

Change and the Self

and other writings



by
Michael Erlewine

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Introduction

What we have here are recent essays and blogs, mostly from 2013, but some from 2012. These offerings are a bit of a smorgasbord, but two principle themes are the effects of change on the Self and its reactions.

Although I have many interests, of late they seem to be narrowing down to dharma-related themes, in particular phenomenology and the dharma. It is a little embarrassing to have such a narrow perspective, but then I remind myself that the dharma is not only the middle way, but it is a wide path, and the only one I feel like traveling just now.

So I hope you find these little pieces interesting. I can be reached at Michael@Erlewine.net.

June 2, 2013 in Big Rapids, Michigan

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Table of Contents

.....	1
DRUGS AND THE DHARMA.....	7
DRUGS AND THE DHARMA.....	7
DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA	15
WE HAVE A CHOICE	30
Poem: Sorry Self	33
HOW PERSONAL IS PRIVATE?	34
HUMPTY-DUMPTY: THE SELF CAME BACK.....	39
A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM.....	41
DISAPPOINTMENT	45
TRANSMIGRATION: GOING SOMEWHERE?	48
ECLIPSE-ASSISTED CHANGE	51
THAT FOURTH THOUGHT	54
SUN STORMS INSIDE OUR HEAD	59
THE POINT OF NO RETURN.....	66
SOLAR FLARES: SEEKING CLOSURE	70
FOUR SOLAR X-CLASS FLARES IN A ROW!.....	75
SOMEWHERE IN TIME... AGAIN	80
SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND DENIAL	84
TONGLÉN: RESOLVING OPPOSITION.....	88
A WALK-AROUND PRACTICE	98
THE OTHER SIDE OF TRYING.....	102
DEPRESSION, THE CHILD OF DISAPPOINTMENT	106

MAY YOU BE WITH THE FORCE!	115
CORE CHANGE	121
ECLIPSE-ASSISTED CHANGE	125
MICRO-KARMA	128
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING	132
HOW TO MOVE THE MIND.....	140
OUR DHARMA AND KARMA	147
THE CARROT AND THE STICK.....	151
SIGHT SEEING.....	154
PERSONA NON GRATA	157
CRITICAL OF WHOM?	161
MEDITATION: MY HISTORY AND TRAJECTORY	164
SELF-RETIREMENT	167
NO SUFFERING ALLOWED, PLEASE.....	170
DHARMA STUFF: TRAPPED BY THE TRAPPINGS	
.....	173
THINGS I DID WRONG	178
SACRED, SACRED, SACRED	182
THE BEAUTY OF IT	186
WHAT IT IS	191
BETTER THAN SUBSTANCES	195
THE HOURS BEFORE THE NEW MOON.....	198
HOW LONG DO THINGS LAST?	200
THE DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES	203
THE TRUTH IS THE FUTURE	206
PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT	208
ONLY THE TRUTH HAS A FUTURE	213

CAN YOU MAKE TIME?216
PUSHING THE ENVELOPE221

DRUGS AND THE DHARMA

I should know better than to talk about drugs and the dharma (and I usually don't) in the same sentence. Encouraging drug use is not my intention. And it would seem that there really is no obvious link between drugs and the dharma in this country. However, there is one indirect link that to me it is very interesting, and worth risking a discussion.

In my experience drugs are not per-se dharmic, with one exception, LSD. And, although they may not be popular, here are my thoughts:

For me the direct results of LSD had to do with the nature of the mind and how it worked. When acid came on the scene in the early 1960s, it was not just another fun high like marijuana. It struck at the core of the 1950's fixed mentality and split it wide open. The genie was out of the bottle.

It is a testimony to the universality of the truth of the dharma that it does not have to come in a Tibetan or Japanese wrapper. Rather, the dharma is like the laws of nature, right up there with gravity and sunshine. It just is. We don't break the laws of nature; they break us. It is the same with the dharma. We work with it and not against it.

When LSD came along and laid bare some of the internal workings of the mind, that was my first real dharma lesson. Like a mental tsunami, acid left in its wake chaos and instability, but also insights and clarity for many of us at that first taste. And it certainly did not have the name of dharma stamped on it, but it was very dharmic.

And when almost a decade later great dharma masters like Chögyam Trungpa came along, they made quick work of our acid trips. It suddenly all made sense. And unlike those of us with acid experience, where we might have this insight right but had no idea where it fit into the overall scheme of life, the dharma had a place for it. Everything we saw in the light of LSD fit together with the dharma teachings like plugging a piece into a jigsaw puzzle.

I had been to the brightest minds I knew (like the Catholic Jesuits) and shared my acid experience asking for an explanation, but they did not have a clue. "Have faith," was about all they said. With my LSD experiences I had somehow ventured beyond the pale of society's consensus and into uncharted waters, territory usually reserved for shamans and those who find themselves in alternate realities and states of mind. I was a voice crying in the wilderness and there were suddenly millions of us. We could not really sort it out. What we were seeing was just too different. Like the dharma, it was a wakeup call.

When the great dharma teacher Chögyam Trungpa came on the scene in the early 1970s all that changed. He was totally at home with whatever we had come across in the mind on acid and never blinked. In fact, it is reputed that Trungpa once took LSD and his only comment was "Nothing happened!" Not only was acid not a challenge to Trungpa, but he was able to show people like myself how each insight into the nature of the mind that LSD had given us fit into an overall approach to training the mind.

Everything my generation could throw at Trungpa just became more grist for his mill. Believe me friends, THAT was impressive and he immediately tamed thousands of us who had fallen into the scary habit of

thinking that we must be the Lone Ranger and somehow unique because of our LSD experiences. Trungpa could settle that question with a simple comment. Nothing we saw in the mind was news to him. Out of the chaos of our acid experiences Trungpa made order. And we just got in line.

What we had seen on acid was the truth or part of it. Like a piece of a puzzle, we had no idea where this or that insight fit in. Trungpa showed how all our pieces fit into the larger picture and we got it. At least in my case, these two powers changed my life, first LSD, and then Trungpa, who helped make sense of it all.

I tell this story because it explains my ambivalence when it comes to drugs. I never got much out of any drugs (except some entertainment), with the exception of LSD. But I would be a liar if I denied that I learned an inestimable amount from taking that drug.

That being said, I should hasten to point out that I sincerely believe that acid was useful at a particular time in history when the fixed dichotomy of the current thinking of the time needed some air, and acid was a shortcut to the future. It paved the way for what we call the 1960s and, IMO, was the principle catalyst for that revolution. Nothing else came close.

And that fact that what we saw on LSD turned out to be part of the dharma is a testimony to its truth and universality. Thank goodness that the Tibetans, driven out of their own country, wandered into America and showed us where the pieces of the puzzle of the mind that we saw on acid fit. Once I found the dharma, drugs no longer interested me.

SOME ELABORATION

I would be surprised if many readers know how much of our worldview is embedded in what we call the self and its perspective. I had little to no idea that what we see out there in the world is very much what we project from our mind in here. We are brought up to believe that what we see in the world around us is objective fact, simply the way things are, the way it is.

I had my first clue that I had it pretty-much backward on May 6, 1964 while I was living in Berkeley California and I had just dropped LSD for the first. And acid was so new back then that what I took was some from the original Sandoz Laboratories in Switzerland. No need to describe my whole trip or to warn you off from running out and taking LSD today. That was then and this is now. For one, acid has changed and the need and the times for it have really changed, but back then LSD was a segue into a new time for an entire generation.

My point here is, aside from literally blowing my mind, the main take-away from that acid trip was the realization that much of what I see out there in the world is what I project from deep in here. I don't mean that I just understand it as a concept, but rather that it was then that I realized in real-time my mind's projections. I will give one clear example.

Back then we had mostly heard stories of acid and few had yet experienced it. The rumor was that LSD was anything you thought it was, which turned out to be more-or-less true.

Despite my attempts to make sure I was in a secure location when I dropped acid, I was not. I made the person who was chaperoning me promise that no matter what I said to the contrary, she would not leave

me alone. I was afraid what I might do. Clear enough? Yet, the first time I told her I was fine and that she should go, she split. Bam! My influence with her was just too strong. She just believed me!

Anyway, there I was, totally immersed in the phantasmagoria of an acid trip and loose on the streets of Berkeley California very late at night. As I passed a dark alley I could hear laughter. And as I peered into the darkness I could see someone coming toward me. It was a black couple. They were drunk and kind of stumbling in my direction. I could see that the woman was leaning into the man and clinging to his waist. I was apprehensive because back then blacks and prejudice went hand-in-hand. I drew back.

Then the couple emerged into the streetlight at the end of the alley and they were white! Not only were they white, they were just a couple of college kids out on a date. What was I to think about that?

What I thought was that in the quick-silver speed of acid I had somehow intercepted my ingrained prejudice and in that slow-motion time that LSD can provide, I could suddenly see the wizard behind the curtain, perhaps more like an idiot. As mentioned earlier, this was not a thought or an understanding. This was a real-time living movie that I was in and I had just stepped behind the curtain of the self for the very first time. My bias, prejudice, and ingrained reaction were suddenly out of the bag and obvious to me.

I had actually caught myself in a contradiction and seen for the first time that the world I lived in was a movie screen upon which I projected what I had

learned or been taught to project, all my likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudice. I was stunned. Wow!

And the whole acid trip that night was like that. In that LSD experience I awoke to real-time psychology. I was suddenly a player within my own mind, and no longer just an onlooker. From that day forward I was a full-time phenomenologist. I had stepped behind the curtain of the self where the projector is located and was soon fiddling with the gears. I was never the same again, and that is good thing.

In the crew-cut straight-jacket world of the 1950s from which I was emerging, I (and everyone I knew) was wrapped way too tight to have any real kind of life. The whole society was similarly frozen, staring at the same locked-step movie that I had just stepped out of. Imagine that!

And I was not alone. My whole generation soon joined me and we stepped through the back of the mirror together and then down the rabbit hole without as much as a goodbye to the status quo. It was total freedom compared to where we came from. We finally understood... something.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. What I saw on acid took me years to absorb and even longer to stabilize, which is why I don't recommend drugs.

Anyway, dharma practice can do the same thing and without the dangers and need to stabilize. But back in 1964, dharma in America had not reached so far as Ann Arbor Michigan, at least not in a form that I could assimilate.

It was then that I began to study my own reactions in earnest. And they were not few, but many. It appeared that I reacted to almost anything and all the

time. My personal likes and dislikes filtered almost everything I experienced, and it was not like my tastes were something special. The net effect was that I was looking through prescription eyeglasses that were anything but rose-colored. Pure, unfiltered experience was almost not on my menu. I was a creature not only of habit, but of bias and prejudice, slammed against the walls of the mind by my every passing reaction. And until I began to develop some awareness of all this, I never even knew all this was happening.

The social mind that emerged from the 1950s was pretty much airtight. Those my age that I knew had no clue either. All of this started to loosen up in the early 1960s, in my opinion largely because of the advent of LSD. That may not be a popular observation, but to the best of my experience it is the truth. Acid exposed the unity of the observer and the observed to most of a generation. We began to witness our own projections and in particular the fact that the strict dichotomy of the subject and the object was not true. It was the Heisenberg principle incarnate, the fact that the state of our mind directly influences what we see and believe is out there in the external world. LSD unhinged an entire generation and the door of the mind blew wide.

Suddenly there was lot's to do. Watching the kaleidoscope of the mind reveal its secrets one by one was riveting. The concrete iceberg of who knows how many previous generations was melting and breaking up, a chunk at a time. And whatever spirit had been trapped in that frozen state was freed and lived again. Suddenly it was the Sixties.

So even before the dharma poured into this country, it was already at work here. When great teachers like Chögyam Trungpa arrived on the scene, they just

showed us how to do it properly, practice methods that really work. However, the mind was already waking up even before that.

DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA

This series of short blogs is a little more direct than some of my writings. You can always just pass over it. For one thing, it has more than a few "Do this" and "Don't do this" suggestions. It is designed for those of you who have found that the mind can at times be quite obscured and is not just naturally clear all the time. If you know this already, then you may be more willing to just get down to learning to work with the mind. What follows are some suggestions and a method of practice to deal with our emotional reactions.

The Tibetan teachings are always about pointing out how we can (and in fact must) eventually enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us. Even the Buddha himself could not just touch our forehead and zap us into enlightenment. The whole idea is that, sooner or later, each of us must undertake the dharma practice necessary to become aware enough to wake up to the true nature of our mind and how it works. In other words, Buddhism is not your typical religious belief system, but rather just a simple path and practical method. It has no cosmology, no beginning, and no suggested end-time. It is a method for developing awareness, pure and simple, just waking up. Period.

There are many recipes, therapies, concepts, and remedies for healing ourselves mentally and we can try them all. Some may help for a time. For myself, what I have found is that I need a practical method, not just a concept if I am going to keep at it, some way to do it. Tibetan Buddhism is all about practical methods. The proof of any treatment or therapy turns

on the likelihood of our keeping up a practice after trying it for a week or so. Most fad-techniques fall by the wayside for one good reason or another. It seems that my "self" does not much like practice (the rote learning of new habits), even if they are supposed to be good for me, so at times I have had to use some reverse-psychology. The self can be fickle.

NO CHURCH ON SUNDAY

There is really no church-on-Sunday equivalent in Buddhism, no once-a-week convocation aside from celebrating natural events like the New and Full Moons, eclipses, and so on. Buddhist practice is pretty much meant to be on in one form or another 24x7. So, don't look for a Sunday one-hour injection of Buddhism.

Another point that surprised me early on is that Buddhism is not evangelical. We are not urged to go out and teach others what we are learning. In fact, it is just the opposite. I was told to work on enlightening myself first, and then (perhaps) I would be fit to be of use to others. In fact, until we are relatively free and clear ourselves, we mostly cause others harm by ministering unto them as long as we have our obscurations pretty much still intact. Work on yourself first. In the lineage that I belong to, we have to be given permission directly from our teacher before we can share our knowledge with others in a formal way.

AND IT TAKES TIME

And here is an important point. What if a student sincerely told you that they wanted to learn to play the guitar or to sing really well, and not just dabble in it once in a while. Of course you might tell them to practice some each day, when they could fit it into their schedule. But we all know that fifteen minutes or

even a half hour a day, while perhaps really helpful, is not what it takes to become a really good player. For most of us it would take a lot more than that. Anyone who is at all expert at anything knows this. It is the same with dharma.

If we have fulltime problems, we need a full-time solution, just as we would if our body needed healing. We don't just apply medicine to our body once a week on Sunday. In a similar way, dharma practice is not a sometimes-thing, not a part-time job or just an option. It becomes a necessity and we can't afford to just dabble in it. Therefore, we have to find a way to enjoy dharma practice more of the time. That is what this blog is about.

PIE IN THE SKY

And let's not idealize the dharma overmuch. Of course, treat the dharma with respect, but know what in it is worthy of your respect. Don't make a religious trip out of what is just rote practice. Being respectful for no reason other than respect's sake is not honoring the dharma, but just another way to keep it at arm's length. Don't mix the Christian (or other religion's) tradition of keeping God on a high altar with practicing the dharma.

Dharma practice involves working with yourself in your day-to-day situation and your "self" is something that you are already familiar with. In fact, if we look we will find that there is probably very little we hold sacred in our self, except perhaps not having our feelings hurt. The self hates that. Dharma practice is like making pottery; you have to get your hands right down into the clay.

So, it is important to separate out any residual or inherited sense of the holy or "religiousness" from our

practice until we can acquire our own reverence. In other words, don't mix your religious upbringing with the dharma. The carry-over is often not helpful. The dharma itself is not mysterious, secret, or especially private, but rather it is wide open, so let the air in. And the same goes for our dharma teachers. Of course, we should respect the Buddha nature in all beings, including animals and bugs. That's not my point.

The dharma is as precious as our attitude toward it. In dharma we respect our teachers because only they have managed to get our attention and can point out the methods to free ourselves from our obscurations. The dharma is sacred as a method only if and because it works for us, and not for any other reason. Don't gild the lily.

The great Zen teacher Lin Chi once said "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." This does not refer to actually killing someone, but rather it recommends that we not worship (sacred-ize) or idealize Buddhism, but rather just apply these dharma techniques to working with our own life and self.

Buddha is not suddenly going to appear and enlighten us. Waiting for that is mistaking the teachings. Our buddha nature is already inside waiting FOR US to become aware of IT. We can wait forever, and apparently we have done so up to this point in time. So, figuratively speaking, kill off that hope and idealization in favor of actually enlightening yourself a day at a time through your own actions and practice. Don't expect it to come from above. But what practice is appropriate for that?

The wheel of the dharma has to be turned, and there are many quotes in the texts that Buddha turned the wheel of the dharma. And so he did, but we have to

as well. Turning the wheel of the dharma for ourselves is also our job. That wheel will just sit there and watch us stare at it. It will never turn by itself. We each have to turn the wheel of our own dharma. That's what the Buddha did and that is what he points out we have to do. Dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project.

As mentioned, don't just place the Buddha on a high altar and consider yourself as separate from him. Be bold. He was an ordinary human being just as we are. His main teaching is that ALL sentient beings have Buddha nature, and we each will have to (sooner or later) learn to enlighten ourselves and do just that. Treating the Buddhist practices as something beyond us, as somehow too holy (or in any way separate from our ordinary self) is a costly mistake. Buddha nature is much closer than that.

As the dharma states, we each have to enlighten ourselves, warts and all, starting just where and as we are now. Don't put off practicing dharma because you feel obscured or unworthy in your own mind. Don't distance yourself from the practice by making it anything other than an integral part of your immediate world. The only requirement is that you learn how to practice and it can be awkward at first, like any first practice. Here and now is when and where to practice.

In summary, the dharma is already a part of us (obscurations and all), so don't perfume the dharma into something separate from you and your particular situation. You are not an exception. There are no exceptions with dharma. We all need it and will someday have to do it.

No matter how stained or depressed you may feel, don't use that as an excuse to give up or get down on yourself. Just drop all that and start again fresh in each instant. No apologies to our self are needed. The self works for us and not vice-versa. And don't waste time on the past. Just walk on. The Buddhist phrase is "Don't Prolong the Past." Make a better past (and future) in the present is suggested.

The dharma is perfectly at home in the most nitty-gritty of our situations, those that we are most embarrassed by or ashamed of. It is a "come as you are" dharma. There is nothing "holier than thou" about dharma techniques. They are perfect for "thou," and they work just as we are, in whatever mess we happen to find ourselves. There is no one watching other than our self, and the self is our own dummy, because we are the ventriloquist. As the Beatles put it "No one will be watching us. Why don't we do it in the road."

So, unless you need them as a comfort blanket, put aside your lava lamps, candles, incense, and whatever for a spell. Don't create a mood. The dharma is not mysterious. We don't have to set the scene in any way, but just start right where we are and practice developing awareness.

I repeat: it is adding insult to injury to be cowed by your own actions, even if they happened only a second ago. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, try not to do it again, and just drop it. Move on. Don't waste time being ashamed or apologizing. Just begin again. Start over. Don't apologize to your self. It's no one you know.

PRACTICAL METHODS TAKE PRACTICE

The Sanskrit word "Buddha" just means awakened or aware, and a Buddha is one who is aware and points out awareness and the path to achieving it. That's it.

There are all kinds of medicines and therapies. Some really help, but most all of them are what the Buddhists call relative truths. They can help us on our journey get from here to there, but most therapies address the symptoms (and removing them), rather than the cause. Buddhist teachings address the cause and offer a method for removing the cause. And the cause is always our ignorance (what we ignore), and our lack of awareness. Removing the cause means waking up to our innate awareness.

Buddhism is not a religion like most Americans are raised in. In Christianity there is a separation between mankind and god, a gap that is addressed by Christ, "God's son." But there is a gap between Christ and mankind, as well. As a young man, I researched this very carefully with the Jesuits, Catholicism's scholars and they very clearly stated: Christ is not us. He is god; we are human. It has become a habit to "believe" in this way. Don't bring that to your dharma. It does not help. We don't believe in the dharma, we test and use it.

Buddha was not a god, and there is no gap between you and the Buddha, as to our essential nature. They are identical. So "holy" to Christians is not necessarily "holy" to Buddhists. There is no separation (other than to practice) between you and the Buddha. This is an important point.

Let's not separate the Buddha from ourselves by putting him on a pedestal. Respect his methods because they work. That is all that makes the dharma

(and him) sacred to us. We need to keep the dharma close to us. It is our dharma, the key to awareness, a method designed specifically to work for us.

SLOW OR FAST PATH

There are said to be 84,000 dharmas or individual ways or paths to become enlightened, and perhaps just as many teachers. And there are short paths and longer paths, paths that can be traversed in this lifetime and paths that take many lifetimes. Slow and steady wins the race, so most folks are introduced to a path (like learning to meditate) that will take most of us a long time.

If, for whatever reasons, we need to take a faster path, it usually requires more (or at least different) practices on our part. In Tibet, in general, simple meditation is not even taught in the beginning as it is here in the west. Before meditation is attempted, most Tibetans undertake what amounts to a dharma boot camp called ngondro. In other words, basic meditation is a more advanced practice rather than one for beginners.

KLESHAS: CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

The ngondo practice (which I will only mention here) is designed to clear away some of the more gross obscurations so that meditation can be more successful. Perhaps chief among these obstacles are the large emotional obscurations called Kleshas, emotions like anger, jealousy, hatred, desire, ignorance, and so on.

Kleshas are nothing to be ashamed of, but they do require our awareness and attention unless we want them to continue to rule us. It is considered very difficult to make much progress in living a happy life if

the kleshas constantly interrupt the life and set us back. It is like two steps forward and one step back, or, at times, one step forward and two steps back.

Once a klesha (like anger) gets out of our control, it can take over our whole mind and we wake up later having kind of wrecked our mental state... once again. Unlike simple "bad" thoughts that can be dealt with through the dharma practice tonglen, a full-blown klesha is beyond our ability to root out, without additional practices.

Kleshas tend to come over us somewhat suddenly, and they usually get out of control before we are fully aware they are present. We end up being carried away with them and are helpless until they eventually savage our mindstream until they blow themselves out.

The remedy for this is to become more aware of our emotions when they are still at arm's length, before they get hold of us. Unfortunately, this kind of awareness training has to be learned and practiced, and we don't just start out practicing on kleshas like anger and jealousy. They are too ingrained, too powerful. We have to start with smaller reactions and work up to the big obscurations.

REACTION TONGLÉN

Practicing something like traditional tonglen, while very good, can be too abstract, with ideas like taking on the sufferings of the world or those of another individual and sending back our love and energy. There is a more immediate kind of tonglen that is designed for reactions, and it is much closer to us than the sufferings of the world or those of another person. To begin with, it deals with our own reactions

and only eventually extends outside of us. I call it "Reaction Tonglen."

This form of tonglen requires that we first examine ourselves enough to determine that it is we (ourselves) that are reacting to the world around us. Even if the world sends us a personal attack, how we react to it is up to us. And we don't start, as mentioned, working with big reactions like anger or jealousy, but rather with the constant rain of tiny reactions that impact us every day.

Someone looks at us in the wrong way, or says something to us in a sarcastic or snappy tone. How do we react? That person may not intend to impact us or they may actually intend to. Who knows what their state of mind is. We can't control that. If they hurt us, it is our fault if we let it get to us, but we don't have to add insult to injury by underscoring that perceived hurt or insult and spend half the day going over and over in our mind what they said, thereby inscribing multiple layers of karma in the groove of the original hurt.

In fact, unless another person actually physically harms us, we don't have to record hurt at all. We can understand that they are in a bad way and not take it personally. Or we don't know why they did what they did and just let it go. This would be an example of reactive tonglen, responding to a reaction that we are capable of dealing with, one that does not have to carry us away into a full-blown klesha-storm.

Emotional klesha-storms destroy hours, days, or months of practice in a single moment and send us back to the stone age of our development, at least for the moment. It is very harmful to have to constantly

recover mentally from this every time a blast of anger blows our mind, and it is harmful to our health.

Sadly, doing this kind of reactive tonglen sitting on a cushion for a few minutes or even an hour a day, at least in my experience, while helpful, is not enough practice-time to actually make much progress, at least in the timeframe of a single lifetime.

The solution for this is to make it a general habit to do reactive-tonglen all day long. It is not that hard to do. I have done it. All it requires is that we begin to become more aware of our reactions. And we can tailor our practice to those reactions that we are aware of and not worry about the big kleshas (like anger) until later, farther down the road. In the beginning, those big kleshas will continue to carry us away as they always have.

It is up to us to not make observing our reactions a chore. Of course, we can ruin it for ourselves, which is just our way of sending our effort to the recycle bin, but we don't have to do that. Our reactions themselves actually are fresh and self-fueling. That's what reactions are. They touch the quick. If we can stay with the freshness, then this kind of reactive-tonglen can be, well, enlightening, and enlightening all the way down the road of doing it. I know this from experience.

And when we are aware of a reaction, we can either just recognize and drop it, or we can examine it. In the beginning it pays to examine our reactions because they show us our own bias and how our mind is programmed to respond without our thinking. I was amazed at how I reacted to almost everything with a like or dislike, as if my opinion in these cases was useful. Not really. All my reactions did was color my

view until I could not see clearly through the fog of it all.

Buddhism is all about awareness, becoming aware. It is about nothing else, and waiting for that big "Aha" in the sky (enlightenment) is not the only kind of awareness. By becoming aware of our reactions, one at a time as they appear, we can gradually develop much greater awareness. Anyway, no enlightenment will come unless we bring it ourselves. The world does not owe us a living.

Most awareness techniques require practice, at least enough to develop the muscle-memory needed to make them habitual and effective. Monitoring our mindstream for its constant flow of reactions is an easy way to acquire a lot of dharma practice, and the rewards that constant practice brings. This very simple technique adds up to real awareness. I have done this myself and know from experience.

We can work on the small reactions at a level we can maintain until we get the hang of it, and then tackle the larger ones, one level at a time. Let's go over the process.

We see ourselves reacting. It could be to something someone said or it could just be a reaction we have to something in the world. We don't like this person's nose or that color of sweater or the way that woman or man flaunts his or herself. There are seeming endless opportunities to react and normally we do react, "all day and all of the night" as the old Kinks song says.

So, we can catch ourselves in a reaction. The first step is that we own that it is we who are reacting, and not something outside ourselves. If we acknowledge that, we can note that and drop it. Or, as I tell my dog

when he shows up with a decaying animal in his mouth, "Just leave it!"

Often a simple recognition (awareness) of the reaction is enough for it to just vanish. We zap it. For those stubborn stains, you may want to do a little regular tonglen with them or, if you are a more advanced meditator and know Vipassana meditation, you can just look at the nature of the reaction and stop following its content.

Start small and work upward. Like the old joke "vote early and vote often," we can catch reactions all day long as the day unfolds. It really does not take any extra time and we are already in the moment anyway. But the good thing is that this is true dharma practice and we soon find ourselves practicing all the time.

It takes this level of practice to make good progress, at least in my experience. And the result of this particular practice is increased awareness of our own reactions, becoming aware of them, owning them, and ceasing to react to them. And by not reacting we cease to record karma we otherwise would accumulate by going over and over our various hurts and reactions. And we eventually stop wrecking our own mindstream.

Sure, it takes some time (and practice) to acquire the habit, but not "time" time. Once I heard of this practice, it took maybe three years of practicing this, as often as I could remember to do it, before I had some real kind of control. That may sound like a long time, but not compared to a lifetime of being subjected to our own emotional storms.

And you can easily mix this with standard Shamata sitting meditation and progress even faster. Then the sequence would be: be aware of a reaction, own it,

drop it, and bring the mind gently back to whatever we were working with before the interruption. Continue on.

Each time we are interrupted by a reaction, we do the whole thing again. But the process is very organic and healing because we only do it when something interrupts us and we react. This is a marvelous and most efficient way to mix dharma practice with our day-to-day work.

This is different from the way normal tonglen is usually taught, which is much slower (no hurry) and it will probably take lifetimes to perfect. However, if we need to get a hold on our emotions because they are damaging our life, then a little bit of sitting practice each day (or week) may not be enough to change things for us. We need stronger medicine, which is where reaction-tonglen can be useful. It is portable, not difficult to do, constant, and it really works well. I have done it for years.

Through this practice we become more and more aware of just how much of our self is pure reaction, judgment, bias, either good or bad. And we don't discriminate between negative or positive reactions, either. We catch them both and learn from each. Our positive reactions can be just as useless as our negative ones.

And one last but very important thing, motivation. The Buddhists are absolutely clear about examining our motivation for any practice. And even though we may learn this practice to help manage our own emotions, we should not do this only for ourselves.

This has never been a problem for me, because it is very clear that any progress I make in managing my emotions and outbursts very directly benefits others,

in particularly my family. They benefit. So my motivation has been to clean up my act so that others don't have to suffer my lack of control, etc.

And Buddhists are also very direct about always dedicating the merit of our practice. You can do this at the end of the day or with each reaction. Probably end of the day is what most will do. And it is very simple.

We just say a short dedication that any merit or goodness (however small) that accumulates from our practice that day may benefit others and help lead to their (and our own) awakening. Dedicating merit is like taking money to the bank. Once you dedicate the merit, it is deposited and cannot be lost. However, and this is a big "however," if we don't dedicate our merit, we lose it the next time we blow our cool and destroy our own mindstream with an outburst of anger or whatever.

I know that this aspiration and dedication thing may be a new concept to many of you, as it was to me in the beginning, but hold your fire. According to every rinpoche I have met and taken teachings from (and that is many), dedicating the merit is an essential key to any real progress in awareness.

This long blog is a short introduction to working with our reactions on a full-time basis. I hope it has been helpful.

WE HAVE A CHOICE

And we have it ten, 100, 1000, probably thousands of times a day, the choice of how to react. Our self is by nature reactive. It is a tight cluster of intense likes and dislikes, and also less-intense "druthers." Although the self is part of us, it is not the whole of us, and certainly not the boss of us, although many here may have forgotten that.

The self is something most of us have to work around, because it is not intelligent on its own. It is a dummy. Like the ventriloquist, believe it or not, we animate the self with our various attachments and then watch it dance.

Because the self is not an entity (a sentient being) like we are, but acts like it is, the likes and dislikes, bias, and prejudices of the self should not be allowed to make life decisions for us. I consider the self like an administrative assistant, much like a phone app we might download, very much a fabricated thing.

And while the existence of some kind of self is necessary to navigate the daily chores of life, it has no permanent existence or true being, but is a shell or a mask through which we work and peer. The self and our personality are pretty much the same thing.

The bottom line is that we each have to be aware enough of the self so that it does not get in the way of what is important, which is certainly not all the petty likes and dislikes that comprise most selves.

If I had to pick one word to describe the self, that word would be "reactive." The self reacts to almost anything and everything, like: all day long. And those myriad of small reactions are like an aperture on a camera,

opening and closing constantly, often dimming out the light we need to see by.

Because we habitually identify with our self, it is easy to forget that we are not exclusively the self, but rather that we are sentient beings capable of being aware of the self. We embrace the self as part of us, and not the other way around. The self does not include the awareness part of us. We are aware of it. It is not aware of us. In fact, the self is only aware of itself, which is where the concept "selfish" comes from.

The sad part is that for many of us the lens of the self is like prescription eyeglasses, and this is what we are used to viewing our life through, at least much of the time. And most selves are a veritable agony of reactions, so many things the self likes and loves, or does not like or hates. Every one of those reactions is a visceral wince we have to survive, and at the same time is a contraction or dimming of our awareness, the light of the mind. The reactions of the ordinary self through the day is a lot like a strobe light at a dance party – hard to see by.

Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, the self is literally a pile of prickly reactions that rule us all day long. However, if we start with the small reactions and work upward, we can train ourselves to, first, be aware when we are reacting and, two, replace our knee-jerk reactions with responses that neutralize and eventually wear that particular reaction out of existence. Like a night-blooming flower, we gradually open until we are exposed to the whole sky and it feels great. We are liberated from this or that auto-reaction one at a time..

The wonderful thing about self-liberating our reactions, especially for those of us like me who are basically lazy, is that if we practice this every day, all day as best we can, we can feel the liberation happening. In other words, each day is lighter, brighter, and better. We can witness the progress of deactivating the reactive self, almost like one reaction at a time.

Because our reactions come from once-free energy that was bound and embedded by our attachments (our likes and dislikes), when an attachment is lessened or removed, that energy is freed and it lives again, literally; it walks the earth as we do. We are it.

Many dharma practices take a long time of doing before we see any results. This reaction-tonglen as described here is not one of those. If you will be diligent for even a short time (days and weeks) and do this practice as you go through your day, you will notice a change for the better.

As you clean up and clear up reaction after reaction, after you learn to respond to challenging reactions in a skillful way, your energy level will go up. You become increasingly aware and the energy curve is exponential, not linear. I don't know of any single beginning dharma practice that is as natural, easy, and effective as this one. It just works.

Poem: Sorry Self

SORRY SELF

Who can blame the self,
For being selfish,
Motherless orphan,
Of the mind,
That you are.

Forever embarrassed,
And feeling sorry,
Hurt by every slight...
Empty of anything,
Permanent,
Yet still,
Full of attachments.

It's no wonder,
You have no confidence.
There is almost,
Nothing to you.

I've never found you,
And I've looked.
You are like,
No one I know,
And no one,
Really knows you.

I would feel compassion,
If you were someone,
Or even just something,
That truly exists.

May 29, 2013

HOW PERSONAL IS PRIVATE?

Plus Flare and Eclipse Update.

[I have another theme here, but before I get into that, please note that the last of the three eclipses will occur Friday night, May 25, 2013 at 00:25 AM EDT (around Midnight on Saturday morning). This will be a Full-Moon eclipse. I have no idea whether there will be any more largish solar flares, but there was a good-sized (M.5) one yesterday (Wednesday), and it had a strong CME Event (Coronal Mass Ejection), which is headed toward Earth and should sweep by on May 25th. So we will get both an eclipse and a solar event on the Full-Moon eclipse day. The solar flare Wednesday was large enough to kind of (in my experience) serve as a setback to what I am calling the reorganization of the self... at least to a degree. It seemed to retard the sense of my returning to normal, and extended the chaos for a little longer.]

I would like to talk about what we call "spirituality." The whole concept of spirituality is so confusing in these modern times. Here in America we consider our spirituality as "private," perhaps based on First Amendment rights and, sadly, meditation is lumped into the concept of spirituality. It is considered politically incorrect to ask about someone's spirituality. We don't go there. That is considered personal and private. It would be funny if it did not also have consequences.

The problem is that here is a whole nation, most of whom will on principle not talk about their spirituality, including their meditation technique and experiences, yet who are at the same time at least somewhat at a loss as to what they are doing when they say they

"meditate." I am not saying no one knows how to meditate, just that far too many have never properly learned how. If they are honest, they know they don't know, because nothing is happening. Or worse: they don't even know they don't know. I understand this is a strong statement, so please hear me out.

In Tibet there are large monasteries filled with monks who, aside from their various dharma practices, debate, discuss, and instruct each other at least on all the basic meditation techniques. Basic meditation technique is open source, transparent. There is nothing private about meditation instruction and how to do it in Tibet. It is an open book and not considered personal.

Sure, your relationship with your root teacher may be personal and private, but not the basic techniques you are using, like shamata meditation. In this country, the whole area of meditation is considered private (too personal to discuss) and there certainly are no open standards to measure against. We are free to set our own standards, which freedom only holds us back.

In this regard we stack the deck against ourselves. Meditation techniques need to be separated out from our cloistered ideas of "spirituality," and vetted by those who actually have been trained in it. By definition we don't know what we are doing when we practice meditation. That is why it is called practice. We need to let some air in. As a nation we would do well to learn which mind-training techniques actually work and which amount to spiritual materialism on our part, just stroking our ego.

I had the good fortune to actually find teachers who did not let me persist in my isolated sense (and home-made notions) of spirituality, but actually marched me

through the steps of actual meditation training until I got it. And they did not buy all the guff I came up with along the way as to my "right" to do it my way, to be secretive about it. No one was fooled by that, and after a while I just gave it up and got in line and learned how to meditate correctly, based on authentic teachings reaching back 2500 years.

I came real close to protecting my pride by cutting and running when I had to face my own stale excuses for not just learning to meditate properly. I had the ridiculous notion that somehow, because I was an astrologer and was, you know, "spiritual," that I should place out of meditation 101. Rinpoche never blinked. He gently pointed out to me that when it came to meditation, it was better for me to simply start at the beginning. It would save time. That stung a bit, but I am so grateful that I managed to squash my pride enough to just do what was suggested. It has made a huge difference in my life.

So, by all means let's separate our first-amendment rights to freedom of religion from the detailed methods needed to learn how to meditate that are openly taught in Asia. There is nothing private about basic meditation technique any more than learning to type or ride a bicycle is considered private. Lava lamps are not required.

Meditation is not something (at least in learning the authentic techniques properly) that you learn by yourself. It is not private, but needs all the open air and the asking of questions possible. We should discuss our meditation experience with an experienced meditator UNTIL such time as we stop practicing and actually just meditate. Then we can be private about it, if we wish.

Having learned something about meditation myself, please hear me when I repeat: there is nothing private about meditation. It is a technique like any other technique, something we need to learn how to do properly and then practice until we get the knack of it. We can call it a spiritual skill, but the skill or technique part of it is like any other technique. We have to learn it properly.

Without being able to ask questions and get feedback while we are learning, we run the risk of not learning meditation properly or, worse, doing it ineffectively and never really being able to actually meditate. I worry that too many people are quietly doing whatever they think is meditation, in the dark (so to speak), afraid to ask someone with experience with the technique for help or insight. I spent years doing this myself and it was a huge waste of time. It is almost an American peculiarity that we always know best, even when we don't know at all.

Learning meditation, at least the kind that the Buddha did, requires some instruction and, more important yet, someone to monitor what we are doing until we reach the point that we actually can meditate. We need to ask questions while we are learning, share our experiences with an instructor, and get clear feedback until we know what we are doing.

There are dharma practices that should not be discussed, not because they are "secret," but because they should not be practiced until the basics are learned. However, beginning meditation practice is not one of them. Basic meditation technique can be discussed, and should be, in order to get it right. It is fundamental, meaning it is the foundation on which everything else is based. If it is shaky, it is not a

strong foundation and it just won't work. You have the idea.

HUMPTY-DUMPTY: THE SELF CAME BACK

Your mileage may vary, but like the turtle who sticks its head back out of his shell, it looks like this recent eclipse of my self is coming to an end. And while there are probably other large solar flares still coming down the road, at least for now, I am starting to recover from the effects of those four giant X-Class flares. I am slowly feeling more like my old self again and some of my interests are even starting to perk up, and they were flat-lined only yesterday.

Anyway, I am back (or on the way back) and my self seems to have recovered from its current hiccup and desertion of....well, who would that be? I guess it is me, myself, and I... which were lost track of for a while.

I must say that although the Buddhists point out that the self has no true existence (meaning it is a composite), it is a mighty familiar and handy tool to have around. I would have to think twice about diving into such a loss-of-self willingly, even though a dip in the cosmic ether is always refreshing, but refreshing like a rollercoaster ride is refreshing. I would probably hesitate to volunteer. Learning to surf these solar tides takes practice, and I am still working on it.

So pardon me while I pry my fingers loose from their static grip on the recent past and try for a more relaxed hold on reality. And I didn't even know I was uptight! When so many of my friends tell me they feel out of sorts lately, I know just what they are talking about.

I can only guess what inner changes locked into place while my self was absent or at a low ebb, and I am sure I will find out in time. Like Earth's tectonic plates,

the mighty machinery of the mind heaves and sighs as the winds of change whirl around us. Who knows what great events will find that their seed was planted in these recent intense solar events.

Like the aftermath of a hurricane, I find myself taking inventory of what I can remember I was doing prior to the onset of those four large solar flares, or whatever may have caused me to lose track of myself. I ask myself: what do I feel like doing now? Whatever I feel like doing, that is my karma or talents.

And what do I not particularly feel like doing now that I did feel like doing before all this? Whatever that is, it is less important to me, something that apparently requires my self to be in top-top shape to feel like doing at all. I take note of this because this is very valuable information as to what is native to me (my natural state) and what I have added on because perhaps it flatters me. However it would seem that I only feel like doing some things when all things are working smoothly. When the fan gets hit, I am back to basics.

And as the rubber meets the road I seem to drop a lot of my perfumed interests like a hot potato. I can see now that when the tide of the self starts to return, those interests that appear first are more who I really am, while those interests that come lately are closer to what I wish I were like. They are high maintenance, take effort, and a self that has enough energy to support them. My vanity kind of drives these lesser interests, but my true talents drive me. There is a difference.

When the chips are down I tend to abandon the weaker type quickly. Anyway best wishes to all. I am learning a lot.

A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

THIRD SUPER FLARE IN 24-HOURS

At 9:10 PM EDT Monday, a huge (and the largest so far) X-Class solar Flare reached a peak, making this the third immense flare in 24-hours! Two of these three flares are large enough to make the Top Ten List of this entire solar cycle which began January 8, 2008, and will peak sometime in mid-2013. Let me try to put this in perspective.

First of all, in my experience sudden intense solar events trump or are greater sources of change than even eclipses, which is saying something because eclipses are traditionally powerful. So here in the middle of a triple-eclipse time we have (so far!) three X-Class solar flares and possibly more in the offing.

The idea is that these intense solar events are instruments of change, change injected suddenly into our mindstream that we have no choice but to assimilate, hopefully creatively, but you can be sure these flares will change our life direction in significant ways, even if it takes some time for those changes to be apparent. This is seed change.

And don't look for outward signs because you would miss my point. Strong solar change is as inward as we are ourselves. As I keep pointing out, with solar change it is we, ourselves, who are changing, and that is hard to observe if we are what is changing, and that is the case here. We kind of have to ride it out and tend to lose awareness at these times quite easily. We are rocked (or knocked) to sleep by the shockwaves of solar change.

Influx of change, even intense change, is natural, but by definition interruptive of the status quo. And once again this brings the "Self" into focus. I hate to always beat on the self, but as far as interpreting or assimilating intense solar change, the bottleneck always comes down to the effects of change on our self, because the self always ends up being (or trying to be) the filter of change.

We know ourselves to some degree. The self does not like to be arbitrarily changed and solar flares are nothing but pure change injected into our time and space. As usual, the self wants to be the arbiter of all change, and that is not possible with flares, except retrospectively. Like a mirror, we tend to only see or witness solar change as it is reflected in alterations (or disruptions) in our self.

As mentioned, the self apparently always seeks to control change, to limit or eliminate unwanted change to its status, but with strong solar flares that is just not possible. The result at these times is that some anomalies appear and are evident, chinks in the airtight armor of the self, and even with minimal awareness we can sense or watch the self break down and attempt to reform, like a stuck record.

In other words, intense solar changes can be overwhelming, causing us to just shut down or lie down, and so on. We somehow just have to withstand these inner shocks out-breaking at times of strong solar activity. It can be (at least for me) a bit of a rollercoaster ride.

I do my best to share these thoughts with those of you interested, but at the same time I am riding out the changes, the same as you are.

Considering phrases like self-centered, self-indulgent, self-interested, self-seeking, self-serving, selfish, self-loving, self-absorbed, self-worth, self-determination, and so on, it is an interesting exercise to look up the definition of the self in a dictionary.

Self as a Noun:

"A person's essential being that distinguishes them from others." If I dig a little deeper into the etymology of the word "self," I find that the root of the word means "separate" or "apart."

So, the self is separating, what distinguishes one from others, or what separates one from the whole. This is a western definition, since the Buddhists would not credit the self with having a "being," as in being existential. As mentioned in a previous blog, the self is our own creation (at least what it consists of), and like a ventriloquist's dummy (we are supposed to be the ventriloquist), we fall into listening to and following its directions. It wants to be our boss. So it can be a kind of Franken-self, if not seen through. This is why making the self transparent is so important in mind training and many spiritual disciplines. We need to see beyond our self to the awareness we actually are. That is our true vantage point, but I won't belabor this point here.

I wanted to make sure you knew about these three huge solar flares and could incorporate that knowledge into however you are taking the changes. I always find these times, rare as they are, wonderful. As I am of a liberal persuasion, I tend to welcome change, and do my best to assimilate it creatively, to use it like the martial art Aikido to better direct my life. I would rather be part of the solution than part of the problem.

Yet, although I do my best to study these solar changes, I too am swept up in them like all of you. Maintaining awareness at the flood stage of solar influx is not easy and requires the ability to swim in the stream of the mind.

Lest you think I am some kind of expert, I had to take some three naps yesterday, just because I could not manage to do much else because of the mind storms. I know. Color me crazy, but also hang on to your hats!

DISAPPOINTMENT

I have been disappointed. Like many of us, I have had some disappointments in my life, and they are, obviously, well, disappointing. A couple of the big ones I have experienced threw me into a loop that was not that easy to get out of, so I want to talk here about the little letdowns of life. But before I do that let's look at one big disappointment that happened to me so that we are all on the same page as to what can happen.

In May of 2008 I was (without warning) laid off (let go) from the job that I had as a senior consultant. It was not exactly personal. Many others were laid off too, but I personally also was let go, so it was personal enough. Suddenly I had no way of making a living. I was 66 years old.

Anyway, there I was, suddenly financially exposed, and old enough to be somebody's grandfather. In fact, I was somebody's grandfather.

I know, I know... time to retire. That would have been good with me if I had had enough money to retire on. Certainly I had done plenty of work in my life, but as it turned out, I could not afford to retire, thanks to another huge (financial) disappointment, but I will spare you that story for now. Someday I will tell it though.

Anyway, when this happened I flashed on something my first dharma teacher had told me many times. He would say, "Michael, it is not the \$64,000 Question [a popular quiz show back then], but the \$63,000 question" that is important. When my teacher was 63 years old he was caught in a boiler explosion and spent many, many weeks in the hospital. When he got

out, he had used up all his life savings and had to start over again at that age. It was a turning point in his life. We all have them. It also is what he called a climactic year in life, and the start of the third Saturn return.

So perhaps I was in the same lineage because there I stood at age 66 without any means of supporting my family. What money I had managed to save was locked up and would not be available for years, so there I was staring into the abyss. What a surprise!

My response was to go off the reservation. I began to spend a lot of time alone and, oddly enough, not time feeling sorry for myself, but time just out in nature, and with eyes open. I was in a kind of shock. For example, from late May of that year until the frost took over in the fall (and I was forced to come in) I was in the fields and meadows watching the sun rise each morning, just taking it all in. I did this every day unless it rained or something.

I was glued to nature like there was no tomorrow. And I was taking photographs. In the early dawn light I could be found (often soaking wet) crawling around in the grass with my camera taking photos of small critters.

It was the shock of the disappointment that cast me over the edge of society and literally into the wilderness of my own mind. All at once I was a free radical, lost for a time from all comfort, and just out there on my own.

My family did not know what to do with me. I could see by their looks and the looks of neighbors and town people who would drive by where I was busy photographing nature. What is he doing? As if I knew.

I spent those predawn days (and entire summer) peering through perfect camera lenses at perfect miniature worlds, like the one shown here. My own world was in chaos and falling down around me, but through the rabbit hole of the camera lens there were still pristine worlds, and I was immersing myself in them. I didn't want to see anything else at the moment. I was outside of time as I knew it.

The story goes on, and I wrote a whole book about it called "Experiences with Mahamudra," because it took a shock like losing my job to jolt me out of my comfortable life-groove and into awareness stark enough to drop some of my attachments and to actually wake up a bit. And I did.

Anyway, that story came to a happy ending as gradually I stabilized after having been hurled through space and time for a spell. I won't relate it here. The free e-book can be found here for those of you interested. It is a story of dharma discovery:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

What I would like to do here and perhaps in a blog or two to come is discuss this whole disappointment thing, how it affects us, and what we can do with it.

I mean, it happens to everyone sooner or later.

TRANSMIGRATION: GOING SOMEWHERE?

Let me warn you right off that what follows is a little "heady," maybe a lot, so please ground yourself and hang on. I have been writing these last days about the three eclipses in a row that we are now in the middle of, and the opportunity for inner change that times like these can bring. Yet words can only take us so far. We all know that.

Beyond words is the life experience that words can but refer to, point at, and we each will have to go deeper into life to have that experience for ourselves. We can stand as long as we want with our toe in the swimming pool, but sooner or later (and it will happen) we each have to take the plunge.

Eclipse times (and also times of intense solar activity like flares, etc.) are moments when change can be more obvious for us to see and feel the urge of, if we will just time-out a bit and let the mind rest long enough to pick up on it. The highest Tibetan lamas tell us that inner alignment is there at eclipses.

In a very real way we each are like the old "camera obscura," surrounded by darkness and watching the world projected on our own inner movie screen through a tiny pinhole of light, the view or vantage point of the Self. And the lens of the Self we peer through is nothing more than the sum total of our attachments, our likes and dislikes. That is how we identify who we are: as me, myself, and I. This is the most common vantage point.

I mention this here because at times of change like these, we can, of course, actually change, and the greatest (or most common) change is one of attitude or view. It is much easier to change our attitude or

approach to life than it is to rearrange everything outside ourselves in the world to our viewpoint. And there are little and big changes of view that are possible.

Someday we each will learn to remove those self-attachments, one-by-one, and just expand into the full light of our natural awareness. This is what all the wise persons tell us and they even tell us how to do it. And here is the point:

When we do become more aware, it won't be from the vantage point of our "self," and I have found that this point is very hard to grasp, but understanding it (or beginning to) is crucial to inner vision.

We have all endlessly heard admonitions from our parents and teachers to "not be selfish," and the like. This is not simply some moral imperative we are expected to follow, but a true clue as to what will eventually take place. The state of "not being selfish" is a clue that we will then no longer be looking from the vantage point of the self, and we need to understand this. It will help.

Instead, like the spider on a web, we will crawl across life, handhold by handhold, moving from our self-perspective to a more enlightened view. And this changing view and new vantage point is profound. It has been called the transmigration of consciousness, and is well worth understanding.

Transmigration is not so much a transfer of consciousness from one body to the next (as many books suggest), although that is what we study when we invoke terms like reincarnation, metempsychosis, or rebirth. Yet this, like so many things, can be misleading.

True transmigration is a transfer of view or vantage point and it can be done right in the here and now, in this life, as well as in any series of successive lives to come. As the Tibetans continue to point out, the life we now live is also just another of the bardo states. There are only bardo states until we wake up and become enlightened.

The entire point of all spiritual knowledge, meditation, and mind-training instruction is to point out how we can go about letting go of where we are now bound by our attachments to a patchwork self (this view that we imagine that we stand behind and have drawn around ourselves unknowingly), and instead migrate or expand to a view as wide as awareness itself. And it is this awareness that we can take with us when we die.

At that point, we cease to identify with the self as exclusively who (or what) we are and gradually learn to migrate to another vantage point, one of awareness of our own awareness. This is what transmigration is about and it can take place as much in this as any next life. Sooner or later we just have to learn to do it.

And eclipse times can make this process more obvious and easier to grasp. At times of change we stand teetering on the brink of changing our view and vantage point, changing it from assuming that life is as we see it from the point of the Self, to letting that go and transmigrating to a view that is as wide as awareness itself.

ECLIPSE-ASSISTED CHANGE

We are in an intra-eclipse time, three eclipses all in a row for that matter. Theoretically we should be (or can be) more sensitive to our inner changes during this time, at least that is what the Tibetans point out. As they say, eclipses are times to observe our mindstream with more care. Why? Because things are happening now, if we will just look or learn to look. And what is happening is change, and change is what fuels creativity.

By definition, change of any kind marks instability of the status quo. Life is once again in flux, and that fact impacts the way things are. This means that things will not be going on the way they have been going. Things are changing. I am reminded of the line in Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man," "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?"

If we are passive, I guess we wait to see how the changes turn out, for the better or for worse. But that is not something we would dare do if we were driving a car, wait to see how things turn out. Instead, we would have to drive the car. What makes us think change is any different and has to be waited out?

I find that change can be uncomfortable, sometimes even unsettling, having my deck shuffled right before my eyes. But change is also a chance. When things change, a little bit of chaos (unpredictability) is injected into our sense of order. Most of us just keep our heads down and wait it out when change comes, but there are alternatives.

By definition, change shakes up (changes) the status quo and brings with it uncertainty, uncertainty that

things will stay the same. Sometimes that is a good thing. We may want or need things to change. And by being aware, we can to some degree even guide our choices in times of change.

The energy of change (during eclipse times) does not last forever, so use it while you have it. When it has run its course, the status quo will creep back in and reassert itself. You can count on that. Things will shrink back to normal, perhaps to a new normal. But change will be gone, and the opportunity for changing things will also be more difficult.

This increased solunar activity at eclipse times produces gaps or openings in our everyday life, chinks in our armor, opportunities for change. Sure, we can hunker down and wait for change to pass (and usually do), but we can also meet change head on and learn to use it to change things more toward how we would like them. We can drive the car. Change is a time of and for activity, not inactivity.

Yes, at times of change everything can be a little more upsetting. Anything can happen when the energy of change is injected into what is normally relatively unchanging. Things move and shift around in there, often seemingly, but not always and not completely, beyond our control. Many of us are waiting and secretly hoping for change.

As for me, I always look forward to these eclipse times because they are so creative. Change is the wild card that trumps the status-quo. And change is so democratic. In the whirlwind of subtle inner changes at these times, things once again become possible that I had all but given up hope of. Eclipse-assisted change means that I may just do an about-

face and start to march to a different drummer. With a little help, I can change.

As the Latin slogan "Carpe Diem" says, seize the day!

THAT FOURTH THOUGHT

I first really got into Buddhism when I understood that it was not another religion like the bad-dream-like religion I was raised in. In fact Buddhism is not a religion at all, but rather just a method through which to become more aware.

It took a little bit longer for me to understand that Buddhism was not atheistic as many claimed, but rather it is “non-theistic” as in: there is no one up there separate from us pulling the strings. Instead, whatever intelligence there is in the universe (“up there”), we are an integral part of as well. There is no absolute separation, like a class or caste between the historical Buddha and me, only a continuum of awareness at which I am, sorry to say, on a lower rung.

In the Catholicism I was raised in, or so I was told (and even by the Jesuits), there is an absolute difference between God and man, and even an absolute difference between Jesus and myself. No continuum. This I could not accept. I was sure that the very best of me at least was like the very worst of Jesus, and so on. However, I was clearly told “No!” and I asked again and again.

Anyway, Buddhism really clicked in for me when I first came across what are called the “Four Thoughts,” more officially called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,” and most commonly just called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.” These are the thoughts that turn the mind away from our busy day-to-day distractions.

Here I only want to discuss that fourth thought, but for those of you who have not encountered them, the four thoughts are:

(1) Our human life is precious. We should not waste it, but we (our life) should be used for some good purpose.

(2) Impermanence is a fact, which we ignore at our peril.

(3) The law of karma is unflinching. Everything we do has an effect and affects us.

And the fourth thought:

(4) Cyclic life is undependable. We will never get our ducks all in a row. Not ever.

These four thoughts were the Buddhist teachings that first got my absolute attention because I had been thinking almost the same things myself from studying the laws of nature as a kid. However, it was that fourth thought that gave me pause. What was that all about?

This fourth thought was hard for me to grasp, not because it actually is that difficult to understand, but because like years ago when I first tried to give up smoking or coffee, inside of me I did not yet really want to give them up, so my non-understanding was driven by my secret joy in still pursuing them. That secret joy had to be plumbed to the very bottom and found to be what was causing me real physical suffering before I could tear myself away from it. And it took me a long time. I was sure that there was a backdoor to life, a way out. This is not uncommon.

With that fourth thought that turns the mind, the idea is that life is inherently undependable and the fact that this cyclic existence we are attached to (life as we

know it) will eventually wear us down and out of memory before we figure it all out, before we actually get all our ducks in a row. But we keep trying anyway. Only we know if we are successful.

And with the end of life, with death, there is no such thing as success, except learning to fail successfully.

Anyway, I was certain that I could somehow game the system and, in fact, get all my ducks in a row. I could master life so that it behaved as I wanted it. All around me, if I looked, other people were suffering, struggling, dying, etc., but somehow I knew I was the exception and that I (perhaps only me) could beat the system. I could make it all come out right. If I was only good enough, worked hard enough, and was careful enough to think of everything, that then, for me at least, life could be mastered. It all could be good. I could have only the high parts of the cycle and escape from the low sides of life's cycles that I repeatedly found myself mired in and unhappy.

We each have to find out for ourselves if life is cyclic. Does life go up and then down, and around again? If it does, we go with it, like it or not. And so on, which brings me to my point here:

Life can't be rigged, no matter how smart we are. "Smart" is not the same as intelligent. A wound smarts. Life can't be taken by force, by cleverness, by scheming, planning, or any other approach than that taken by the historical Buddha, which is why he took it. And that approach or path is "awareness." In fact the word "Buddha," in ancient Sanskrit, simply means "aware one" or "awakened one." It is all a question of awareness. We are all aware, but to what degree?

The Buddha's entire path or method, which is called the "dharma" is about one thing only, waking up,

becoming more aware so that we can respond appropriately to the ups and downs of the life we now live, so that we can learn to fail successfully as life ends, which it, of course, eventually will.

Without that awareness, we are subject to being torn apart by the tides and cycles of life, a piece at a time, and can't seem to control it, can't get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak.

So the point is that in my priority list, at the top of that list, before everything else, is the need to develop increased awareness, so that I can respond to the exigencies of life that confront me daily in a useful and successful manner.

It came as a real shock to me to learn from the highest Tibetan lamas that we have about zero chance of figuring out how to become aware of the true nature of our mind and existence WITHOUT guidance and help. In fact, they use this analogy, which was a show-stopper for me:

Imagine the entire earth covered by water. Into this we toss an inner tube with a single hole in it. Winds from the four quarters would push this tube every which way, constantly. In that ocean of water is one blind turtle that comes to the surface only once in a hundred years and pokes his head out. How long will it take for that turtle, as it surfaces, to coincidentally stick his head through the center of the inner tube?

That is how long it will take us, life after life, to discover the true nature of the mind and be able to respond to life in a workable and enlightened way...WITHOUT a guide from someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind.

That is something to think about. We need help to learn how to become more aware. We need someone to point out to us how the mind works.

SUN STORMS INSIDE OUR HEAD

There are still lower-level flares (C-Class) taking place on the sun, and I should move on to other topics, like the flowers of spring here in Michigan. However, this series of huge flares coupled with the three-eclipse-time we are still in has caused a lot of disturbance in many people that I know, and in myself as well. Like the Sun itself, my self is in flux just now. With that (almost an apology) said, I feel like continuing this thread on the self and change.

Can you imagine what pours through our mindstream (stream of consciousness) even in a single day? Mind stream? It's more like a mind river or at times even a storm surge. And what remains? Not much, some impressions and selected memories.

Those memories, however, are not all nostalgia either. We equally are imprinted by or remember the good, the bad, and the ugly. And the tip-of-the-top, the best of the lot of memories, whether loved or hated, are reserved for the museum of our Self. And then there are the fixations.

As I like to say, attachment is the glue that holds the self together, and if something really impacts us, for better or for worse, it becomes part of our self and we begin to identify with it as "us." And that, my friends, is sticky. Again, don't fool yourself into thinking that our self is made up only of treasured or much-loved moments. It is not about nostalgia. Once we identify with something, good or bad (and it is up to us), it goes into the closet of the self and remains there until its memory is worn out of existence or we can release it. And that can be a long time. Like a sore tooth, we keep peeking (by reaction) to see if it is still sensitive,

and that is what keeps it forever on our mind. We further underscore it every time it comes up and we react. This is the nature of the self.

And the key to freedom from self-dependence, is the fact that the self is composed of many distinct impressions, and is not simply a unified whole entity like we imagine. Like the seeds in a sunflower, and there are many, each of our reactions is a separate seed or impression. Because the self is blind and has no overview of its own "self" (meaning that it is not an entity), it can be successfully deconstructed one memory at a time. This is the beauty of the dharma practice called tonglen that I have been describing in recent posts.

As mentioned, the self is not of one piece (there is no Over-self), and the individual pieces that make up the self are not of the same degree of imprint. Some are stronger or deeper, while others are lighter and weaker. And we don't have to go searching through our self for ways to liberate it; not at all.

Instead, the only requirement for self-liberation (or whatever we can agree to call it) is to develop a little awareness, which simply means to become more aware of what comes to our attention throughout the day. That is all we have to do to begin unraveling the self.

Every reaction that we have is based on something we have previously identified-with enough to register or log it into our self as good, bad, or indifferent. So when we bump into that attachment again on the road of life and react, just look at the reaction and do some tonglen with it. Tonglen is as simple as acknowledging the reaction, accepting it as our own projection, embracing or taking it in, and then sending

out good energy in response. In other words, make peace with your own reactions.

Tonglen is the Mahayana Buddhist practice for the type of self-liberation practice described here, while in Vajrayana Buddhism, another form of meditation practice is used called Mahamudra.

As pointed out, we don't have to dig in or hunt through the memory-collection of the self for sensitive hotspots to do tonglen with. It is enough to just relax and allow the self to bring events to mind, one reaction at a time as our day unfolds. Just watch the show. With our perpetual fountain of reactions, we can undo attachment to the self a response at a time.

Of course this may take quite a while, but we can mix this practice with our daily routine. In fact, that is the preferred way to do it, like: all day long. As each reaction comes to mind, as we are aware that we are reacting, we just neutralize it with some tonglen to take the starch out of it, a reaction at a time.

Sure, some deep identifications will take repeated treatment, perhaps even months or years, but by attending to the reactions that bloom in the moment, gradually, like a glacier melts, we will reduce the frozen mass of the self to something manageable, and it will thin out and become transparent.

Our goal is not to deny or get rid of our self. The Buddhists say that can't be done anyway, because we would just have to go out and invent another personal assistant to help us get through the day. The self is a necessary middleman, but does not have to get in the way.

What we want to do is tone down the attachment to the self, thin it out until it is no longer an obstacle, and

does not stand in our way. In time the self will become transparent, and we can gradually see through it and begin to identify with the awareness beyond and behind it. Our innate awareness surrounds the self, and not vice-versa.

As an added bonus, concurrent with this process of deconstructing the self, we end up transferring our consciousness from the self and learn to identify with the pure awareness that is our mind, rather than with the composite self that we have created and drawn around us. In fact the deconstructing of the self is simultaneous with our taking up the vantage point of a more pure awareness. That is the process of enlightenment.

COSMIC BREATHING

Sorry it is taking me so long to wrap this solar-flare stuff up, but I have one more consideration. I have written about this years ago, but not mentioned it much lately. If you are interested in learning about and tuning into solar flares, there is something else you might like to know. I call it the cosmic breathing, but if that is too direct just call it cosmic flux.

There are two main types of cosmic radiation that reach us. The first obviously is radiation from the sun and that follows (roughly) an eleven year cycle. When the solar cycle is at its strongest (like now), we have a sharp increase in solar flares. This increase during the solar maximum acts like a great shield that wards off another kind of radiation that is not coming from the sun, but rather coming from deep space, places like the center of the galaxy and elsewhere: cosmic rays.

Cosmic rays are super high-energy particles that come from outside our solar system, and their

secondary particles directly penetrate and impact the Earth's atmosphere, occasionally reaching the surface of the earth. Cosmic rays are anti-correlated with the eleven year solar cycle, which simply means that when the sunspot solar cycle is at its peak (like now), the cosmic ray particle penetration is at a minimum. And the reverse is also true. When the sunspot cycle is at its minimum (weakest), cosmic ray penetration of Earth's atmosphere is at its strongest.

In other words, we are alternately pummeled by extremes of solar radiation on one hand, and cosmic ray influx on the other. I hope that is clear.

It is also important to understand that Earth's magnetosphere protects Earth from both kinds of radiation, solar and cosmic. In the image shown here, you can see how the magnetosphere, like the bow of a ship, envelopes and protects Earth from ready access by solar ejections and cosmic rays, the two influxes.

Of course I tend to think of both of these influxes as coded information for change. They are like different kinds of cosmic vitamins, and we get dosed with one and then with the other, alternatively. In this way the cosmos is both our doctor and life keeper.

Because we have them (and are still alive), it is obvious that we need both kinds of vitamins to exist and it has been pointed out that large-scale systems like the galaxy (and even our solar system) require a constant flow of information to continue to cohere (hold together) and to not collapse. The science of such information is called cybernetics, the study of regulatory systems that allows us to remain the same while undergoing change. In other words, cybernetics is the process of how something becomes different

and yet remains the same. Our physical body requires cybernetics to remain regular and not morph into something weird.

Nothing is more regular than solar radiation, except when it is not. Then we have discussions like we are having now with solar flares, conversations centered on sudden solar change and how to take it gracefully.

All I am doing here is pointing out the existence of this great cosmic breathing, an eleven-year cycle such that every five and a half years we are breathing in either solar change or cosmic change. Because they exist, we must need and be used to both. We could also say that one is local (solar and about our self), while one is much more distant (the cosmic rays). This current solar maximum is more disruptive and obvious to the self, but that does not mean that the cosmic rays are not just as seminal, but perhaps not as direct in effect . Again: different kinds of vitamins.

As you can see, all of this can be endlessly complex, but also very simple. I can't speak as to what destiny holds, but I do know that certain parts of us will not be denied. We can call them talents. When everything else falls away, the last to go would be those talents or urges that just keep on coming. They are the strongest, and our talents are where each of us is a die hard.

It is to our advantage to learn what our particular talents are and attempt to position them so that they can be realized in this life. The traditional recipe for success has always been not to hide our talent under a bushel, but to find a way to put our talent between us and a need that society has and let nature take its course.

But to do this, many of us have to figure out what our talents are. You'd think we would know, but often we can't distinguish between what are talents and what are just hopes and dreams, i.e. what we wish were talents.

Times of extreme solar change or personal catastrophes can be helpful. When the self is shattered or vacated and is forced to reform, many of our so-called pipe dreams are lost along the way. If we are patient and watch our appetites return (as the self patches itself together), our actual talents usually are the first to reappear, so take an inventory. What do you really want to do with your life? Let your talents be your guide.

I spent some forty years working with an astrological technique that combines traditional astrology with solar energy, the structure of our solar system. One of the more interesting results is the ability to describe what I call the archetype or tribe each one of us belongs to. And part of that analysis is a rendering of the main talents of a given person. I put this talent information into two interpreted reports called the Life Path Report and the Life Strategy Report. They contain similar information, but the Life Strategy Report is more oriented to learning how to trade your talents for what you lack, you know, use what you have to get what you want. If anyone is interested, they can be found here:

http://astrologyland.com/personal_report/LifePath.aspx

http://astrologyland.com/personal_report/StarTypeStrategy.aspx

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

The great solar flares run deep in the mind just now and they flutter the dovecote and stir things up, myself included. Since I can't sleep, it has me thinking back to my very first dharma teacher Andrew Gunn McIver and his main teaching. Andrew was a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. I met him in the mid-1960s. He was the first human I met outside of my family that cared for me more than I knew how to care for myself. He tamed me and I became his student. When he died in 1969, it was I who saw to his burial and designed his tombstone, the symbol of the Sun. I include it here.

I received my first transmission from him and I will share something here of what he taught me. I warn you that this is esoteric and abstract, so please feel free to pass it by. It is not for everyone.

The one thing my first dharma teacher was perfectly fascinated by was palindromes, words or phrases that read the same forward and backward. Examples of palindromes are words like desserts (stressed), snap (pans), live (evil), and stop (pots), or phrases like Bonaparte's "Able was I ere I saw Alba" or "Do geese see God?" What was his point?

His point was that life reads the same forward as backward. The fact is that this simple statement is terrifyingly true, although it can take decades to sink in. What can I say? I could repeat it, underline or underscore this, and emphasize it in ten other ways, but it still might not register... yet. It is 'the' esoteric truth par excellence.

Like the snake shedding its skin or the glove turning inside out when it comes off, life is a palindrome. It is

reversible and the pivot or turning point is thirty years of age, that first Saturn Return. I have written many articles about the return of Saturn to its natal place in the zodiac at that age. This is one of the great climatic years in life that marks a rite of passage that, sooner or later, cannot be ignored.

While this may appear as just a clever piece of writing on my part, you will be humbled to find (as I did) that this is a profound truth from which there are no variations. Even more incredible, the concept is not even linear, but rather spherical, like the Sun! It was no accident that the title of the first book I ever wrote (back in 1975) was "The Sun is Shining!"

Feel free to note my remarks and move on, for now, but I promise you that it will bookmark itself in your mind and, if you consider the mysteries of life much at all, you will return to this concept in the future. Why? Because like the bird who flies from the mast of the ship far out at sea, you have nowhere else to go. The truth of life is no beggar. It does not need me or you to help make the ends meet. The ends already meet.

As my teacher pointed out to me, life is a palindrome, and the pivot, balance or turning point, is around thirty years of age. A rite of passage is something we pass through. It has a before and after, and after we are not the same as before. We have passed. There is a turning point in life for each of us. Words of prose fail me, but this poem I wrote some years ago says it clearly.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

The point of the “point of no return” is that:
When you have reached the point of no return,
From which there is no return,
The point is to turn and return.

That is the turning point.

Every life has a turning point,
Whether it’s in the echo of age
Or in the very midst of life’s prime.

As we reach our point of no return,
We pause,
Then we turn.

And, in turning, we begin to reflect.

In our reflection,
And rising into view,
Perhaps for the very first time,
The Sun.

Where before it was we who were seen,
And others seeing,
Now we are the mirror in which they see
themselves,
And we can see our self in them.

What we once saw shining before us, as
youths,
That which we gladly embraced in our prime,
And what we now see etched in the mirror of
reflection,
Is our eternal Self,
The Sun,

Ever burning in the darkness of our life.

That's it.

I understand this.

What I find harder to understand,
Yet still believe is:

We didn't know it then;
We don't know it now.

We never knew it.

In truth,
It never was.

IT NEVER WAS;
It never will be.

It is not now,
And still, it is.

It still is:

This most brilliant illusion,
Shining in the mirror of the mind.

Feb 14, 2006 2-4 PM

Grand Sextile Helio

A Poem for My Daughter Michael Anne

SOLAR FLARES: SEEKING CLOSURE

Well we did not have another X-Class solar flare overnight, so I am going to try to wrap this up for now. However, don't be surprised if one pops up.

The solar influx (sunshine) each day on the quiet sun changes the self, but gradually. We never notice it. Intense solar change, like we get with these recent strong solar flares injects change into our mindstream in quantum leaps that cannot easily be assimilated. We tend to notice this level of change, but we may not have identified it properly. Some of your comments tell me that you are still looking for change outside yourself, when I keep pointing out that with solar flares it is our own self that is changing. And who is there to monitor that, Me, Myself, and I?

I have repeatedly pointed out, and this should tell you something, that with huge events like solar flares we all experience them at the same moment in time. They are not spread out or happening in this country and not in that. The entire Earth takes it all at once. If we blink, we all blink together. Perhaps like the ostrich, everyone sticks their heads in the sand at the same time. We close our eyes, wait out the shock wave of change, and then, all together, we open back up again. I have seen this happen.

One thing is certain. There is very little acknowledgment of all that which we share in common, and much more interest in how each of us is distinct, preferably unique. That is our "self" interest. The symphony of life is conducted and articulated by solar change, with long adagios on days with a quiet sun, but with prestissimo during times of intense solar bursts.

In a way, our self is like those lovely sea anemones, moving slowly in time to the currents of the ocean, but also when disturbed in-folding their tentacles all the way inside and hiding, and then opening back out again, gradually extending their tentacles fully as things calm down. And it would seem by necessity that we all do this together, in harmony, wide-eyed creatures that we are, winking and blinking in the night of time. Our collective 'selves' is the secret garden of consensus, dictated by convention, and pruned by experience. I could go on into this theme, but it might be more useful to focus on how the self changes us in real time.

With the quiet sun, and left to our own devices, each of us will do what we want, including indulge our self and all of the hopes and dreams we stuff away in there. We build sand castles in the air and polish the patina of our appearance until it shines and glows. All is right with our world, hopefully.

Then comes a time (like this one) of intense solar change. Despite our best attempts at self control, what we know and call our self undergoes sudden change that is almost impossible to ignore. Now, I am not talking about crashing glass and shifting mountains. That would be external change. Instead, here we need to look at internal change, and that means change in the shrine of our self, and that may be a little harder to see or we may just ignore it.

We look for changes in our self, but at the same time that is just what is changing, especially who it is that is doing the looking. So there is at least some recursion here, and most likely the makings of a full Catch-22, the chicken and the egg. Looking at the self looking at the self, etc., we are approaching a logical impossibility, and therefore perhaps moving beyond

time and credulity, our own. Of course, this may be the best moment for insight and breakthroughs as to the nature of the mind.

My point here is that intense solar change disrupts our orderly self and all the horses it rode in on. It takes the shine and polish off whatever we have been polishing, and rearranges the deck chairs of the self despite any attempts to prevent it. It reshuffles our deck and lays down a new deal. How can we know this?

For one, check how you feel. Do you feel like doing what you were just recently doing, like yesterday? We have to do our homework. The self always seeks to regroup, but when major change intervenes something is inevitably lost. Our actual talents will always reappear, just like perennials come up each spring, but our pipe dreams (and wishful thinking) tend to be aborted and lost to us. We wake up without the usual inspiration to pursue certain of our directions. They are dead in the water, while others are still with us, and then new ones appear. We don't quite know who we are for a time. Our self has changed, simply reorganized itself.

So we don't look outside ourselves, and we don't look intellectually at our carefully manicured spiritual concoctions. Instead, we simply rest and see how we feel and what we feel like doing. Perhaps we take an inventory of projects and find that we no longer feel like doing some of them. And the smart money is on just dropping those directions that have dropped themselves, and instead checking to see what we really feel like doing. What we truly want to do will always be in there somewhere, if we can just wait and let the water clear.

As mentioned, the self is changeable, and solar flares bring change and the rearrangement of priorities. I have (more or less) learned not to cry and moan when some desired direction I was building suddenly comes up empty, void. I don't endlessly force myself to start it up again as I used to, but now I just say, "Oh well.." and turn to those things that I do feel like doing. You could say that I am on call by change, and not ashamed of it. How easy is this?

Well, not always that easy. I have learned to have patience with sorting out the self after it rearranges itself when change comes. To make it clear, remember in your life when something really catastrophic happened to you, like the death of someone close to you. What happened to your self then? Did you find that you suddenly lost your appetite for certain things, enjoyed being alone more than usual, took long walks all by yourself, looked out the window at nothing at all? Get the idea? Those are signs of more extreme change.

When the self is vacated (and just goes empty), that fact is the proof that the self is really nothing all that important. We can drop whole avenues of interest in a moment. Gone. We just don't feel like that anymore. We are on vacation (vacated), like it or not. This is a measure of change.

With that in mind, turn your attention to what happens to you during an intense solar experience. Check your priorities. See what you feel like doing and not doing. What has changed? Inventory that and then do what you feel like and don't push what you no longer feel like, no matter how important it once seemed. I guess the old adage is "go with the flow." At least, this is what I do.

I am doing my best to put this into words. More than that I cannot do.

FOUR SOLAR X-CLASS FLARES IN A ROW!

Readers, I was ready to move on to other topics, but at 9:25 PM EDT last evening (May 14, 2013) we had the fourth X-Class solar flare in two days, this one a X1.2 flare, all from the same solar region, sunspot 1748. And this sunspot region has now turned the corner from the other side of the Sun (as it rotates) and is now facing Earth. Scientists predict a moderate chance of having more such flares on May 15, 16, and 17, so this may not be over yet.

I should mention that scientists have long speculated that at some point the Sun will emit a solar flare so large that it fries all of the electronics on Earth, sending us instantly back into the 15th Century. They say it 'will' happen, but it may be 10,000 years from now or it may be tomorrow. No one knows.

Regardless, my interest has always been in the inner, psychological, and creative aspects of these intense solar phenomena. I have already written most of what you need to know these last several days, and there are two free e-books (and videos) on the topic here for those who want more in-depth discussion:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/#&panel1-1>

I will just continue on with this theme, so please bear with me or do other things. This is a very rare and strong time, so letting our attention rest on this solar influx (not to mention the eclipses) is warranted. In other words, I am back to trying to point out to readers how to detect change within the self, when that vantage point is what is changing. It is the Heisenberg principle all over again.

The self (our self) is tireless and elastic in the extreme. It bobs, weaves, and bends over backward to avoid the tides of change, willing to do almost anything rather than to give up ground or admit a mistake. When it comes to matters of our self, most of us are perfect conservatives. The self does not like to be embarrassed, upset, or disturbed. But then, that self is not the real us, but only something we created or at least have allowed to happen. And as I have pointed out here endlessly, we identify with the self at our peril.

Our self is that secret garden of likes and dislikes that we tend or feed, the desires of all of our attachments, like that plant in the movie "Little Shop of Horrors," whose refrain is always "Feed me!"

Solar flare activity is not kind to directionality (linear thinking), but tends to level our little sand castles so that we have to start over. It does this by simply pulling the rug of enthusiasm (or spirit and direction) right out from under us, leaving us wondering why we ever thought whatever-we-are-doing would work in the first place.

For me it takes time for the dust to settle after an influx of solar change, time until some form of directionality can reestablish itself and send me off on yet another mission. I certainly fall for the "Man on a Mission" scenario every time. I have got to be going somewhere or I feel naked and empty. These four giant flares have managed to level most of my directions.

And with heavy solar change I always have to eat a lot, if only to weigh me down, like the deep-sea diver uses weights to reach the ocean floor. I need to be grounded. And I do a lot of sitting still at these times

too, sitting still and searching (waiting) in my mind for direction(s) to appear. And I mean real still. Solar change kind of truncates direction, leaving me with no compass. And it takes time for the self to reestablish connections, much less accumulate something that amounts to a life direction. In the meantime, I wait.

In the beginning I used to be a little terrified when I lost my sense of direction, of where I am going under a solar storm like we are having now. I would look around and do what I could to reestablish my last known direction and take it up again. Yet often I just would draw a blank. But over time I have come to appreciate having this self I am stuck on kind of vacated, including whatever train of thought I was on, leaving me silent and somewhat alone in my universe.

And these are very large gaps that come with flares, not just moments or hours, but hours and days when I have little to no clue where I am going. I have learned not to attempt to force direction, but to just let go as much as possible and allow myself (and its direction) to kind of fall into place in as natural a way as I can.

There is no question that the self will reconfigure as quickly as it is able and, once established, it will be as airtight as it was before, but perhaps in a somewhat altered configuration. Desperately forcing (panicking) the self to come back together quickly does not benefit us. The more we can let go and allow the self to organically come back together, the more comfortable will our grip on life be going forward.

So what's to be done?

Most of all we have to eventually get to know the self, and here the old phrase "familiarity breeds contempt" is useful. Well, contempt doesn't help, but a couple of wry smiles are allowed. As we get over worshipping

ourselves, and constantly distracted and entertained by ourselves, and begin to develop a sense of humor about all of this, the self becomes less dense or opaque and gradually becomes more transparent. We begin to see through it, like through a windowpane, and what is beyond the self is the awareness of the true nature of the mind.

Like the old Zen drawings of the ox herder, after recognizing the self for what it is (our own pastime), the self is still with us. Nothing has changed, but something has changed, i.e. our own view and eventually our vantage point. As I keep harping, THIS is the transmigration of consciousness, as we tune out our preoccupation with our self, and find behind the beyond something much greater and more portable too, meaning: this awareness is what we will take with us when we die, not our self.

After we recognize what the self is all about, the self is still there, but it works for us now, not we for it. We begin to treat our self like we would treat the self of anyone else, with kindness and politeness. As I like to say, I turned my self out to pasture years ago, like an old cow and I let it graze. I no longer battle with it as much. Instead I have learned to almost be friendly, but its hold on my attention is gradually being loosened and I am free to begin to be aware of awareness itself... and to identify with that. It is a simple transfer of vantage point, a transfer of consciousness.

The self eventually becomes the tool that it is and no longer an obstacle. In time we learn to look through (or past) and behind the self to the overall awareness that embraces the self, which turns out to be who we really are anyway. These solar flare times are perfect for getting insights into all of this.

To see the show, we have to open our eyes, which we tend (at times like these) to keep closed.

SOMEWHERE IN TIME... AGAIN

We had some C-Class and M-Class flares last evening and then around 10:37 EDT we had a major X-Class solar flare (X1.7) just off the edge of the east limb of the sun. It caused a strong R3-Level radio blackout on the sunlit side of Earth.

X-Class flares are the largest class of solar flares and we have not had one for quite a long time. This particular flare was not facing Earth and the CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) that it hurled into space will not hit us. Nevertheless, this is some very intense solar activity, and as this flare turns the corner and begins to be apparent from Earth, we may not have heard the last of it.

Of course I am fascinated to look at the government sites and at the various photos, movies, graphs, and data streams detailing this event. Yet I also know to turn my gaze inward and also stare a bit in there at what is going on. The outer and inner should match up, and they usually do. And remember that my take on intense solar activity like flares is that they are a game changer. What does that mean?

I can only tell you what it means to me, and I will give it a shot. Here is my segue into right now, starting with yesterday.

On Sunday we celebrated Mother's Day and the birthday of my daughter May, so starting Friday people streamed in here from Traverse City, Lansing, and Ann Arbor. We had a great time, ate wonderful food, laughed a lot, made a bit of music, and then some of the crew played board games, and so on. Baby Emma was here too.

I went to bed last night with a fairly clear idea in my mind as to where I was headed and even what I would write about today for this blog. I could already feel the words coming together in a meaningful way.

I don't usually dream much, but these last weeks, this eclipse time, I have been dreaming and my dreams last night were rough, one of those reoccurring nightmares where I am trying to dial a number on my cell phone, but can never get all the digits right, and it goes on and on.

Anyway, I woke up this morning, very early (as usual), and it was as if all the threads that were running through my mind last night had just been cut. In other words, I don't see the reason right now for thinking what I was thinking last night. It is as if my line of thought has just run out or, as mentioned already, somebody cut the power.

This is so typical for what happens with an intense solar event like this current flare. Suddenly here I am, back to square one and wondering a bit where (and who) I am and (as Dylan put it) "with no direction home."

Of course, I know that time will fill in the blanks, and that gradually I will come together and discover I am in fact going somewhere, and do have a direction after all, despite appearances.

The comfort of having some linear direction, of making progress, of being headed somewhere is so much a part of my character that is it humorous. I feel naked without it. And, as mentioned, I know that my self is already hard at work repairing the broken connections, busy putting my Humpty-Dumpty-self back together again so that it will point to and promise

a future. I like the comfort of linear time or, at least, am used to it.

And, although I am right here talking to you, I don't know just where that is just now. I even have to apologize to myself for having very little clue as to what is coming next, although last night I had no doubt I was headed here and there. It was quite clear.

I write this to give those of you unfamiliar with the inner or psychological effects of solar flares (and sometimes eclipses) an idea of how cosmic events change us. I have written much of late about change and what it does to us, but what I just wrote out above is a good example of how change can appear, like we have (at least briefly) run out of time and are once again standing somewhere in the universe looking around for a thread to follow.

I hope you get the idea. Otherwise, I am just exposing myself here for no good reason. Change changes things is my point, and in order for change to do that, what we had been doing has to come up short or empty. And so it has, once again.

As for me, I am used to it. I follow these changes as best I can. I no longer panic when I find myself staring out over the edge of eternity at just nothing at all. I rest in it, relax, and do my best to watch this world of appearances come back into focus and appear once again, this phantasmagoria I call life. It always does, and I learn something in the process.

For one, I learn where I am going only as things fall back into line, as they take on a linear form and direction again, and I settle back down to riding this freight train of time into the so-called future. I love trains. I love looking down long two-tracks in the deep forests until they vanish to a single point in the

distance. Linear is so comforting, even if it is not the truth.

So what I will be doing today, and what I will be thinking today, and what I will be writing about today, who knows? I certainly don't. I write right now about this, because I am treading water in the universe, and waiting for linearity to reassert itself, after which time I will be able to tell you.... what I am doing.

I feel like the kid who is building a house of cards only to have it all knocked down and have to start all over again. That is what intense solar change is like. It does not just modify our life course a bit, and tweak it. Instead, it just stops us cold, reshuffles the deck, and deals us a new hand to build another house of cards.

Typically it takes a day or two, or at least part of a day to piece itself back together again. Keep in mind that this is all about the Self and maintaining the self and its fondness to have the comfort of always going and getting somewhere in life.

Actually, these times of change are refreshing, scattering the cards, and returning to ground zero and starting over. This is an excellent opportunity to get a look (and feel) of the nature of the mind itself. Don't be in a hurry to rebuild. Watch the self reconstruct what was just deconstructed in one fell swoop, as best it can. I like to joke to myself that the self paints a new portrait or image of us, but as likely as not, that portrait is impressionist or even cubist, or hails from the realm of Salvador Dali. We might have an ear where our nose should be, for a while. Where is our sense of humor?

Right now I am mostly doing nothing. What about you? How are you taking this time of intense change? Notice anything?

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND DENIAL

I have heard for many years from Asians, astrologers from India in particular, who do not understand the western concern of the self. Why? Because they are somehow inoculated at an early age against what we call self-ishness. How can this possibly be so? Are not all humans just plain selfish?

Well, the answer appears to be, yes, Asians are also selfish, but no, they are not selfish in the same way we are here in the west. Tibetans regard the "self" differently than we do. The Tibetan Buddhists learn at least two concepts early on in life that those of us here in the west apparently never know, and I will present them here so that we can all be on the same page.

The Buddhists emphatically teach that the self is a pure composite, a personality that we pull around ourselves like a cloak made entirely of our likes and dislikes, our habits and experience. The self is our servant, not our master. After all, we created what it is composed of. How this master/servant order reverses itself in our mind would take a lot of looking at, so let's just agree for now that somehow it does. Like the old Marxist axiom, the master becomes dependent on the work of the servant and thus servants become masters in their own way.

Of course, that is what self-control or self-mastery is all about, but not many of us achieve it. It is more common for the self and our selfishness to master us, at least much of the time. We allow our self to master us and end up serving it, rather than it us. It would be kind of humorous, if it were not so obstructive.

The Buddhists actually teach that although we all have a self (and always will), what makes up our particular self has no true or permanent existence. We have no such teaching here in the west, and no one pointing out to us that the self is an ever-changing fabrication that we ourselves create, made up entirely of whatever currently most has our interest.

Worse, we easily fall into the habit of taking the personal self as the main vantage point from (or lens through) which we view our entire life. And we foolishly assume that this collage of a self will survive our death and travel with us (whoever we are) and will somehow be reborn in our next life. This is problematical, because the personal self, for all practical purposes, dissolves and is left behind when we die. It is all dressed up with nowhere to go.

This very simple mistaking the self for who we, in essence, are leads to (obviously) a fierce fear of dying and death on our part. If we painstakingly search through our entire self, bit by bit, we will not be able to find a center or kernel on which the self rests. There is none (and no one in there) because, like an onion, the self consists only of layer on layer of the various things we are attached to, positively or negatively.

In other words, the self is not our awareness, and this should be patently clear by just noting that we are (or can be) self-conscious, as in: very much aware of our self. If the self was our spirit, it would be aware of us, but it is the other way round. Our awareness is aware of the self. We are sometimes conscious of the self, self-conscious. We are the awareness, not the self, the baby and not the bathwater.

I believe that this very simple misunderstanding is the cause of an incredible amount of personal suffering, struggling to prop up and believe in a self that is by definition not what (or who) we are, and moreover not something that will outlive our current life. It is like carrying water in our hands.

That is point number one.

The second point has more to do with what remains to be done with this self that has no true existence, but yet which we earnestly continue to believe in. Our self is very much real to us and perceived as solid as solid can be. And most of us have put all of our eggs in that basket, so to speak, assuming that our self is the permanent "us." This is what is called a big mistake, a bad takeaway.

The simple fact is that we got it wrong, and have yet to get it right. To do this we must somehow transfer our consciousness (our vantage point) from identifying with (and looking through) the lens of the self at life, to identifying with the awareness that is aware of that self, the same awareness that allows us to be self-conscious, as I mentioned earlier.

However, before we can do that, we have to recognize the self for what it is, our own personal dummy, and acknowledge that we are in fact the ventriloquist. Yet it is too easy to fall into listening to our own dummy-self talk and then follow its demands. Obviously, this is a problem, falling in love with our own creation.

This is why tonglen is so powerful. Without violence or trauma, tonglen can gradually help us thin out the opaque membrane of the self so that it becomes transparent enough for us to finally see through and

beyond it to the awareness that we naturally are and have been all along.

This is not easy to do through any other way than with tonglen; at least that has been my experience. By learning to monitor our reactions, one by one, we can quite easily see that they all can be traced back to our self-image, our likes and dislikes. And it is not about punishing our self (it is not an entity!) for being so narrow minded, but rather (like my mom used to do when popped open the stitches on a hemline with a little tool), incrementally releasing our prejudices and setting them free.

My self is pretty picky, opinionated, and biased -- reactive. First we have to become aware of our reactions, and then learn to monitor those reactions, and tonglen has proved (for me) to be the easiest way to do this.

The amount of time in a day that I can find to sit on the cushion and meditate is like going to church once a week on Sunday. It will never get me to heaven. I have to supplement my on-the-cushion practice with post-meditation practices like tonglen, and I do and have for many years.

Confronting my own reactions is almost a full time job, but it is one dharma practice that I can do as I walk around on my busy day. Removing these many small dualities by becoming conscious of them takes time, but with this in mind I can log many hours each day with tonglen, and that is just what is needed. Dharma finally must become our full time job, even while we work our regular jobs.

I have done my best to point out some of the benefits of this remarkable Tibetan Buddhist practice, tonglen.

TONGLLEN: RESOLVING OPPOSITION

Tonglen was introduced into Tibet in the 10th Century by an Indian named Atisha (Atiśa), who had learned this practice in Indonesia (Sumatra). Tonglen practice is most often associated with a text by Chekawa Yeshe Dorje (1101-1175 A.D.) called "Seven Points of Mind Training," which includes some 59 slogans, pithy aphorisms intended to be meditated on. These slogans are very remarkable. The first time I read them I immediately felt that they were essential truths. You can read them here and see for yourself:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lojong>

The tonglen practice is about taking and sending, breathing in and breathing out, and typically is introduced by asking the practitioner to breathe in all of the suffering in the world, take it on (and inside oneself), absorb it, and then breathe back out (on the out-breath) all of the goodness we have within us. And continue to do this until some kind of equalization occurs.

In other words, tonglen is the exact opposite of what most of us are trying to do in our lives, which is bring all of the goodness of life to us, and keep all of the badness of life as far away from us as possible. Tonglen is a prime example of how Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist psychology functions.

I should say a few words about why Tonglen may be easier for you to learn than other forms of meditation. For one, there are few variations here in the west for the tonglen practice. With traditional sitting meditation, there are literally hundreds of practices that are referred to as "meditation." Most of them are not traditional or "authentic," historically speaking. And

everyone seems to be getting something out of each one of them.

This makes it very difficult to say to someone, "Wouldn't you like to learn the traditional (tried and true) form of meditation?" That does not go down well, even though it may be clear that they are getting nowhere with whatever it is that they are doing. Because meditation in this country is considered "spiritual" and thus personal, and we don't question someone's spirituality, even though this kind of behavior would never fly in a real practice-oriented eastern society. Someone would insist on making sure you knew what to do and that you did it correctly, in addition to whatever lava lamps and incense you might want to use. Thus very few people that I have met who insist that they meditate know how to meditate properly, in my opinion. And there is very little to be done about it.

I am not going to repeat the many instructions you can find on tonglen just by searching the Internet. Instead, I want to focus here on tonglen as a means for disarming our habitual preoccupation with the self, effectively weakening our habitual identification with our self, and causing the sense of the self to gradually become transparent to us to the point where we can recognize our true awareness shining through from behind it. Tonglen actually works.

So yes, by all means, do the tonglen practice with the object or focus being all the suffering you can imagine in the world. This is good, of course, but it is also somewhat abstract, and not so much a part of our day-to-day experience, like what we actually bump into as we go about our life.

But, in addition to that practice, let's also get more real, a little closer to home. Tonglen is a practice that confronts our habitual duality of thinking in terms of subject and object, the "I in here" and the "they and them out there," and gradually resolves that difference. And while it is grand to take on all of suffering humanity as the subject for tonglen, I find that I have learned more from taking on all of my own petty likes and dislikes, especially dislikes – my personal reactivity.

Our reactions are what trouble us the most, and to be perfectly clear here, and take careful note when I say that our reactions are all "self-related." Our reactivity, like fat in a hot frying pan, does not come from basic awareness (our true nature), but rather from the various likes and dislikes that we have collected into this coat of many druthers we call our self.

Our self is what is reactionary, liking this a lot, and hating that on sight, etc. In other words, at least in my opinion, before we can meaningfully take on the sufferings of humanity, we might be better served to cherry-pick among our own copious reactions. I mean, they happen all day long. All we have to do is to admit them, become aware of them, and do tonglen with them.

And we might as well start with the small stuff, like around the corner comes this guy with the big nose. You never liked that nose and you can't help but react without thinking. Just be aware of what is happening, and do some tonglen with, yes, with the nose, at least your reaction to it. Own it and unify that dualism as your own creation.

And learn to do this all day long with every reaction that you can catch yourself having. I don't know of any

better (or faster) way of deconstructing the excess attachment to the self than by doing tonglen with each and every reaction, no matter how small. I have done this and it really, really works. It is easy, can be done while we do all the other things we have to do in a day, and is relatively painless. We can log many hours of practice this way, and most of us need many hours of practice to get anywhere at all with meditation. It takes real time.

With Tonglen, we basically are making friends with our self, or at least ironing out the wrinkles of bias, prejudice, and other reactionary ingrained behavior we have accumulated. Our self is the unabridged current history of all our likes and dislikes, right down to the number of angels we think should be dancing on the head of a pin.

Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we can deconstruct our self (one reaction or bias at a time) with relatively little pain, as opposed to having to go through some huge collapse or vacating of the self as sometimes happens.

It is tricky. Somehow a loss of self-confidence, confidence in the self is warranted, even necessary, but how to bring this about in a gentle, gradual way, is what tonglen excels at. Sure, we can have some catastrophic event in our lives, like the death of a loved one, and the self is vacated in a New-York minute, but the rebuilding of that self (which in the course of time must take place) is very hard on the system, and still does not solve the problem. After something catastrophic happens, the self wants to make us even more airtight. Tonglen gently undoes this, a reaction at a time.

Yet, at those times when the self 'is' vacated (empty), we often can see what is really important in life, not clouded by all the entertainment our day-to-day self demands of us. Self-transparency is pretty much required for spiritual awareness. It is the Sine Qua Non for awakening. So there you have the idea.

Tonglen is all about the self and its reactions, better therapy than a dozen psychologists could provide, because it gets at each and every reaction and begins to neutralize and sooth it, ending the dichotomy, and bringing the subject and object back together into harmony. Tonglen is holistic in the true sense of that word. It makes us whole.

I like to tell myself that tonglen is the great equalizer, and I use the analogy of a pebble dropped into a small pond. Its ripples gradually spread outward, enclosing more and more of the pond within its embrace. Tonglen is just like that: unifying.

As we acknowledge and make friends with more and more of our reactions, we identify with more and more of the world around us and not just with or through the lens of our self as we are habitually used to. In the process, we see that the filter of the self distorts our view of life enormously, and that by thinning out the attachments we have, removing them one-by-one, the self gradually becomes transparent. We begin to see through it and to the awareness we actually are (our true nature), which starts to shine through.

Once we begin to recognize our true nature, we are good to go, which simply means, we don't need help because we perceive how this self-thing works. We see the problem and begin an orderly exodus from imagining we view the world from the vantage point of

a self, and learn to take up the vantage point of awareness itself. We shift our view.

We transmigrate while still here on Earth from self-dependence to independence of the self. Please note. We are not trying to remove the self, because the self is a natural function of the mind to help organize our day-to-day existence. Instead, we just want to thin out the membrane of the self, the filter, so that we can see through it to recognizing our true awareness nature.

Once we have done that, it is relatively smooth sailing from there on. We transmigrate, moving all our eggs from the one basket of the self and placing them with confidence in the awareness behind and beyond the self. The self becomes the tool it always was, a tool that we use with awareness.

Let me know if you understand this, please.

TONGLLEN: TAKING AND SENDING

Tonglen practice is perhaps the easiest and most-intuitive approach to meditation training that I have come across, at least for westerners. It was the first practice that my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche pointed out to me many years ago. I didn't think this fact was that important at the time, but now that I think about it, of course Rinpoche knew exactly what he was doing. Trying to learn standard sitting meditation is much more difficult, at least it was for me. With that in mind, let's look at tonglen together. I will try to go slow.

The great Tibetan siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche tells a story in his autobiography about watching some mean person beat a tiny puppy to death. Actually, I don't remember the exact details, but somehow Trungpa witnessed the death of this small animal and was deeply moved. It touched his heart. For the rest of his life, so he writes, whenever he wanted to bring to mind the idea of compassion, he would think of this puppy and how it touched him.

The reason I mention this here is to point out to you that a good beginning target for tonglen practice is an experience like that, where your heart goes out to a person or animal in a natural and spontaneous way.

Keep in mind that tonglen practice is all about breathing in something that moves you or causes you to react (good or bad), taking it in with your breath (and keeping it there), and then breathing back out toward the object all the good energy you can muster, sending your love, so to speak.

Here is the thing. Tonglen is always about duality, about you and something outside yourself that you either care about or don't like at all. It is easier to start

with something you love, an experience of compassion or love that you hold dear, but you can also start with something you hate or can't stand. Most find it easier to work with something they love and feel natural compassion for, like Trungpa did that puppy.

Either way, you are examining a reaction that YOU have to something that you consider outside yourself. Tonglen is always about resolving our dualities with the world outside our skin. Actually, we might better say that tonglen is about resolving dualities that our "Self" has, if that is not putting too fine a point on it. And here please bear with me, while I introduce an important sidebar. It is key.

Both eastern and western psychological and spiritual practices consider the "self," (as in our personal self) as something that can stand between us (whomever we are) and enlightenment or at least greater awareness. The self can be an obstacle. I won't revisit this whole "self" issue here, as I have written about it almost endlessly in previous blogs and books. A quick reminder might be this:

In the west there is some confusion about the nature of the self, to the degree that we are told on the one hand to always be our self, and yet on the other never to be selfish. I won't try to resolve that western conundrum here, but am just pointing it out. On the other hand, eastern psychology (Tibetan Buddhism) defines the self as the sum total of all our attachments at any current moment, our likes and dislikes, something we have created, and then identified with – a long and painful history.

However, where we westerners think of our self as a conscious being (you know, "us"), the Buddhists do

not see the self as a consciousness or living being like we are, but rather as a convenient personal assemblage (like a secretary) that helps us organize our daily priorities, keep our appointments, and so on.

As mentioned, at least here in the west, most of us have personified our self as an independent being as opposed to our actual nature, who we actually are. We even tend to see life from the vantage point of this self that we have created and breathed life into. Sorry if this sounds confusing, but it is, and obviously we could have a long discussion about this whole concept of the self, how we created it, and so on.

But here I invoke this concept just to point out that dealing with this self that we all have (and resolving the duality between the self and the outside world) is something that each one of us will have to do, sooner or later. And because the self is nothing other than our attachments (and by definition we are attached to our attachments), this can be very tricky stuff, which is why reverse-psychology exists, of course. Sneaking up on yourself is like sneaking up on a mirror. Every time you look, there you are. At least we habitually believe this is so, and so on.

My takeaway point here is just to let you know that the practice of tonglen has the quite marvelous side-effect of deconstructing the dependence on the self in a gentle, yet very effective way. In other words, if we will practice tonglen throughout the day, it will reduce our dependency and attachment to our self a bit at a time, eventually rendering our self as transparent enough to see through to what is behind the self, which of course, is our own awareness, the same awareness that is aware or conscious of our self, i.e. self-consciousness.

In order for there to be something like self-consciousness, there has to be a vantage point or awareness that is not the self. Otherwise we could not be self-conscious. Make sense? Tonglen practice allows us to transfer our identity (gradually) from our current identification as a Self, to the vantage point of awareness itself. And it is this awareness that will be leaving with us when we die, not the vantage point of the self like most of us tend to believe now.

No wonder we are afraid to die? We are totally attached to a self-concept that by definition is nothing more than something we have created, a montage of our likes and dislikes (our personality), which will eventually dissolve at death like mist on a summer day. And this point is kind of a big deal.

Sooner or later, we each will be transferring our identity from this patchwork-self to the pure awareness we in truth are, a vantage point that is actually portable, which the self is not.

I can see, as usual, I am getting long-winded here, so this will have to be continued. I hope it is not too dense to be boring. If we can get on the same page here, perhaps I can show you how tonglen is such a brilliant and effective practice. And it is easy to do.

Questions are welcome.

A WALK-AROUND PRACTICE

First, this is the day of the New Moon Eclipse, tonight at 8:29 PM EDT, so take note. That being said, I want to continue looking at our reactionary self.

It should not surprise us that the Tibetan Buddhists have a special practice designed just to handle our reactions. This practice is distinct from any sitting meditation we might do and is called Tonglen, which in English translates to something like "Taking and Sending," and it has to do with gradually becoming aware of our reactions, our likes and dislikes, and disarming them.

Tonglen is about becoming aware of our own reactions, our prejudices, likes, dislikes, etc., and owning and clearly seeing them. We take in or become aware of our reactions, and we send out or respond with openness and kindness. Literally we breathe in what we react to (like or don't like, including the suffering of others) and send back out whatever is good and in us in return, the best thoughts and energy we have within us. The concept takes some getting used to by westerners. It took me a while.

When I first heard about Tonglen I was shocked. It was everything that the various trance-mediums and psychics I had known said not to do. Those same psychics had me washing my hands after every astrology reading I did to help remove the negative energies my clients may have brought with them. These negativities supposedly went down the drain with the water.

And here were the Buddhists telling me just the opposite, to breathe in and absorb the negativity of my worst reactions and to respond in return with all

the goodness within myself that I could muster.
Confusing.

Let me tell you, I had to just sit down and think about that for a very long time. It went against everything that I had been taught up to the moment that the Rinpoche I had recently met suggested as a practice that could benefit me greatly.

And I did not just casually read about Tonglen in some book. Instead, I had driven over 800 miles on one of the coldest days of the year, with my entire family, including our youngest, who was only a year and a half old at the time. It was so cold as we drove up the steep mountain to the monastery where Rinpoche lived that I had to use a piece of cardboard to scrape a tiny hole on the inside of my windshield just to peer through. It was even cold inside the car.

And we had not even phoned ahead. I don't know what we were thinking. No one knew we were coming as we pulled up to this large old building that had at one time been a hotel in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. Now it was the beginning of a monastery yet to be built. It was mostly dark inside and the bitter wind on the mountains whirled around us as we stood in the doorway huddling together, my wife and I, and our three children.

When someone finally opened the door, I stammered out that we had come to see the Rinpoche, and I can only be eternally grateful that Rinpoche was who Rinpoche is, a great master, who in that dark night received us with the utmost grace and kindness. We talked of many things, but that is another story.

I bring this up here because Rinpoche did leave us with one request when we parted, and that was to learn to practice Tonglen, and he gave us a small

book called "The Torch of Certainty" which had the proper instructions as we said goodbye and prepared to leave.

We stayed that night in a small motel down in Woodstock, NY, one that had no regular furnace, but just one of those little infrared heaters stuck in the wall. It was there that Margaret and I turned the pages of the book Rinpoche gave us and first read about Tonglen, and what we read more-or-less frightened the bejesus out of us, because it said very clearly to accept, take in, and breathe in all the negative reactions we had (and we had), and breathe out and give back instead all of the best goodness that was in us.

Believe me folks, there was a see-saw moment when we teetered back and forth as to whether to accept Rinpoche's advice and learn Tonglen, or to just cut and run. All of this in a tiny motel room on one of the coldest nights of the year, those days just after Christmas and before the New Year, some 800 long and frozen miles from home.

It was only due to the sense of truth we saw in Rinpoche (whom we barely knew) that we did not just give up and get out. But the connection there, from the first moment we met Rinpoche, was so real, and so genuine, that we just put all our eggs in that basket and took a chance. Of course that chance was well-founded, and we have worked with Rinpoche now for thirty years this October.

Ton-Len is a mind training exercise that is IMO much easier to learn than standard sitting meditation, and aside from doing Tonglen on the cushion, we can do it throughout the day as things come up in our mindstream, and you know that they do.

As I pointed out, many years ago on that cold day I recounted above, it was Ton-Len that Rinpoche pointed out as the place to start. In the Buddhists textbooks Tonglen consists of taking on (breathing in) all of the suffering and disharmony in the world and sending out (breathing out) all the goodness we can feel inside us. This is why it is called taking and sending. And this taking in and sending out is done over and over again until we have kind of neutralized the reaction we find ourselves having.

Everything we react to in the world, be it the suffering of others or any other reaction we have is fuel for practicing Tonglen, all of it. And although the technique is traditionally presented as a way to (virtually) take on the sufferings we see in the world, the net effect of this practice is to become aware of and neutralize our own reactions. We don't so much change the outside world through Tonglen, as we change ourselves, and our attitude toward the world. It can be a game changer. It was for me.

So if you have have problems getting into sitting meditation or have not noticed much change from that practice, I sincerely suggest that you give Tonglen a try. It is very much a pay-as-you-go practice, meaning you get back feedback and resolution from Tonglen on a reaction by reaction basis. You can see the effect and the progress easier than in sitting meditation, at least I did.

If there is interest out there in this topic, I will go into more detail on this easy-to-do practice in another blog.

THE OTHER SIDE OF TRYING

Tibetan Buddhism is energy efficient to an extreme degree, aerodynamically designed to fly even in the worst psychological weather.

When we run out of good things to do, we can start looking at and absorbing all the so-called bad things, one by one. They contain their own demise, and more important, they contain the energy needed to fuel us on to greater awareness. If you read even a little in the Buddhist literature you will come across the Three Poisons or the Five Poisons

The three basic poisons are ignorance, attachment, and aversion. These are often expanded into the Five poisons by adding pride and jealousy to the three above, so we have ignorance, attachment, aversion, pride, and jealousy. In other words, our likes, dislikes, and all that we just ignore.

The Buddhists are very list oriented. Everything is always listed out, the eight this, the five that, and so on. These lists are very helpful, but only if you grasp the thread that binds them together. Lists seem invariably more advanced than I am. They are like a crib sheet and not a tutorial. Lists just kind of put me to sleep at first sight. I don't want to discuss lists here.

My only point in bringing them up is that a list like the Five Poisons is always accompanied by their inverse, the Five Wisdoms. In other words, the Five Poisons somehow contain the Five Wisdoms within them. How is that? And this is something worth considering, and not just idle talk, not just a "list" for lists sake. It is key information laid right out in the open and even pointed at. Nothing secret here, yet in the confusion of our

day-to-day mind and busyness, it is hard to grasp what it means, so it might as well be secret.

The dharma is so cool. It never stops. Indeed it is the gift that keeps on giving. The farther I get into it, the more fluid and spontaneous I find the dharma is. I don't want to be particularly poetical here, but indeed, the dharma is the thread on which the beads of my life are strung. It has turned out that way.

And what is more amazing than to find that in the secret heart of all that ails us, deep in our vices (the Five Poisons) is just the energy we need to enlighten ourselves, and it is always there for when we need it. These poisons appear to be everything that holds us back from just becoming more aware, yet they contain the means for greater awareness. They are key. And we will never wake up or become aware by just crossing our fingers at these poisons and avoiding them.

The Five Poisons are like little time-capsules of energy embedded in our mindstream, waiting to be discovered, booster rockets that will take us where we most want to go, which is to greater awareness.

This secret stash of energy cannot be tapped by running away or denying the five poisons. That is what has us bound to them now, our attachment (via aversion) to them. I am not saying here to run out and strengthen the five poisons in your life. That would be a big mis-take of what I am pointing at here.

It is not the content of the five poisons that we should follow, but rather learning to know the true nature of the five poisons for ourselves is what is on our "to do" lists sometime in the future. How do we do that?

There is no better place to start that I know of than to begin to monitor our reactions as we react. It takes a little bit of practice, but not really all that much. And we can do it all day long, as they come up. We don't have to set a special time aside to work on becoming aware of our reactions.

All we have to do is live our regular day-by-day life with a little more awareness than perhaps we have been. We can log lots of practice time on this without scheduling it. It just happens and all we have to do is to become aware of it as it happens, rather than just simply react and get flung around.

Sure, in the beginning we will do more reacting than catching ourselves reacting, but what's new? Even a little awareness of our reactions pays big dividends, as you will see. We not only catch ourselves before we react big-time in some horrible little drama, and don't have to go there, but more important we begin to see into the center of what these reactions are all about. That is the point.

We learn to look into the three main poisons, our attachment to things, our aversion to things, and our tendency to ignore things (even though we know better) until they are out of hand. This amounts to what we like, what we don't like, and what we choose to ignore. There is nothing unknown or strange about these three. We all know them by heart, at least as experiences. We don't and have never known their true nature.

What we may not know is what makes them tick, and what we certainly do not know is their secret heart, the wisdom they contain and the energy that is released as we learn to know that wisdom.

We may search through life for the keys to our release, clinging to what we like and avoiding as much as possible what we don't care for, which is much like trying to ride a beach ball in the middle of a deep swimming pool. Good luck!

Meanwhile, if we will learn to look at the nature of these three poisons, our likes, dislikes, and that which we ignore, they contain not only everything we have always searched for, but also the energy we need to convert them into the awareness we require to become more enlightened.

I am not trying to preach here. I am just saying...

DEPRESSION, THE CHILD OF DISAPPOINTMENT

As they say, "disappointment is the salt of life," and the big disappointments in life can be, indeed, earth-shaking, but they sometimes can serve as a wake-up call. However, the steady rain of quiet disappointments has less to recommend itself and potentially is even more dangerous to our mental health.

With the big disappointments, and I have had a few, the best advice I have given myself is not to add insult to injury. It is bad enough that I have been disappointed, that I took a turn life gave me in a hard way, but it is much worse if then I add to that perceived injury the insult of following it with endless regret and, worst of all, bitterness. Bitterness is a real life killer.

The slam-dunk of a major disappointment is one thing, but the subtle undermining of our self-confidence brought on by the endless underscoring of what happened to us is so much worse. In other words, the karma of a kick in the face from the outside world is one thing, but the karma accumulation we add to that event by endlessly reviewing and underlining what happened add up to far more karma than the original event, not to mention the bitterness.

Perhaps we cannot avoid what life brings us in the way of disappointment, but how we take it and what we do with it is very much up to us. If I think about it for even a short time it is usually clear to me that it is best not to throw good luck after bad and further invest my life in regretting what happened to me. Best to just suck it up and walk on. That is my view.

And these little slights and subtle disappointments can leach more from life than their big brothers. They literally will eat us alive, if we let them. And again, it is up to us. And this has been, for me, a tough lesson to learn.

It did not take me too long to grasp from the Buddhists that expectations are never our friend. They cause us to hope on the future rather than to depend on the present. But that word "hope" is another whole thing entirely. I was raised on hopes and dreams, so learning about the failure of hope to really help, took a long, long time to digest.

It was this very clear admonition, repeated by so many great siddhas, in the Buddhist cannon that finally got my attention and led to my taking the warning on hopes (and fears) more seriously. It reads:

"Don't Prolong the Past,
Don't Invite the Future."

I knew at first read of that phrase that it held something important for me because it struck at the heart before I could ignore it. Not prolonging the past, well, that much I could figure out. Don't dwell on the past, overmuch. I get it.

But this phrase about not inviting the future, not having hope. That was against my beliefs. I have been a great fan of hope, and an even greater dreamer. I have dreamed, my friends!

But gradually, like creeping age, I became aware that almost all of my minor (daily and endless) disappointments came from expectations and, yes, from my hopes, each and every one.

If I looked closely I could see that I would even have a tiny time of mourning over every disappointment, and

my days can be full of them. And they can be linked, one-to-one, like a string of firecrackers going off one after another, each sucking some sense from whatever life energy I have that day. What began as a fresh "me" when the sun came up each morning was too soon hamstrung by a series of quiet disappointments, like gradually letting the air out of my tires. Pretty soon I was deflated and often was not even aware enough to know why.

I should also mention that depression is the step-child of disappointment.

So beware of these small disappointments, because how we take them is really up to us, and they can eat away at our confidence and sense of wellbeing like a mental cancer. But I have learned, or at least am learning.

I am learning, through awareness training, to catch disappointments early-on, when they first peek their gnarly little heads into my life causing me to go into reaction.

And reaction is the keyword here, how I react to what I perceive as disappointing. Of course that is all based on hope and expectations, my hopes, my expectations. When the Buddhists tell me that hope and fear are not my friends, they are speaking of our reactions, not that we are to have no dreams or hopes. It is our reactions that we can control.

The Buddhists go on to point out that if we will work on becoming more aware, we can catch ourselves in moments of disappointment and actually observe our reaction, watch the energy running out of our life through expectations that are not met or biases that must be acknowledged.

And this awareness approach can serve all sizes of disappointment, from the big ones on down to those that barely get our attention, but still function without fail.

Let me give you an example. Not long ago I got a phone call in the night from someone who was touched by something I wrote and who was in collaboration with others who probably share my same training and view. She told me she would be contacting me that night by email and invited me to come and visit their group, etc. This was dharma-related, so that is my favorite stuff, and many of you know.

Of course, I was thrilled with the idea of speaking with these folks, in particular because it was on subjects of the greatest interest to me. Well, that email (and any other kind of feedback) never came. What a great opportunity (perfectly made for me) to practice what I am preaching here about disappointment, and I did.

Of course, I have thought about the call a few times, but not as I would have years ago, when I would deeply have regretted the proximity to having hopes fulfilled, and then dashed. You get the idea.

Instead, I just note it, and put it on hold. We have to trust in our own karma and fate. Our own will come to us, as I am reminded by this great poem by John Burroughs, called "Waiting," which I will post here

WAITING

SERENE, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind, or tide, or sea;
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
For, lo! my own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Nor change the tide of destiny.

What matter if I stand alone?
I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it has sown,
And garner up its fruit of tears.

The waters know their own and draw
The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delight.

The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
Can keep my own away from me.

-- John Burroughs

P.S. That poem says a lot.

CHANGE: THE UNWRITABLE AND UNTHINKABLE

This should be my last post on inner change, and I have thought for several days whether or not even to write this part because it touches on some very esoteric (sensitive) topics. What is the problem with inner change?

The problem is that we are protected from witnessing inner change by our own social conventions, by what is called "sanity" and, for that matter, social sanitation. We do everything we can not to come into contact with our conflicting emotions, and all of the rest of the stuff that may be festering in our psyches. In reality, our internal worlds have no fixed boundaries and can include more than a little chaos and all manner of undigested experience – paradoxes that we have come up against but have failed to assimilate, especially relating to our "self." The "Self" does not like to be embarrassed.

We habitually just ignore and tune out what we don't understand or fear, and try to keep it at arm's length. We close our eyes to it all and then we keep them shut. I am surprised how little western society knows about its own inner life, about what goes on in there just beneath the surface veneer. This post is just touching on that. I won't probe.

On the inside, mostly connected to our self-image, we literally experience mental earthquakes, as the great tectonic plates of our fabricated-self move and rearrange themselves within us in response to change, mostly in an attempt to keep change from reaching us. After all, the self is the ultimate conservative, ever afraid of change.

And our own self is very protective of its existence and functions as what is called (in esoteric literature)

a ring-pass-not between itself and our actual mind, a filter that we can't (or won't) easily see through. The self, at least in this society, is not transparent, and that apparently by design. As the great German philosopher Hegel so aptly put it:

"We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

That is how much we fear awareness or what is sometimes called "emptiness." The "Self" is like our own private ventriloquist dummy and we the ventriloquist, although we have managed to fall into the unfortunate habit of taking orders and direction from the dummy rather than to get to know our true nature, a simple twist of fate as Dylan put it.

It is the 'self' that's responsible for most of the difficulties we have in recognizing and incorporating inner change at times like these. Like the fury of a sudden summer storm, our inner worlds can (and do) collide, and we are hurled through a space and time that we cannot stand to keep in mind, and are just too happy to forget. And when this inner turmoil passes or quiets, we settle down to living once again, with scarcely a memory of what took place, of what we just lived through. But there are sometimes telltale signs left behind.

Like magnets that oppose one another, parts of our inner psyche are reflected in the mirror of the self and we sometimes can catch a brief glimpse of truth in the corner of the eye, and we are overwhelmed. What is it to be overwhelmed? What happens that we just shut down and crawl off to sleep through it?

Our day-to-day outward busyness may or may not reflect the psychic storms raging within. Some days

we are just tired. What do you think gets us so tired? What do we go through that we are mostly unaware of? Have you ever had such an embarrassing or difficult thought that you found yourself spontaneously saying something out loud, despite your "self," in an attempt not to look at it? That is what I am pointing at here. And this happens a lot.

You may feel that I am magnifying the effects of change (and the self) here for dramatic effect, but am I? When change emerges in the mind (like during eclipse times), everyone takes it personally. We all experience it (all humanity) at the same time, but we seldom realize that all present in the world share this same energy at the same moment.

We each tend to turn inward and experience it (or so we think) privately. Imagine a garden of flowers all closing at once and then opening back up again, when the change has passed. No one saw anything. In fact, we do this all the time.

Anyway, enough about psychological disturbances that we endure because we can't manage to look our own self in the eye. Change itself is nothing less than a shot of pure energy into space and time that allows our great constipated inner worlds to move, to expand and contract as they will, and neither you nor I can fully control it. We can hunker down and ride change out or we can learn to take advantage and use it creatively.

In a very real way, our sense of time is a social convention lived by the majority - a mere consensus. We don't always remain within that social convention, but in times of change, in odd moments, days, and hours of our lives, some of us may wander (or be thrust) into more unusual (altered) states of mind and

time. We don't remember it because we find it too hard to grasp, much less sustain any awareness of. We just shut down in there. And this is more the rule than the exception.

Eternity does not exist somewhere out there in our future, at the live-long end of history and linear time. Eternity exists right now, of course, deep within (or without) time. Time does not just extend to some linear end as we may like to believe. Instead, as individuals, we extend (stretch) time. We are stretched and endure for the length of our effort. We last until then.

In other words, we go between the moments of clock-ticking time. We stretch time, make time for the things we care about, and extend ourselves. In moments of great change, we leap between the seconds (beyond time) to the day of creation itself. We become co-creators if we can keep our eyes open. Eternity is always found just in time.

By becoming more and more aware of the actual nature of the self as something we habitually fabricate, we can increasingly be aware of what change is and participate creatively (consciously) in shaping our own life and destiny.

Is this too weird to consider?

MAY YOU BE WITH THE FORCE!

Recently, solar flares and solar activity has been steady in the C-Class range with one spike early this morning that almost reached into the strong M-Class. So we are kind of at a solar slow-boil and have been for some time. That, coupled with this triple eclipse time, means the opportunity for change is very much with us.

If I look up the meaning of the word "change" in the dictionary, it is defined as the "process of becoming different." We are all kind of familiar with change, or should be by now, with one provision, and that (unfortunately) is that many of us tend to view change as something external that just happens to us. This is a little bit masochistic on our part, seeing ourselves as somehow the victim of change. Passivity.

When we study intense solar change or the possibility of change at eclipse times, we are speaking of 'internal' change, and not so much external change, so we might want to modify the above definition of change to something like: change is "the process of how I become different" and... still remain the same. Hmmm.

Watching how we change internally is not quite as simple as watching outer events as they flicker by on the movie screen of our life. Inner change can be much more personal than that and we can be uncertain how to identify just who and what is changing, much less how to incorporate it and proceed on.

Just as the center of our Earth is molten fluid, so our inner emotional worlds can be in upheaval even while our outer appearance may appear calm to others.

Only we know what is going on in there, and most of the time we don't even know or go there. Fires can rage on the inside that never go out and we just find it easier to ignore them, except perhaps when they erupt and reach the outside where others can see or sense them. We can be as surprised as anyone at our reactions.

My point here is that not only do many of us have little control emotionally, but we are not used to touching ourselves or being touched in there. Like a bad tooth, we are just too sensitive. I am not trying to exaggerate here, but rather to point out that when we talk of being aware of (much less cooperatively incorporating) inner changes, we may (without thinking) always take a back seat to our driving emotions and fears.

In other words, we don't really know our inner self (and mind) that well and may be passive to change, when what is required is to seize the window of change and actively work with it, i.e. to change ourselves, rather than to be passively changed by circumstances.

Inner work requires not only clarifying our emotions (so we are not always in reaction to them), but getting to know the mind itself within which all of our emotions and thoughts reside. Of course that involves mind training, meditation, and so on, which I won't go into here. You know my thoughts on meditation by now. It is a good thing.

What I am saying here is that when change comes, internally it is not "things" changing us, but rather that we, ourselves, change, and that is much more difficult to assess and monitor. How do we change, often despite ourselves, and still tell if we have lost something in the transition? The simple truth is that

when we change internally, we don't really know how we are different from what we were before the onset of change. This is not news. It has always been this way, and this fact is part of why inner change is so scary.

We are monitoring our own change and yet we are also that which is changing, seemingly a logical impossibility, which simply means: this is life. Always has been just like this.

And this little paradox is why words like "faith" and "trust" are of such long life. Sooner or later the process of inner change requires that we let go of any meaningful ideas of control, and just abandon ourselves to the very process of life. We trust because we have no choice. We are being liberated, like it or not.

And now for some closure here. If you have followed my train of thought so far, in particular this last part, then you can understand why grasping inner change is problematical, especially if we seize up or freak out, and are unable to free-float and trust ourselves to the forces that be. It requires that we be relatively unattached and, sooner or later, we will.

To do that we have to go from our embryonic inward curl to literally bending over backward, turning ourselves inside-out spiritually. In other words, just letting go. We need to have our hands free (metaphorically) to work with change.

Creativity is working with change successfully, being one with the forces of change.

We all know the phrase "May the force be with you," but we may not be as familiar with the reverse "May you be with the force!"

TRANSMIGRATION: GOING SOMEWHERE?

Let me warn you right off that what follows is a little "heady," maybe a lot, so please ground yourself and hang on. I have been writing these last days about the three eclipses in a row that we are now in the middle of, and the opportunity for inner change that times like these can bring. Yet words can only take us so far. We all know that.

Beyond words is the life experience that words can but refer to, point at, and we each will have to go deeper into life to have that experience for ourselves. We can stand as long as we want with our toe in the swimming pool, but sooner or later (and it will happen) we each have to take the plunge.

Eclipse times (and also times of intense solar activity like flares, etc.) are moments when change can be more obvious for us to see and feel the urge of, if we will just time-out a bit and let the mind rest long enough to pick up on it. The highest Tibetan lamas tell us that inner alignment is there at eclipses.

In a very real way we each are like the old "camera obscura," surrounded by darkness and watching the world projected on our own inner movie screen through a tiny pinhole of light, the view or vantage point of the Self. And the lens of the Self we peer through is nothing more than the sum total of our attachments, our likes and dislikes. That is how we identify who we are: as me, myself, and I. This is the most common vantage point.

I mention this here because at times of change like these, we can, of course, actually change, and the greatest (or most common) change is one of attitude or view. It is much easier to change our attitude or approach to life than it is to rearrange everything

outside ourselves in the world to our viewpoint. And there are little and big changes of view that are possible.

Someday we each will learn to remove those self-attachments, one-by-one, and just expand into the full light of our natural awareness. This is what all the wise persons tell us and they even tell us how to do it. And here is the point:

When we do become more aware, it won't be from the vantage point of our "self," and I have found that this point is very hard to grasp, but understanding it (or beginning to) is crucial to inner vision.

We have all endlessly heard admonitions from our parents and teachers to "not be selfish," and the like. This is not simply some moral imperative we are expected to follow, but a true clue as to what will eventually take place. The state of "not being selfish" is a clue that we will then no longer be looking from the vantage point of the self, and we need to understand this. It will help.

Instead, like the spider on a web, we will crawl across life, handhold by handhold, moving from our self-perspective to a more enlightened view. And this changing view and new vantage point is profound. It has been called the transmigration of consciousness, and is well worth understanding.

Transmigration is not so much a transfer of consciousness from one body to the next (as many books suggest), although that is what we study when we invoke terms like reincarnation, metempsychosis, or rebirth. Yet this, like so many things, can be misleading.

True transmigration is a transfer of view or vantage point and it can be done right in the here and now, in this life, as well as in any series of successive lives to come. As the Tibetans continue to point out, the life we now live is also just another of the bardo states. There are only bardo states until we wake up and become enlightened.

The entire point of all spiritual knowledge, meditation, and mind-training instruction is to point out how we can go about letting go of where we are now bound by our attachments to a patchwork self (this view that we imagine that we stand behind and have drawn around ourselves unknowingly), and instead migrate or expand to a view as wide as awareness itself. And it is this awareness that we can take with us when we die.

At that point, we cease to identify with the self as exclusively who (or what) we are and gradually learn to migrate to another vantage point, one of awareness of our own awareness. This is what transmigration is about and it can take place as much in this as any next life. Sooner or later we just have to learn to do it.

And eclipse times can make this process more obvious and easier to grasp. At times of change we stand teetering on the brink of changing our view and vantage point, changing it from assuming that life is as we see it from the point of the Self, to letting that go and transmigrating to a view that is as wide as awareness itself.

CORE CHANGE

Spring seems finally to be here, almost a month late.

When I go over my photos from past years of the chorus of spring frogs, they are usually in full swing toward the end of March. This year they have only been really active in the last few days. There have been thin layers of ice on the small ponds most mornings until now. I can only try to imagine the suffering of cold so many animals go through just to stay alive. It is unimaginable.

And the spring flowers have waited all this time to pop, and now they all coming at once, which makes seeing them all, much less photographing them, a hurry-up process, and so on.

Here is a daffodil bud in my yard taken yesterday with the Nikon D800E and the Voigtlander 125mm APO lens.

Don't forget we are in an extended intra-eclipse time lasting about a month and a half.

There were some comments yesterday in my blog about the effect of eclipses on the stock market. I am sure they are valid, but I tend not to associate eclipse times with outer events and I will explain why. And I must comment that if eclipses could accurately predict the stock market, some folks would be rich. Perhaps they are. However, I have a different take on the effect eclipses bring, one more focused on inner changes rather than outer. Here it is:

I am not saying that there are no outer eclipse effects, but I tend to follow the Tibetan view that eclipses mark times when the inner subtle bodies all come

together and clearly line up or align themselves within us.

This alignment marks a change from these centers being unaligned as they otherwise are most of the time. Perhaps we like to think that change precipitates sudden external events, but in my experience that only is true if we neglect to respond to inner change with the appropriate measures.

My experience with change, limited (of course) to my personal experience, suggests that inner changes or realignment bring clarity in which decisions can be made that only later will result or can be measured in the external. I could be wrong in this, since I tend to focus inside more than outside. And I tend to associate deep inner change with intense solar events (like solar flares), eclipses, and various major astronomical events.

Core change of this kind, for me, is more like setting or rearranging the sails on a boat, taking a different tack or approach. These inner adjustments, once made, eventually result in our going in an alternate direction. In other words, inner change marks a change in attitude or approach more than a sudden outside event. However, failure to note and adjust our attitude can result in physical consequences, i.e. external events.

The result of attitude changes, changes in approach, seldom are evident at once, but gradually appear as the two courses, the old and the new, veer apart. Eclipse changes, in my experience, become apparent down the road, over time. But they are (or can be) made now, while the eclipse alignment holds, and there is sufficient alignment and clarity to see how and what changes can or should be made. Of course,

we personally have to make them. No one else can do that for us, but failure to make adjustments to change can effect us.

The old adage is that a change at the core is worth more than any amount on the periphery. The analogy I hold close on this subject is that of a sphere. We can endlessly travel on the surface of a sphere (like Earth), but we will never get any closer to the center. This is what the Tibetans call relative truth, something my dharma teacher explained to me many years ago in reference to the value of astrology.

Of course, the Tibetans use astrology all the time, but even so, Rinpoche said that astrology (like all relative truths) can but help us get from here to there, just as we go from Detroit to New York on the Earth's surface. And this relative change may (or may not) be helpful, but regardless it is relative only. By moving on the surface we can perhaps improve our situation. That is the value of astrology, geomancy, tarot, and any number of other oracles, and this is not meant as a put-down.

After all, I have spent most of my life as an astrologer, so I do value and use it all the time. That being said, Rinpoche pointed out to me that astrology (his words) was one of the limbs of the yoga, a relative truth. But, he went on to say, it is not the root or absolute truth. Only the dharma and its path lead inward toward the center of the sphere and are not relative truths, but are "absolute" truths.

From the center of a sphere the entire surface can be viewed and is made practical. Now, this is just an analogy, but in my opinion, a pretty good one.

Getting back to these eclipse alignments, when they occur, things can free up, and we have the

opportunity to make inner changes at a core (or toward the core) level, and the results can be much more powerful than just changing course at the surface. I don't want to push this analogy too far, but for me, it has been very, very useful.

Change at the core level is not the same as change at the surface level. Eclipse alignments and intense solar activity (in my experience) allow for changes to be made at the core level. We can creatively take part in making these changes or they can (and will) be made for us. Events can and will overcome us, if we are unable to act.

In other words, what may appear as random outside events that impinge on us are often just our own ignorance of and inability to be sensitive to the demands of inner change and to make those changes. Make any sense?

ECLIPSE-ASSISTED CHANGE

We are in an intra-eclipse time, three eclipses all in a row for that matter. Theoretically we should be (or can be) more sensitive to our inner changes during this time, at least that is what the Tibetans point out. As they say, eclipses are times to observe our mindstream with more care. Why? Because things are happening now, if we will just look or learn to look. And what is happening is change, and change is what fuels creativity.

By definition, change of any kind marks instability of the status quo. Life is once again in flux, and that fact impacts the way things are. This means that things will not be going on the way they have been going. Things are changing. I am reminded of the line in Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man," "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?"

If we are passive, I guess we wait to see how the changes turn out, for the better or for worse. But that is not something we would dare do if we were driving a car, wait to see how things turn out. Instead, we would have to drive the car. What makes us think change is any different and has to be waited out?

I find that change can be uncomfortable, sometimes even unsettling, having my deck shuffled right before my eyes. But change is also a chance. When things change, a little bit of chaos (unpredictability) is injected into our sense of order. Most of us just keep our heads down and wait it out when change comes, but there are alternatives.

By definition, change shakes up (changes) the status quo and brings with it uncertainty, uncertainty that

things will stay the same. Sometimes that is a good thing. We may want or need things to change. And by being aware, we can to some degree even guide our choices in times of change.

The energy of change (during eclipse times) does not last forever, so use it while you have it. When it has run its course, the status quo will creep back in and reassert itself. You can count on that. Things will shrink back to normal, perhaps to a new normal. But change will be gone, and the opportunity for changing things will also be more difficult.

This increased solunar activity at eclipse times produces gaps or openings in our everyday life, chinks in our armor, opportunities for change. Sure, we can hunker down and wait for change to pass (and usually do), but we can also meet change head on and learn to use it to change things more toward how we would like them. We can drive the car. Change is a time of and for activity, not inactivity.

Yes, at times of change everything can be a little more upsetting. Anything can happen when the energy of change is injected into what is normally relatively unchanging. Things move and shift around in there, often seemingly, but not always and not completely, beyond our control. Many of us are waiting and secretly hoping for change.

As for me, I always look forward to these eclipse times because they are so creative. Change is the wild card that trumps the status-quo. And change is so democratic. In the whirlwind of subtle inner changes at these times, things once again become possible that I had all but given up hope of. Eclipse-assisted change means that I may just do an about-

face and start to march to a different drummer. With a little help, I can change.

As the Latin slogan "Carpe Diem" says, seize the day!

MICRO-KARMA

The problem with great moments (or insights) is that I tend to naturally want to repeat them, to have them happen again, just as they were, or even better. That wish on my part is like a death sentence, a sure sign they will never come again, at least not like that. And it gets worse.

Not only will those pure moments not reoccur, but my labeling them as "best" or desirable immediately puts a filter between me and that possibility, and every time after that, when I compare any decent moment to that "best" moment (and, of course, I do), the filter becomes more and more of an obscuration, until, top-heavy, it tumbles from my inner sky. What was a pole star in my life has become an anchor pulling me down.

This is especially true for any moment that I might mark as "spiritual." For me, so-called "spiritual progress" too often turns into one of those one-step-forward and two-steps-back processes that quickly mark a point of diminishing returns, like the return of that experience. It won't return, at least not like that.

It can take me days, weeks, months, years, and decades (!) to repeat or even come close to some (what I call) break-through moments. I like to joke with myself about it, and an analogy I use is that of being held under water by life and finally coming up for air and getting a breath, and then wanting that air so badly that I hold my breath so I won't lose it. That would be me.

Of course, I can only hold my breath so long before life knocks it out of me in an attempt to start me breathing again, much like doctors slap the newborn's

bottom to make the baby breathe. Life does that to me every time. And I guess it is a good thing too.

Of course I have read all the books, been to the teachings, and even common sense tells me that clinging to a spiritual (or treasured) experience is the perfect way to stain it. Any kind of undo attachment on my part will poison a moment and send me tumbling over and over in inner space trying to hold on to it. And it can't be done. It is like a law of nature.

Sooner or later, I have to breathe. One of my life teachers taught me early-on that a person can only hang on to any thought for around three days, or as long as they can go without sleep. But sooner or later, they must sleep, and in that sleep we tend to let go of what we cling to, whether that thought is good or bad. Our enemies (whatever they are) also cannot hang on to bad thoughts about us, either. That is a correlate.

Like the hummingbird, we are meant to just sip the flowers of life on the fly, so to speak, and then move on. We dare not hold on to anything, if we want to live.

So the obvious point here is to take note of what happens if we label and become attached to a desirable experience. This is an easy experiment to make with your own precious moments -- common knowledge, so to speak.

Less obvious (and here comes the point of this blog) is learning not to be attached (in the same manner) to disappointments, blind alleys, and any bridge-too-far that we set for ourselves. We also grind those experiences into habit by attachment, albeit reverse attachment. We don't want that to happen again, so of course it does, or at least our negative attachment becomes the glue that underlines the experience in

our mind until it becomes an inscription, like an epitaph.

The brilliant Tibetan Buddhists point out that this is how karma is created, not just in the big mistakes we make in life, but much more insidiously in the perpetual rain of self-judgment and negative attachments we record in our mindstream each and every day, and for many of us, almost every moment. These are what add up into real karmic debt that we pay just by living as we do.

It came as a revelation to me when my Buddhist teachers pointed out that by just learning (and training, mind you) to let go of these attachments, positive and negative, we stop recording karma and can begin to go karma-free. We stop accumulating and inscribing in our mindstream a constant torrent of micro-karma that incrementally adds up to certain suffering on our part.

To my mind, the scariest part of karma is not only the dimming of our mind that its accumulation brings, but the fact that all karma which we accumulate also will eventually ripen (and with interest) down the road in ever more serious suffering (even worse dimming). For me, that was something to consider. I had no real notion of this, until I examined it.

The takeaway here (at least for me) is that the most worrisome karma is the endless underscoring of bad thoughts, hurt feelings, emotional reactions, likes and dislikes, the incessant labeling that we constantly do all day long. That is a karma causer, but one that we can do something about, if we wish.

We can learn to suspend judgment, to not-label, to put our over-critical tendencies into neutral gear, and

simply stop recording as much karma as we now record. It is that difficult or that easy.

Yes, it takes work, and that is why some of us learn to train our minds through appropriate meditative practices to not underscore, inscribe, and endlessly record and accumulate this micro-karma. In other words, as they say, don't sweat the small stuff.

Make sense?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

[Before I launch into this blog about doing nothing, timeout for a photo of Emma from the Bay Area where she is for another week. I also have a photo of Emma in the giant redwood forest, but I can't post it because it is too dark and she is so tiny in it, so this nice clear shot will have to do.]

Now back to my doing nothing. That's right, doing nothing or as little as possible. Dr. Dolittle here, busy learning to do less all the time, and that takes work.

Things I ought to do, should do, must do, and of course what I have to do. They haunt me every day, and I'm always looking for a time when I actually feel like doing them. And with me that can be a long time.

Doing something just because I "can" (or have to) no longer cuts it. There is no joy in that for me. I find myself waiting for a moment when I naturally feel like doing something, or better yet, I check the present queue of this moment to see what is currently surfacing and then do that. I go with the flow.

This makes planning my days difficult, but also more interesting, just waiting around to see what I will do next. I am learning to, as much as possible, not force things anymore. Just because I have to do it (have it on my "to do" list) is often not the best reason to do it. Or, if I force myself to do things, they seldom come out well. I have to have heart when I do things, if I can afford it.

With chores like picking up the dog yard, I might have to wait a very long time until I naturally felt like doing that, so some things I just have to do, ready or not. So I do them, like we all do.

But more and more of the time I am learning to check to see what I feel like doing, or not even what "I" feel like doing, but what is fresh and spontaneous in my mind that instant. It's like spinning thread (not that I have ever spun any), but drawing a thread out of the ether into something, and doing that spontaneously, has real merit. I get the best quality of me when I do that.

I am kind of being humorous here, but in reality I am very serious about winging it in the moment, waiting for things to be right. Shakespeare said "Ripeness is all," and I believe that, but it involves discipline, the discipline to do nothing, to wait. I am, by nature, somewhat impatient.

If I am doing something and I become aware that I have drifted off the edge of wanting to do it, I stop doing it, set it aside (with no prejudice), and pick up on something else, another thread of my life, or I just do nothing. Now, doing nothing, that takes some practice!

And the same goes for disappointments, running out of steam or inspiration, as well as finding myself up a blind alley. I used to kind of panic a bit when I ran out of future for a particular vein I was mining.

It is hard, but I am learning to just let it go, and so I rewrite my future all day long. Nothing is certain anymore. Everything is possible and projects of great moment and perceived importance are set aside as soon as I reach a point of no return with them, as in: nothing coming back or the simple loss of interest.

Whether this is a good long-term strategy I can't say. It is, by definition, interesting, but also a little bit fractured. Like most of us, I have dozens or hundreds of threads of interest. Who knows just where they will

lead. It used to be that if I was invested in a project, I had some obligation to see it through, come hell or high water. It is called perseverance.

I still persevere, but now I am more persevering in doing things that are lit up, alive, and allow me to exercise some creativity. I like the space or aura of the creative me better than that of my being a slave to my projects, but there is a risk factor.

The risk is that I may not go where I imagined I was heading or I may not be who I thought I was or even once was. I hate reinventing myself just to save face with myself, and am learning to let parts of my self-image just die if need be. No use in keeping up appearances for appearances sake. For whom?

An about-face used to embarrass me, but who's watching? I don't even care what my own self thinks half the time. I just like the feeling of going with the flow, doing what comes to mind and is fresh. And I find creativity in the moment's appearance, as in: much more freedom and space. This spontaneous moment now is so spacious, at least relatively, compared to the baked-in staleness of the past or the uncertainty of my expectations of the future.

"Living for (or in) the moment" is not a new concept, right? I remember the "Be here now!" of Baba Ram Das, and others. Is that what I am learning here? If so, it is not other-worldly or "spiritual" in any way that I know. Rather, it is practical and freeing. My fear (I guess) is that it is too eclectic, too much a tasting of here and a sipping of there. Or is this new approach just multi-tasking personified? Not a doing of nothing, but a doing of everything, a thread at a time, but all threads being serviced as a need spontaneously arises.

Anyway, do you get the idea? Am I a lone wolf or am I in good company? You tell me.

UNUSUAL TRIPLE ECLIPSE: VISIONS

Eclipses most often come one at a time. Sometimes they happen two in a row, but it is somewhat rare to have three eclipses in a row, two weeks apart, one after another. We are entering such a triple-eclipse time today on the Full Moon. Here are the coming three eclipses, dates and times:

Partial Lunar Eclipse (Full Moon)

April 25, 2014 3:56 PM EDT

Annular Solar Eclipse (New Moon)

May 9, 2013 8:29 PM EDT

Penumbral Lunar Eclipse (Full Moon)

May 25, 2013 00:23 AM

Next to intense solar activity (solar flares and Coronal Mass Ejection), eclipses are generally the most powerful astrological events. This is clear not only from Western astrological tradition, but in the Eastern traditions as well, and the Tibetan Buddhists even provide reasons.

The Tibetans point out that at both New and Full Moons the subtle inner energies (what are called the winds and the channels or chakras) line up or come together within us more exactly than at other times, and when a New or Full Moon is also an eclipse, that inner lineup is about as perfect as it can get. In fact, the Tibetans set these very special days apart as "days of observation," when perhaps the best thing to do is to allow the mind to rest and observe our own mindstream. That is how we learn.

In other words, these powerful celestial lineup events (eclipses and solar flares, etc.) happen outside ourselves in the heavens but signify change that

appears from within us. We can sometimes see the eclipse in the sky, but we must look and feel within to come to understand what change it brings, like: what it means for us.

Where do you think change in the world (or in yourself) comes from anyway? I am not saying that astrological events 'cause' change. I am saying that the cosmic dance happening all around us in the heavens is also an invitation for us to get in synch and dance with the cosmos. We are partners to the dance, and can either work against the rhythms of change or get in step with the music. We can learn to dance.

How we take change as it comes is what adept-ship or mastering this world is all about. Change in life will (and does) come. As they say, change is the only constant. How we assimilate and absorb the changes that come for us is what I am referring to here. Do we treat change as our opponent and oppose it as in the martial art Judo or do we passively (and skillfully) work with change as in the martial art Aikido?

The influx of change and how we receive it and work with it is the measure of our creativity. Change changes the static flow of the stream of life, sometimes injecting bends in our personal river that were not there before. Things can take a turn for the better or for the worse. As some wise folks say, "It is all good."

Good is what we make of change, if we can, how we assimilate it in ways that are beautiful, elegant, and useful... or not. Creativity is all about skillful incorporation of change. Don't ignore the fact that change can overcome us and "change" us so that we find ourselves having to be creative – not the worst thing.

I have written dozens of articles on eclipses and I list a free e-book below on the nature of eclipse times and the deep inner visions that come with them (and that we can tune into), so I refer you to that book if you are new to using eclipses creatively in your life. Or you can watch a video on the same topic. Links below.

What I am attempting to point out in this blog is that we can become aware at these times of what is happening inside our selves, but it takes some attention on our part, and, in the beginning, some effort to step off the freight train of our life for a day or even a moment.

We are used to being swept along in the path of change like riders on a train, passengers unable to lift our gaze from our day-to-day distractions long enough to view the landscape much less to get off the train and smell the flowers. There are no gaps (or few) in our distraction. We are used. We are used in this way. We are used to this.

Well, Eclipses are natural opportunities to shake our heads, wake up, and participate in our own dreams, to be more awake in this dream of life we are all dreaming. That is the idea.

In another blog, I will try to point out more on the nature of these particular three coming eclipses, but I will say they are ripe for inner viewing. In the last weeks, we have been pummeled by changes, many quite physical and hard-to-take, for some of us: harsh.

The next month and a half, during these eclipse times (and their visions), we will be looking more inside, looking within. Each eclipse brings and offers a vision, something we all experience, but few consciously. We agree to forget what we find too hard to remember.

Learning to remember or be aware of what we have been through and are going through right now is what mind training is all about. Happy eclipse!

If you have questions, please ask.

Video: "The Vision of the Eclipse"

<http://www.startypes.com/spiritvideos.aspx#124>

Books: "The Vision of the Eclipse"

<http://www.startypes.com/e-Books.aspx>

HOW TO MOVE THE MIND

I am going to share with you a powerful teaching. You have heard the first part before, but the second part is something new that I have not shared here before.

The idea of not being overly "selfish" is nothing new. We all have been brought up with the self and what to do with it. We are told to be our self and be self-confident, but at the same time we are told not to be selfish or think too much of our self. Either way, we are caught up in the self.

Like sticky molasses or a tar baby, the more we struggle with the self, the deeper into it we get stuck, the more attached we become. Remember that attachment does not just mean positive attachment, what we like, but also negative attachment, like when we hate or don't like something. That equally is attachment. The self likes either to get close, back off, or to just ignore.

This bi-polar-ness makes working with self-attachment tricky. Attacking, getting down on, or feeling sorry for our self is just another form of attachment. For all of the many worthwhile achievements that Western civilization has managed, mastering the self (and attachment) is not one of them. This is why we increasingly turn to the Eastern (and Buddhist) views as to managing the self. They have figured it out and we can learn it if we will.

In summary, the more seriously we take the problem of attachment and the self (the more airtime we give it), the stronger our self-attachment gets in response. There is a definite mirror reflection here, which is kind of humorous, like looking at our self in a mirror.

So the bottom line is that struggling with our self, by punishing, admonishing, hating, or about any other approach to the self we might take will never work, and this: on principle. We are just feeding the fire.

What does work, and the approach taken by the Tibetan Buddhists, is to get to know, understand, and even like your self, and not just "your" personal self, but also learning about what the self actually is.

And there is a lot of misinformation about the Buddhist view as to the nature of the self, for example the old-wives tale that the Buddhists claim there is no self. That is a half-truth. Of course there is a self, because we each have one and it acts like our personal nag or secretary every day. What the Buddhists do teach is that this self we each have has no permanent existence, meaning that while it is very much a part of life, it is not going anywhere, like with us when we die.

A proper relationship with our self needs to be a little more formal than that. We should consider treating our self (or at least the being behind the mask) like we are supposed to treat anyone else, cordially, kindly, and compassionately. That is a good start or at least a way of not strengthening the self until we actually have time to get to know the self a little better and discover for ourselves the actual nature of the self. Here is the key:

The way the Buddhists approach the self, however, actually takes some work on our part. Like getting enlightened, ultimately we have to do everything ourselves. That's the whole point. And here is something else to chew on.

Start to look at yourself, at what you consider as the parts that make up yourself. For example, who are

you? Who do you imagine others think you are or are good for? If you had to tell another person who you are and what you can do, what would that be? For example, I am an astrologer, so I could take a look at how I value astrology in my life. Is it part of myself? You bet, but then I could also ask myself this question:

Was astrology always part of my self? The answer is no. When I was younger, I had never even heard of astrology, so this supports the Buddhist view that our self is made up of things we identify with or are currently attached to right now, our personal montage of likes and dislikes. Yet what we identify and what makes up our self changes over time, like a coat of many colors. These ever-changing parts of our self are not our essence, as in who, at heart, we are. Otherwise they would always be there from the beginning. So what is always there in us?

Since I lived quite well without an identification as an astrologer as a kid, it cannot be a permanent part of who I am. Do you get the idea? Try it.

In your spare time, start going through all of the self attributes you have collected around you that amount to a persona, your personal image or self. Can you find even one of them that you have not lived without at one time or another? If you can, tell me what that is.

If you cannot, then that tells you something, that it is an attachment you have rather than who or what you actually are. And do the same for what you don't like.

It would be good if you could find out, then, who is it that has all of these non-essential attachments? If we take away all of what we can (and have) lived without, what and who are we left with?

This is the essence of how the Buddhists begin to approach deconstructing the self, at first kind of intellectually, by thinking about it, as I am presenting. And here is the thing I learned that really opened doors for me:

I had assumed that the mind was always intellectual, which means I depend on understanding most things first intellectually. The mind is intellectual too, of course, but there is another component to the mind that I was never introduced to, much less taught, as a child.

And that is that the mind is also muscular, which sounds like an oxymoron, but it is not. Just as we can understand what muscle-memory is when we learn to play a guitar, you know, learning all the chords, scales, etc. until we can do them automatically.... the mind is, in some way, similar. There is some muscle to the mind.

When we are asked to look at who it is that identifies with astrology or has attachments to it, we make a big mistake if we short-circuit that request by simply understanding this intellectually. Instead, we are being asked to actually struggle some.

For example, right now, look at who is reading this sentence. Don't look at the content of the sentence, which is asking you to look at the looker, but actually attempt to look at who is looking, at who is reading this page.

If you really try that right now (I mean really try), you will feel the effort and, like two magnets repelling one another, you will feel that force of not being able to look or of what you are looking at not holding still.

That force that won't be held can be overcome, my dear friends, and that is the first step to building mind-muscle, only we have to do a lot more of it to become accomplished. But the good news is that you can do this kind of looking-at-the-mind work throughout the day with no problem. That is how I did it, by mixing my mind with my work. And I did this for a long time.

The mind is more than just thinking and understanding. It is deep and we must plumb it not just with the thin thought of "getting the idea," but with our entire heart and being. We have never used this mental muscle and at first it will be very, very difficult to even move around in there at all. It takes effort and practice of a non-intellectual kind to move the mind, but once you get it moving, it will move on its own from then on. I know because I have done this.

And we build this mind-muscle by actually looking at who we are, again and again, over and over. We build on this by looking at all of the components of what (we think) makes up our self, one by one, determining if this or that is essential (and has always been) a part of our self.

The KEY is that we cannot just say to ourselves something like in this example:

"Oh, I get it. If astrology is an attachment (for better or worse), and has not always been part of myself, I will abstract it all and say to myself that nothing (no thing) has been a part of myself and be done with this exercise."

That would be the mistake I made, intellectualizing it. For your sake, please don't do that.

Instead, we must make a mental effort, again and again, to actually look at and track down each part of

our self and decide whether this or that attribute, this or that like or dislike, is essential to our self-image, and has always been there. Was there ever a time when we did not have it, and if there was, then it is not essential. And so on. It is not so much the content of what we are examining, the attachments, but the exercise of repeatedly learning to look into the mind and verify things.

It is the effort to move the mind to look inside itself that is key here, not the particular thing we are looking at or looking with. The mind must be moved by exercise, and in the beginning it is very, very difficult to move. We have to learn to do it through practice.

But we can't learn to do this by intellectually understanding it, like we usually do, as in: we see an example and then generalize globally that all examples will be the same, and leave it go at that. We have all been there, done that.

This would be like (using the guitar as an example) grasping how a "C Chord" is made, and then generalizing it to all other chords, without learning each chord, one by one. We have to learn each chord. We have to make the effort to actually look and see if we can see.

In summary, don't succumb to drawing any premature intellectual conclusion to this exercise. That won't work. Actually looking is not that hard, but you have to move the mind around and learn to move around in the mind.

I once used the analogy of setting up a vast circus tent in the mind, one with many peaks, gradually pushing each pole until the tent is up and we have some room or space in there.

This mental music is very important, and it is something that we westerners apparently have never, ever done. So I have just shared with you a powerful technique that is quite easy enough to do and that can change your life. It did mine.

Dharma practice is like a train or a sled, hard to get moving, but once moving, is unstoppable.

OUR DHARMA AND KARMA

I would like to follow up on some comments on the astrological Dharma Chart and Karma Charts, along with their differences.

First, these are two different charts calculated for the same exact birth moment and the same planets, but each from a different perspective or view. So, what you have here are not different entities (you are the entity), but rather different views of the same entity and the same moment in time. We are talking astrology here.

The one chart, let's call it your "Karma Chart," is the standard traditional astrology chart used for centuries and probably millennia. And there is nothing new here that I have added. This karma chart has always been a chart of the personality (how we appear, with ascendant and houses, etc.), you know, the particular Earth-centered circumstances in which each of us find ourselves embedded in and looking out through the lens of our particular personality, which some poets have referred to as that "terrible crystal." The personality eventually grows old and dies. That kind of thing.

The second chart is not really new, but it is still new or "news" to astrologers. In fact, it is about 400 years old, originating when Copernicus first pointed it out to all the astronomer/astrologers back around 1514 A.D. Copernicus pointed out that it was the Earth that goes round the Sun, and not, as we had mistakenly thought up to then, that the Sun goes round the Earth.

And although this may sound like a simple mechanistic and mechanical observation, it has much deeper roots in the mind than that and longer legs, as

well. Of course, those we know today as astronomers immediately adopted the Sun-centered view, which they added to the traditional geo-centered view and went on to become the astronomers of today, putting men on the Moon, and all of that. They used both charts in their work, and continue to do so.

Yet, for reasons not clear to me, those whom today we call astrologers did not accept the Sun-centered chart that Copernicus pointed out was, in fact, the way things were, as in: the truth. Instead, they continued to use (and still do today) the standard geocentric birth chart they had used since time immemorial. Why astrologers chose to ignore the helio chart, I have no idea, but would love to understand. However, astrologers have paid a dear price for their ignorance and continue to pay it forward, even today.

And that price is that astrologers failed to become empowered by the truth of a sun-centered solar-system view and continued to behave as if everything revolved around us here on Earth, including the Sun. This kind of self-centered view is obscured to the degree that we ignore the truth that not everything revolves around us.

Because we are still wrapped up in materialistic (19th and 20th Century) science, it has been convenient (and even now traditional) to ignore any spiritual ramifications of our views, and to carefully compartmentalize our spiritual leanings as distinct from the mechanistic truth of science, as if scientists do not have a heart, a soul, and a spirit. Save that for Sundays and church or don't go there at all.

So we end up with folks like me "crying in the wilderness" and echoing what Copernicus and

scientists ever since have known as the truth, that we are also children of the Sun, not only children of Earth.

I believe anyone reading this can grasp what I am explaining here, but let me point out what apparently cannot be grasped, so that you might grasp it.

The mechanistic transference of view from that of looking at life through our Earth-eyes to that of also (in addition, mind you) looking at life from the point of view of the Sun as center is not without spiritual, emotional, and psychological ramifications. The transition to a Sun-centered perspective does not mean that we give up our Earth-centered perspective and somehow are "planet-less." Not at all.

It is more like we transfer our consciousness to the Sun-center and from that vantage point continue to look out through our Earth-centered personality at our life. But there is a difference.

This transference of consciousness is a profound empowerment that changes forever our, well, view, of course, the seat of our consciousness. And that seat is also the heart of what is called the Dharma, the path or way to full awakening for each of us.

In other words, the Dharma Chart (our sun-centered) chart is a map of our spiritual path or dharma, the dharma being also the path and way through the obscurations and thickets of our personal (Earth-centered) life.

And while this transference of consciousness for me began as the intellectual exercise of looking at two kinds of astrology charts, one Earth-centered and the other Sun-Centered, unknown to me at the time, the ripple effects or implications of that act, when fully

resounding through my life, was what I am making an effort here to point out to you, that my consciousness transferred from the outside (my personality) to within (inside) and a new and more deeply seated (and natural) vantage point, my spiritual being (whatever we could agree to call it).

I am making that transition here and NOW, rather than at the time when my physical body passes on. This is the transmigration that the Buddhists point out happens in the bardo. We are in the bardo now and it can happen now, as well. It is a simple SHIFT of vantage point or attitude.

Let me know if you get this please.

THE CARROT AND THE STICK

Learning meditation is a little like a cowboy roundup and then the rodeo. You have to tame the mind before you can ride it. And there is a bit of the carrot and the stick involved, only in reverse order, first the stick and then the carrot.

Learning meditation takes practice and practice (for most of us) is no fun or at least not much fun. So in the beginning it is hard to get folks attention enough for them to actually do the habit-building work of learning to meditate.

To facilitate this, the Tibetan Buddhists introduce us to what are called the "Common Preliminaries," which are meant to be a reality-check enough to get anyone's attention. They consist of the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma, sometimes called "The Four Notions," and they are sticks, not carrots.

Briefly they remind us that our life is precious and we might want to put it to good use, that impermanence could be only a next-breath away, that the karma we create always comes back to bite us, and that trying to game life is an exercise in futility – ideas like that. They are a wake-up call.

The Four Thoughts urge us to let go enough of our distractions to at least learn the basic habit of meditating and, as you can see from the list above, they do it with a stick, not a carrot. So where does the carrot of Buddhism come in?

The short answer is "Later." The longer version of an answer is really interesting to me, and it involves a pivot or point of transformation, let's just call it the "point of no return," because once past that point, the

stick turns into a carrot from then on. Just where and how does that point of no return come about?

Traditionally, as it is taught, it does not come about until we have mastered (at least to some degree) the basic habit of meditation, until we can allow the mind to naturally rest, just as it is, in awareness. This involves learning Shamata meditation and being able to rest in Samadhi from that practice.

Once we learn to leave the mind just rest in its natural state, we can begin to learn Vipassana, insight meditation. Mahamudra meditation, the main form of meditation practice by the Karma Kagyu Lineage, teaches a special form of insight meditation that uses Shamata meditation as well.

The main idea is to begin to examine thoughts not for their content (what they mean), but rather for insight into their true nature. All of this takes time and effort, which is a little more of the stick.

When the true nature of the mind (how it works) is seen, that is called "recognition." It is not enlightenment (nowhere near it), but it is the moment when the stick turns into a carrot, so it is more than a little worthwhile. This is what I would call the "point of no return." There really is no turning back after recognition, mostly thanks to the advent of the carrot.

What was before sheer effort now because sheer interest, as the practice of meditation is finally brought into line with our ingrained self-interest. We become attached to our practice, in a good way, finally propelled by an enthusiasm that is self-generated, like one of those perpetual motion machines – mental fusion.

After recognition, we take possession of our life, and assume full responsibility. No longer does the world owe us a living, but we owe ourselves life and are empowered to live it. And we know just what to do.

It is from this "point of no return," when we no longer can go back, that the road to true enlightenment finally begins. At least, that is my understanding.

SIGHT SEEING

For me, writing prose about spiritual experience is like carrying water in your hands. In the end you have a waterfall of words and very little sense. Some experience is beyond words, but not necessarily beyond poetry, which sometimes can freeze-frame a moment in clarity.

My real interest in poetry started back in the mid-1960s when I was going through internal changes so fast that no amount of writing could capture them. That is why poetry exists. You might think that prose with its more words would ultimately be able to describe anything, but I have not found that to be true. Poetry for me is an attempt to cut through the molasses of prose.

I never thought of my poetry as "lovely" words to whisper in the ear, but way more didactic than that. It usually has a purpose, which is to transform a spiritual insight into a form that I can remember, one that clarifies the experience.

Way back then I called some of my poems, "mantra poems", not because I would recite them over and over, but rather because that if recited aloud (and exactly), they would more-or-less recreate the spiritual experience back into memory, and hold it long enough for the mind to see and remember. They are more like incantations or spells, mini word-dams to bring back and hold the insight from vanishing.

I also found that the few friends with whom I would share the poems (or recite them to) did not consider it actual poetry because it was too hard to grasp and the sound of it sometimes seemed to verge on nonsense. I like the "nonsense" part of my poetry, the

pushing words beyond their limits until the consonants crackle and pop in the ear. To my mind, the outer edges of sense point to what is beyond the sense world, i.e. non-sense, which is not the same as nothing.

Be that as it may, here is a little (imperfect of course) poem I wrote yesterday in the mantra style (it came out that way) while trying to put into words the fact that insight meditation (Vipassana), at least the kind I practice, does not concern itself with the content of a thought, but only with seeing its true nature. This poem is all about the "Seeing" in Vipassana meditation.

SIGHT SEEING ...

Is the,
"Seeing,"
And not,
What is seen.

When sight,
Sees itself,
Nothing,
Can be seen,
Except,
"Seeing"
Seeing itself.

When sight,
Itself,
Is seen,
"Seeing,"
There is:

Rest in,
Sight.

March 31, 2013

PERSONA NON GRATA

According to the Buddhist view, our personality and "Self" is nothing more than a composite image or montage of attachments, all our personal likes and dislikes. I mean, it's right there in the word "persona" if I would just read the dictionary, often defined as social facade or mask, but masking what? And what is behind the mask?

I sometimes think the mask of personality (self image) is like those old view cameras where the photographer holds up a little stuffed bird and calls out "watch the birdy" while he snaps away. Anyway, that's what we seem to do with the self, focus on the personality or self image surrounding a person (or ourselves), rather than what is inside or behind it. We see the cover and not the book. What is inside?

While we may gradually get over our own self (as in "get over yourself"), we socially watch each other's selves twist and turn with what seems like rapt attention. No wonder cocktail parties were often so barren of depth for me, not that I have been to one in 40 years. We seldom look beyond the veneer, much less behind the mask. Or is it that with the self, there's no wizard behind the curtain?

And the Buddhists don't claim that there is no self image (that the self is not real), but rather simply that the image is not permanent, but changes with our wandering interests. The bottom line here is that the self is not an entity, not who we actually are. It may serve as our front man, who we think or wish we are. Perhaps the self is what we show (make socially visible... what others see) to the outside world, but it

indeed is a mask or façade, just as the dictionary says.

And we can learn to see through the mask of the self, both in the sense that with mind practice it becomes more transparent to us (not important), and also in the sense that we can easily mistake it for 'the' vantage point or peephole through which to view life. It is this second meaning that most fascinates me in this particular blog, the idea that we adopt this montage we have collected around us, this mask, not only as something to be seen by ourselves in the mirror and by the world (our self), but also as the vantage point from which 'we' view the world, as the entity that we like to think we are. Talk about science-fiction.

Is it no wonder that many of us fear death, because deep-down, we must instinctively know that when we leave this world, the self we cherish (and all its components) will not be traveling with us, but the clinging and attachment, that does go with us. In my opinion, western philosophy got closest to looking at this 'self' concept when Hegel wrote in the "Phenomenology of the Mind" this one sentence.

"We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen." That is pure Buddhism speaking. And who is the "we?"

And we are surrounded by other selves doing just the same, and this is never more apparent than at social gatherings, especially stuffy ones where all we see (and show) is the veneer we have painted on our personal masks. Give me one-to-one communication, any day.

The Buddhists are spot on in telling us that these social masks (these selves) that we wear are not

entities, and have no permanent existence in themselves, but like the layers of an onion, they have no actual core. But don't stop there. That is only half the story, only half of what the Buddhists are pointing out here. The other half is that we each have (beyond the mask) what is called Buddha Nature, and that behind the personal self is a mind that does not yet know that it is a 'Buddha in waiting', a fully enlightened mind waiting to be discovered by each one of us.

And the Buddhist view is not Platonic in that we once-upon-a-time were enlightened but somehow fell into our current obscurations (i.e. original sin). The Buddhists don't really have a Cosmo genesis, and I have been very careful to ask the Tibetan rinpoches about just this concept. In their view, it is not that we originally fell from grace and are now somehow trying to recover that state. They say that we (you and I) have been ignoring the true nature of our mind, call it our inner nature or whatever, for eternity up until now, this present moment.

In fact, my dharma teacher says that we are the "stragglers," the ones who, in all the time there has been up to the present, never managed to "get it." He actually said that we are, and I quote, the "hard cases." What about that?

So the bottom line here, at least for me, is this concept of transmigration. And I am not talking about transmigration as in death, dying, the bardo, and rebirth, although there certainly is a parallel there. Instead I am talking about the transmigration of "view" here in our life right now, in particular, our starting to do the homework needed to vacate our belief that the ordinary self is a viable vantage point to experience life, much less solid grounds for future lives.

The Buddhists emphatically tell us that it is not and that the self as we know and love it will be jettisoned down the road when we die, so best to be packing out of there now or soon. We would do well to gradually transmigrate from the view of ourselves as the self to identifying with the awareness and clarity of our mind itself.

I understand that perhaps this concept of not depending on the self that I write here about probably reads a bit "heady" or theoretical to many of you, but it is worth a serious second look by all of us. The process of gradually moving our vantage point away from self-dependency is what much of meditation (and mind training) is all about.

However, the self-exodus we here in the West face was taken long ago by the Buddhists, so we are in good company. All we have to do is to follow the breadcrumb trail or method, which is called the "Dharma."

CRITICAL OF WHOM?

One thing I have noticed in my years of being around the Tibetans (monks and rinpoches) and Tibetan Buddhism in general is how they approach criticism, and here I mean personal criticism.

I used to think their attitude toward personal comments might be just that old cliché, you know, oriental inscrutability and reservation when it comes to being personal, but I finally had to give that thought up. It does not seem to be the case. Their attitude seems to reflect Buddhist philosophy about the self, at least among the high rinpoches that I have met.

My guess is that in their view, addressing the 'self' is just talking at the symptoms, without reaching the core. In other words, true to their philosophy, just as Buddhists don't consider the personal self as having permanent existence, they don't bother to address their criticism to it either. To make a joke, the self to them is a non-entity. Their view is much deeper and I believe better than that, and I have to take a lesson from them and reorganize my own thinking on this topic.

After all, I am not only a professional music critic (or was), but I am very, very critical in general, and certainly not above sharing my criticism with those I am critical of, and personally too. I have been told this is not one of my most endearing qualities, and my tendency to be very direct and to not beat around the bush only makes me harder to take... for some.

The Buddhists don't take the self as seriously as we here in the West do. Not only that, they believe that each one of us has Buddha nature, and is at heart a living Buddha that has not yet recognized his or her

own nature. They not only believe this, but act on their belief by addressing not the personality (what we call the "Self"), but the Buddha (and the Buddha nature) within. I am finally getting my mind around this approach. It is superior to what I have been doing or trying to do.

So the Rinpoches seem to skip over trying to criticize or address the personality, but speak only to the Buddha within. Instead of laying down the law and reprimanding another person, they tend to speak respectfully to the Buddha within us and do their best to point out things that might be helpful. What a great idea.

I always wondered how Khenpo Rinpoche (the lama I work with) could be so kind to others. It used to really bother me that he would take as much time with just any old person, even if they were rude, as he would with me. After all, I was (at least in my own mind) devoted and respectful, and many "outsiders" were just plain rude.

I remember one particular time when Rinpoche was speaking at the local university here and there were, of course, many students present. Some of them had not come to hear the dharma, but just on a lark to see (I guess) what Tibetans are like. Worse, they would ask Rinpoche rude questions, questions they would never ask their own parents or their parent's friends, questions like: "How is your sex life?"

This really irritated me, the sheer disrespect to someone I respected so much. Yet Rinpoche never batted an eye, and would patiently and carefully and lovingly answer each question, like the above question about his sex life, with "Me...a fat old man?" Things like that.

I guess my point is that Rinpoche (and perhaps Tibetans in general, or at least rinpoches) are looking beyond the person to the Buddha nature within and always addressing that. And the inner Buddha in each of us is deserving of great respect. I mean, what a future we have, eventually. I can at last understand their approach. Perhaps that is why instead of offering personal criticism (as I tend to do), they only point out things that might be helpful, and always with a gentle tone. They know to whom they are speaking.

And now that I think of it, my very first dharma teacher, many years ago, would repeatedly say to me.

"Five things observe with care, to whom you speak, of what, why, when, and where."

This makes a lot of sense to me.

MEDITATION: MY HISTORY AND TRAJECTORY

Growing up in the late 1950s, Buddhism was an intellectual topic, something my friends and I would sometimes talk about (like existentialism and Ingmar Bergman films) late into the night while stoked on cigarettes and coffee. I did not know anyone in the 1950s who actually meditated.

Back then I wanted very much to be a beatnik and refashioned myself in that image as best as a teenager could. By 1960 I had dropped out of high school and was living in an abandoned wooden freezer in the basement of a gallery called the Gas House (a famous Beat hangout) on Venice Beach in Santa Monica, California. I was sure that I was destined to be an artist and was painting oils at the time.

Beatniks knew at least something about meditation. In that time it was all about Zen Buddhism, with its beautiful stark aesthetic and images of the sitting Buddha. Probably some of my ideas of Buddhism came from seeing temples and Buddha statues in the films of Akira Kurosawa, still my favorite movie director of all time.

And I did try to meditate back then, including an all-day sitting sesshin with Roshi Philip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, at which he would walk around and whack people on the back with a stick. Already the times were drifting into what would become the spiritual backwash of the 1970s. Spirituality of some kind or other was all the buzz.

But it was not until the early 1970s and the advent of the books of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche that my friends and I first understood that Buddhism was not

just an intellectual topic, but rather a method and path. And meeting Trungpa in person changed my ideas forever about what dharma was, not an idea, but a way of life, a method to become more aware. Who would have thought?

After Trungpa appeared on the scene, my ideas of carefully-manicured Zen sand gardens, teak floors, and sliding rice-paper screens quickly gave way to the overwhelming visuals of the Tibetan shrines and the cacophony of other-worldly sounds of a full monk-chorus playing instruments like the Jaling (an oboe-like instrument) or the thigh-bone trumpets called Kangling. It was strikingly familiar to my Catholic upbringing, with its colorful vestments and strange church Latin.

Also gone were the dreamy half-hearted attempts to light a candle or incense and just sit for a spell. Trungpa recommended sitting for long, long periods of time, or at least his lieutenants did. Sitting meditation (at least for me) quickly became something more than lava lamps and a little reverie.

From then on meditation was something I had to do (or ought to do) each day. I loved the idea of the dharma and being a meditator (at least theoretically), but on any given bright sunny morning, that first flash of thought (remembering) that I had to do my daily meditation practice was too often more like a cloud on the horizon than something I was looking forward to. In this I am not the Lone Ranger. This was (and is) a common problem.

The New-Age 1970s swept through my generation like a spiritual firestorm, probably doing as much damage to true spirituality as good. We are still recovering from it and nothing was more damaged

than the whole idea of meditation. The sublime images from the late 1950s and early 1960s of a Zen composure had been overwhelmed by literally hundreds of kinds and styles of "meditation," few of them having any authentic background or tradition. Meditation in the 1970s was whatever you wanted to think it was, and this is generally true even today. I could go on.

Well, I started out to write about something totally different than this brief history of my encounter with meditation, but so be it. What I wanted to say was that once habituated to meditation, the mind wants to do it at every opportunity, including writing this short piece. I no longer feel like myself if I am not engaged in some kind of meditational state for at least a good part of the day. It does not have to be on the cushion, but it does have to be. Maybe I can write more about this topic another day. Right now I have to go and be very still for a while, but also very active.

What's your history with meditation?

SELF-RETIREMENT

It came as a bit of a shock when I first understand that I, as myself, you know... "Me" will never (not even ever) reach enlightenment. How disappointing is that!

The reason is that the 'self', as Buddhists know it, is nothing more than the sum total of our attachments, positive and negative, at best a kind of general secretary for our life, and not any kind of permanent 'being' or vantage point. The assemblage (montage) of what makes up what we call our "self" changes as our interests change. Like an onion, the self has no permanent core. When we die, the self is gone, but the mind is not.

So I find the idea humorous that should I become enlightened, myself as I now know me won't be around to see it. LOL. In other words, the self can't be the natural vantage point it appears to be now from which to survey life as we become more aware. Why is that?

Because becoming aware of the true nature of the mind is concomitant with a thinning out and dissolving of the attachment to the self, the self largely being all our personal attachments, likes and dislikes, our personal scrapbook. Sooner or later, they all have to go (the attachments, not what we are attached to), and with it goes the hope of somehow carrying the self as we know it on to the next world or life. In other words, as we become more aware, the self becomes increasingly transparent and less and less important as a refuge. We discover that it is not the "decider," and ultimately we gradually switch vantage points. We stop viewing everything from the point of view of our

self. We stop being "selfish," because we discover it is an exercise in futility.

This is not to say that we should not have or will not still have a self when enlightened, because the self is a practical personal secretary that we would have to invent if we did not already have one. Like a good secretary, the self is like a butler to something more important and greater than itself (no pun intended), whatever we could agree that is, awareness, enlightenment, or whatever. However, most of us did not set out in life to be our own secretary. The secretary does not usually run the whole show, but will if we let it. In a word, we are not just "ourselves," if that makes sense.

The point here is that, while the self is not about to dry up and blow away, the extreme emphasis and concern with the self (call it our selfishness) will soften and our awareness or extreme focus on it will shift away from that vantage point to something more encompassing, more natural. And again: let's not forget that the Buddhists point out that this cluster of attachments we call our "self" will not be traveling with us when we go, and advise us not to put all our eggs in that basket. Don't count on it

As I like to say, I reached a point in life where I just put my 'self' out to pasture to graze as we would an old cow, and I make sure it has enough hay and sunshine, but I have ceased to consider "myself" as the be-all and end-all authority of anything. At this point I can laugh at myself, at least a little. And the proof of the pudding is that I have begun to treat myself as I would treat any other person, with as much love, kindness, and compassion as I can manage.

However, I have been reminded (and more than once) by those around me, that perhaps I like myself too much. But I just say that you perhaps don't like yourself enough. After all, the self is really harmless when seen for what it is. It is OK to like oneself, nothing to be ashamed of or to beat-around-the-bush about. We are free to like ourselves, and with no apologies, even if no one else does. And here is a little poem I wrote about just that:

ME AND YOU

The fact that,
I like 'me',
Does not mean,
I don't like,
You.

There is room,
For you,
In me.
And,
You can like,
You too.

You too,
Are,
Like me.

I like you too!

NO SUFFERING ALLOWED, PLEASE

The first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is 'The Truth of Suffering,' and I am often asked: "Where is the suffering? I am not really suffering? Life is good!" It is as though they are suggesting that Buddhism is a downer and that Buddhists believe we are supposed to be suffering.

Daniel Brown, Clinical Professor of Psychology at the Harvard Medical School, who is also a skilled translator of Tibetan (and a Buddhist practitioner with a knowledge of Sanskrit) states that "suffering" is not a good translation of what the original Sanskrit word "dukkha" means as used in the First Noble Truth.

He points out that the Sanskrit word "dukkha" means more like "the dissatisfaction, anxiety, and unrest that is the result of constant change," and he says that a better word than "suffering" might be "reactive," like an abscessed tooth reacts when ice or heat is placed next to it. That is what "react" means here – approach / avoidance. The self tries to get close to what it likes and far away from what it does not like. Both are reactions.

If we will look closely, we will see that we react (one way or another) to almost everything, constantly. Substitute "react" for the word "suffering," and what the Buddha was pointing out may be easier to understand, the First Noble Truth then reads "The Truth of Reaction or Reacting."

Many of the same folks who tell me they are not suffering, certainly are reacting, because they can't seem to stay on their life course and/or are being beat

apart by their closest relationships, which ancient wisdom tells us are the perfect mirror of the mind, like: our own mind. They are reacting, at least to one another, and to the speed bumps of life. And of course, aside from lip service, they have no time in their busy life, and cannot move a muscle, when it comes to any real kind of mind training. I do understand their situation, because I was the same way and feel genuine compassion for them. They are in reaction and certainly their compulsive reacting is a profound form of suffering in my book.

The meditation teacher Jack Kornfield tells a story of an interview with the Dalai Lama in which someone asked the Dalai Lama questions about self-hatred, not liking our self. Instead of answering in English, which the Dalai Lama speaks very well, he began to talk with his translator and for a long while. After an extended discussion in Tibetan, the Dalai Lama said that neither he nor his translator could find a word in Tibetan for self-hatred or getting down on oneself. Apparently, this is purely a western concept, a real difference between eastern and western psychology. It seems that Tibetans, as a rule, don't have such a thing as a negative self-image.

For me, the saddest part of all this is that we can be the cause of our own suffering. It is not something that life demands of us. We continually sow the seeds of our own unhappiness with our self, life, and others, a real syndrome or loop into which we seem to be locked. And we apparently don't know how or have time to remedy this.

Beginning meditation and many of the more advanced meditation techniques are geared to desensitize our reactions and allow them to begin to naturally subside, gradually exposing the actual nature of the

mind which is there all the time, but obscured by all of our constant reactions, labeling, and other busyness. That is the basic idea and reason for training the mind.

Like a stuck record, I repeat in blog after blog, that it is all about awareness, becoming aware of what we are already experiencing to the point of catching ourselves on the verge of reaction and then not reacting. Meditation practice desensitizes our tendency to go off in endless reaction and allows the mind to settle down, come to rest, and for clarity to arise.

DHARMA STUFF: TRAPPED BY THE TRAPPINGS

This may be my last apologia for a while. Hope they are useful in clarifying my mistakes and pointing out that we all make them.

In those thirty years of practicing, as regards the results of sitting meditation, apparently the only thing I accumulated was more dharma toys. In the beginning I had no toys. I had no shrine, no statues, no mala (beads), no nothing. I had a little piece of paper with my dharma name and a line drawing of the Buddha on it. That was my shrine and I placed it on a little shelf at eye level while I practiced meditation..

But while I sat there for thirty years, although I didn't accumulate any real meditation results, I did manage to accumulate an incredible amount of dharma "stuff".

For example, I tried out every kind of cushion to find the one most comfortable for my rear-end. I had cushions piled on cushions. I made ramp-like cushions out of graduated layers of carpet samples that I cut up, cushions stuffed with buckwheat hulls, cushions shaped like kidneys, rectangular cushions that cut off the circulation in my thighs, Zen cushions (zafu) we made ourselves, cushions stuffed with Kapok, and the list goes on. I could write a long article (and have) just about meditation cushions. P.S. I did finally find the right kind of cushion

And I had all kinds of little tables to set my sadhanas on, the texts I was chanting or reading. I had wooden tables especially made and painted for me by Tibetans. I designed tables and had them made. I even had a special mini-spotlight installed on my ceiling with barn-doors that placed a rectangle of light just on the area of text I wanted it on.

I went through any number of ways to burn candles. I had special Chinese lotus lights that I could dim to where I wanted them. I had shawls for my shoulders, all kinds of them, ones from India, and ones I measured and made myself.

I built or had built small and large wooden shrines, one out of old 2-foot-wide (two-inch thick) cherry wood, others made of black walnut. Some were small and portable, others were large and wide. Most were multi-tiered and held dozens of statues and dharma items. I spared no expense.

I then started a whole mail-order import business for dharma items to help out our monastery, because at the time they could not handle shipping things to practitioners. I staffed and ran it for many years and by way of that had a river of dharma stuff flowing through our center from which I could cherry-pick whatever I liked. And I liked.

I had malas, the 108-bead rosaries that the Tibetan Buddhist use to count prayers and chant mantras. I had malas made out of coral, of lapis lazuli, of crystal, of Bodhi-seeds, of lotus seeds, of sandalwood, and other woods, of amber, and all kinds of semi-precious stones. The list goes on.

I had damarus (the small hand drums) and the larger chöd drums. I had Native American drums, Irish drums, and a large Tibetan drum that could only be hung in a frame. I had hand-cymbals, sets of cymbals, and large brass singing bowls. Of course I had the traditional vajra and bells used in Tibetan ritual practice, and learned how to use them. There were brocades and gaos, and on and on.

I learned to read Tibetan script. As part of our dharma-goods project, I had translated and printed

(on fine paper with foil-embossed covers) many of the major practice texts of our lineage.

I could go on. And I have not even described the dozens of fine statues of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other Tibetan deities I acquired, and so on. I had lockets and vials, packets of blessing pills, etc. door mantras, door hangings, wall hangings, etc. Enough already.

And you know the punch line here. I was all dressed up dharma-style, but with nowhere to go, as in: I was not really learning what I needed to learn.

To be perfectly honest, aside from my inability to really learn to meditate, I did an awful lot of other practices, many of which were good for me, and did help to remove obscurations in my mind, so don't be put off by my sense of humor here with all the paraphernalia. I am laughing at myself.

I guess I needed all that dharma stuff to keep my hopes up of getting anywhere with my practice. It did help, all that stuff, but was no substitute for progress with authentic meditation. All the elaborate Tibetan dharma items were just the frosting on the cake. I had the frosting, but no cake.

In other words, endlessly adding on to dharma stuff did not guarantee learning dharma meditation. It was just more stuff, but nice stuff.

And while I still love and admire all that stuff, let's not confuse the baby with the bathwater. In America (at least for me) the dharma came wrapped in Tibetan culture and no one was interested (or easily able) to separate the one from the other, lest something be lost in translation. I understand that.

All of my dharma practice was done in Tibetan, because it was unclear what might be lost if we suddenly switched to English, and we didn't have any enlightened Americans (yet) to help us rewrite all of those practices in English. Such separation of what is Tibetan from what is universal dharma can only be done over time as we as a culture become enlightened enough to distinguish one from the other.

They tell me that it takes Buddhism about 300 years to enter a new country. Since we are not really even 100 years in yet, things are still a little murky in the baby and the bathwater department.

When your teachers (and the liberating teachings they bring) are wrapped in Tibetan culture, some rubs off. We end up respecting the culture (perhaps overmuch) in which the precious dharma appears to us.

The dharma has to do one of two things. It will either die out in this country or grow and spread. Since it is essentially the truth of the mind, it is not about to die off or go away just now, so it seems it will grow and spread, there being nothing more lasting or true than it is. It will outlast all of these meditation fads and what-not.

Being caught up in the flow of dharma entering this country has been amazing, an eye-opening experience. Unlike most religions, which are dead-set on converting everything to their faith, Buddhism is not like that. And this is a remarkable aspect of Buddhism.

Buddhism is so fair or "good" that it changes nothing of whatever original religion it finds when it becomes available in a new country. This is totally clear from looking at Tibet. The original Bön religion of Tibet was not stamped out and removed. It remains today, like

insects in amber, preserved in the Buddhism that flowed into Tibet. How is this possible?

It is possible because Buddhism actually fulfills other religions that it contacts. It answers the questions, often unspoken, that exist in these religions.

Buddhism can exist side-by-side with other faiths, because it complements and fulfills needs, and does not oppose anything. It is there to help, and it does. So it will flow into this country and society, existing side-by-side with whatever religion or spiritual practice we now have.

Buddhism is really all about knowing the true nature of the mind. It has no cosmogenesis, no original sin, actually no beginning (and foresees no end). It doesn't even have a god. It is all about using our innate intelligence to free ourselves from obscurations and become aware. Not a bad thing.

As for all of my dharma stuff, I am going to turn what little knowledge of it I have to use and perhaps write some blogs here about how to use it properly. I am working on a video that shows how to use the Tibetan rosary (called a 'mala') for saying mantras. Does that interest anyone here?

THINGS I DID WRONG

... in learning meditation, that is. Otherwise, it would take a book or two. Here are just a few of the many things I didn't get right. This has to be a little bit humorous. Otherwise it is too depressing.

One thing I did wrong (way back in the 1960s) was to make up my own idea of what meditation is. I mean, everyone else I knew seemed to be doing it too. We all had our own idea of meditation and these ideas were all over the board. No one knew what I did in the privacy of my meditation, sadly, probably including me. Only later did I find out that most of us did not know what we were doing, but we each thought everyone else did and wanted to keep up with the Joneses. How common is that?

It was only when I began meeting the actual Zen and Tibetan Buddhist teachers that I cleaned up my act, like when I realized that these folks actually had a consistent idea and method as to what meditation was. I kind of stopped trotting out my own version of meditation and was forced to take a second look at what I was doing, which really was pretending to meditate. My own private (and supposedly ingenious) ideas on meditation did not last long around real meditators. They knew what they were talking about. I did not.

TRY TOO HARD

Another thing I have lived to regret was trying to go along with the popular idea back then that you really had to meditate for long periods of time, until it hurts. This was the "no pain, no gain" approach. The pain of effort was good for you, I was told. This approach was

all the rage back in the early 1970s, but not with me it wasn't.

All that pushing too hard did was make me not like meditation and (subconsciously at least) try to avoid meditation as much as I could and still look myself in the mirror, still be a "New Age" person. I liked the idea of being a dharma person, and so I tried to keep my hand in, but pinching myself has never been my idea of a good time.

THINK I KNEW

One of my worst habits was to actually believe my own BS. In the beginning, after sitting for a short time, I promptly labeled (to myself at least) what I was doing was "meditating." Everyone else did the same thing. People seldom talked about what we actually did in meditation. It was a little like the confessional of my Catholic upbringing, secret. In truth, mostly I was sitting there waiting until the time I had set to sit expired. All too often I was waiting to get out of there and on with my day.

Sure, I half-heartedly tried to learn the basic technique, but mostly I was daydreaming, totally lost in one thought or another. I even knew this was what I was doing, but somehow thought that a little bit of meditation (whatever that was) would rub off from just sitting there. Not much ever did. Why?

Mainly because I did not really know how to meditate or what kind of effort (how hard to try) it took. What I was supposed to be experiencing (i.e. meditation) was an unknown for me. I had no real idea or experience what it was, and my feeble efforts seemed lost in the expanse of daydreaming that went on. I was just sitting there, kind of looking around and waiting until the meter expired.

When Buddhists use the term “turning the wheel of the dharma,” they refer to the activity of the Buddha, but the Buddha pointed out that we each have to turn it for ourselves. It was not like my Catholic upbringing, where (supposedly) Jesus could touch me on the forehead and a miracle might happen, and I would be saved, enlightened, or whatever that touch does.

Buddha makes it clear that no one will ever just show up and enlighten me. Not only will we wait forever, but Buddhists claims we already have waited forever, that we are the stragglers. Enlightenment is a do-it-yourself project and some day we each have to enlighten ourselves. I mean, that’s the whole point!

The Buddha pointed out to all of us how we can enlighten ourselves, the method. That is what is called the “dharma,” a path that someday we each have to enter, and it’s not a zap on the forehead. We can sit there forever, daydreaming (and apparently have been doing just that), and nothing will ever happen. That was a tough concept for me to get my mind around. I kind of liked delinquently sitting there, hoping I would get enlightened by something or someone -- somehow struck by enlightenment. No such luck. This was the old “the world owes me a living” syndrome so popular with young people.

For me (and for all of us), sooner or later, it is a case of pick up your bed Lazarus and walk. Someday I actually had to get serious enough to practice the dharma for real, and in earnest. And I had to do it by myself because I want to do it. I sat there waiting for something to happen, for someone to enlighten me from the outside, for like thirty years. Imagine that!

It must be some kind of record. I bet few (if any) of you reading this have sat that long and come up with

so little results. Well, I did that. That's how much of a quick learner I am. I first had to admit that I knew nothing about meditation, and back in the 1970s that was not a cool thing to do. LOL.

SACRED, SACRED, SACRED

I also had a problem with the idea of the sacred. Back then, to my mind, the sacred was always outside myself, wrapped up in the “there” and the “then.” It was in my future and never now. It was there and never here. Of course, I wanted my life to be sacred, but I definitely identified more with the profane. It seemed I had no choice. The ‘sacred’ was something I wanted to get to, not somewhere I already was or even had been. I had not internalized it.

As it turns out, the sacred is not a ‘thing’ at all, but more of a process, a way of living. I know, we label some “things” as sacred, but if you look into them, they are sacred because of their use, and the way they are used. Sacredness is an attitude, an approach to life.

This can be clearly seen in the way that the Tibetans offer a sand mandala. It is not the elaborate colored sand mandala that is the offering. That is just swept into a stream or river after it is made. All ‘things’ are temporary. The gesture, care, and intent while making the sand mandala, that is the offering. To use the above concept of sacred, the sand mandala is not sacred in itself. What is sacred is the process and intent of making and offering the mandala and dedicating it.

No ‘thing’ is sacred in itself. It is just a thing. How ‘we’ use or treat the ‘thing’ is what can be sacred. And the same goes for people. It is not the person that is sacred, but what kind of attitude the person invokes in us that can make them sacred to us. Again, like many wisdoms point out, here the process is the goal, not the end result.

It is not the brand of coat we wear, and not who we are labeled as that is special. Rather, it is how we act that distinguishes us, again: the process of living, not how we end up. I mean, we all end up dying, right? So our value cannot be found only in our end result, but must be located somewhere else in our lives.

I perhaps first saw this clearly when I met the great Tibetan Siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and spent a little time with him. We were together in a small room, a study filled with various mementos. And there I sat, frozen in self-consciousness, while Trungpa Rinpoche proceeded to examine every object in the place with the greatest delight, picking each one up, peering into it, holding it to the light, you-name-it. I took this all in.

While I was unable to move any which way, Trungpa effortlessly and thoroughly enjoyed that room. Life is so much a case of monkey-see, monkey-do. It had never occurred to me to be that free. I had never seen it done and having once seen it, I never forgot. Not ever. And from that point onward, I began to allow myself those same freedoms. I mean, I had always been free to do that, but somehow never knew it was possible or permitted. That experience with Trungpa Rinpoche is a minor example of what the Tibetans do so well with the mind, with what are called the “Pointing Out Instructions.”

Sometimes we just need to have things pointed out to us. It can be the fastest way to learn. That is what I understand a dharma teacher’s job is, to point out the true nature of our mind so that we can see and recognize it. There are said to be 84,000 dharmas or paths to awareness, each one different. We need to find our particular dharma path, the one that will work for us. It only takes one, but it does take that.

In my case, I knew I had found the right teacher when what my teacher pointed out to me about how the mind works actually worked. I got it. That is how we know, if it works. There is no other way.

Even if a teacher has a great reputation, if their pointing out does not work for us, then this is not our teacher. And even if a teacher has a terrible personality, is rude, rough, or whatever. If they can successfully point out to us the true nature of the mind, that is enough. A dharma teacher does not have to be our personal friend. It is enough that they can point out the mind to us, more than we could hope for. I don't buddy around with my dharma teacher. My relation with him is sacred. It is what the Tibetans call "Samaya," the bond of lineage that unites teacher and student.

Anyone can talk about how to meditate, as I am doing here. That is not what I mean by a dharma teacher. It is after we finally learn to meditate that we need an authentic dharma teacher, someone to point out to us the true nature of the mind so that we can grasp it.

What I am writing here is not true just because I say it. I say it because it's true. Those of you who read these blogs know that I am kind of sensitive, prone to having my little visions, etc. Please hear me when I say that of all the ups in the "ups & downs" of my life, there is no more useful "up" than having my dharma teacher point out the true nature of the mind and getting at least a glimpse of that nature. It is the up that never comes down because it is not just another experience, but a recognition or realization as to how the mind works.

In the firewall of fear of facing my own ignorance, of admitting that I did not really know much about

meditation, I was finally able to overcome that fear and actually learn to meditate. What went before was all pretense, pretending, only I could not admit it. “Spiritually,” true meditation has to be the best thing that has ever happened to me, which is why I talk about it so much and recommend it to others.

THE BEAUTY OF IT

Perhaps we are not supposed to talk about the excellent and wonderful qualities of meditation, because indeed it is a long slog from learning the basic technique and habit of meditation to experiencing the fruits of actual meditation, other than as some quiet time in a day.

For me this took many, many years, but not because it had to, only because I was not doing it right and thought I was. But if you have ever learned to type or play an instrument, it is no different. We have to practice, and practice is not meditating, for the most part.

There is a ticket price, an ante-in, a paying of the dues, all of which are just the learning of the habit, building the basic muscle memory needed to meditate properly. If we don't want to (or "can't right now") learn that, then the door to meditation remains closed to us. Every activity requiring practice is like this.

I fussed around at the doorway to meditation for decades before figuring out a way to enter. That was my bad, the fault of no one but myself. I assumed I already knew what (by definition) I did not know, which was how to actually meditate. I am not alone in this, either.

There is the necessity of learning the technique, building the habit, and that is not a lot of fun, at least in my case. For me there has to be some joy in what I do, and finding joy in rote practice is probably an oxymoron, at least for me. Practicing and building the habit of meditation is the great barrier (the guardian at the threshold) of real meditation for many, and it kept me out for a very long time.

This is why I keep suggesting here that we supplement our on-the-cushion practice with post-meditation practice, with something we do each day that requires concentration and focus, something that we not only can do, but hopefully love or at least like to do. Then we can have that missing ingredient of joy or enthusiasm that we may not find in rote learning of the technique of meditation.

The very greatest mahasiddhas from India and Tibet all seem to agree that many short sessions of practicing meditation techniques is recommended, rather than some long grind you force yourself to do. They cite sessions as short as the time it takes to take a sip of tea. By forcing practice, we run the risk of staining it with effort, our disappointment, and exhaustion. That stain is hard to remove; only joy can remove it. So there is a bit of a Catch-22 here, a hurdle for most of us or at least a speed-bump in the road.

How do we find joy in rote practice?

I practiced meditation technique for 31 years and still never got the hang of it. Looking back, what a huge disappointment it was (for me). And please everyone, don't tell me that all that time I was busy removing obstacles, or that everything in life comes in good time. That is only a partial truth.

It is quite clear to me, aside from thinning out my obscurations, that with a proper understanding I could have learned to meditate in fairly short order, especially if I could have realized that meditating was so clarifying, and that joy was the key. I was too often told that perseverance was the key.

A big, big problem is that as beginners we have no experience of the fruits of meditation, i.e. what it is actually like. If we learn to play a musical instrument,

we already know what music sounds like. We can be inspired by it. But with meditation, there is no “music” we can play. We have little to no idea of what real meditation is like, other than what we have gleaned from books, teachers, and our own imagination, the last being the most dangerous.

And... in my case actual meditation was nothing like what I imagined and had determined it should be. My ill-formed opinions turned out to be my worst enemy, what I think I knew, but didn't, which opinions I held up as a bar my actual experience on-the-cushion had to measure up to. How foolish that was!

I don't know what I was thinking meditation was. I guess I thought it would be enlightening, but having never experienced enlightenment of any kind, all I could do was guess at what real meditation would bring to my life, based on books I read and things other people had said to me, including my teachers.

As a funny aside here, the assemblage I gathered in my mind around the word meditation was identical (in nature) to what each of us gathers around us that we refer to as our “Self” or personality. LOL.

If I would have admitted to myself (and to my teachers) that I was getting nowhere, I know that they would and could have helped me. But like so many of my dharma brothers and sisters, I kept a stiff upper lip and believed I was already meditating, and that what I was experiencing was enlightening me. In truth, aside from my good intentions, it was not.

I was finding no joy (or very little) in my practice and kept at it (at times) only because to not do it at all would be too embarrassing. If I was not a dharma person, then what in the world was I? That was too hard a question for me to face, so I kept at it,

essentially staining my practice with effort that I did not joyfully give. That was a big mistake, folks.

After 31 years of practicing, one summer while attending a 10-day dharma intensive on Mahamudra meditation, I finally understood (got a glimpse) that working with the mind was not something in the future for me, some pie-in-the-sky idea that I had been floating, but rather something that “I” actually could do right here and now. Up to that point I was like a swimmer with an inner tube beyond my reach. My own swimming efforts were pushing the inner tube of meditation-success beyond my grasp. All I had to do was to find a way not to make tiresome effort, and things would work out. I was onto something

I spent the next three years actually working with my mind, not only on-the-cushion, but also (and especially) off-the-cushion in post-meditation experience. After that (and some life-shaking experiences), I found true meditation (true for me, that is) through the process of taking close-up pictures of nature. Go figure. It was the ‘joy” factor that I loved nature and critters that made all the difference.

After that it was only a couple of years to settle into a meditation style that actually suited and worked for me, rather than I for it.

I guess part of the takeaway here has to be that (as far as I know) learning meditation takes real time, not just a half-hour a day or ten minutes. So does learning to play the piano, for what it is worth. There is no free lunch. Is it worth it?

Yes, absolutely, and then some. In all the world that I have seen, there is no more valuable tool than the clarity and insight meditation can bring. With it I can

see, without it I could not see very clearly how to negotiate the curves and turnings in my life.

True meditation cannot be taken by force of practice, but (like so many things in life) only by love and enthusiasm. We need to be aware that the process of learning the habit of meditation is not meditation, but practice like any other form of practice.

If we keep that in mind and apply the practice to something we love, the doors of meditation will open. If it does not feel better than any other state we know, then we are still practicing and not meditating. At least, that is my experience.

WHAT IT IS

What I am finding out is that many people have no idea what meditation actually is, although they think they do. There are hundreds of opinions on what meditation is in this country, and most don't jibe with the authentic types of meditation taught for thousands of years in Asia.

In a word, basic meditation is about mindfulness and it is quite simple. Do you know what it is and understand how it works?

There is also a fairly precise posture to sit in that really helps, but not if you are too busy to learn it or self-conscious about using it. So let's put the posture aside for the moment and just focus on the essential technique of learning the habit of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is just that, being mindful, and not distracted. Mindfulness is useful in everything we do, and not just for sitting on a cushion. The Zen Buddhists teach mindfulness well. The reason we learn to meditate is not only to sit quietly for a time each day, but also to gradually bring the meditative habit and technique to bear on all aspects of our day-to-day life. If we are going to be (or have to be) there anyway, why not also be present?

And meditation is not just for the "spiritually inclined," whatever that is. If you mean by spiritual, burning incense, lighting candles, and looking at lava lamps, then meditation does not depend on any of that. Shamata meditation (and its sister Vipassana meditation) is designed, ultimately, for one thing: to allow us to rest in the true nature of the ordinary mind. And it is a deep rest.

Awareness of the ordinary mind apparently isn't all that common because most of us obscure it with all our busy thoughts and attachments, etc. We ignore it, which is what ignorance is about. If learning to rest in our ordinary mind is somehow "spiritual," then you can say that meditation is spiritual or sacred. What do you hold sacred? Many divide the world into what is sacred and what is profane (in their opinion), while others consider everything sacred. Sacred is as sacred does.

The goal of the basic technique of Shamata meditation is very simple, to build a habit of allowing the mind to rest on an object, like: whatever we are doing at the moment, "AND" to not get distracted. If we attempt to do this and wake up to find ourselves distracted, daydreaming, and our mind no longer resting on the object, then we gently bring the mind back to focus and rest again on the object of meditation. We do this every time we are distracted, again and again and again. That is the technique to build the habit of meditation.

Over time, we develop a habit of staying on focus. Eventually that habit becomes (excuse me) habitual. We no longer have to try to do it. Our muscle memory takes over and we just can do it. We remain aware of the object of meditation for as long as we wish, as long as we need to for the task at hand. We rest there. That is the bare technique.

In time, the habit we have acquired of resting our mind on the object gradually becomes portable. Just as we learn to stay on focus when sitting on the cushion, we gradually find that in other areas of our life we begin to be able to do the same thing, to stay focused on whatever we are doing. This is the great

value of meditation training, that it expands like circles in water into which a pebble is dropped.

And when we are distracted in life (just as on the cushion), we also gently bring the mind back to whatever we are doing. We strengthen the habit. This, then, is basic meditation, in itself of great personal value in life.

Originally we learn the technique on-the-cushion, but later we use the technique off-the-cushion more and more of the time. The more we meditate in life situations, the better we get at it, the more we enjoy it, and seek out other situations in which to rest our attention. This is basic meditation and, by itself, it is very useful, practical in the extreme.

With basic meditation as a base, once we have stabilized the mind, we can begin to learn another form of meditation called Vipassana, "Insight Meditation." With insight meditation we are no longer concerned about letting the mind rest. We already have that.

Vipassana is a much more active looking into and at the nature of the mind itself. A couple of possibly useful analogies for these two kinds of meditation (Shamata and Vipassana) are:

It is like threading a needle with shaky hands. Basic resting meditation (Shamata) removes the shakiness, so that we can thread the needle. Vipassana meditation is actually threading the needle.

Or...

We have some goldfish in a muddy bowl of water, which we have never seen. Shamata meditation settles the mud in the water, which then allows us to

see the brilliant and vivid goldfish (Vipassana). The goldfish represent the true nature of the mind.

These two types of meditation are a tag-team. They work together, usually by learning Shamata first and Vipassana second. That is how I learned it. Some schools teach both at once, but I never learned it that way, so can't really comment on it. I can say this:

These two methods are interdependent and reinforce one another, as in: the more I get into Vipassana meditation, the better my Shamata meditation is, and vice versa.

BETTER THAN SUBSTANCES

Of course I am talking about meditation. Like a bulldog with a bone, I can't seem to let go of talking about how incredible meditation is. Now, I am not talking about "practicing" meditation. That is tedious. I am talking about actually learning to meditate.

The main (and hardest) part of learning meditation is building the habit of mindfulness. That is what it is all about. This typically involves sitting (often on a cushion) in some quiet place and practicing the basic technique of meditating. It does take time. The emphasis is on "practice" and the purpose of practice is to learn (make a habit of) mindfulness. We need mindfulness in order to meditate and we need (at least I do) meditation in order to see clearly and respond skillfully to life.

Once a real mindfulness habit is acquired, then we can be said to actually begin to "meditate." Before that what we are doing is practicing meditation, building a habit of being mindful.

Not everyone is good at rote practice like learning the keyboard of a typewriter, for instance, or memorizing the multiplication tables. Some folks do better than others at creating habits, although most of us have no trouble creating bad habits.

If you can easily build a habit of mindfulness, meditation comes more effortlessly. By all means do that. If not (as it was with me), it can be difficult and take a very long time. There is an alternate approach to meditation for those of you who have trouble with rote practice.

Take the time to understand what basic meditation is (technically), and then learn the technique. Once you understand it, you can begin to apply it throughout your day in the many other things you do. It does not all have to happen sitting on a cushion, especially if that is not working out for you.

In a word, mindfulness is just that, being mindful of whatever you are doing, that and learning that when you do get distracted from what you set out to focus on (and find yourself daydreaming), to gently just bring the mind back to the object at hand and continue as you were. That simple act is the basic technique of beginning meditation.

And you do this again and again and again, always bringing the mind gently back to the task at hand until it becomes a habit and it is just natural for you to keep focused.

Once you have built a habit of mindfulness, of remaining focused, then all that remains is to learn to let the mind rest in that awareness you are maintaining through your mindfulness, and relax. Relax and rest in that.

We do that until the effort of mindfulness (trying to do it) has subsided, and we are naturally relaxing in mindfulness. At that point we are actually meditating or close to it. Why bother?

Meditation is known by its clarity and awareness. Once actual meditation is achieved and becomes a habit, the mind naturally wants to remain in that state and seeks opportunities to meditate, not just on the cushion, but throughout the day in various activities.

It took me almost forever to get to the point of actually meditating, because I am naturally rebellious and

refused to just bite the bullet and learn the habit of mindfulness. Once I experienced real meditation, with its clarity and spaciousness, I felt uncomfortable (and obscured) if I was not in that state at least part of my day.

Kind of without realizing it, in the beginning I found myself ranging through my daily schedule trying to find my way back into that meditative state. At first my meditation was certainly not very portable. I could only do it with photography (you have seen my work), and then, very gradually, I separated the meditation from the photography, understood what led to meditation and what was the object that allowed me to do that, like photography. I began to include other activities in my day, like writing, and so on as objects of meditation. And the list grew.

Today, my meditation is quite portable. I can use it often throughout the day on almost anything I do that requires some kind of attention and focus. Why do I endlessly write about this?

Because meditation is way better than anything else I have ever experienced, and it is free and not-harmful. Moreover, it gives me the time I need to respond skillfully to the challenges life brings. For me at least, it is the very best thing I have ever experienced that is legal (not lethal) and that I can indulge in as much as I want to. And it feels natural.

THE HOURS BEFORE THE NEW MOON

If you ask a Tibetan where their mind is, they don't point to their head, but to their heart, actually to the middle of their chest. Here in the West, we point to our heads.

Of course, the mind can't be in two places, one for Tibetans and another for westerners, which is a good sign that the mind is not somewhere, but more like anywhere. The mind is not physical and has no one physical home.

And we have our habits, like using the mind to look out at the world. And we have assumptions, like that our mind is good-to-go, just as it came out of the box. We assume that our mind is transparent, perfectly clear, a proper lens to view the world through. After all, we have been using our mind all our lives. Of course our vision is clear and unimpeded.

And 'our' mind lives on a one-way street. We look only one way, and that is out at the world. It is our habit. For the most part, we have never thought to (or learned to) look "in" at the mind itself.

So there you have it, some of the differences between East and West. We believe the mind is in our head and the Tibetans find it in the heart. We use the mind only to look out while the Tibetans learn to look both ways, in and out. And there are other differences.

The Tibetans don't just assume the mind is clear, just as it is, but rather that we each probably need prescription mental glasses (meditation or mind-training) to see more clearly. And there is more.

Many Asians believe that our mind is a projector, and that what we see out there depends to a great extent

on what we fear, hope, and believe in-here. We project our own inner movies on the screen of life and then watch them as if what we see out there is the absolute truth, while much is just our own bias, prejudice, and fears personified. Etc.

Unfortunately, our upbringing and social veneer is in lockstep with a fixed mental outlook (looking out) so that gaps or chinks in our mental armor are few to none. For many of us, it takes a personal tragedy for us to vacate our biases, even for a few days and to actually look around.

And even pointing this out here makes me some kind of a social critic or discontent and what I have to say appear as just another rant. I understand that.

If this particular situation (the way things are) did not cause prolonged suffering, I would just let it go, and not say a thing. When I see people I care for and love causing their own suffering, it is hard to take. And I am not above it all, either. I am my own worst enemy, as well.

The saving grace is what little I have learned about looking both ways, looking out, but also learning to look in and see why “out” is as it is, and gradually remove obscurations so that I can see more clearly.

It makes celebrating tougher. And there is the fact that we are today at the very end of the lunar cycle, in those last hours before a New Moon, which are always tough for me. I wait it out.

HOW LONG DO THINGS LAST?

Every idea since time immemorial, every invention and book idea, not to mention every last thought came from the mind. By itself that should be enough to point out to us that the mind is a treasure trove, if only we know how to mine it. The Buddhists call the mind the “wish-fulfilling gem,” which is totally telling, if we think about it.

And every once in a while, each of us manages to find a good idea or two in the mind. Yet, it seldom occurs to us that the mind is evergreen, and always fertile. And it would seem that few deliberately set about to mine it.

Modern etymologists point out that the word religion comes from the Latin ‘re-ligare’, to bind or to re-connect. The Sanskrit word ‘dharma’ is sometimes translated as religion or law, it being the specific methods to enlightenment that the Buddha pointed out. In fact, the Buddha said there are 84,000 dharmas or ways of liberation. We each need to find the one that works for us. One size does not fit all.

We could argue whether Buddhism is really a religion, since it is in essence just a methodology for enlightenment, and has no cosmogenesis, is non-theist, and so on. But we perhaps could agree that religions (and Buddhism) are concerned with what is true, with what lasts.

And by “last,” we mean what lasts longest. As the Christian Bible so elegantly says, everything comes to pass, not to stay. How long things stay (including truths and ideas) depends on how long they last, how true they are. And common sense tells us that what is made well lasts longest.

“True,” “truth,” “truths,” such important concepts.

In this phantasmagoric world we wander in, reaching for a touchstone, for something that lasts and that we can hang onto is not always easy. Truths are like the fixed stars. They have different magnitudes and colorings. As things fade, and they all eventually do, only those truths last which are, of course, most true. These are the pole stars in the general direction of our life. All else fades.

We pilot our ship of life and set our sails by whatever we consider (and can see) as true, the brightest lights in our personal sky. We head for them.

If you have ever seen the Milky Way (our galaxy) on a dark night, stretching as it does almost vertically in the sky above, then you know by experience that there are not only pole stars and constellations, by vast clusters of stars that are of one group, one mind. There is no lack of light in the universe.

And so it is with our inner universe. The mind is ablaze with light if we will look. And as the Buddhists point out, even the light of one match can end the darkness of eons.

As for myself, I have seen the Milky Way stretched across the night sky, marked by the planets wandering through it. But I also have had the very good fortune of being instructed on how to look into the mind itself, how to catch at least a glimpse of the actual nature of that mind.

“As above, so below” is the old hermetic axiom.

We might add that what we see outside is what we project from inside, and were we to not only look outside in life for truth, but also turn our gaze within,

we would find that same Milky Way of light reflected inside as well. In fact, we would also realize that the outer is the reflection of the inner, and not vice versa.

I mean: there is light in there.

If the mind is like an ocean, let's not spend all of our time in the shallows.

THE DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES

No, I am not talking about the U.S. constitution or the Monroe Doctrine. And I am not even talking about the doctrine of signatures used by herbalists and doctors all the way back to Galen. I am more referring to how mystics like Jakob Böhme used the term “signatures,” that everything signals or is a sign of its own nature and use. And I also am leaning toward what in the East is called the Great Seal, also called Mahamudra or Dzogchen or Maha-Ati, that the natural world itself is a gesture and perfectly reflects the true nature of the mind.

And most of all I am simply saying that as I progress in life (that is a kind way of saying I am getting older), but I mean here (rather than aging) some kind of spiritual progression. And I should remark that it totally amazed me when I first discovered it that the Tibetan masters have biographies called Nam-Tar, where the simple facts of life, like where you went to school, your personal circumstances, and so on are not in the biography.

Instead, only the teleological progression of spiritual changes or events in life are recorded. How great is that? How forward looking. How different than here in the west where biographies are mostly all circumstantial and the spiritual changes are usually left out. What a flip.

Anyway... I am mostly interested in spiritual changes in myself and others. With most of my friends, the first thing I ask them (or want to ask them) is “What’s new spiritually?,” what have you been thinking of lately, and what gets you up in the morning? That kind of thing.

There is always change at the core of each of us, somewhere deep down or way in or far-somewhere, but still there. And changes at the core, as we know, control the entire periphery. Spiritual changes control our attitude and our attitude, like the sails of a boat, is how we take the winds of changes life offers, and therefore dictates in what direction we head. Make sense?

As I grow older and, hopefully, spiritually a little more adept, I feel like a blind man feels along the corridor of my life for change. I am way beyond drawing any kind of spiritual conclusion from the flotsam and jetsam of outer life, this cyclic turmoil in which we are all immersed. But I am gradually drawing my physical conclusion, day by day.

Like the blind I feel within me changes and I do watch for signs of these changes in my outer life. I love the analogy of a school of fish, which randomly set here and there in the ocean, on some hidden (to me) cue, suddenly 'school', and all point in the same direction, and this in a flash.

The cues of life around me seem to do this too, and this is what I mean by signature. Everything in life signals or signs something, and we all read sign language. It is when those signs school or cluster that I am forced to pay a little attention, like those pictures embedded within a picture that we suddenly see. That is what I mean by "signs." Do you have them too? Sure.

And I use the word "see" here, but I more mean feel and I live for those thought-free moments when life offers a crystal clear image of reality, of what is true, of truth. It is this truth that can tell the future, because as I like to share here, what is true is the future

because while other things will fade in time, the truth will last until then, until the future.

So I cast my net into the sea of sense and retrieve the odd sign now and again of what is real. I can't help but read it. And we all have our heroes.

My hero of heroes is the great Mahasiddha Tilopa, one of the lineage masters of Mahamudra of which I hopefully am a member, who left these six words or phrases of advice for me and for those of us who will hear it. He said.

Don't prolong the past.

Don't invite the future.

Don't think.

Don't analyze.

Don't control.

Just rest in the nature of the mind.

THE TRUTH IS THE FUTURE

Yup. We got snow. It snowed all night and it is still snowing now. The snow plows have been rumbling up and down our street all night. The whole house vibrates as they go by. It reminds me of when I was a kid and those trucks were a harbinger of no school that day, a snow day. What happiness that was!

And with this snow, Margaret, who is in New York, can't drive in this weather, so her return is delayed by a day or so.

As for me, I have been busy building a mini-studio to begin filming various topics. I wasn't going to do this, "this" being personally getting in front of a camera, but I had one of those little bubbles from beyond float up into my consciousness telling me to do it. Do you have these?

As I get older, I pay more attention to these unannounced impulses that arise spontaneously in my mind. Suddenly, there they are, a thought or a vision of what is to be.

I am not talking about my biases or any train of thought that I am driving, not thoughts that arise out of what I wish, think I want, think I need, etc. That's different and I am on to them. They may or may not presage anything. Sometimes they come true, but just as often, perhaps even more often, they don't. They are just thoughts from thinking, a byproduct.

However, these other kinds of impulses just come out of the blue and are not pre-meditated, not what I wish, not what I have been thinking about, would like to see happen, or whatever.

The “good” impulses just arise in the mind, unknown before that moment, and not anticipated by anything. Presto! There they are and I am thinking or experiencing them.

It’s not like my internal narrator, you know, that personal inner-secretary that jabbers on all day about anything. I kind of keep a distance from those constant comments on life and that commentator.

No, these fresh impulses find me thinking them. There is just one thought, not the dualistic jabber I referred to above. It is like a pure experience, perhaps experiencing the future in a pure way. I am of one mind and that mind is wrapped in a vision at those times. When I say “vision,” I don’t mean some floating image walking on water, either.

I mean “I,” me, am of one mind, the subject and the object, of the vision or thought. In a way, I am rapt, frozen in experience and taking it all in. When the moment passes, and I come out of it, I know it is one of those moments, a presage, or glimpse into the truth, and into the future. I say “future,” because the truth will always last until then. The truth is the future.

Anyway, lest I fall into total jabber here, I had one of those glimpses of me in front of a camera doing my very, very best to communicate what I feel is so important to me, so important to share, and that, as most of you know, is about awareness and how to increase it.

PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT

Meditation and the practice of meditation, two different things. I have written here many times how meditation is first about building a habit and only later can it be said that we are “meditating,” much later for most of us. Like the scaffolding on a building, meditation “practice” is just that, practicing meditation, and not meditation itself. The practice or habit-building part of meditation has to eventually be let go of or removed, leaving room for the actual meditation itself. In order to learn to meditate, we must practice the process of meditating. We must learn it. It is a little like those molds that form Jell-O our moms had when we were kids. When the molds are taken away, the form remains. This is sometimes called muscle memory or just plain habit.

How do we know when to remove the scaffolding? Luckily for us, meditation is organic enough that the scaffolding just melts away or we walk out of it. When I used to ask my first dharma teacher questions liked this, he would often respond “How do you know when you have to go to the bathroom?” You just know.

Few of us probably love the rote practice of meditation, but most or all of us will love meditating once we learn to do it. Why? Because actual meditation is a clear and luminous state, one that we would rather stay in than fall out of. In the beginning it is almost impossible to get into that state, and later equally impossible to fall out of it out, so I am told.

The problem for me has always been to be able to distinguish the forming from what is formed, the scaffolding from the meditation, the baby from the bathwater. I tend to become attached to the

scaffolding or worse, think that the practice is meditating. Not so.

The great Tibetan meditation masters tell us that not only can we each learn to rest in the natural nature of the mind, but we often do so every day and just aren't aware of it.

Actual meditation, then, is resting in the mind's nature and being aware of it at the same time. This suggests that what is lacking in learning meditation is not something from the outside, not something we somehow have to add on or "get," but rather just an awareness of what is already there, of the mind itself. Awareness too can become habitual, which is why we practice, to form that habit. It follows then that all meditation practice is designed to... eventually... allow us to recognize and become aware of the nature of the mind itself, which nature up to know we have managed to ignore.

In other words, we are never going to get anywhere other than where we already are, and the goal of practicing meditation is to somehow become aware of what we now already have, our mind. This is just ancient wisdom.

So, we "practice" meditation until we become aware of what meditation actually is, after which the mind becomes something we can finally recognize and work on. And here is a key thought: this assumes we don't know what meditation is, and for most of us that is a fact. Before we manage to actually meditate, we have no idea of how to become aware of the natural state of the mind that we already experience, but are not yet aware of.

How do we learn to be aware of something that we are not already aware of? That is the question. The

Buddhist teachers attempt to point out the nature of the mind to anyone who will pay attention, and this is even called the “Pointing Out Instructions.” The nature of the mind is so close to us that we can’t get enough distance or perspective on it to see or be aware of it. That is why the first major step in true meditation practice is called “Recognition,” recognizing the true nature of our own mind. We can’t work with something we don’t know exists.

And “recognition” is not enlightenment or anything close to it. However, it is the means through which we can at last actually meditate and make progress on our own, AND without a teacher. A teacher is just that, a teacher. Once we are taught to recognize the nature of our own mind, we can see for ourselves how to work it. Sure, after recognition, the teacher can then help us further with techniques to more readily work the mind, but essentially their job is done.

So we “practice” meditation until we achieve recognition of the mind’s nature, after which we no longer “practice,” but instead we then actually begin to meditate, but without the training wheels of blindly practicing. Recognizing the mind’s true nature is the first step on the road to realization, to what has been called enlightenment. However, recognition is not enlightenment.

If we learn a dance step, there is a point where we no longer are learning it and instead are just dancing. Meditation practice is like that. It is a practice (a “sounds like this”) that hopefully eventually gives way to a natural awareness of the nature of the mind. After that, we are actually meditating and can begin to perfect our meditation. Before that we are just practicing, and kind of blindly.

When we practice a musical instrument, we already know what music sounds like. However, when we practice meditation, we have no idea what actual meditation is or feels like. To make matters worse, most of us have formed our own opinion (from books and friends) of what meditation should be like, and unfortunately we hold that preconception up as a standard we are supposed to meet. This is a (or perhaps “the”) major obstacle to actual meditation.

Here “practicing meditation” means finding our way in the dark, more or less, until we somehow recognize the true nature of the mind and how it works, and then begin to actually meditate. One of the scariest teachings I have ever heard is that we have virtually NO CHANCE of ever just stumbling on the nature of the mind. The greatest Buddhist teachers I know have made it crystal clear that we need a guide, someone who actually knows the nature of the mind to work with us and point out to us (if we can grasp it) the true nature of the mind. If we are afraid to seek help, we should change our mind about that and get that help.

The meditation practice we do should help us form a mental habit that facilitates actual meditation, while not becoming a habit itself. That is what the following little didactic poem is about. The habit we want to form is meditation and not the habit of practice. Make sense?

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.

February 20, 2013

ONLY THE TRUTH HAS A FUTURE

Every once in a while I have to write a little essay. Who knows why? I can't explain it. I just do it. Here is one:

Astrology is cultural astronomy, a simple reflection of the facts of astronomy, what those facts mean to us here on Earth. What does this statement mean?

Astronomy is a fact-based science as in: this New Moon or that Full Moon takes place on a certain date, at a certain time, and that is a fact. It can't be argued. This is astronomy, pure science.

Astrology has to do with what these objective scientific astronomical facts might mean for us. Like psychology and the social sciences, astrology is what is called a "soft science." Some hardline scientists say that the soft sciences mean nothing, and that meaning is so subjective that it cannot be organized. It does not cluster or form. However, more flexible and forward-looking scientists suggest that the soft sciences work with future facts that have yet to be determined, facts in their birthing stage.

What may not yet constitute facts or "science" to the general population may be considered facts by the relative few whose experience or awareness allows them to be able to resolve them from what can appear as chaos. In other words facts, like everything else, (especially in the soft sciences) are often discovered over time. They emerge.

Another way of saying this is the concept of what constitutes a fact itself changes. What once were not considered facts gradually come to be considered

facts, and vice versa. What once were considered facts may be perceived differently over time and finally seen as not factual at all or as incomplete truths. Even the concept of facts is relative. Things change.

Those with greater awareness may be able to resolve future facts from the subtle matrix in which they are currently embedded, just as fossils carefully emerge by removing what covers or hides them. But one thing is sure.

Only what is true has a future. Our guesses, presumptions, conjectures, suppositions, and speculation are subject to reality and what is not true does not endure. That is the nature of truth. It lasts. In fact, truth lasts until the future, while other things pass away.

Those with enough awareness to see the truth in life, by definition, are prophets, because since the truth is the only thing that endures long enough to have a future, it will last till then. Seeing the truth clearly is seeing the future clearly. Telling the truth is the same as telling the future. This is common sense, or “uncommon” sense. Now back to astrology.

In soft sciences like the mystery traditions, there are no hard facts, no hard science. It is anyone’s guess, and only the most aware among us can sort out the baby from the bathwater. There are not many like Nostradamus. Astrology has been called the “king” (or queen) of the soft sciences because it is based on hard astronomical facts. As I pointed out in the beginning of this essay, astrology is a direct reflection of astronomy. This is an important point.

Astronomy guides astrology and dictates its parameters. There is no astrology aside from the

astronomical facts. Anything else is relegated to some other of the soft sciences, like “the psychic,” séances, and so on. I am not putting the psychic sciences down, but pointing out that astrology has to do only with the meaning and interpretation of science, in this case the astronomical facts. The astronomical facts guide astrology. Anything else is not astrology.

“Coming events cast their shadow” is an old adage, and astrology has to do with the shadow of astronomical events, trying to bring them into the light, and explain them. As mentioned earlier, the power of truth (how we know it) is that it lasts or endures into the future. All truth is factual, be it hard or soft science in the making. Since we know exactly (to the minute and second) when this or that New and Full Moon will occur far into the future, these astronomical facts or signifiers are the keys to the future.

It is astrology’s job to interpret and explain the possible meaning of these astronomical signifiers. I don’t believe in astrology on faith. I find it useful. Let me put it this way:

Who among us does not at times speculate about the future? The very exact and steady motions in the heavens are how we tell time, by the day, the month, the year, and so on. This is astronomy, pure and simple.

Astrology, as I have come to know it, is just gathering up what we have learned from these astronomical events over the centuries and projecting that knowledge into the future, reflecting the facts and what they might mean. Astrology is cultural astronomy.

CAN YOU MAKE TIME?

This little blog is one of my convoluted, thinking out loud, ramblings, so you have been warned. Probably not for everyone.

Clock time may be static, but real time, the kind you and I live, is dynamic. It not only varies in perceived speed and quality, but it varies individually. We can both look at our watches and share the same clock time, but beyond that, time for me may be condensed and for you expanded, or vice versa. Just as you can't tell a book by its cover, we can't know what kind of time folks are having internally, but we can sometimes get a sense of it. I found this out through listening to blues music generally, and to the great blues artists performing live in particular. You may be moved by some other kind of music, but for me I like the blues. Substitute your favorite music here please.

In the great blues players I can feel something coming from inside of them, something not in my experience, yet something I can recognize and still respond to.

Blues strikes a chord in my mind. At the very least I know that somewhere deep within me there is some kind of 'receiver' that knows authentic music when I hear it. It is a little like the old story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Part of me can't help but respond and move to the authentic blues. And then there is "blues time," which is the reason for this blog.

I have been writing about this for years, but like so many things in life, it is hard to get a witness. Music is not just something to listen to. It is also about time, and the great blues artists can't help but structure their songs around their own internal sense of time.

We have all heard of “quality time,” but there also are qualities of musical time.

Consider the old idea of marching to a different drummer. Other than looking at your watch, time is not a constant, but variable. I learned about this many years ago while reading the journals of the writer Franz Kafka. Kafka let fall a sentence, which went something like this: “Each sentence I write, it already has perfection.” It took me some years to fully appreciate what he was saying, which put simply I believe is:

We can try and learn to write poems or play music, imitate the great artists (copy their style or whatever) in an attempt at a close approximation to what we read or listen to. We want to do it too. Of course, we all have to learn the basics of writing or playing an instrument, but there is another way to do this other than imitate, which is what Kafka was pointing out. Rather than try for a series of successive approximations (imitations) to what we feel is good outside of us in another artist or player, whether it be in writing, music, or what-have-you... instead we can work on perfecting our own mind until, as Kafka put it, everything we write or play already has perfection (of some kind), because we do. I would ask you to consider this concept carefully.

Rather than learning from the outside in, as is commonly taught (by imitation), we can also learn from the inside out, with the bonus that we end up being original, or at least as original as we are capable of being. With that thought in mind, now let’s return to ‘blues time.’”

These great blues artists are not just good because they practiced a lot, but are ‘good’ because of ‘who’

they are through the wisdom of their experience. Many of them have reached a point in life experience where everything they do is somehow authentic. Why? Because they are authentic, and this includes their music. I spent years learning to play the riffs of the great blues harmonica players, when my time would have been better spent improving my mind, you know, improving who I am, the one who is playing all this music.

Having heard most of the great blues artists in person, often many times, I can attest that musical time is individual, a direct reflection of the mind of the player. That I am sure you will agree with, but try this:

As listeners, these great blues artists create or 'make time' in their own image, and here is the remarkable part: you and I can hear and even take a trip with them on their sense of time, not just our own, and learn from it too. I don't know exactly how it works, but the real artists make and know time that is not only different from ordinary clock time, but different from the time that you and I live. When we listen deeply, we let go of our personal sense of time and get on their (perhaps more experienced) time. I mean, that's what makes the music we respond to so powerful, the kind of time it offers us, like 'good' time or even a great time.

We take a ride or trip on their time, the artist's time, and their time may be (I don't have the words) more spacious, expanded, open, deep, etc. than our own. And in that sense of expanded time the artist creates, we experience both time and life a little differently than we do just on our own. We go for a ride on their time, perhaps feel or learn something while out there in their music, and then, when the music stops, come

back and pick up on our own time again. Am I making myself clear?

Anyway I find this concept of living to alternative time through music fascinating, and have tested it again and again over the years. I have told this following story before, but it belongs here, so I will tell it again.

Years ago, while on one of our trips to Chicago to hear the great blues players, my brother Dan and I went into a little place on the north side where the great blues artist Howlin' Wolf was playing. It was kind of late and the place was almost empty. There was the Wolf sitting on a wooden chair way up front, while next to him the legendary guitar player Hubert Sumlin was playing, just the two of them.

It was quite dark in there too, with a little lamp shining on Wolf. I don't know if those of you reading this have ever heard Howlin' Wolf sing, but if not, you are missing something important, that is, if you like the blues. Anyway, Wolf was singing and he was singing on his time, not mine. It was so intense and spacious that I naturally kind of fell in with his time and pretty soon I was living it with him. He was making time and it was stronger than my own sense of time. He could make time better than I knew how. I went for a ride on Wolf's time.

As I listened in that little club, everything around me, the walls, the chairs, the dim lights, and so on, became completely transparent. In the piercing sound of Wolf I found myself suspended in space, no longer in a little room in Chicago, but just out there, somewhere in the universe, a mind just floating in space. My local reality all just went void or perhaps I saw through the veil of the flesh for the time it took for Wolf to play. And no, I was not high.

In a way it was terrifying, and at the same time exhilarating, that sense of space and time Howlin' Wolf laid down. I was definitely on Wolf's time, and I took a trip with him in his mind, and forgot about my own. Or was I just seeing that my mind was his mind, but just inexperienced and unexpanded? Who knows. I guess you could use the old phrase "he was blowin' my mind!" Anyway, there you have it.

As you can see from reading this account, marching to Wolf's time had the effect of reordering my own experience somewhat, and then returning me to what I call normal, but not without an affect. We are changed through life processes like I am describing, whether we know and remember them or not. Powerful music, art, or writing can actually change us on the inside, and introduce us to alternate realities that help to open us up and expand or modify our own sense of time. We are affected by great art and music, as in: actually changed.

And there are many other great blues players (and of course, not just blues) who can share their expanded sense of time with us. I mean: what is music anyway? Why and how does it affect us? That's what I am trying to get at here.

Have you experienced this too?

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

While I am on this jag, I will push the envelope a bit further and perhaps test your credulity. I admit, what I am going to share with you is a little far out, but see if it makes any sense.

This is a concept that is mostly from my own experience. It happened to me, so you probably can't read about it anywhere else. And I am sure some of you will just shake your head, which is, of course, your right. I even understand why you might, but still, I can't go against my own experience, so here it is.

I am seventy-one years of age, but inside this aging body is the consciousness of a 25-year old. For some reason, it seems I stopped aging on the inside on May 12, 1967. I can remember the day and the hour, after which I somehow froze in time at that particular age. I will spare you the story of what went down, as that would be a long story of its own.

And I can remember what happened to me before 1967, as a kid, but from the point of view of a 25-year old. Even today, I mostly have the energy of someone that age. So, what happened? I wish I could explain it exactly.

In general, I feel part of me died or stopped on that particular day in 1967. And I have gently tried to ask others I meet who are also older, what age do they feel they are "inside?" And the response I get is that the age others think they are varies. Not everyone is 25 years old. They are of varying ages. What age do you feel you are? How do I explain this phenomenon?

Well, something sure happened back then or today I would be 71 on the inside, whatever that would be

like. For some reason, the “I” of me stopped changing inside way back then. Call it a Peter Pan complex, but I have never aged a day since, at least as to who I feel I am on the inside. Something or someone stopped growing older. What was that all about?

Then it was mentally just a hop, skip, and a jump to wondering if some inner cord snaps for each of us, not at the age-old end of life, but right in the middle, somewhere in our prime. It is like a kind of death, and an ensuing immortality that appears to remain unchanging. I grant you this may sound kind of nutty, but as I pointed out, I have no other explanation. This is a real question for me. Perhaps some of you reading this can enlighten me?

If I want to get maudlin I can say I am a 25-year old trapped in a 71-year old body, but that is not how I tend to think of it. What I do entertain is that a certain ‘kind’ of death happens smack in the middle and prime of life, after which we don’t change. In some ways we are immortal. Furthermore, I believe that those who claim to be born again, mostly evangelical Christians, are just those of us who become aware of what happened to them, of what I am talking about here. And it happens to all of us.

Thankfully, I happen to like being 25-years old, since that was more or less a banner year for me. I don’t feel like forty, fifty, sixty, or seventy years old. I am 25.

Ok, color me crazy. I can live with that. But before you write me off, ask yourself what age do you feel you are? You might be surprised. My guess is that this happens to each of us and that it is only the awareness of this change that is lacking, so just take a good look at yourself. How old are you?

And looking is very simple. I just look, see how I feel inside, and find myself going back in time until 1967. Time stops there. Before that age I can't see anything but some childhood history. I don't feel younger than 25. As mentioned, I feel just as I did in the spring of 1967. I may be stuck there, but I am very much present.

And I figure: why not talk about it? Perhaps I am not alone in feeling this way. What are your thoughts?

[Here is a photo of me from 1967, the year I stopped changing inside.]

