations based on mirrors, dreams, casting lots, arrows, malas (prayer beads), yantras, lamps, stones, drums, bones, bowls of water, cards, medical examination, and of course, mediumistic oracles, to name a few.

Astrology and most of the other forms of divination were performed by Buddhist monks rather than lay people, although it seems that all lay people follow at least some of the indicators, such as the various element combinations. For the most part, monks handle not only the dharma rituals, but also astrology and the other forms of divination. Even the highest rinpoches often practice what is called “Mo,” a form of divination, and it is common practice to approach a Tibetan lama with a burning question and ask them to do a “Mo” on that question.

Some lamas don't do divination, and the Nyingma lineage (as a whole) is probably the most oriented to these forms of divination. When asked to do a “Mo,” a lama may do it on the spot for you or ask you to come back later or the next day to receive the answer. And the answers to Mo questions are seldom very mysterious, but usually very matter of fact, like: “Yes, do go back to school,” or

“No, don’t travel there.”

As mentioned earlier, astrologers are called “Tsi-Pa” in Tibetan and every monastery has a Tsi-Pa, almost by default, just as here in the West there is almost always someone who knows a little astrology, and astrological questions inevitably fall to that person. It is the same in Tibet, although monasteries always require some astrology to set up their schedule for group practice, since it is based on the lunation cycle.

[Graphic by me.]

