

BLOGS 2022 AUTUMN



by Michael Erlewine

2022
Essays
AUTUMN

by Michael Erlewine

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These are not all, but they are the most useful essays from 2021, sorted by the seasons.

I don't have time to 'fine edit' them and still get them out there, but these are certainly in good-enough shape to be readable.

And I don't expect many, but hopefully 'any' folks will find these useful.

They are eclectic, yet the overriding theme is dharma and dharma practice. Those of you who reach a certain point in your own trajectory of dharma practice may find some of these useful.

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SAMSARA “The same world, That early on, Makes it difficult, To meditate, Later, Makes it difficult, Not to.” It’s been 64 years since I first began to wonder about and look into Buddhism, around 1959. This gradually led to my entering the stream of actual dharma practice. In 1972 Margaret and I opened the Heart Center in Ann Arbor Michigan, and in the mid-1980s, our center in Big Rapids, Michigan became the Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Choling), a Karma Kagyu dharma center, with a

large shrine room and several smaller shrines around the property. Here is one of the smaller shrines, actually my own personal shrine, as a photo, but I include a closer copy of that photo plus one calling out some of the items on that shrine for those interested. Why so many dharma things? Well, after 64 years of gathering dharma objects, this is how it turned out. What can I say? I started with nothing, and it seems I added an item every few years. As for me, my life is one of meditation, not meditation as some lofty state or off in a cave, but meditation as a process, which I am in the middle of. I meditate more and more of the time, not so much by time set aside for meditation each day, but rather by the process of meditation as I go about my daily rounds. That way I log a lot of hours of dharma practice in a day. I mix meditation with whatever I do. It took me years to learn to do this. Well worth it, IMO.....164

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THE REST OF THE MIND “You cannot rest the mind, but you can let the mind rest. Just let go, And don’t mind the rest.” A little poem I wrote that says what I wanted to say about allowing the mind to rest. It’s not about effort at all, but all about removing effort and just allowing the mind to come to rest on its own, which of course it already is anyway. The mind is the ‘Mind’ and is always at rest. It’s we who have to get out of the way of making efforts to rest the mind. That can’t be done. You can’t REST the mind. The mind itself is always at rest. It’s we who are not. So, it’s a case of hurry up and rest, which is an oxymoron. In my case, this took two steps. The first step was for me to understand that dharma rest, rest in dharma, is the same kind of rest I can already do watching a movie or whatever. Rest is rest. And the second step is actually practicing resting in meditation practice, very much a process of trial and error on my part. I had to learn to just let go, abandon all hope, so to speak, and just rest in the moment. This took a while because expectation, hope, and ‘minding the rest’ won’t work. Resting

works, and nothing else. As my Tibetan teacher (a rinpoche) would say: “slowly, slowly.” [Midjourney graphic by me.].....173
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ATTACHMENT The glue, That holds, The Self, Together. Here is a little poem to take the place of something I write on the spot,

other than these words. I am outside, it is below freezing, putting up (or repairing) the last of three gutters and drains, one on our house, and two on the dharma center next door. We have (so they tell me) snow coming in a few days and need to get these up and running. The poem is pretty easy to understand. What we call our Self is all self-made (no pun intended), basically what we like (or dislike), much like a ventriloquist’s dummy, which is why we should check once in a while as to who is the ventriloquist and who the dummy. There is a Full-Moon eclipse early this morning. And, of course, please vote. [Midjourney graphic by me.]183

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A BEAUTIFUL MESS

October 1, 2022

All this life we have and are living is something, even if technically philosophers say it is nothing at all. To me, it's still something. And even if the life we have is a limited engagement, the whole thing is amazing to behold.

My daughter May Erlewine is a fine songwriter, IMO. She wrote a song called "A Beautiful Mess," which I feel is appropriate for here and now. I put together a little video to share this song:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAq_6ehZp2o

Give it a listen, if you have that kind of time, and I hope you do. No matter what we think or talk, the overriding fact is that we are here right now with one another reading this.

The Sun is shining. There is light and life, all thanks to the sun. We only know the here and the now. The past is gone, and the future uncertain. We have no guarantees whatsoever.

Yet, this whole montage called "Life" that we see around us seems eternal. People act like they are going to live forever. I wonder where that came from? This whole

unfolding present moment is beyond imagining, IMO. Time and space seem infinite, aside from our personal time and space being limited. As I write this, life goes on because life is going on.

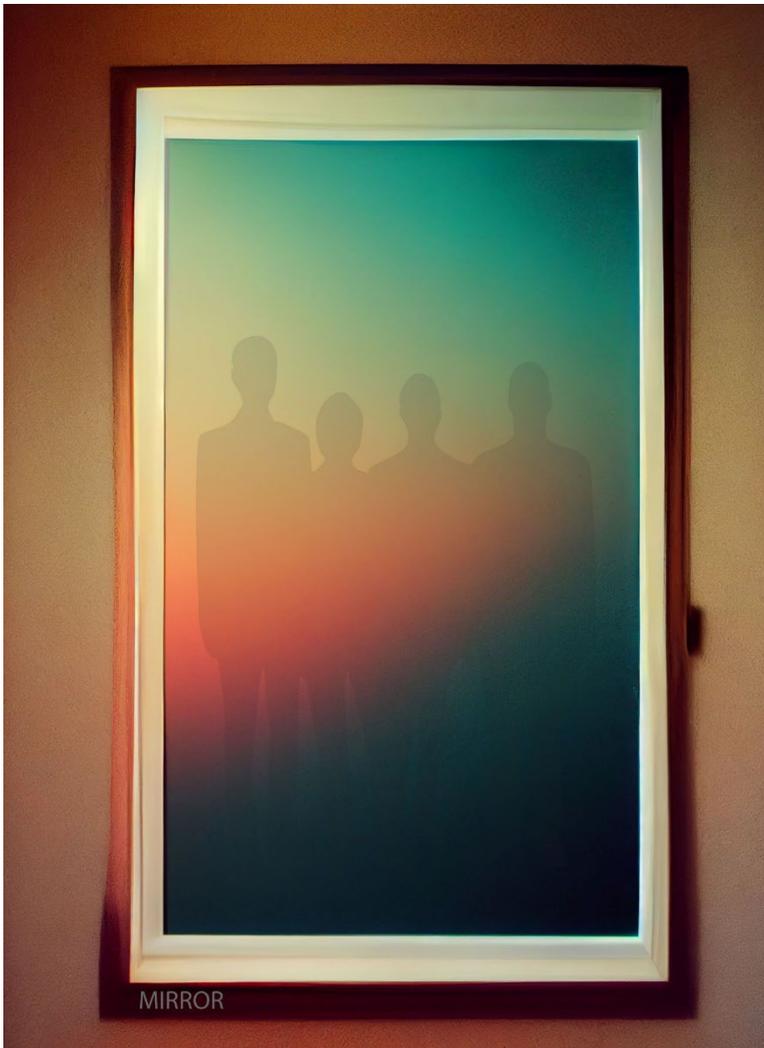
The reason most NOT often given is that here we are, smack dab in the middle of eternity busily talking with one another.

Aside from the 'blue sky' thoughts (above), there is my mundane life, which trundles along. After ten or eleven days living without our kitchen, we now have a new kitchen floor. And, we didn't rush into this because it took years to get to this point where our kitchen floor was worn out and falling apart and Margaret and I knew going in that the whole process would be massively disruptive, which in fact it has been.

And the 'toe kicks' are all from the same tile, so it will be easy to mop out.

I don't know any other way to get a new kitchen floor than to tear out the old one and put in a new one. That is now done, and we love it. Next, in a few weeks, new countertops. With the help of a good friend, we are getting ready to tear out the old countertops and go through this all again. Then after four decades we will have a new floor and new countertops.

[Photo by me.]



THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

October 2, 2022

We all do it, poke around in the outside world, scanning

both places and people for information by reflection of ourselves in them (comparing) as to who we are, what we are good for, and how far does our influence extend. We don't know.

It's kind of a touchy process, testing by trial and error in those around us as to where we figure in it all or if we figure. As mentioned above, we just don't know that much about who we are and where we fit into the world. And it's not helpful if we let our imagination just run wild or the opposite, if we fail to participate out of shyness when we can and should.

Most of us spend years doing this kind of testing by reflections of ourselves in others, perhaps our entire lifetime. It's a prime source of feedback, bouncing reflections off the outside world and then reading them, at least until we galvanize ourselves enough to do this internally, and by that find certainty through our own experience rather than attempts to deduce it from the outside by the examination of endless reflections. And such an internal galvanization amounts to a real turn around.

This turn-around I mention is the change from reading life from the outside (by reflection) to reading life internally through our own actual knowledge and experience, reading from the inside-out through the provenance of dharma and dharma training. This reversal, going from attempting to read the tea leaves of

the external world to the certain knowledge of our own internal experience, is like a ballet at best and a jigsaw-puzzle at worst. And some kind of training (dharma or otherwise) can help.

The whole set of dharma preliminaries (Common Preliminaries, Extraordinary Preliminaries 'Ngondro', Lojong, etc.), with its relative dualistic truths and repetitive tasks, can through practice lead to this 180-degree rotational flip or reversal, much like someone in a spacesuit in outer space trying to reorient themselves in the opposite direction. It is awkward with nothing to grasp on to but the tether of our own interest and any discipline we have managed to achieve, yet that is the norm as best I can understand it.

Another way to say this is that our 'inner nature' is so very close to us (in our face) that we cannot see it no matter how hard we look. And this because what we are trying to see and who is looking at it are one and the same. It's like an eye trying to see itself. And here is the Zen quality to this. However long it takes to wear ourselves out attempting this is just that, futile, and when we at last give up and let go, stop making efforts that themselves are waves of obscurations, the cycles of life itself (its ebb and flow) will just naturally reorient us from looking outward for signs to looking inward with certainty.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



A SECRET OF MY PHOTOGRAPHY

October 2, 2022

What I will explain here is not true of all my photographs, just for those portraits of flowers that I share with my FB friends.

A simple explanation is that these flower portraits are non-dualistic, in that they do not have my personal point of view baked into them, meaning you can't find a unique or single point or plane of focus from which the flower portrait was taken, no matter how hard you look, because there is none. Compositions, yes, but not a point or plane of focus.

Standard photos, even snapshots, have a single plane and point of focus, the photographer's (and camera's) view, from which the photo was taken. Although we may have never stopped and noticed this, you can be sure it's there, because that's how cameras work. The only way to avoid that would be to NOT have a single plane of focus with its unique view and viewpoint.

In order to achieve this state with no plane or point of focus, I would have to take a large series of photos, starting from the very front of the scene, and stepping closer, one-fraction-of-an-inch at a time, taking successive photos from the front of the scene in sequence all the way to the back, hundreds of them perhaps, thus avoiding a single unique point of view

such as that apparent in any single-shot photo. And that's exactly what I do, shoot a whole stack of photos from front to back. It's tedious, yet effective.

This takes some very careful photo shooting on my part and only really works properly for still life, a scene or subject that has no movement within it that would create unwanted artifacts.

A typical flower portrait that I create may have as many as 200 or more layers, 200 distinct photos, each at a successively closer distance until the entire photo is documented from the front to the back of the scene or however much of the scene I want to include. I often leave the very back of the scene blurry (and not in focus) to create what photographers call 'Bokeh', which is pronounced 'Bō-Ka' and also 'Bouquet'.

So, if you examine one of my flower portraits, your eyes will actually go to whatever you find the most interesting point in the photo and not the trace of the plane of focus left by the photographer in a single-shot photo. You can look around in the photo and are free to do so and not bound by a baked-in or embedded plane of focus.

Is this liberating? I think so, yet you can see for yourself by just looking. It's like taking "Big Brother" out of the image as there is no guiding or 'set' frame of reference dictated by the plane of focus. Aside from any obvious

composition on my, every part of the image is equal in terms of being in focus.

Of course, this approach can be 'messed' with, as I can easily create two (or many) points of focus by using selective focus which pulls out two or more main areas of the scene in focus, yet I usually don't do this.

This photographic technique I am describing is called 'stacking focus' or more commonly 'focus stacking', because as mentioned focus is literally stacked from the front to the back of the image.

And, in a way, focus stacking is a very dharmic approach to photography because in traditional photography with focus being relative to a single plane of focus and focus point (dualistic), with focus stacking, each scene with 'stacked photos' is non-dualistic because the focus is all one, united. Everything is in focus. I happen to like that and the freedom to look around wherever I want in a photo without being led or guided. For me, this approach goes with my particular form of dharma, which is non-dualistic forms of meditation like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation. These non-dualistic forms of meditation have neither subject nor object. Everything is immersed in one. In a stacked photo, everything is also in focus.

I have written several books about focus stacking and am somewhat well-known for my particular approach,

which is usually portraits of flowers.

“The Art of Focus Stacking”

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

“The Art of Focus Stacking: Book Two, Samples”

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

There is no doubt that focus stacking in its finest form is very time consuming and requires a lot of attention, not only in taking the photographs, but in processing the stack and afterward removing unwanted artifacts that crop up in the stack.

I do it because I can and like the freedom of view and the lack of any guiding hand from the camera or the camera operator. LOL.

[Photo by me.]





SKIN IN THE GAME

October 3, 2022

I am coming to understand that a lot of my skills are beyond words. You know from my blogs that I know how to work with words and I push them as far as I can. Yet, beyond the end of words there is a lot more, in my case it's music and photography. I'm sure you have your own skills. I can say things with music (at least hear things) that I can't put into words, and it is exactly the same as to vision, with art and for me particularly photography. I can articulate photography quite fluently, so to speak. I will give one example, using photography, where this is easy to see.

I have a lot of photo equipment acquired over decades. Some of it is essential (camera, lenses, etc.), and other equipment makes things easier or faster. Of course, I have tried them both a lot.

As for the equipment that makes things faster (and perhaps easier in one sense of that word), after some time savings, if I become dependent on it as a shortcut, it's value wanes. I get lazy and a lazy-me does not take as good (IMO) photographs as an effortful me.

In other words, I have to have skin in the game to be at my best. I can't delegate either interest or effort. I have to be there and be all in, in order to get my own approval. Or so it seems.

There is a distinct connection between my hands-on involvement and the finished results. For me, it has

always been about the process, not the result. I'm not just saying that. It came about because I fell into the process of photography early on in my dharma 'awakening' experience and did not care about the results. It was the process of taking photographs (the seeing the Seeing itself) that brought me clarity and not the resulting photos, and I just let those photos fall where they might.

In fact, my attention to the process of photography eventually resulted in better final photos, yet I could have cared less in the beginning. So here, many years later I am having a bit of a Déjà vu, realizing the value of the process in how I work photography, and the fact that I have to have some skin in the game to satisfy myself. Is that not what Shakespeare meant when he wrote "To Be or Not to Be, That Is the Question."

[Photos by me.]



WHERE THE TWAIN MEET

October 5, 2022

In dharma, a lot goes unsaid because it can't be said, at least not in words. Samsara involves what are called "Relative Truths", and that includes Samsara in its entirety, which means we are eternally separated from unity (oneness) by duality, a sense of separation, the fact of being ourselves a subject and looking over there at an

object. The two can never meet without both uniting in a single nonduality, which can never happen in Samsara, by definition. Samsara itself is that separation.

And there is no backdoor to Samsara, no way around duality other than to grab both separate poles and unite them, meaning see through and beyond the imagined duality to their actuality, a single unity. Samsara is a very bad habit that we have had since eons ago, or so the dharma texts point out, and we can't shake it.

That's why Zen, Tibetan, and the various other forms of Buddhism exist, to invoke the dharma that they represent and assist us in transmigrating from our habitual clinging and dualistic view to one of full immersion in nonduality, or as the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea" and is free.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



RITUALS: GO TO MEET YOUR MAKER

October 6, 2022

This blog is about turning our daily routines, those things we have to do each day, into rituals, and by 'ritual' here I mean carving space, making these actions more meaningful. Rituals don't have to be religious, whatever we could agree the term 'religion' means. Daily routines can be rituals, if articulated carefully, and rituals can greatly slow and expand time so that we can feel life

passing instead of life just passing and we are unaware. We can slow and expand time.

To repeat: the rituals in our life, in particular if they are carefully articulated, exactly done, are not just another byproduct of the process of living; they can help to define life itself. In a very real sense rituals are the Zen of life itself, and they tend to a useful way to handle the things we have to do in life, in particularly our everyday habits. If we neglect or are delinquent in those daily rituals, hurry through them or don't do them at all, by that we simply compress or speed up our rush to the end of life. Time evaporates. Rituals (careful articulation) can slow us down so that we can smell the roses, so to speak.

At the same time, some days we may not even feel like taking a shower or brushing our teeth that day, and, for that matter, how do we go about celebrating the ritual of brushing our teeth? If all those habits, those routine things we HAVE to do each day, are ignored or receive short shrift from us, what does that leave us with? My answer to that is "Not so much", in particular since our life is filled with day-to-day rituals that can't be ignored forever.

An analogy that makes sense to me: Life seems to be carrying us downstream in a fast-moving river with the winds of time in our face. If we properly articulate a ritual, each word and action is like a sail that pops up,

catches that wind, and slows us down to a living pace. The magic of ritual enactment or articulation is to take command of time and slow the fast pace of time down into a slow (or slower) meandering river. With practice we can rest IN time rather than be driven BY time, courtesy of the articulating of our daily rituals instead of being dragged along by them. My suggestion is that in a very real way, we go at least halfway to meet our maker.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



ACTIVITY CREATES SPACE

October 7, 2022

The key thought here is that our activity, any activity or thing we do, generates space around us of some kind, call it our personal atmosphere or 'Aura'. In astrology the planet Mars is the energy that moves us. In other words, the kind of energy or activity that we have determines the kind of room or space we have in which

to live, call it our 'living' room or the room life offers us. The 'kind' of our living room or aura we have determines how we 'feel' about our life, the room we have — comfortable or cramped.

And as in the preceding post, making a ritual (meaning somehow making sacred) our otherwise mundane routines can be very important in carving out (creating or expanding) our living space and thus expanding time. Expanded time is our window into eternity.

Mundane space and time are what we mostly have here and now, business as usual, and often we are not developing the awareness as to what we are doing on a day-today basis. When we choose to become more aware of our mundane routines and turn them into more of a ritual, we do that by first becoming aware of them and then begin to consciously articulate each routine.

Awareness of each routine is the first step in ritualizing it, enacting it consciously rather than just automatically doing it as we have been all these years. It's not difficult, yet it does require that we be aware of it and then do it consciously.

I like the word 'articulate' because it means the clear and effective utterance and decided action of any given routine, thus making it somewhat more special or sacred, turning what was mundane into a ritual. And the

point of any ritual, as mentioned earlier, is that any activity done with conscious awareness generates some kind of space around it and expanded space orders or expands time as well.

In the shorthand of astrology, activity (Mars) creates space and space orders (Jupiter) time (Saturn). And, in the rush of time toward our inevitable end, ritualistic actions, when effectively articulated, flag down and slow time, and by expanding time they create room or space for us to live in. Rituals are a benefic and can help to arrest the unrelenting onslaught of time, thus managing time, giving us 'time' to live more openly and free.

Ritual activity is the bringing across of spirit (the sacred) or space into matter, the injection of space into time, thus, as mentioned expanding our sense of time. An injection of pure energy, our activity, can free things up and creates an atmosphere, room for things to move or change and then re-form.

In other words, ritual activity expands time with space or room. The kind of room or atmosphere (aura) in which we have to work very much determines the way we work — the 'kind' of our action. In astrology, Mars activity has come to represent the sphere of action, the kind of way we do things. Mars or activity is our way of working, the possibility of work. Mars is the energy that creates the expanded room that makes work possible. In other words, Mars creates the space in which things can

happen. Our activity expands both space and time.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



AWAKENING AWARENESS

October 9, 2022

Among what are called the dharma preliminaries are the mind-training exercises known as “Lojong,” and within that is the text “The Great Path of Awakening,” which is a commentary on the Mahayana teachings of the “Seven Points of Mind Training” by Jamgon Kongtrul that contains some 59 slogans or axioms. In ‘Point Two’, the

sixth slogan reads:

“IN POSTMEDITATION, BE LIKE A CHILD OF ILLUSION”

“In post meditation” means that between meditation sessions, when we are not meditating, but just going about our business in everyday life, we should notice that all appearances are illusory, like illusions. Dreamlike. The appearances surrounding us are not only empty by nature, appearances are the emptiness itself arising, meaning, as in this old round puts it:

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

I got that. This life is a cross between a dream and a hard place. However, with a loosening of the veil, as we drift downstream, I am reminded of the carburetor that all cars used to have, which mixed the fuel and air in just the right proportions to make the engine run. To me, that’s like successful dharma practice.

The process of enlightenment itself is just similar, the mixture of awareness and Samsara, a thin frontline of continuous expansion, and what is being expanded is our awareness. Perhaps a more accurate analogy is that of the fringe line of a grass fire moving across a field. This is a process, in which our increasing awareness is

converting Samsara, degree by degree, incrementally, a thin but constant line of awareness awakening. Hold that thought.

That's the discipline we want to have, where the incendiary tip of the blowtorch of pure awareness meets everyday life head-on, enlightening it up, and transforming it. I find it helpful to remember that the other view of Samsara is Nirvana and that in the enlightening process, Samsara is transformed into Nirvana.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



INTO KATHMANDU

October 10, 2022

[While I negotiate the next day or so, working to complete the buildup preparations for receiving new kitchen countertops, I may not have the usual amount of time to put a blog together as I intend. Instead, perhaps these journal entries from August 1997 relating to our first trip to Tibet may prove a fun read.]

It was evening as the flight from Hong Kong began to descend from the clouds into the beautiful Kathmandu valley, and thus we caught our first view of Nepal. In the approaching twilight, we could still see, clearly, the rich terraced green of the endless rice paddies and the fields below. As we got lower, we saw whole towns, and then individual houses.

After deplaning and entering the airport, we walked along a path filled with exotic blooming plants, the air alive with the sound of katydids and crickets. It was a warm and humid night and smelled great. After almost 48 hours of traveling, we had arrived somewhere we actually wanted to be—at last.

It took what seemed like forever to fill out all the forms, pay airport taxes, have our passports examined, receive a visa, get through customs, and exchange money. A note about money exchange:

I spent far too long studying the various travel catalogues, trying to pick out a money purse or a secret money pouch—as they are sometimes called. In the end, I took a wide variety: the money belt, the wide purse that straps around your midriff; the packet that hangs around your neck; and even the secret money pouch that hangs from your belt, inside your pants, etc. We had them all.

However, the one thing that none of these catalogs

bother to tell you is that, in most of these countries (Nepal, India, China), even a small amount of money takes up a huge amount of space. The problem is, almost no vendor is able to cash something as huge as the equivalent of twenty dollars, much less that of fifty or \$100.

Perhaps a few of the largest hotels can, but never anywhere else, and we didn't stay in large hotels. Where were they? Finding a place to exchange money is difficult, so when you do find a place, you need to exchange enough to last you until you get to the next bank in a large city. Worse, any money you do exchange has to be exchanged for about the lowest common denominator, like a dollar, since this is the only cash that the common people and the shops will even look at.

It is not that they are not willing to— they just don't have the change! So, the result is that you exchange, say, one thousand dollars, for huge packs of money that end up being somewhere between 4 to 5 inches thick. Try putting that in a money pouch. It's a brick.

It is bad enough in Nepal and India, but in China they staple these packs of currency with an industrial stapler, and the staples cannot be removed by hand—you need pliers. So here we are, with all of these nifty secret money pouches, and a wad of dough 7 inches thick. Go figure. So, you fill up all the money pouches with about 20 dollars worth of money (all that will fit) and stuff the

rest (most) of it, in your knapsack. Your money belts cling to you and you cling to the knapsack.

At any rate, with large rubber-band-bound packs of Nepalese currency jammed into my pockets (like Uncle Scrooge), my wife Margaret, my daughters Anne and May, and my young son Michael Andrew we were ready to leave the protected area of the Kathmandu airport and venture out to where mobs of taxis and touts were waiting for us.

By now, it was quite dark. Originally, there was to be a car sent to meet us from Thangu monastery in Kathmandu, but now, since we were a day or so late (remember we had to drive back home for a night) there was little chance of people that we did not even know being able to track our belated progress through the various delays to this late arrival.

Thus, the lot of us crept outside the terminal. I had my family stand back (behind the police lines), with our mountain of baggage, while I ventured forward and carefully surveyed what awaited us. And it was indeed scary. On all sides, men rushed up and tried to seize any baggage a person might be carrying. Each person spoke in broken English, authoritatively asserting that only they could help you and see to your safety, and yet they were just what I was afraid of. How to choose from the array of cars outside, which taxi was trustworthy, and which might drive you off to who-knows-where?

As we emerged from behind the police line, I could see a whole wall of people behind a fence across the road, beckoning to me. I was about the only passenger coming out just then, but all of these people seemed to want my attention. And then, in the middle of those people, I saw a group of maroon-colored robes—Buddhist monks—who almost seemed to actually be waving at me—as if they knew who I was. Could these be the monks we had hoped would come, or, in my tiredness, did I only want to believe this?

But no, they kept pointing at me and beckoning. I wasn't dreaming. They did come! These were the monks from Thrangu Monastery, including their head monk, and they had been waiting for us for a very long time. It was too good to believe, but sure enough, there they were, and they had a Toyota Land Cruiser as well. Goodbye taxi hunt!

We moved towards them, and suddenly we almost had to fight to keep track of our luggage, as many hands from unwanted helpers appeared everywhere. The monks who came to get us struggled to control the flow of our luggage, which sort of floated on a sea of arms toward the back of the Toyota. It was all confusing to me, and I slowly realized that most of these folks were not with the monks. Yet, somehow, we got our mountain of bags into the Toyota and started to squeeze ourselves in also—not to mention the monks climbing in on top of

that.

The unwanted helpers, who had obviously been drinking, were now demanding money, but I had not had the foresight to have any small bills handy at that point. The monks were laughing. We were packed in! There were four people, I believe, smashed into the front seat of a two-seater, the rest in the back with a mountain of luggage. I was on the outside, and much of my self was actually hanging outside the window as we pulled away from the airport.

Words fail to describe that first night's ride from the airport into the city of Kathmandu. I was about to get my first taste of a third-world country. We were tired and somewhat disoriented. As mentioned, I was jammed (like never before) into the passenger side of a Toyota Land Cruiser. Much of me, literally, was leaning and hanging out of the window, so everything along the streets was crystal clear to me. It was night, and there were no regular street lights—only a few lights of any kind.

It had been raining recently, and the road was filled with both small and very large puddles, many of which had to be driven around. More, we were moving at what I felt was considerable speed, given the road conditions. The road was in bad shape. Worse, there were all manner of things in the road, a totally new experience for me. Hurling through the dark we would come upon cows

just standing there, and packs of dogs everywhere. And people—people all over the roadway—walking, standing, alone, and in groups. The extreme poverty of this city impressed itself on me, along with all the other input. Just beyond the road, people were everywhere in the dark, gathered in small groups, smoking, exchanging things, watching us, and getting out of our way.

It did not seem to me that the driver, leaning on the horn of the Land Cruiser, really gave anyone or any animal enough time to escape our forward motion. I kept looking for the main part of the city, or for any area of bright lights (civilization) to appear before us, but all I saw was the darkness of the streets, with brief glimpses here and there of what was happening around me.

The city I imagined existing never materialized and it began to sink into me that no such city actually existed—that we were in a very different kind of place than I had ever been in before or had even ever imagined. I was numbed by the constant jolts of the car on the street as it lurched from side to side, hitting the potholes. It was a crazy ride, seemingly right out of a movie like *Blade Runner* or *Road Warrior*. It had a postapocalyptic feel to it and was like a bad acid trip. I knew I was very tired, but I was also very awake now, taking all this in. This was new.

The streets got narrower and narrower, until we were crawling through alleys having only inches of side-room

to spare and passing so close to people that their faces were right before my eyes. "What had I gotten us into?" I thought. Thousands of miles from anywhere I knew, with no obvious place to get to—no city lights, no Holiday Inn. Just alleys and smells and dogs and darkness and... STOP.

We had arrived through the darkness to a large, locked gate, which soon swung open, allowing us to drive into a kind of compound. We were at the Lotus Guest House—our hotel. Piling out, we were greeted by two woman friends of ours who had arrived some days before. One of them was in tears to finally see us safely there. I was, at this point, quite numb. We were literally helped to our room, our luggage deposited in a pile along with us, and left alone.

Gecko lizards, holding onto the walls with their suction-cup toes, were outside our door catching insects by the single lightbulb. Dogs barked continuously in the distance. Our rooms were shabby, dirty, soiled, and used. There were no towels, and the bedclothes made me certain I would use my sleeping bag. Any lighting was stark and minimal. The bathroom was a new experience entirely, with a showerhead that used the entire tiny bathroom as its stall—the water just spraying on the toilet and sink, then draining out a corner of the room. We were all experiencing jet-lag, shock, and culture shock at the same time. Yet, I was so glad we were here. This was Kathmandu.

Here is the journal of the whole trip for those interested:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

[Midjourney graphic by me. This image is very much like the actual way it looked as we arrived at the hotel. The Toyota Land Cruiser could barely fit in the alley.]



THAT FIRST DAY IN KATHMANDU (KTM)

October 11, 2022

[UPDATE on Kitchen: Yesterday was another 8 hours of work, on my feet the whole time. We spent it building up the cabinet tops in our kitchen, two bathrooms, and mud room, getting them level and strong enough to support quartz countertops, which we are trying for the first time. After 35 years, our Formica countertops are

dilapidated, some of them worn through the Formica and unrepairable. Also had to wear a N95 for 8 hours straight, which gets old fast. This morning the new countertops arrive with an installation team.]

That first night in Kathmandu (KTM), sleep was all upside down. Keep in mind that our internal clock had just turned 180-degrees. Only two days before, at this time, it had been the middle of the day for us in Michigan, while now it was the middle of the night for us in Kathmandu. Trying to sleep that first night was one of those never-quite-drifting-off affairs, not helped by the fact that the jet-lag we were experiencing was now accompanied by strange smells and sounds.

Just before dawn all of the surrounding monasteries (one right next door!) began sounding gongs and chanting. Sets of Tibetan horns rang out, some sounding like oboes and others deep bass and rumbling, and then—the dawn! It was eerie but beautiful listening to the sounds that first dawn in Kathmandu.

I was so tired and yet so awake. But rest, I could not. We had already accumulated real problems. Because we had been delayed for two days, we had lost the three-day safety zone we needed to apply for the visas for India and Sikkim. We also had almost lost the time we needed to get our Chinese group visa for Tibet, but this visa was soon taken care of by paying a bunch of extra money—we were to fly to Tibet the next day.

Whether we would get to visit India when we returned from Tibet was another matter, because the three-day waiting period for that visa application had vanished. Worse, this one remaining day we had in Nepal was a Nepalese strike day— something we would come to know only too well.

It seems that the government of Nepal was trying to create a value-added tax (VAT), something like they have in the United Kingdom and in many other European countries. It was perceived as something that would be a real hardship for the people, and they had organized a series of national strikes in protest. On such strike days no motor traffic (cars, buses, etc.) is allowed, thus strangling business for that day.

The penalty for violators is the stoning of the vehicle. The result was that we were stranded at our hotel area, unable to take any action on our Sikkimese visa. The embassy office was some 7 kilometers away and there were no cars, cabs, or busses. As for our Tibetan visa, the tour guide had arranged for a courier to come by bicycle and pick up a rather large sum of cash we had to pay and then—through the streets of Kathmandu—deliver it. Trusting this much cash to an unknown carrier worried us; in the end, the main guy came to get the money himself, including the extra cash we had to pay the Chinese to do all of this at the last minute.

I asked the man if he could help us get the Sikkimese visa, but he just shrugged his shoulders—sorry, he could not help. If I could somehow get to the Indian Embassy, he suggested, at the center of downtown Kathmandu, something might be done. There was still time, but it would have to be done right away.

I was suffering from sleep deprivation, jet-lag, culture shock...and I had not yet had any breakfast; I was unwilling, however, to give up on visiting Sikkim, because Gyaltsap Rinpoche was there, a high lama I had always dreamed of meeting, because he was our lineage's emanation of the deity Varjapani, and that was a practice I was devoutly interested in. I considered a wrathful form of Vajrapani my yidam, my key to awakening.

And so, I resolved to find a bicycle and go to the Indian embassy myself—that morning. My wife, who couldn't believe I would attempt such a trip, was too beat to come with me, but my 21-year old daughter, Michael Anne, a two-time champion cross-country runner was game. We would go, no matter what.

At first, no one seemed to even know where the Indian embassy was, much less be willing to accompany me there on a bicycle; I finally managed to find, though, a man about my own age who knew where it was. He said he would go with us. As for bicycles, all we could find were some not-too-bad, old-style, one-speed American

bikes: you know—the kind with foot brakes, a kickstand, and one loop of chain. No ten-speeds!

As for the man who would guide us, well, it turned out that what he really had in mind was for his young (perhaps 12-year old) son to accompany us on the trip, not himself. And so, the three of us—with the young boy leading in a Mary Poppins sort of way—started out on that 7-kilometer trip through the unpaved streets of Kathmandu. We started from the Boudinath Stupa (where we were) and traveled to a location near the Royal Palace—where the Indian Embassy was located.

One lucky thing, because of the strike, was that there was no traffic, and so the normal dangers of Kathmandu's crowded streets were reduced to only the presence of military vehicles here and there and the odd car or truck that dared to break the strike—and, of course, there were still motorcycles and motor scooters.

On the downside, the streets were unbelievably potholed and rough, not to mention the ever-present dust, in clouds. However, I did get an instant and close-up introduction to Kathmandu culture. I was so tired and zoned out that the whole thing was quite beautiful even if somewhat surreal—and so, through the streets we went. Everywhere, there were people and animals, with shops crammed into any available space—one next to another. Often a shop was little more than an old bucket for a seat and one jar full of something or other (like

hard candy)—this was the store—a single jar!

And there was this sense that everyone was everyone else's customer, if that makes sense. Let me try that again. It seemed to me that there were no store customers from outside the neighborhood, but that everyone was just kind of hanging out in each other's store—like one extended family. It was kind of like kids selling lemonade on the streets—gone mad.

After what seemed like a long time, we reached the embassy, and my body was almost vibrating on its own after the ride and from the sudden extended exertion. We had the young boy look after our bikes while we went through the long procedure to apply for the visa. The process would take ten days, which is why we had to do it now—before we left for Tibet, so that the visas would be ready when we returned.

Forms and officials, more forms, and, of course, the waiting. At last, the head honcho explained to me how, really, it was impossible for me to get what I wanted, but that he, on the day that I returned (a Saturday = holiday), would interrupt his day off and come down to this office and, unofficially, complete our visas so that we could fly out the next morning. He would do this for me, if, and only if, I could reach him before noon of the day we returned from Tibet.

With that news—fees already paid and forms filled—we

headed back up the long road to Boudha, which was this time mostly uphill. I did make it back, covered with sweat, exhausted and hungry, but exhilarated. My butt was bruised and sore from that ride for many weeks after. Margaret was so proud of me and so amazed at my going.

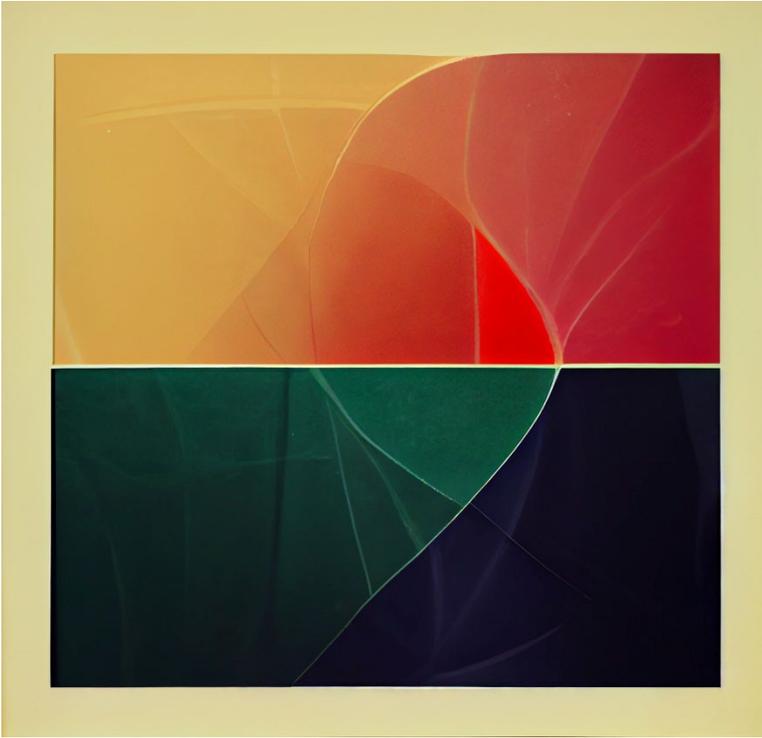
We then got to meet Ward Holmes (of the Tsurphu Foundation), and Gloria Jones, secretary of Thrangu Monastery, for a late lunch. Things were cool, laid back. I liked this Kathmandu place.

Just to complete this story, when we came back from Tibet, I was able to get in from the airport (through another strike zone), and phone the embassy official just barely before noon, arranging to meet in his office—which we did. Taking a cab this time, we met, and he completed our visa for India and Sikkim. He never asked for any money, but I gave him a good sum anyway—for the idea was in the air. We ended up (when he found out I was an astrologer) discussing very abstract spiritual philosophy while we filled out the forms—it is something I believe every Indian, at least the Brahmins, are fully able to do. Here I am, literally slipping him money under the table, and he is telling me about my soul's journey through time. That's India. America has no obvious spiritual underpinning like that...yet.

Here is the journal of the whole trip for those interested:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



"GETTING TO KNOW YOU"

October 13, 2022

Philosophically, there could not be any place in the mind that is not an equal part of the mind. It's of one piece, indivisible, and non-dual. The fact that I am uncomfortable with some part or other of this is not that the mind is 'off' or any less itself. It has to be my problem. Either I am off or just not interested. How

could there be any place in the mind that is not equal and that I could not be interested in or at peace with? And what is it about 'interest' that it should be so particular, so finicky? Interest leads us by the nose, so it's worth looking into.

For that matter, why am I uncomfortable anywhere? As they say, "Wherever you go, there you are." If I stray or wander (or end up in) an area or time warp where I am not comfortable, what are my options? Should I scurry back from that lack of comfort (or control) and try to find a place where I am comfortable? Or should I stop that, and just get comfortable and learn to relax wherever I am. The dharma texts seem to suggest relaxing 'as it is', however it is, and wherever it is and they call this 'becoming familiar with the true nature of the mind.' What is the nature of the mind? I believe we need to find out.

Is 'familiarity' (in dharma terms) simply our getting used to, becoming comfortable wherever we are? Instead of changing where we are, scurrying out of a rough place to a place more comfortable, what if we, instead, learn to relax and see if we can become familiar, familiar wherever we are. We are stronger for it.

If the goal is to become familiar with the nature of our own mind, as the dharma texts suggest, what choice do we have? There is nowhere else to go. My dharma teacher of 36 years used to tell me quite directly that he

had introduced me to the nature of the mind. Those were his very words. Having done that, have I become friends with my own mind? Is the mind now a familiar place for me in which I am comfortable? Certainly, not totally. This 'becoming familiar' is a process and not a state of mind that we all (and each) are involved in, the process. In other words, there are degrees of familiarity, yet only if we take the first step.

For me, the first step was deciding to stop wandering and cycling and become familiar with the mind as it is right here and now, rather than try to hide myself in distractions, entertainment, and 'interest' for interest's sake.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



STRIKING FLINT AND STEEL

October 15, 2022

"Great oaks from little acorns grow," and it takes just a spark to make a fire if we know how to do it. Yet, often, looking for the end of a thread that sparks our interest is just out of reach. Let's talk about that.

I am a bit of an expert in finding what interests me and channeling it down to the purest thread I can manage

and then following that out And I have done this all my life, ever since I was just a young boy, and I only got better at this as I grew older. There is, however, one problem.

Somewhere along the line, and for me not so long ago, I realized that the chain of my interests may also be a bad habit, like leading me by the nose, around and around down the halls of time. In other words, interests can be many, some of them useful, of course, but others not so much.

Interests that lead to greater awareness are one thing, but interests for interest's sake alone (just to hide in busyness) are quite another. It's no good to hide in our interests anymore than it is to hide anywhere else, especially in this samsaric world where busyness and entertaining ourselves just to pass the time are rampant and are the de facto standard.

Some time ago now I became aware that just because I am interested in something does not mean it leads to a solution useful to me. I can also end up just going in circles, which I don't need any more of.

And so, this realization brought me up short on the subject of interest. In other words, there is something in this world we share other than what just interests us. Interests can also be very much 'samsaric', much like the phrase "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic,"

while they can improve the problem, they are not always the solution. If the ship is sinking, it will sink with nicely arranged deck chairs as without them.

For me, this insight was a major realization, something to seriously think about. If I am not looking for what interests me, staying active, how else am to get information or stay active? Well, there is an answer to that question.

And that is to let things come to us rather than we always trying to find them. Everything in the future, from the future, will eventually present itself, enter the present moment, and arise. At that point we don't have to reach for the future because the future has reached us and is right there and ripe.

In other words, instead of always going to find what's interesting, what's interesting will find us and present itself in the current moment. Of course, this may require patience on our part, which was never my long suit, patience to deal with what's at hand because 'there it is', and I can't forget the words of great Mahasiddha Tilopa, his words of advice, which were:

"Don't Prolong the Past."

"Don't Invite the Future."

And Tilopa's advice continues with:

“Don’t Alter the Present.”

With his concluding remark:

“Relax, As It Is.”

Those simple words of advice from Tilopa affected me immediately, on first reading them, and even after years of mulling them over, they have only grown in importance. In my opinion, these words of advice say it all. They contain everything I need to know, yet it has taken me time, and a lot of it for that matter, to realize how earthshaking this advice is and to actually get around to implementing that advice.

I understand that we should “Not Prolong the Past” and I understand that we should “Not Invite the Future,” yet it took me a long time to understand and to practice that we should also “Not Alter the Present” and, instead, just “Relax, just As It Is.”

And as for honing my skills at following my interests, which I was proud of my expertise at, this was harder to let go of because it was by now an ingrained habit that I had. To do that, I had to let go of being driven by interest and suffer the ‘boredom’ of a present moment that often was naked of interest, naked until something came along that was interesting without my trying to conjure it up or reaching for it. This took real time and every boring moment that seemed like a dead-end had

to be waited out until the natural bubbling well of the present moment... presented something fresh and interesting to my awareness quite effortlessly.

I had to learn to stop trying or reaching for the future and instead, as mentioned, wait out the present moment until things came to me on their own, naturally, rather than my trying to reach for them. The effort of reaching itself is an obscuration.

The reason I often talk about the famous advice of the Mahasiddha Tilopa is that while I have studied dharma since the late 1950s, and quite seriously at that. In all that dharma literature, IMO, nothing has been more effective than Tilopa's words of advice. They actually work. Imagine that!

TILOPA'S WORDS OF ADVICE

Don't Prolong the Past.

Don't Invite the Future.

Don't Alter the Present

Relax, As It Is.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



FUEL INJECTION

October 15, 2022

I want to revisit the classic set of advice from the Mahasiddha Tilopa, a great dharma master. In doing this, I would like to differentiate between a conceptual understanding and its actual implementation. First, the advice from Tilopa is this:

Don't Prolong the Past.

Don't Invite the Future.
Don't Alter the Present
Relax, As It Is.

As mentioned, I will attempt to point out here the difference between grasping the concept (and perhaps even the import) of these suggestions and actually attempting to master them.

What Tilopa, at least in my opinion, is saying here is that this present moment is like the Bunsen burners we had in chemistry back in high school, in which the single burning flame has to be adjusted until the tip of that flame burns blue with brightness, although perhaps surrounded by orange and red flames.

This present moment, at least how we take it, can also be adjusted to burn brightly. In fact, it pretty much has to be adjusted, much like the fuel injection system in our cars is adjusted to burn most efficiently. Tilopa's words of advice are all about just this. If we spend too much of our time in the past, clinging to memories or too much of our time in the future, trying to snag what's coming, we are not, so to speak, 'burning efficiently'. The present moment alone is where it is at.

And it is not difficult to check this out. Just look at where your mind is dwelling. Is it noodling in the past (among memories) or grasping at the future (speculating and expecting). That will tell you something. Yet, it is one

thing to diagnose the problem and quite another to remedy it, at least that has been my experience. Doing something about the diagnosis seems to require both effort and time. IMO, it's a big deal.

We either have to stop leaning so far into the wind or stop dwelling on the past so much. The flame of our mind needs to burn brightly in the space and time of the present moment. I found that a simple discussion like this, getting the picture conceptually, was not enough, not even near.

To physically implement this advice and adjust our own inner-burning flame at a practical level is very difficult. We don't usually reach that deep into our own inner processes. In fact, we tend to skim over the top like a flat stone on a still pond, just barely getting wet until we sink. By then it is too late.

We all know that a change at the center of a sphere will affect the entire periphery. I'm talking here about changing our central view, even a little. As mentioned, I have found this to be very difficult, at least in my experience. And I have tried. And of course, trying doesn't do it; doing does it.

In my case, as a type, I am very future oriented. I lean too much into the winds of change trying to grasp what I imagine might be there or that I expect. Fruitless. It took me decades to realize this as a problem. I was

jumping the gun, thinking that was intelligent or helpful. It has limited value. I was, as Tilopa said, 'inviting the future'. Not doing this was a problem for me. It's my natural inclination.

I was addicted to looking in the future for what can only be found in the present, and thus was neglecting the present moment, the here and the now. How to throttle back my leaning forward in time and, instead, resting in the present was a very difficult habit to practice, much less achieve.

Unless I experienced the 'promise' of the future that I was used to, in the present, I felt life was boring, empty, and that sense of emptiness frightened and worried me. Hopefully, you get the idea here. My internal-combustion flame needed adjustment, and I had (literally) no 'interest' in adjusting it.

And so, for me the hardest problem was realizing I had a problem. Once I did, I could find the whereabouts to change it, if only gradually, which is what it took.

To sum this up, my point here is that we have an adjustable flame in the present moment. It is not fixed, except by our habitual tendency to lean forward toward the future or backward toward the past. We burn best and brightest in the present and not in the future or the past. In other words, we are flexible and can adjust our rate and kind of awareness, what I call the inner flame of

life.

Depending on our inclination, we are either leaning too far backward into the past or leaning too far forward toward the future. Either way is inefficient and amounts to an obscuration. Like the old children's story of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', it was baby bear's porridge that was 'just right' and by analogy it is the present moment we want to center in.

[Midjourney graphic by me representing the Present Moment.]



THE PRESENCE OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

October 16, 2022

Dharma training seems to revolve around the present moment and remaining in it, rather than spending our time either in the past reminiscing or in the future anticipating and expecting. The caution is that like one of those carnival rides I saw as a kid where we have a boatload of people swinging back and forth from side to side, from extreme to extreme. The amount of time that

is spent balanced in the center is almost nil. Well, that center is the 'Present Moment'.

If we spend all our time in the past or future and almost none just being in the present moment, we pass on the chance of a realized lifetime. Of course, the fact is that actually we do spend all our time in the present, the here and the now; we just are not aware of doing that. As the Mahasiddha Tilopa said:

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

As for a remedy for the above, I only know about the remedy for "not inviting the future" as Tilopa put it. I have never been a history buff, and the past has never been for me a haven. Even at 81 years of age, the future is still more promising than any past I want to recall.

So, history buffs, you dwellers in the past, you will have to learn by analogy as I talk about my predilection for the future. It's the same general idea for those who can't help but prolong the past, so that should not be a problem.

How does one who is addicted to looking toward the future for input throttle back to resting more just in the present moment? Being future-oriented is the habit I have had to unpack and deconstruct. I've been working on this for some time now. Let's start with a little poem I

wrote years ago.

BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

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

Expectations can't define,
And you can't expect to find.

That's the nature of the mind.

This poem is kind of an oblique way to view the problem, but it won't hurt to consider it. After all, I have been an astrologer for over 60 years, and astrology, at least in the mind of the populous, is all about telling the future.

And while I'm not a fortune teller, I have diligently worked to mine the future for everything it is worth. I am very forward looking. I don't need to make a case for my future predilection. Just trust me on that. Here is the point.

When we finally grasp things at a core level, we don't often have a lot of leverage on what we find, although what leverage we do have is more than we ever had up until that moment. What I am trying to say is that if we succeed in changing ourselves at the core level, even the tiniest bit, the effects of that movement will be greatly

magnified at the periphery, in our day-to-day life.

Yet change at a deep level is very rare for most of us, at least in my experience. Often, my efforts to change myself seem to be superficial, more often more gestures than effective. It tends to take some profound event in my life (like a shock or death of a loved one or friend) for me to reach where I have to reach when it comes to real change. Otherwise, I just continue to float on by.

Of course, there are many dharma practices that work away on our problems by degrees, dharma habits that become tools for awakening. There are scores them, and they can be arranged into different levels and have been, most often into two main groups. There are what are called 'The Preliminaries', which are all 'Relative Truths. By 'relative" it is meant these practices are dualistic, involving subject and object. We are the subject and the object of our endeavors the object.

Examples of dualistic practices would be the 'Common Preliminaries' (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma), Lojong (Mind Training Practices), the 'Extraordinary Practices' (The Ngondro), the 'Deity Practices', and Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). That's the first group.

The second group of practices involve what have been termed the 'Absolute Truths', and these practices are all non-dual practices, which do not involve subject and

objects, but rather full immersion on our part. We are all in, so to speak. These non-dual practices include Vipassana (Insight Meditation), Mahamudra Meditation, Dzogchen, and others.

All of the above terms and classifications exist for our convenience in discriminating the kinds of dharma practices and their individuality. They are distinct, but I find it is best not to get too hung up on what separates them, one from the other, but rather to understand that all of these intermingle and merge into one another and to a marked degree. Everything ultimately is one whole mind and life. It's right here now.

As for dharma, sooner or later we each have to start somewhere, and that somewhere is where we are here and now. However, determining exactly where we are in our dharma evolution in the 'here and now' is not so easy for us to figure out, since we are right in the middle of it.

This is why, IMO, taking a look at just where we spend most of our time is something anyone of us can do. It's not too difficult. Are we present? Or are we pretty much of the time lost in reverie, thinking, in memories and the past? On the other extreme, are we anxious, worrying about everything, trying to guess at the future, lost in expectation, and trying to game the system?

Once we have actually looked at where we spend our

time, we can either forget about all that and just let the chips fall where they may or we can at least consider adjusting our mindstream, either back from the future or out of the past, or some of both. It is axiomatic that we can't change what we are unaware of, so developing some awareness of just where we are and how we spend our time is the first step to adjusting our flow.

Of course, diagnosis is relatively easy. Doing something about it is much more difficult. However, I found that working on it, as it occurred to me in real time was not so hard to do. Here is one example:

I had a habit, built up from a life of doing it, of kind of thinking myself to sleep at night. I would not just let go and drift off to sleep, but rather I would concentrate quite consciously on something I wanted to do tomorrow, or something I had to do, would like to do, or that would happen, and so on. Whatever. Actually, I did the same thing pretty much all of the day as well, yet never thought much about it.

And then, when I did manage to become aware of it and decided that, at least for me, this was not all that beneficial. So, gradually, as I could manage it, I made a point of just dropping all that thinking, much like when one of my dogs used to come home with some dead thing in its mouth, I would say "Drop it!" I told myself to just let it go and replaced all that 'tight' thinking with doing nothing at all. Imagine that.

Now, this was not easy, because that concentrated thinking was hard to stop doing. So, it did not happen overnight, but took a long time, months or more. And I am still working on it. Yet, gradually, I did let go of all that and learned to instead rest in the present moment, and this was a much better way to drift off to sleep. Now here was the bonus.

Surprising enough, I realized that the same was true with all the wishful thinking, expectations, worries, and the like I was doing through the day, like most of the time. I began to let it go too. I let it go and go on because, despite anything I could do, it already was going on. My attempts to distract myself with unnecessary thinking were in vain, a nervous habit, and a total waste of time.

And so, hopefully you get the idea. And some of you may want to experiment around with your mind and determine what you are automatically doing now, to see if that is useful, and if not, you might want to adjust the flame of the present moment to not prolong the past or invite the future. Since this present moment is where every thought, word, and deed originated, we might like to relax and spend more time resting there and be more able to receive what arises.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



RELAX, AS IT IS

October 17, 2022

"Hurry up and wait!" The operative word here is 'wait'. As they say, "Wait for it!" Don't rob the cradle, so to speak, or push the envelope. Instead, just relax and let the world bring itself to you via the present moment. Or, as Shakespeare put it: "Ripeness is all."

As simple as this solution is, it's still pretty much a cure-all. It works. The great Mahasiddha Tilopa, one of the founders of the Mahamudra tradition, the author of the seminal "Ganges Mahamudra" (a pith Mahamudra text), was someone who received his instructions directly from the primordial Buddha Vajradhara, and he left this essential suggestion:

"Relax, As It Is."

Does the word 'Relax' as used here have the same meaning as when we relax watching a movie or football game. It does, and this is because it is we who have to do the relaxing as best we can. There is not some special kind of dharma relaxation as opposed to mundane relaxation. Relax is relax. And we all know how to do that, I hope.

Of course, part of 'relax' as used here includes not dwelling on the past or being anxious about the future, or as Tilopa put it.

"Don't Prolong the Past"

"Don't Invite the Future.'

And, as I have shared here many times, perhaps the even more important words of advice from Tilopa are:

"Don't Alter the Present.'

And that simply means to not mess with the present moment, in hopes of improving it or suppressing it if it is not what we wish it were. Just let it be as it is. I can't help but remember the line from an old blues song:

"Take your fingers off it,
And don't you dare touch it,
You know it don't belong to you."

We are talking here about adjusting our attitude as regards the past, the future, and the present, plus centering on the present moment, yet not altering it. If we are behind the curve (past) or ahead of the curve (future), we have to bring our awareness back to the present moment and, when there, not alter or mess with it. And having done that, we have to rest or relax in the present moment. That is the suggestion of the Mahasiddha Tilopa to folks like us.

Is it hard to do? Well, it is not easy in my experience, yet it can be done, which itself is a great blessing IMO. Our hold on our own mindstream admits adjustment, yet we have to be the ones to adjust it.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



STRANDED IN THE JUNGLE

October 18, 2022

[I'm still working long hours, mask on, in finishing up the
woodwork and electricals, so there is little time to write
blogs. I offer a couple of my journals from our first trip
to Tibet for those who have the inclination to read
them.]

Though we had arrived at the international airport in

Kathmandu, we knew little about the adjacent domestic airport from which we were about to fly out of to Bhadrapur, a tiny town in southeastern Nepal and very close to the Indian border.

From there, we planned to cross over into India, first to the Indian border town of Karkavitta, and then on to Sikkim, where we were to visit more Karma Kagyu dharma centers. All five of our family members had elected to go.

We arrived at the much smaller domestic airport and managed to wrestle our own luggage away from the army of touts and pile it near the small office of the Royal Nepal Airlines, with whom we had tickets. For the umpteenth time, we confirmed our tickets, and managed to weigh our luggage and present it for inspection.

As usual, the guards demanded we open this or that bag for inspection, only to tell us to forget it the moment we began to comply. I had no idea what kind of plane we would be on, only I suspected (from the size of this airport) that it might not be a DC-10.

We waited for our flight to be called, with me checking every time any plane was being boarded just to make sure it was not our flight, and that we were not somehow missing it. Finally, it was time for us to board, and we climbed into the small bus that would drive us

out to where the plane was waiting. We kept going farther and farther out, until we were at the very edge of the airport, passing jets and larger transports and then pulling up in front of a tiny propeller plane that seated maybe 16 people. Gulp.

The small hatchway of the plane had a three to four rung ladder hanging down, touching the runway. Climbing up the ladder on board, we wedged ourselves into the tiny wire-frame seats. The single flight attendant offered us a tray on which were balls of cotton for our ears and a piece of candy to help us swallow.

With the few people from the bus on board, the pilot climbed in, and we took off at once. I could not see much from the tiny porthole windows, but I could see the Kathmandu valley unfolding beneath us. In about an hour we prepared to land.

I looked hard to see the airport, but could see very little. We dropped lower and lower. I still couldn't see a runway, only a grassy field, which, of course, turned out to be the runway. Bumpity bump, we came to a halt, swinging around in front of a small ochre-colored building with a bunch of people in front. Out we climbed.

It was very hot, ninety degrees or more; as my family watched the growing pile of baggage being tossed from the back of the plane, I went to try and find a taxi to

drive us the short distance from the airport to the Indian border-town of Karkavitta, about a half hour's drive away. I was hoping to find a driver who might also take us across the border and all the way to Mirik, Bokah Rinpoche's monastery in West Bengal.

"How far to the border?" I asked one driver, just to confirm. "Which border?" he said. "Why the Indian border, of course." "It's a ten-hour drive," he responded. Here was one confused taxi driver, I thought. "The border is no more than a half-hour from here..."

BHADRAPUR AND BHARITPUR

"No." he said, "The Indian border and Karkavitta are at least 10 hours from here." I didn't get it. "This is Bhadrapur, isn't it?" I ask. "No, this is Bharitpur." It turns out Bharitpur is in Western Nepal, some ten hours from the border and in the opposite direction of where we had thought we were going.

I began to get excited, and the airport attendant said, in his best Hindu-English accent, "Sir, there is no problem. I can stop the plane"—which had begun to taxi away—"I have the authority to stop the plane." "Do stop it," I stammered. "We have to go back to Kathmandu, right now!"

So much for that idea, though, for the plane just took off and vanished into the shimmering heat, leaving us

(along with our baggage piled five-feet high) standing in a field in one of the hottest parts of Nepal, near the edge of a tropical jungle. What a deserted feeling that was!

The Royal Nepal Airlines ticket agent had misunderstood our destination and interpreted 'Bhadrapur' as 'Bharitpur'. After milling around with any number of Nepalese, all of whom were trying to speak English—which they could not—we were finally helped by a Brahmin—often the only ones of the Nepalese who could truly speak English. There was very little we could do, he explained. We would have to wait at least one day for another plane. That was that. I looked around at the sad state of the town we were in. Twenty-four hours here?

Well, I refused to accept that fate...spending a night in this little sweatbox of a town, completely screwing up our trip, and with people waiting for us to arrive later that day at the other end, eventually worrying about us...by God, I would rather spend the next ten hours driving to the Indian border, arriving late at night, but getting on with our journey.

I set about hiring two cars (since my family, plus baggage, were too much for any one taxi) to drive us that great distance. We were driven to the local Royal Nepal Airlines office, a single room that was soon filled with onlookers ogling us. We managed to find one

middle-aged man (having somewhat of a wreck of a taxi) who was willing to take us, and, after a while, a young Nepalese driver popped up with a very tiny, but newer, vehicle (he was the only one of the two who claimed to know English, which, it turned out, he also did not).

We were determined to go, if only to get out of where we were. I explained to both drivers what we were doing, and that, at all times, we must keep each car in view of the other. We must always stay together. Yes, yes, they agreed. As we started out, the older driver had to stop at his house to get his license and a few other things. We waited out front. My wife, my young son, and myself had gotten into the larger, older car, while my two daughters, May and Michael Anne, had gone in the smaller car with the young driver. Both cars were jammed-packed with our luggage.

ON THE ROADS OF NEPAL

As we waited for the older driver, the younger of the drivers kept motioning to me from his car to take the wheel of the car I was in, and just take off, leaving the older man behind. Funny guy, I thought. Then, as the older driver came out with his license, the younger driver started right off, moving toward the nearest main road. We followed as soon as we could close the doors and get moving; and yet, when we reached the main street, there was no sign of the car with the girls.

Looking to the right and to the left, we saw nothing. He had vanished, and, with him, my two daughters, aged 15 and 21—just gone. Well, we would have to catch up. Our driver took off in the correct direction, but we did not manage to catch sight of the other car, even after several miles. “But I told him to stay in lock-step with us,” I stammered to the older driver, who understood not one word.

All he did was throw his hands up in a gesture of futility and say “young driver.” After one or two miles, I was still hopeful, but after ten and fifteen miles, at quite a fast pace, I began to lose hope. Around this time, our driver began to swing into various filling stations and stores, asking if they had seen the other car. Nothing was forthcoming.

I was getting quite upset at this point and began to be more vocal. At some point, our driver just turned around and we began heading back to the town of Bharitpur, and to the Royal Airline Office. After what seemed an eternity, we arrived at the office, and I rushed in and began to explain to the agent there what had happened. My wife wanted to contact the police at once, but the agent didn’t really want to do that. He kept saying we should get back on the road and keep driving, and, if after one hour of driving, we did not find the girls, then we should drive back to his office here (another hour) and THEN he would go with us to the police.

My wife was having none of this, she insisted we go to the police NOW!—which we did. Time kept slipping by, with well over an hour and a quarter having passed since we last saw the girls. The police just went round and round, up and down the line of authority, to no real effect. We probably wasted a good 45 minutes in that office before they once again insisted we drive that one hour west along the road to the next town, and, if we did not find them, then we were to call them from that town and they would institute a major search.

On and on down the road went, through incredible scenery—tall grasses along a large river, etc. Still, we did not come to the town. And after more than an hour, we were still driving, looking in every filling station, every store—and there was nothing but stores along these Nepalese roads. I was sick with worry at this point, running any number of horrible scenarios through my head. Then, some 54 miles down the road—there, by the side of the road, was the car, and the young driver—and our girls!— all alive and well. We were so relieved, but I was really pissed at the driver.

The girls were worried too, and did not want to ride with the young man any farther. Nothing much had happened. He had made eyes at them, and otherwise tried to impress them. Of course, there was also the fact that he had paid no attention to our instructions. I spoke strongly to him. We decided that the possibility of getting this combination of cars, people, and drivers all

of the way across Nepal was unconceivable—we would not try to.

We gave up and drove back down that same damn road for the fourth time, this time all the way back to Bharitpur, where we would just have to hole up for the night. Our trip had ground to a halt. Seldom in my life has something stopped me so cold—I really understood, in this case, the word ‘frustrated’. Back at the Royal Nepal Airline office, I fumed and spouted, refusing to pay the young driver much of anything. Then I arranged to find the most expensive hotel in town—which everyone warned was way too expensive. It was called the Safari Hotel, and rooms there were up to \$65 a night. It sounded like a deal to me. We packed up all our gear, and, along with our girls, headed for the Safari.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



Into the jungle.



Riding down the road toward the jungle at dawn.



Houses along the road.



Crossing the river to enter the jungle.



Making our way through the jungle.



Fording streams with steep banks was difficult for the elephants.



Just a few feet away, a rhinoceros family.



Rhinoceros family.



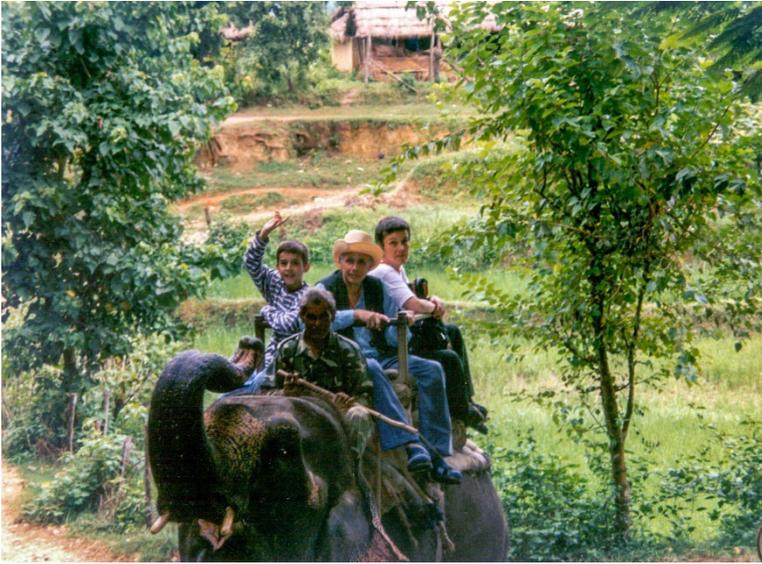
Rhinoceros family.



Crossing the river, leaving the jungle.



Our guide.



Back at camp. That/s Margaret, myself, and my son Michael.

INTO THE JUNGLE

October 19, 2022

[Continued from previous day's blog.]

Well, the "Safari" turned out to be a huge resort, with a pool, a vast dining room—the works. After weeks of marginal hotels, tiny bathrooms where the shower drenched the toilet and the washbasin, we all hopped into the pool and cooled off. And cool was needed, for this was a tropical climate—just plain sweating hot. The entranceways, and even some of the rooms, had geckos (lizards with suction-cup toes) all over the walls, which were great fun to watch them catching insects.

As we (half starved) waited for dinner to be served—at what seemed for us the to be a very late time, 7:30 PM—we discovered that what the Safari was really all about was the taking of trips (safaris) into the nearby jungle while straddled atop elephants. Since we had nothing better to do but wait for the next day's afternoon plane, we resolved to set off into the jungle the following morning—on elephants! We would start for the jungle at 5:30 AM. It was our first non-pilgrimage act, but it seemed exactly like the right thing to do.

ENTERING THE JUNGLE

And sure enough, at the crack of dawn, there we were, hurtling down the back roads in an open jeep, heading toward the jungle. We passed numerous grass houses and shacks, with the people and animals all around them starting their day; everywhere along the road were flowers and plants, the dawn light illuminating their blossoms. What a difference a day can make.

We arrived at some kind of a hotel camp overlooking a large river, on the other side of which was the vast jungle. We could see herds of deer or antelope moving along the jungle's edge. After being offered tea, we were guided down a path to a high landing where, one by one, several elephants moved in and allowed us to climb into the wood-frame baskets securely mounted to their backs. It was four people to an elephant, plus the

elephant driver way up front sitting just behind the elephant's head.

RHINOCEROS FAMILY

The elephants then walked right down to the river, drank their fill, and began to move out into the mainstream. The river was maybe a quarter of a mile wide, which is wide. As the current got stronger, the elephants had to turn sidewise (directly facing the current) and began to sidestep toward the distant shore—this was a little scary! Gradually, however, we crossed the expanse of the river and the elephants climbed up the far shore, moving into the jungle proper. It was good to be high up on the elephant, because the grass we walked through (called, oddly enough, 'elephant grass') was at least a good 5-6 feet high—and there were tigers in this jungle. The short of it was that we saw all kinds of deer, wild boar, and most important, wild rhinoceros. What an experience!

Riding high up on the elephants, we walked right into a group of three rhinos—a mom, a pop, and a 3-year old baby (not so much a baby anymore). There they were, just that close. And, as it was, the elephants would leave the marked and trodden trails to crash on through the jungle itself, blazing new trails by tearing off limbs with their trunks and smashing foliage down with their feet. We hung on.

As they made their own trails, shaking the trees, insects

and leaves rained down on us from the foliage above. And the elephants would make this deep shuddering sound whenever they smelled something ahead of them in the jungle that they were not sure of. The steep-banked muddy narrow streams were forded and, after crossing a stream, the elephants often had to get down on their knees to climb up the other side. I must say, this was an experience I would not soon forget. I sure got close enough to a real jungle; on the way back, as we again crossed the river, I saw a large crocodile eyeballing us—not a good place for swimming!

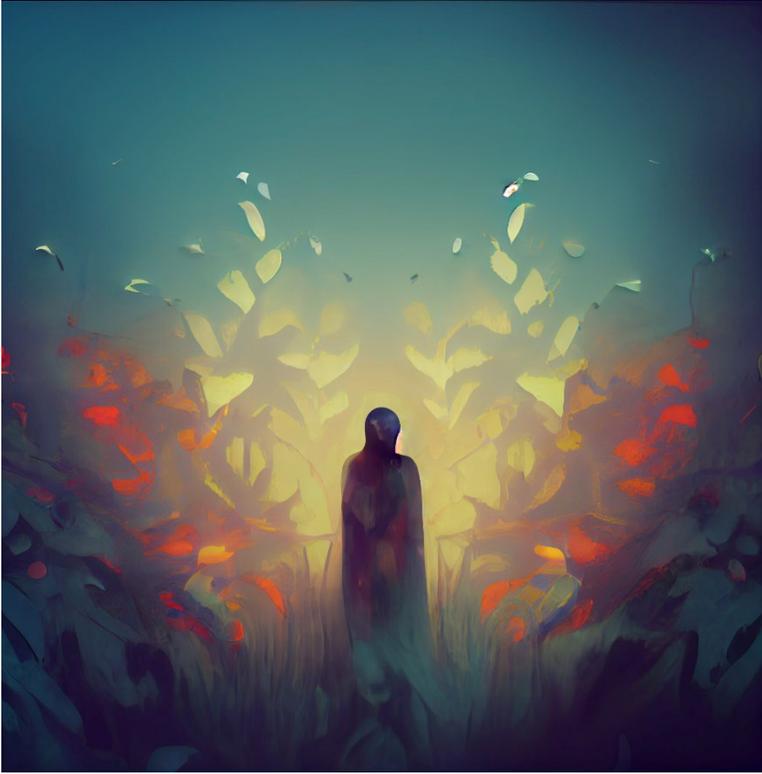
After eating breakfast at a camp near the jungle's edge and hearing that very venomous snakes could haunt the camp's trails, and playing with giant six-inch millipedes that crawled all over our hands and arms, we were back at the hotel by 10:00 AM. We grabbed our bags and made for airport, there to stand in the heat and sweat. The sun was fierce, and I was quickly soaked to the skin with sweat, which, as it dried later, actually left a salt residue. At last, an air-raid siren sounded to get the cattle off the runway so that the plane could land. As the siren went off, boys with sticks swarmed onto the runway and drove the cattle and water buffalo back from the landing strip. The plane was able to land, and we climbed aboard. Stuffing cotton in our ears, we were on our way, back to Kathmandu to catch the correct plane—the one to Bhadrapur not to Bharitpur!

After this experience, though, our two girls elected not

to go to India; they wanted to spend the coming week in Kathmandu instead, just doing whatever they felt like. We really couldn't blame them, and although we hated to be separated, we said goodbye to them at the airport. We had two women friends that they could hang out with.

Back at Kathmandu, a dozen airline officials in three different offices spent two hours running around correcting their original mistake and issuing us new tickets. There we sat—and waited—until we could finally climb aboard another cotton-in-your-ear propeller plane, this time one taking us, hopefully, on to Bhadrapur and finally to Bokar Rinpoche's monastery.

[Midjourney graphic and photos by us.]



MY DEAR MICHAEL ...

October 20, 2022

This is a message, a letter from the cosmos, my better self, and my better half (Margaret) about my walking too close to the edge of life, which apparently I have been of late.

Unfortunately for me, it has been too many 8-hour days

or thereabouts, wearing a mask the whole time, and not drinking enough water because of the mask being on. Yesterday I had to pause to rehydrate and get some electrolytes, which I am now in the process of doing, because of serious health warning signs to act my age, so to speak. My blood pressure shot up promising a TIA and even showed clear signs that I better go to the hospital or do something. I did something.

Eight hours on my feet and wearing a mask, for many days in a row, seems to have turned out to be too much for this 81-year-old. I have had to throttle back. Also, the fact that I stopped urinating much, etc. told me (and I should have listened) that my body needed water. And water was not enough, because I had all the signs of impending collapse. With this dehydration, I needed electrolytes to recover, which my friend and co-worker went and got for me. And it took a long time to return to normal. I am better today, but I have to take it easier.

I still think I'm 25 years old. I have a theory that each of us begin to leave the body (and die in a sense) somewhere before or after our first Saturn return at around 30 years of age. I feel my inner cord snapped at around 25 years of age and while my body continues on its journey to oblivion, internally I am still think I am 25 years of age. How old are you inside? Ask yourself.

Astrologically, the reason I behave so, at least in my opinion, is that in my heliocentric natal chart (this works

only in the helio, not the standard geo chart), I have what is called a grand 'Grand Trine', made up of six of the nine planets and it is very exact. This signifies great sensitivity, of course, but oddly enough also greater thirst for and tolerance of pain. I am not always aware (or aware enough) when I am hurting myself through effort. I got the message in the last couple of days. And now for an update on our work here.

REMODELING

Our remodeling task is winding down, with the final installation of splash guards to the countertops this next Tuesday, October 25th. There is also considerable woodwork finishing to do. This whole project has required extensive rewiring, based on the original wiring rather than new wiring, which means working in the walls with very short wire ends. The wiring got quite complicated but is almost finished. There will be some repainting.

All the plumbing is done (four sinks and one disposal), and a few leaks found and closed up. All and all, it goes well. And, as mentioned, it winds down, which I am grateful for because it means the approach of the return to a regular life.

Yesterday, car trouble with a dead battery at 6 AM while I was out getting groceries, left me stranded in a parking lot in the cold. It is now around freezing each night. As I

was leaving to go out, my mind told me to take my Apple watch, which I hardly ever wear. I did as I was told. Luckily, thanks to the watch, which has a phone built into it, I was able to call Margaret who came out and I jumped the car. Things like that intervene. I had a new battery installed.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



OUTSIDE THE BOX

October 21, 2022

We know we are outside the box when there is nothing in the box to be boxed. How's that? A moment of nothing but quietness is an example, when there is just nothing going on. If nothingness itself is boring to us, that's unfortunate because it's just a mirror of our reaction. 'We' are bored and not the nothing. Nothing is never boring or bored.

And, if we are bored with nothing going on, well, what's

new? Obviously, nothing. Nothing is new because we don't know how to deal with it, yet it embraces everything.

In that case, perhaps it's time to get to know nothing, because nothing is not just nothing, but also really something. If we are always packed tight with something and have never known just nothing at all, of course it might seem boring to step outside our box of busyness.

And if nothing is being outside-the-box and it makes us nervous, it is because we don't know what to do with nothing. Yet here it is, and much of the time at that, nothing. If we have always avoided it, sooner or later we will have to get around to doing nothing. I wrote this little poem.

TIME FOR NOTHING

Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,
I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



MUSICAL CHAIRS

October 21, 2022

A comment from Shakespeare is "Much Ado About Nothing." Mentally, we can't catch a breath of air because we have packed our schedule so airtight. Why is that?

I can't claim to know all the reasons why, just that there

is something in many of us that does not love or welcome space, especially empty space, perhaps because of its emptiness. We often keep our schedule full to the brim and avoid any windows (or gaps) in time.

In other words, we keep our mind occupied, busy with just about anything we can think up, rather than face an uneventful present moment where we might get bored or not know what to do with ourselves. Fear of the unknown.

It seems very hard to get out of that box. And why should we? What's wrong with keeping busy and active as much as we possibly can? After all, "Idle fingers are the devil's workshop" as the old saying goes.

However, what happens if everything stops, if we stop doing so much? Is it like 'musical chairs' and we feel left out and not in? What if there is no echo when we call out? I'm just asking.

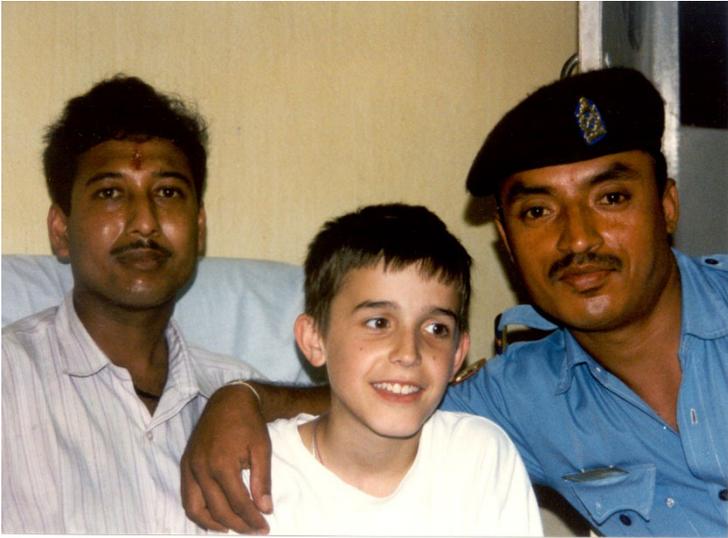
I guess I am saying two things. Are we afraid of the 'emptiness' of our empty moments? Or is it that we don't know what to do with spare time or space on our hands? Or both?

It seems to me that a packed schedule is like a freight train hurtling toward oblivion, with no roses and no time to smell them.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



The three-hour drive through the strike zone in Nepal was nerve-wracking.



Here is our driver, my son Michal, and the police officer who rode shotgun on our trip.



Here is one of a great many poles to stop traffic, each monitored by a local group and all wanting some fee to get past.



The road was filled with animals.



Groups of people were everywhere.

RUNNING THE STRIKE ZONE

October 22, 2022

[Still finishing up the remodel. Today I built a little concrete step at one of the rear doors, leveling the concrete stones. I also painted the north wall of the kitchen and around the various electric plugs and switches, readying it for the back splashes coming Tuesday. So, here is another chapter in our Tibet story for those who like them.]

Coming back from India and about to enter Nepal, we found we had a problem. On the day we were to fly back to Kathmandu, from Bhadrapur, Nepal, another Nepalese nationwide strike-day had been scheduled, this one to protest the advent of VAT taxation. In fact, this time the strike was scheduled for two consecutive days, and the first day was declared to be very serious. In order for our vehicle not to get stoned, we had to somehow GET out of India and into Nepal early enough in the morning so that the strikers were not yet up and about. That seemed doable.

We rose well before dawn, grabbed our baggage, and prepared to set off. Our hotel was locked up tighter than a drum and chained, so we had to feel around in the dark for lights, wake the gatekeepers, etc. At any rate, by 5 AM we had left Silagree and were heading toward the

Nepalese border. Even in the pre-dawn darkness there was heavy people-traffic on the road, probably because this day was also some sort of Hindu holy day.

Everywhere were small tent shrines with glaring lights, inside of which were brightly-painted statues, and outside of which loud music played. In many places along the road bare 4-foot florescent tubes were mounted upright (vertically) and arranged in converging rows on either side of a shrine, to create a funnel-like light effect into the statue. Perhaps as many as 10-12 tubes would be set up this way, producing an eerie and carnival-like effect. The sacred music boomed out of the darkness as we sped along. It was like a carnival, but a sacred one. To me it seemed garish.

And soon we were once again in the dangerous area outside of Karkavitta as we headed toward the Indian-Nepalese border. For these few miles you never slowed down or stopped because many cars were stopped and robbed at this point. We drove through at high speed. At the border, the three official checkpoints were not yet open, and huge booms across the road blocked all traffic from passing through. In our hurry to avoid the strikers, we set about waking up the local officials, who were in no hurry to help us until we promised some 'bakshish', or bribe money. Even then, it was a slow go.

Finally, the customs and immigration officials appeared and put us, ever so slowly, through the long form-filling

process while we eyed the clock and the coming of dawn. The arrival of dawn would mean the possibility of more danger for us, once we were inside Nepal. There were three checkpoints, three sets of forms, and three waits. I left my family locked (like some folks lock dogs in a car when going into K-Mart) in the jeep in the darkness.

Of course, the officials then had to have each member of my family come, personally, into the office and sign the forms, even my 11-year old son. At last, we were done. We crossed from Karkavitta, India into Nepal. Unfortunately, it was now daylight as we headed for the airport. Groups of Nepalese were gathered here and there. Some had rocks in their hands.

But luck was with us, and we wheeled into the tiny airport and piled out. We were pleased with ourselves—that all had gone, thus far, so well, and that we were already at the airport. Now all we had to do was wait for the plane. Little did we know what fate held for us!

It was still early, and no one was around. Our conversation managed to wake a few of the people who had been sleeping at various places in the open building. Our driver had an animated dialogue with one these people and then turned to face us, a little wide-eyed. I thought he was telling me that the plane had been cancelled and would not be coming today. The man next to him nodded in agreement and, in better

English, said the airport had been closed due to water in the field that served as the runway. He WAS telling me that!

I was in shock and refused to accept this information. They were happy to repeat it. It sounded no better the second time. My mind was racing. Let's see: The strike was on in Nepal, not just for today, but for tomorrow also. The plane we needed only came twice a week. In other words, we were stuck some ten hours by car from Kathmandu with no plane and no way to travel to another airport.

Worse, we had only two days to make connections for our plane reservations back to America. The start of a two-day strike meant we could not take the all-night bus ride through the mountains to Kathmandu, even if we wanted to. I was not a happy camper. My protestations soon produced an airline official on a motorcycle. He was a Brahmin who spoke English, and he assured me that we could stay here, locally, as long as we wanted, and we would be well treated. Not comforting.

"But I have no intention of staying here," I protested. The official appealed to the airport manager, who just shook his head. He would allow no planes to land here today, and that was that. The airline official said he would appeal this decision, stating that 'their' planes could land in these conditions. Accompanied by another motorcyclist, he went out in the runway field and drove

up and down. I was hopeful.

But when they returned, they just shook their heads. No plane today, or even soon. He suggested we go to a local restaurant and wait, and he gestured toward a building that was little more than a hovel. “No!” I exclaimed.

By now we had quite a group of people gathered around us enjoying the show, watching me freak out. The nearest city was Biratnagar, almost a 3-hour overland journey from where we now were, and there was the strike to consider. A call to the owner of the jeep we had been riding in and paying for this last week, brought only the response that he would not allow us to use his vehicle. There was too much danger of damage being done to it from the strikers. We were stuck.

DRIVE, POLICE GUARD, AND MY YOUNG SON

All of this was made worse by the fact that my son had been quite sick for the last few days, throwing up and not feeling well. He had lost some weight, and we needed to get him back to Kathmandu where there was food he would eat. Thoughts flooded through my mind: of us here for days trying to get out, missing our flights to the states, not to mention the fact we needed those last days in Kathmandu to finish up our trip—after all, we had not yet been to the great Swayambu stupa, etc., and so on.

I pleaded with different folks for help, and then asked if there was an ambulance we could hire to drive to Biratnagar. Surely people would not stone that! I pointed out that my son was sick— he hacked and coughed for them on cue, yet he was sick. There was an off-duty policeman standing around: perhaps, I suggested, he could ride up front in the ambulance, and make us look official.

They all liked the ambulance idea and began to call around looking for one. We found one, but it would not be available until afternoon. "Better than nothing," was my response. Upon hearing of the advent of the ambulance, the owner of the jeep (who had refused us the use of it earlier in the day) came down to the airport and dickered with us. He was also a Brahmin, so we had a Brahmin war between the airline official—who was really trying to help us—and this man, who just did not like to see us spending money on an ambulance and putting him out of potential money.

So, we suggested that the policeman ride in his jeep, along with us, and a stiff fee would be given him, of course. The owner saw dollars then and said "Yes." We were willing to chance it. This way, we could start at once. We made a deal to drive through the strike to Biratnagar, and all we could hope for was that there would be a plane leaving soon from the airport there.

After a stop to bless the jeep to protect it from harm, and after laying some garlands of flowers on the front bumper, we headed out— our uniformed policeman sitting up front— into the strike zone. The plan was to tell anyone who stopped us that we were headed to the hospital at Biratnagar and, at the last minute, we would head for the airport instead. My son, Michael Andrew, lay across our laps in the back and hacked and coughed whenever we were stopped. He looked the part. Skinny anyway, he had lost weight in Tibet and India. He did not look well.

And so began a nearly three-hour trip across Southern Nepal. We did stop at different checkpoints, and we also passed many groups of men with stones, but no stones were really thrown—although I did perhaps hear one hit the back of the jeep. Still, there was tension in the air as we drove along. Our policeman sat bolt upright and hung one arm out the window as if he could care less (acting as a policeman should) casually surveying the endless throngs of people along the road who were eyeballing him and the jeep. The fact that the strike was on meant that the roads were empty of cars but were even more packed with people and animals.

The short of it is that we made it to the airport and through the armed guards who had congregated there. Once inside, we had the extreme good luck of catching a plane to Kathmandu, one that was leaving within the next 30 minutes. Now this was luck! We said goodbye to

our driver and to the police guard, giving both of them some extra cash. We checked our pile of baggage and were ushered over to one of those small propeller planes. We were given cotton for our ears, candy for the swallowing, and soon, were on our way back to Kathmandu.

A funny thing happened during that flight. I am not a lucky person—in that I don't win raffles, contests at poker, etc.—and everyone who knows me will tell you that I don't like to fly. I normally don't even travel at all. And yet here I am, flying across Nepal in a prop-driven plane, with cotton in my ears. Then, the flight attendant decides to hold an in-flight drawing, based on one's seat number. They select my son, Michael, to select the winning ticket. And you guessed right—I won the contest! My reward? A free ticket on this same airline for any place in Nepal. Talk about irony. I had to laugh. But I gave the ticket to a friend. All I could think about was getting back to Kathmandu and seeing my daughters again.

Once we arrived at the local airport in KTM, we paid through the nose for a taxi willing to brave the Kathmandu streets (because the strike was still on), but we were soon driven safely back to the Boudhanath Stupa area and to the Happy Valley Hotel, where we were finally reunited with our two daughters.

We were so glad to arrive! And everyone was very glad

to see us also, for they had worried about us when the plane from Bhadrapur hadn't arrived. By mid-afternoon we were all sitting high on the terrace in the Stupa View Restaurant, enjoying a quiet (and edible) vegetarian meal, while only hours before it had looked as if there was little hope of reaching Kathmandu for days. What a switch.

Here is the journal of the whole trip for those interested:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>



THE BUSY SIGNAL

October 23, 2022

Samsara is not just our own addiction to being entertained virtually all of the time by our own interests, desires, and attachments. Samsara is the combined attachments of all sentient beings accumulating to create an impenetrable jungle of similar habits. We are all in cahoots and the resulting mass of obscurations is as thick as thieves, endlessly robbing us of our natural

awareness. Unfortunately, we are too entertained to be aware of anything but this constant entertainment, and to make sure it continues.

Collectively, we are fixated 'en masse' on exactly what is not true or helpful to us, being Samsara in all of its attractiveness and magnetism. That's all that Samsara is, our distractions and inability to be aware of the actual or true nature of the mind, and that same samsaric view is a fixed habit, a habit reinforced by as many lifetimes as we have collectively lived. Up until now, there is no escape or relief from Samsara, both for you and for me.

Unfortunately, our constant entertainment is the good news. The bad news is that (apparently) we have no idea how to get out of this situation. As my Tibetan dharma teacher of 36 years put it: "We are the stragglers...", the ones who in all the time (and lifetimes) up until now never got it. Worse, it seems that we don't even want to be distracted from our distractions. And 'very worse', we even imagine that we are breaking free from Samsara when we have not even yet breached the gap of duality. Samsara is the perfect dualism.

At best, we are busy improving our current situation within Samsara, which is like the old chestnut "Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." What in dharma are called the "relative truths", which include all of the many preliminary dharma practices, are dualistic and very much a part of Samsara. They do not bridge

the gap to the non-dual dharma practices. We each have to do that for ourselves through breaking free of our Samsaric myopia.

And for that breakthrough, most of us need an authentic dharma teacher, one who can successfully point out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it, which once recognized, bridges the gap to non-duality and is, IMO, the key to our deconstructing Samsara and its misdirection.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



A SIMPLE MISTAKE

October 24, 2022

The worry, what worries me (as those who read my blog know) is that to me it seems we fail to realize the seriousness and the actual nature of Samsara, that it is so pervasive and yet it is based on a simple binary mistake, like a zero or a one, much like the wheat and the chaff or the baby and the bathwater.

Somehow, we have mistaken the chaff for the wheat and thus the wheat for the chaff. Samsara is everything else but the true nature of the mind and yet we are wedded to and stuck in it. Samsara is the sum total of our attachments, the ground and not the figure, everything we don't want and yet this is what we have to consider most of all, and we do. We are fixated.

It's not the world that we live in that is the problem, but rather our attachment to and on that world. The attachment itself is the narrowing of our eyes, the clinging, and what restricts our vision. It's like pinching ourselves and being unaware that we could just stop pinching ourselves and we would be OK.

In the common descriptions like "the vicious cycles of Samsara," what are they saying? It's the ultimate "Catch-22," pure recursion. That's what is meant by 'vicious cycles', the very nature of Samsara feeding on itself. We can't let go of Samsara and won't even think about it, wouldn't consider it. Again, that's recursive fixation, the glue that holds Samsara together. Otherwise, Samsara could not cohere. Remove the fixations and Samsara would self-destruct.

How could we get it so wrong, just exactly wrong? It's not something we did, but rather something we didn't do. There is no original sin. And we have not gotten that far in all the time there is and has been. Just as our being is still becoming, but has never been, so we hover

at the point of being and have always done so, eternally. Impermanence is our true condition, not some sort of permanent personal existence.

Our being is becoming because it never has been actual being like we imagine it could or should be. That's the angst that we all seem to share. Yet look around. Here we are, and we are alright! What's the problem? And this is why the great sages and dharma masters keep telling us to relax, and when they say: "Relax, As It Is," they are telling us something important.

We just have to accept what is, that our very being itself is becoming and has never been more than that, is not more than that. We hover just at the edge of permanent existence and always have. We can (and have to) rest and relax within that. It's impending but not imminent. When the sages say "Wait!" and "Relax," they mean for a long time, don't they?

Rest in that.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



WHAT'S IMPORTANT

October 25, 2022

What I consider important as to dharma is 'Awareness'

and our developing it. The word Buddha is said to mean 'That which has become aware or awakened,' thus awareness is the key to dharma, all dharma. The word Buddha (Sanskrit) is in Tibetan "Sang gyay," again, the fully awakened one.

And so how do we awaken or become more aware ourselves, and perhaps help others to do the same? Seemingly, there is an endless amount of dharma books, texts, dharma practices, empowerments, and the like available. They all can help and perhaps have to some degree. Yet, it is up to each individual to realize awareness for themselves. Even the Buddha could not do it for us. Dharma is a DIY project for each and everyone.

In my own case, despite years (decades) of dharma practice, lots of texts, a whole library of books, and some of the best teachers in the world, for me it came down to my developing awareness by more and more carefully watching my own reactions, no matter how small. It was something I could do all day long without interrupting my busy dash for oblivion.

And it was only by my realizing that while I could not control what in the outside world made me react, I was solely responsible for my own reactions. How I reacted depended on me and me alone. As I gradually realized that my reactions were mine and that I could either continue to knee-jerk them or over time learn to react

responsibly, appropriately, my awareness grew. And by that, I mean my awareness of my own reactions and learning to endure those reactions and work on them, gradually toning them down until I was no longer being jerked around by reactivity.

By doing this, I also became aware that I was reacting not just throughout the day, hundreds or thousands of times, I was also reacting on a larger scale in various similar ways. And, as that dawned on me, as I became aware of larger swings in time, I used the same methods of tempering my reactions to those larger issues as well.

The nice thing about this process is that as we become more adept at managing our own reactions, reacting appropriately instead of involuntarily, our awareness not only increases, but seems to begin to increase exponentially. What was a spark or two becomes an intense blaze of awareness that burns off a lot of the dross of our reactions, leaving just an increasing awareness being aware of itself being aware. This is direct recursion and can serve as a bridge from duality to non-duality, from Samsara to Nirvana in dharma terms.

[Photo by me, taken yesterday.]



THE SHAMAN IN US

October 26, 2022

To a great degree, time is a social convention lived by the majority — a consensus. We don't always remain within that convention, but in odd moments, hours, and days of our lives, we may wander into more unusual (altered) states of both mind and time.

What we call 'Eternity' does not somehow exist at the

end of history or linear time. Eternity exists now, deep within (or without) time. And time does not just extend to some end. There is no end to time itself other than each lifetime

Above all, 'time' is a process and not an end in itself. It is seemingly endless. Instead, individuals extend time, and we endure for that length. We last until then. In the moment, always the present moment, we go between time's seconds, stretch time, and make time. We extend ourselves much like stretching a thin piece of polymer plastic admits sudden extension.

In moments of great vision, we leap between the seconds (beyond time) to the day of creation itself. And we each have and develop our own sense of time, and sometimes what we see and experience can be quite unconventional. This is particularly true for the shamanic among us. Most of us have a bit of the shaman in us.

The shaman is an isolate from convention, doomed or blessed to stand alone beyond what society knows and understands or even considers acceptable. The shaman is separated by an altered state of mind from society's norms and conventionality. He or she stands alone, somehow outside of time as consensus has it, and sometimes left on his or her own devices to either sink or swim.

To some extent, to repeat just a bit, what we call time is

a convention agreed on by the majority, a consensus. We go beyond conventional norms at our own peril and risk the invisibility that comes with falling through the cracks of society. If we represent an experience beyond the conventional, who is it that will recognize it (or us) as acceptable? In my experience, we are talking about the realm of the shaman, someone who falls down the rabbit hole beyond convention, and either goes crazy from the isolation and loneliness or stabilizes in their altered state enough to return to society, where they to some extent can be heard, and accepted along with their altered experience. It's either that recovery or to be labeled as a bit (or a lot) 'looney'.

One is not born a shaman, and true shamanism is not in our DNA or something that can be conferred on us other than by our own deviant (alternate reality) experience from society's convention. I understand that nowadays there are shaman gatherings and conventions, but a mass meeting of shamans or commercial shamanism is IMO an oxymoron, or at least something other than traditional shamanism. Traditionally, shamans are each somewhat unique in their alternative views. They don't 'gather'.

One becomes a shaman based on actual experience outside of the conventional societal norms, a singleton. If our own psychological state of mind wanders us beyond the norm of known conventions, we are by definition on our own, just out there without a witness.

Who would know we are even gone?

My point is that we can't be witnessed by conventional society because there is a limit as to what is acceptable and if we wander beyond that limit, who is there that is credible among society to recognize us? It's a Catch-22 and the shaman ends up as the odd-man-out (or woman), so to speak.

And its not like we choose to fall through the cracks of normality and just strike out on our own. Instead, we fall through those cracks of normality by wandering into an alternate reality, a psychological state of mind, and can't get back. We have no way to get conventional society's attention without being labeled as weird or looney, or even insane. This happens to a few of us, but many of us many experience this for a day or a part of a day.

And so, it's get-with-the-program (conventionally) or be left out there on our own to fend for ourselves. And this kind of traditional shamanism, as mentioned, is not a group experience, but usually happens singly, one person at a time, those who wander off the conventional trail and are initiated to experiences unknown to society as a group. The closest thing in my lifetime to a group shamanic initiation were the 'Hippies' of the middle 1960s, and that shamanic group immersion was driven by LSD and reactions to it.

It's a case of the old saying that "If you lack the faculty,

you can't perceive the phenomenon." And when the faculty is experience that is beyond the pale of conventional society, how can we expect recognition, much less any help? This is the dilemma of the shaman or shamanka, and why one is not born a shaman, but becomes one through life experience that deviates beyond the conventional norms into alternate realities, alternate to the conventional limits.

Every society or group has conventional boundaries, beyond which one is an outsider, literally outside the group. When anyone in the group through alternative experience slips between the cracks of convention and finds themselves unable to communicate their experience to the group through lack of the groups familiarity with their experience, they have the unenviable predicament of either stabilizing their state of mind by themselves and rejoining society, or going 'mad' and being labeled as looney or at least an outsider, which they in fact are, conventionally speaking.

Of course, what is considered normal or acceptable endlessly changes, and whole sections or groups like the alternative lifestyles of the 1960s, which had fallen away from the masses like a huge iceberg that breaks from the shelf, eventually normalizes enough that they are accepted and actually fertilize society. Yet there also are groups like the Jim Jones Massacre, where a group separates itself from the norm and then proceeds to simply self-destruct.

Yet, as mentioned, shamanism is not a group phenomenon, but is typified by singletons, a particular individual who finds him or herself, at least temporarily, thrust outside conventional society and with no way to signal their condition that makes sense to society. The potential shaman has to go it alone as best they can, stabilize if possible, and work their way back into normality enough to be recognized and heard again. Otherwise, they can fall prey to isolation and loneliness, and all that can mean.

These shaman outriders, like the canary in a coal mine, by definition define the conventions and sanity for the group, and once stabilized, a shaman can spot other folks who have fallen through society's cracks and minister unto them as needed.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



WHAT ABOUT SEANCES AND THE PSYCHICS?

October 27, 2022

I'm not saying the mass of society are sheeplike, huddling together, yet there is not a lot of understanding (much less compassion) for those among us who represent an alternate state of mind or reality to modern society's conventions. They are considered

outsiders. Mostly, out of sight, out of mind is the case. If an alternate state of mind is unknown to conventional society, not recognized, it is just that, unknown, and probably not able to generate much of a response other than perhaps a question mark.

Of course, back in the mid-1960s many of us, through the auspices of LSD, explored all kinds of alternate realities, and it took some of us (myself included) decades to stabilize from it, although it was worth the effort in the number of doors that were opened through the process.

And by altered reality, I don't consider (I don't) much of what passes for modern psychism and psychics as shamanic in nature, although some might. I explored psychism early on in the 1970s in some detail, about as much as was available back then as to psychics, seances, message-services, Ouija boards, and the like, and all that is not what I consider the province of the shaman. I was very interested to see what the psychics and their seances were all about. I met, made friends, and hung out with many of them. What I found taught me very little.

For me, my dharma teacher, a Tibetan high lama and rinpoche summed it up best when he was asked if these seances and attempting to contact the dead were useful dharmically by answering, and I paraphrase here:

"In seances and the like, we may be encountering the deterioration of what in Tibet is called the 'Lha', the subtle etheric-energy body of a person, which basically is the disincorporation of what remains of the psyche or wraith after death, but the 'karma' and consciousness of the deceased person is long gone, already very busy negotiating the bardo."

I found that remark helpful, that what passes for psychic in contacting people after they die is dealing only with the wraithlike remains of their astral or etheric body as it decays, while the consciousness and karma is already more than busy elsewhere. In other words, psychics are not contacting a dead person, but only their echo.

The concept of the 'Lha' in dharma is somewhat esoteric, but fascinating, nevertheless. If some of you want to know more about the "Lha," I would be glad to blog in more detail about it if there is any interest. Let me know here.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE LHA OR ENERGY-BODY

October 27, 2022

Here is some further information on the Tibetan concept of the Lha. What in Tibetan terminology is called the 'Lha' (and sometimes the "La") here in the west is called the 'etheric body', which came out of modern Theosophy, which took the concept directly from the Tibetan dharma. I am no expert here, but just curious as many are.

Also called our 'astral body', the Lha is the ethereal counterpart of our physical body, the 'shadow', wraith, vital body, or etheric double (doppelganger), it is said to be connected to the physical body by something like a tenuous umbilical cord. The Lha on its cord never strays too far from the physical body, and when the physical body dies, the Lha begins to deteriorate as well. This is a reason that Tibetans cremate the body (or offer sky burials), for when the body dies or is destroyed, the Lha goes with it and is not hanging around. It can, however, last for some time. Let me repeat some of this for clarity.

I imagine that few readers here will know much about what the Tibetan Buddhists call the 'Lha.' The 'Lha' is an energy-body we each have that is superimposed between the physical body and our mind or mental body. Rinpoche said he could say whether the Lha was some kind of being or not some kind of being, because in some ways it acts like an entity. Apparently the Lha can be stolen from us by other spirits, but I don't know more about that.

Rinpoche said that one analogy is that the Lha is like the person who died's dog. When they die it is up to the family to take care of the dog, and keep it happy. Apparently the Chinese tradition concerning the Lha is much more detailed than the Tibetan.

It is often described as a shadow of the physical body, a

complete mirror-reflection of our physical and psychological makeup combined. It is said to be slightly larger than our physical body, thus perhaps the idea of the 'aura' is connected.

The Lha appears to be what western theosophists and psychics call the etheric body, which term, as mentioned, itself originated from Tibetan texts. What is interesting about the Lha is that when we die, our mind body or consciousness (in some form) and karma go on into the bardo (and perhaps eventually are reborn), while our physical body decays and dies, and the Lha or etheric-body remains with the physical body as a kind of body-double, a psychic duplicate, that also gradually decays and fades away. In my study, while the Lha is important while we are alive, I have yet to read anything positive about the Lha after the body has died, other than care of the Lha can somehow affect the family. It is extinguished in a relatively short time. However, it is written that the Lha of a person can be courted and pleased, so that a 'happy' Lha can benefit the family and an 'unhappy' Lha will not be able to benefit. The condition of the Lha after death does NOT affect the dead person whose consciousness and karma enter the bardos.

Apparently, the Lha lives on briefly as an etheric mirror-image, but decays as the body decays. It does not migrate to the next lifetime. It is not migratory like our karma. In other words, the Lha is somehow useful when we are alive and as long as we have life, as a supporter

to the physical body and our psychological self. It is tempting to think of the Lha as being a mirror-reflection of the image of our western concept of the Self, if not some kind of Self-like emanation, other than the Self is pretty much made up of our attachments, while the Lha seems like a more natural apparition, almost an entity.

Remember that Tibetan Buddhists point out again and again that what we call the 'Self' is nothing more than a collection of our attachments (likes and dislikes) and does not have any permanent existence. It is created by us. Our sense of self changes with every new desire and craving, so what made up our self when we were a kid (a new bike, etc.) may not be anything like what makes up our self as an adult (a new child, new car, etc.).

In other words, it is not clear to me how the Lha relates to the modern 'Self' image. Is the Lha the similar to the self or is it different? I would say the Lha is different from the Self. Both have no permanent existence, in any case. When we feel good and are healthy, the Lha and our physical body coincide or are somehow in synch, and we feel like ourselves. We feel energetic, full of life.

Yet we are not always in equilibrium. Each of us sometimes get, as I like to say, 'beside ourselves', out-of-synch, and out of sorts. We can be separated from our Lha when our connection to it becomes weakened. If we become too separated from our Lha, drift too far from the body, it can result in physical sickness and

psychological upset, and in extreme cases, according to Tibetans, even in death of the physical body.

And so, somehow, we all need our Lha to stay with us while we live and not wander. The Lha can be disturbed by sudden shocks to the system, accidents, emotional disturbances (much like the Self), and so on, at which time it can separate and wander away from the body leaving the physical body depressed, out-of-sorts, and subject to illness and anxiety. Perhaps we all know something about how a sense of ennui feels when we lose a loved one, and so on.

The Lha is said to be a direct copy of our physical and psychological self. In fact, as mentioned, the Tibetans say that what western mediums and psychics claim to be (in séances, etc.) as contacts with departed spirits is not their consciousness (which has gone into the bardo and perhaps on to another rebirth), but rather their Lha or psychic double.

It is the Lha that is channeled by mediums in almost every case, and never the consciousness of the deceased, although the lamas say that one does not know if you are invoking the Lha or the actual consciousness. However, the dead person's consciousness has already gone beyond and is fully engaged in the bardos for the most part. Only the Lha remains for an indeterminate time, gradually decaying.

After death our consciousness and Lha separate, with the consciousness and karma going beyond death into the bardos, but our Lha stays here with our decaying body. The Lha stays with the body as long as it takes the body to decay or until the body is destroyed... or longer, an indeterminate time. This is why Buddhists tend to cremate the body or tear it up, so that vultures can eat it.

In that way the Lha or energy reflection of our self is completely destroyed and does not wander around in some kind of Limbo state. It is claimed that it's not easy to become aware of your own Lha, except by its absence. In fact, Tibetan doctors take a pulse reading for a person's Lha from a different point of the body, the ulnar artery, than it does for usual medical pulse.

The Lha meridian or channel goes from the heart to the ring finger along the ulnar artery. As mentioned, the Lha can be weakened by accident or when we are in shock, very sad, or depressed. It can also go away for a time, leaving us weakened.

One account likens it to a radio and a transmitter; if the radio gets too far away from the transmitter, there is signal loss. The connection weakens or is lost. The same is true if the Lha gets too far out of the body. Not only can we feel out of sorts, but if it continues, we can become ill, disassociated, and so on. Out-of-body experiences follow this same trajectory.

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

Here I convey only what I have understood from the teachings I have attended and the texts I have read. I am not sure how much personal awareness of or conscious experience I have had with my own Lha. There have been times when I have not felt fully present in my own life (you know: "beside myself") and have had to consciously work on getting back into my body, pulling myself together, and somehow getting re-centered, so please note that I am not an expert in this, but just interested (as some of you may be) in this fascinating topic.

And so, if we find ourselves too much out-of-the-body, weak, and floating away, feeling life less and less, we might want to exercise or do something more physical, such as rites and ritual actions designed to ground ourselves and better connect spirit and body. It seems the Lha admits to being strengthened and made more vital. IMO, it requires it.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



OUT OF THE DARK

October 28, 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVYKNNcj4HY>

The song "Out of the Dark" by James McCarty, one of the founding members of the Yardbirds ("For Your Love"), who became my friend. This was a song I heard around 1994 that told me that McCarty came out of the same 1960s as I did. I contacted him after hearing the

above song, interviewed him, and eventually spent time with McCarty at the 50th Reunion of the Grande Ballroom on October 7th, 2016, held at the 'Ford Community Arts Center in Dearborn, Michigan (Detroit area). I was surprised to find that Margaret and I received VIP passes to the event when we arrived, and hung out with McCarty much of the day, having dinner, etc.

Here is that fun story of the 50th anniversary of the Grande Ballroom, where I played in the 1960s, and meeting my friend Jim McCarty of the Yardbirds in person, for those with interest and a moment.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=352&t=3339&sid=95e4db13634e72b205633eba0fd420ef>

That's just for laughs. Now for the blog:

We come from a dark place, not from a sea of light. The sea of light is in our future, not our past, or so say the dharma teachings. When I say 'Dark', I don't mean the black of night, although that works too as an analogy, but rather the dark shadow of sheer busyness, blocking out everything in our life but whatever is currently entertaining us. We are coming to the light, not from it. It is the light at the end of the tunnel, and not something we know.

Now, not all philosophies or cosmologies agree with

this. Just to cite two examples, Christians believe in 'Original Sin', which means that we fell from the light of the Garden of Eden and need salvation, to be saved. And there is the Greek philosopher Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave', which also says we once knew, but have forgotten the light, have to regain it, and so on. However, the Dharma does not support this view, which is something of a big deal.

One might think that coming out of the dark into the light would be easy, welcomed, yet this does not seem to be the case. As the Tibetan bardo descriptions point out, the clear white light in the bardo can be blinding, causing us to turn away and seek the shadows from which we come and are so used to. After all, in all the innumerable previous lifetimes we have had, we have never emerged from the dark shadows of Samsara, so it is no surprise that we would be blinded by the light, at least at first.

This is made clear in teachings on the "Chönyi Bardo," the fifth bardo, 'The Bardo of the Luminosity' of the true nature, which commences after the final 'inner breath'. It is in this bardo that the spontaneously arising visions arise, including the clear light.

And that light, like the midnight sun, is shining right now in the firmament of the mind, just as blinding today as it has always been, yet somehow, we can't see it. And we can't see it because we turn away and have religiously

turned away in all the past time up until now, or so state the dharma teachings. We are trained by endless habit to ignore the light and turn away. We are doing it as I speak.

My point is that don't assume that we welcome the light because it, like the Sun, is shining now as it always has shined and yet we can't see it. I feel this is what the bardo teachings are telling us, when we turn away from the Clear Light and instead seek the habitual shadows of the mind to hide in. And we do this every second of our lives, at least up to now, this present moment.

Again, like the Sun, which is shining now in the heavens, the light of the mind is shining in the same way, but not seen because we will not (or cannot) stand to look at it. It is all there is and so obvious as well, yet we turn away and have never seen it. Is this so difficult to accept?

This is not something I just read, but something I have experienced in detail and duration. Of course, I want to share this information because for me it was mesmerizing and also terrifying, at least at first. I am working through it.

And just to repeat what I consider the takeaway from this blog is: We are interested in 'The Light' and becoming enlightened, and ASSUME we would welcome it, should it arise. However, my own experience tells me that not only has 'The Light' arisen, but it is shining this

very moment in our face, yet we cannot see it because we habitually turn and look the other way. And the light is blinding!

And so, that is something, IMO, to consider carefully. We can't assume we want to be enlightened just because it sounds good. If we are not ignoring the light, we would know that by now because its right here all the time. If we can't see it, we have to develop our awareness and further thin out the obscurations.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



WATERFALL

October 29, 2022

Here is an early song by my daughter May Erlewine, called "Waterfall," done years ago yet always new to me, with lines like:

"Close your eyes and forget it all.
Just when you think you know way the water rolls..."

Waterfall.”

I leave those of you with an extra minute or two to give this a listen.

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

As for the blog, I am all about what I call “The work of the day,” meaning, to see what the day brings and work with that, to see what each minute brings and work with that. Some days bring sunshine and others bring rain, inside, outside, or both. And I find it especially important to be aware of the ‘pivot’ points, and by that, I mean when we are segueing between one thing we are doing and on to the next, those moments when we are in-between, often out of step and just stuck in the moment wondering what to do. I find those are the key points, these ‘null’ points, rather than either the highest or lowest points. I don’t know what to do when just ‘nothing’ happens.

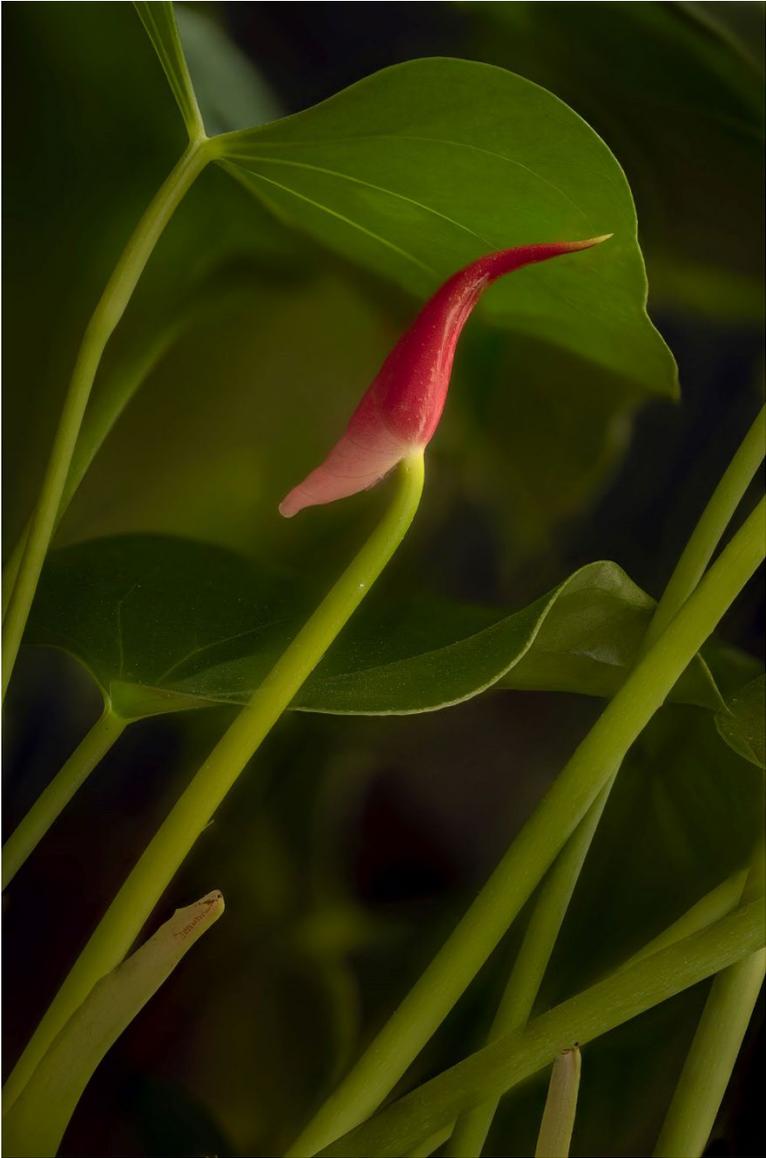
And it often happens to me just before I go to bed. In fact, these ‘ennui’ or null points actually send me to bed because I don’t want to deal with them. I could just say those points when I come to a complete stop from my busyness and, well, I used to say, get bored, but what used to be boring moments now are suspect, and of interest. What exactly are they and why do I react to them as I do? What do they threaten that I fear them?

Just before bed, as I was saying, I often seem to be too tired to do much else, but not quite ready for sleep either. I am 'done' for that day, sometimes fried, and not even interested in more entertainment or busyness of ANY kind. As they say, I am at my wit's end at the end of some days. And although I seem to like these moments less, this is a null spot, some kind of turning point, perhaps a point of true opportunity and interest, yet I dread them. Mostly, it's as simple as that I don't know what to do with these moments, which means I could learn what to do with them, which I am attempting to do.

At those null or stalled points, everything seems off balance or uninteresting, so often I just try to go asleep and forget it all. I can't seem to find any place to rest my mind. I'm tired of thinking and I withdraw from the usual places I like to think on. Everything that usually interests me now seems fatigued and worn out, at least for the moment. And so, I try to lose myself in sleep and even that does not always work. I have trouble being able to stand those moments of ennui (at best), which otherwise are seen as some kind of boredom.

It seems ironic that the points of least interest have become the moments of perhaps the greatest opportunity to learn.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



FROM A DREAM

October 31, 2022

[Too many details, too much busyness, attempting to do all the things I have to do these days. I need some rest, time, and space, and so I submit this poem I wrote to make my much needed excuse:]

FROM A DREAM

"I have gone to paint the sunrise in the sky,
To feel the cool of night warm into day,
The flowers from the ground call up to me,
This self I think I am is hard to see."

[Photo taken in the last couple of days.]



TESTING THE REST

November 1, 2022

"Learning to rest the mind,
Really puts my practice to the test,
So sometimes I just need to take a break,
And simply get some rest."

Something that took me a long time to understand and longer yet to implement is simply resting, as in 'give it a rest'. Even "Tranquility Meditation" (Shamata), which

requires concentration and focus, requires allowing the mind to rest as it is.

After a while, no matter how hard and long you practice meditation, it is not meditation unless you can just let go and rest. I have mentioned this before, but it's worth restating, that 'rest' in dharma practice and rest at any other time of the day are identical. Rest is rest, plain and simple. There is nothing special about dharma resting in the moment.

After many years or sitting there, trying to rest, it finally got through to me that I should just rest like I rest watching a movie or a football game -- that kind of rest.

The point is that we already know how to rest, hopefully, and we do it however we do it. Learning to rest in the same way in dharma practice, during dharma and mediation practice, is just what the doctor (or rinpoche) ordered. Start with that. Rest as it is.

There is a lot to say about diligence, persistence, effort, and the like, but sooner or later, if you pursue dharma training, we each have to allow the mind to rest as it is. My little poem (above) says it well. If you want to learn dharma, we have to allow ourselves to stop with the effort and just rest and rest thoroughly.

We have to be focused and also aware while at rest.

It took me 32 years to learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) because I was not able to first rest. My two-cents.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



One of several shrines at our dharma center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. This one is my own shrine.



Here is a closer look at the collection of dharma shrine items, gathered over 60+ years.



For those interested, here are what is in this shrine, or most of it. There also are blessing bills, dharma medicine pills, and other smaller items.

November 2, 2022

SAMSARA

“The same world,
That early on,
Makes it difficult,
To meditate,
Later,
Makes it difficult,
Not to.”

It’s been 64 years since I first began to wonder about and look into Buddhism, around 1959. This gradually led to my entering the stream of actual dharma practice. In 1972 Margaret and I opened the Heart Center in Ann Arbor Michigan, and in the mid-1980s, our center in Big Rapids, Michigan became the Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Choling), a Karma Kagyu dharma center, with a large shrine room and several smaller shrines around the property.

Here is one of the smaller shrines, actually my own personal shrine, as a photo, but I include a closer copy of that photo plus one calling out some of the items on that shrine for those interested. Why so many dharma things? Well, after 64 years of gathering dharma objects, this is how it turned out. What can I say? I started with nothing, and it seems I added an item every few years.

As for me, my life is one of meditation, not meditation as some lofty state or off in a cave, but meditation as a process, which I am in the middle of. I meditate more and more of the time, not so much by time set aside for meditation each day, but rather by the process of meditation as I go about my daily rounds. That way I log a lot of hours of dharma practice in a day. I mix meditation with whatever I do. It took me years to learn to do this. Well worth it, IMO.



SECRET DHARMA TEACHINGS

November 3, 2022

I don't know any secret dharma. I guess they never told me. LOL. The only thing not to share, which is not a secret, is information that will harm a student or make it more difficult for them to learn dharma, the nature of the mind, at the stage they are now in.

In western occultism, there is a phrase/term "Crossing

the Nadir.” The ‘Nadir’ is the bottom of the astrological chart, meaning the point in life of deepest incarnation, before evolution can begin. If a student is encouraged to not reach the nadir, but instead to cross over too early, skipping the nadir, and begin the evolution arc without a certain depth reached, this is considered a serious mistake with untoward repercussions.

And the mistake is that without reaching the nadir and fully experiencing life, in its depth, we don’t know (have not yet experienced) what we are talking about. We may act like we know, but not actually know, thus the phrase “You don’t know what you are talking about.” The ‘too intellectual’ are prone to this.

And this holds true for dharma terminology and too much talk, as well. If we have not paid our dues, have not penetrated deeply into life, we cannot but have a shallow sense of evolution, and start evolving out before experiencing enough. For these reasons, I understand that certain dharma truths and practices are not suggested before the student has reached the greatest specific density of matter, dharmic-ally speaking, and thus is naturally ready to evolve.

Perhaps the pejorative term for those who have not properly crossed their nadir is ‘Airheads.” Another would be ‘too conceptual’ and still another would be ‘overly intellectual’. Whatever the term, this describes someone who has not yet lived enough to know life, much less

draw any conclusions, yet they try to.

Another way to express this is that these souls have left the body too early via, you guessed it, too much out-of-the-body experiences. They spend all of their time, or too much of it, out of the body in mentality and conceptualization and neglect actually feeling and living life. Mostly, they are useless as far as practical knowledge is concerned. They are literally out of touch.

There is no question we each will, and have to, leave the body, sooner or later. Easy come, easy go. The point is not to leave the body too early, before 'crossing the nadir', before reaching the full depth of incarnation and penetration. History is filled with stories of intellectuals, airheads, who thought it was cool or grown-up to get out of the body as fast as they could, to float outside and above it all, only finding out too late that they missed the chance of a lifetime. They were old but had no experience to speak of or measure from.

"The philosopher Hegel called this type, the "Beautiful Soul," and there is a whole genre in German literature of what are called "Bildungsroman," self-building novels, novels like the Sorrows of Young Werther" by Goethe, and "The Wanderer" by Henri Alain-Fournier, or American novels like J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye", and "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee.

Hegel, in his classic text "The Phenomenology of the

Mind" wrote this about the 'Beautiful Soul':

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

People over thirty years of age, perhaps may ripen for a few years longer, and then quite automatically began to leave the body. The Christians calls this being "Born Again," yet all folks begin to leave the body at some time or other, after thirty years of age, actually 29.4 years, which is the return of the planet Saturn to its place in the zodiac.

However, younger folks, perhaps trying to imitate the natural out-of-the-body experiences they see in their elders, often fall into trying to act like they are older than they are, and try to leave the body before their Saturn return or their prime of life, thus never finishing their incarnation, their incarnating years. This happens all the time.

"You can't lose what you never had" might be the refrain for these souls. They attempt to leave the body and live

a purely intellectual and conceptual existence, to float above the physicalness of life, never realizing that they are passing up the chance of a more in-depth lifetime in exchange for not being in touch with the reality of life, a bad bargain.

And before they know it, as we who are already old know so well, they fail to incarnate to the degree necessary before evolution takes hold, the natural leaving of the body, begins.

The same holds true, to my knowledge, about learning dharma. You can't take a rabbit out of the hat, before you put one in the hat. There is a simple mudra, a natural gesture, of turning inside out and outside in, much like the mathematical form of a torus, a simple gesture of the mind.

We emulate that mudra with our life, with the pivot point at the prime of life, sometime around or after thirty years of age. Before that we are busy approaching the prime of life (nadir), and after that we are withdrawing from the prime of life. A wave of the hand, a mudra.

If we are too smart for our own good and try to leave the body before the body has finished forming, before we experience deeply, it's like trying to answer before the question has been asked. We short-circuit the equation of life and lose the depth that otherwise would

be there.

The great Mahasiddha Tilopa said all this simply:

"Don't Invite the Future."

Wait for it!

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



November 4, 2022

THE REST OF THE MIND

“You cannot rest the mind,
but you can let the mind rest.
Just let go,
And don’t mind the rest.”

A little poem I wrote that says what I wanted to say about allowing the mind to rest. It’s not about effort at all, but all about removing effort and just allowing the mind to come to rest on its own, which of course it already is anyway. The mind is the ‘Mind’ and is always at rest. It’s we who have to get out of the way of making efforts to rest the mind. That can’t be done. You can’t REST the mind. The mind itself is always at rest. It’s we who are not.

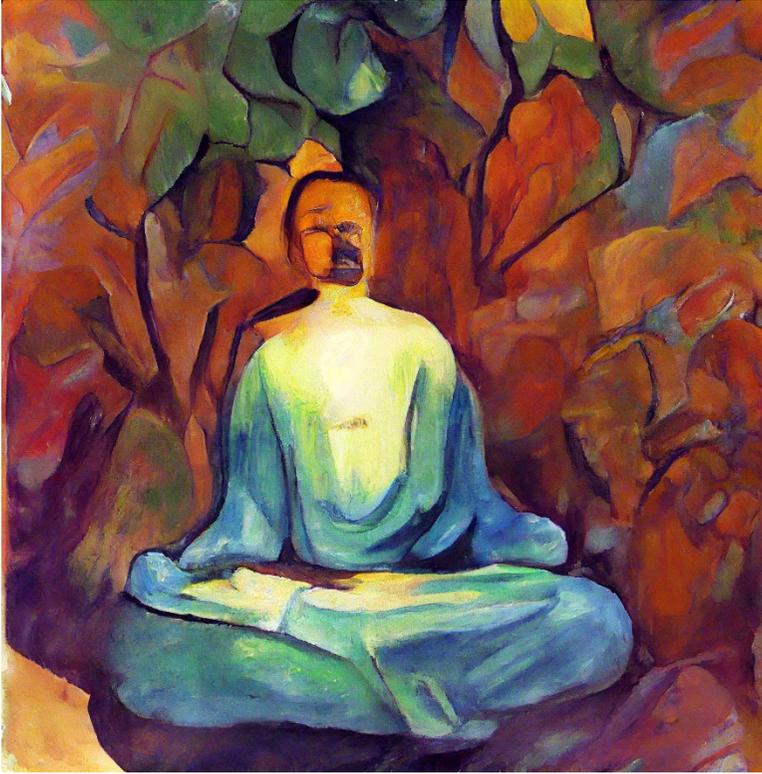
So, it’s a case of hurry up and rest, which is an oxymoron. In my case, this took two steps. The first step was for me to understand that dharma rest, rest in

dharma, is the same kind of rest I can already do watching a movie or whatever. Rest is rest.

And the second step is actually practicing resting in meditation practice, very much a process of trial and error on my part. I had to learn to just let go, abandon all hope, so to speak, and just rest in the moment. This took a while because expectation, hope, and 'minding the rest' won't work. Resting works, and nothing else.

As my Tibetan teacher (a rinpoche) would say: "slowly, slowly."

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



November 5, 2022

MIND PRACTICE

“Not an option,
But a refuge,
Less painful than
Anywhere else.”

Meditation is an economy of effort, ideally none. If Samsara were a wind tunnel, then meditation is a perfect aerodynamic design to work with this samsaric life we share.

“Dharma Practice” is simply practicing meditation to learn

meditation. Yet actual 'meditating' is something else again. Natural meditation, done without effort, can transform Samsara, increment by increment, and moment by moment. It takes some learning, but what else do we have to do that is as important?

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



DHARMA LAKE

November 6, 2022

[Here is a poem I wrote on the birth of my granddaughter Emma May on January 16, 2012 in Ann

Arbor. Emma was given the name "Dharma Lake" by the Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and I wrote this poem on the day of her birth.]

Dharma Lake

Your birth,
Pushing back,
The darkness.

Your activity,
Creating space,
Enough,
For all of us.

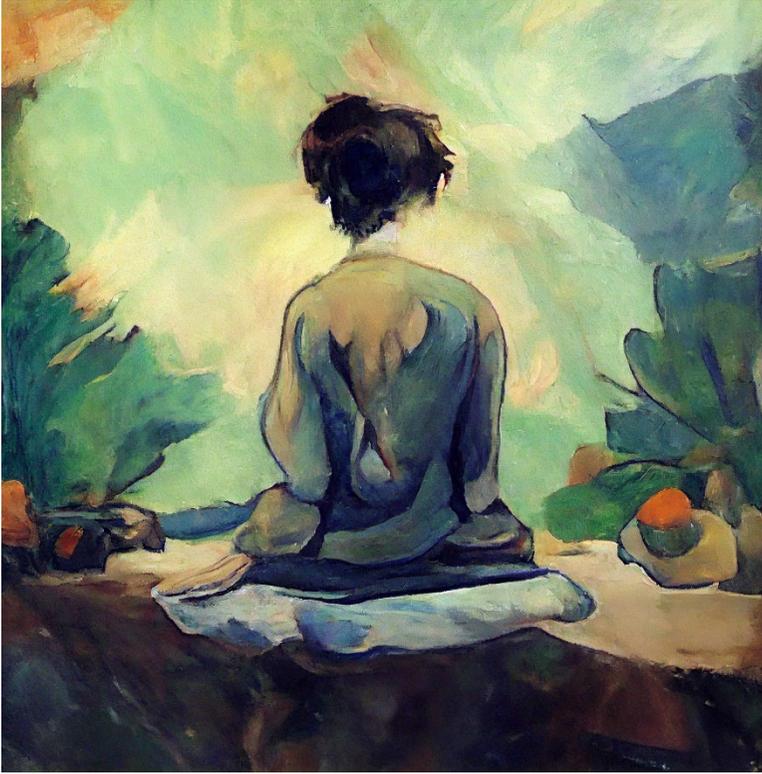
Your aura,
An envelope in time,
In which a family grows,
Closer.

We holding you,
You holding us,
Together.

Such gentleness.

[Photo of Emma (left), her younger sister Josephine, and their mom Anne, my daughter. H.H. the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje physically in person blessed my daughter Anne (and her coming child) at KTD by

touching her and saying a prayer when they both were there together at the monastery.]



WE NEVER KNEW

November 7, 2022

Here is a little tongue-twister about the fact that we have never known the true or actual nature of the mind. This is in distinction from the Christian concept of original sin, meaning we once knew the true nature, but ate that apple and fell away, and have for ever since been trying to get back to where we once were. The same goes for the philosopher Plato's 'Allegory of the

Cave', where again we knew but have forgotten what we knew. This poem I put together is about the fact, at least according to the dharma, that we never knew and are still working on knowing.

Never Known

If I know,
I don't know I know,
And I don't know I don't know I know.

I don't know what I would know,
If I did know.
That's how I know I don't know.

So,
I don't know,
I know I don't know,
And I know I know I don't know.

I have never known.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



November 8, 2022

ATTACHMENT

The glue,
That holds,
The Self,
Together.

Here is a little poem to take the place of something I write on the spot, other than these words. I am outside, it is below freezing, putting up (or repairing) the last of three gutters and drains, one on our house, and two on the dharma center next door. We have (so they tell me) snow coming in a few days and need to get these up and running.

The poem is pretty easy to understand. What we call our Self is all self-made (no pun intended), basically what we like (or dislike), much like a ventriloquist's dummy, which is why we should check once in a while as to who is the ventriloquist and who

the dummy.

There is a Full-Moon eclipse early this morning. And, of course, please vote.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



HOW ABOUT THEM APPLES?

November 10, 2022

Let's examine this somewhat involved poem:

SEEK AND NOT FIND

"If you find yourself,

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

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

That is the nature of having no nature."

The meaning of this poem is quite simple. We bump into ourselves just all the time, especially when we are not aware or not looking to do so. We are 'self-conscious', 'self-involved', and on and on.

Instead, if we actually look for the Self and look carefully, we will not find our Self at all, because there is nothing there such as an entity to find, but rather the "Self" is just a collection of our odd attachments, likes and dislikes, and the most amazing discovery is that what we call the Self is our own creation. We are the creator or 'god' of the Self as driven by our cravings and desires.

And so, the true discovery of the Self (self-discovery) is that there is none, at least nothing there that is independent, such as a permanent entity or subject.

This is not to say that what we call the Self is not very

much here with us and quite obviously a part of our daily life, but that the Self is a convenient conglomerate of our attachments, much like iron filings collect on a magnet, only that in this analogy the filings are our attachments, the sum total of what we are attracted to (likes and dislikes), and the magnet is our craving and desires.

“That is the nature of having no nature”

That last line is standard dharma treatment to the effect that our true nature is that we have no permanent nature, like a ‘soul’ that exists from lifetime to lifetime as a continuing entity. Instead, we have a ‘craving-ness’ or karma that transmigrates after death and takes rebirth, yet one devoid of ‘personness.’ The dharma differs from most religions in this regard. We are not our Self or person (which is abandoned at death), but rather a set of karma (cravings) that seeks to exhaust itself through continued rebirth.

As the old saying goes, “How about them apples?”

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



November 12, 2022

REST HOME

"My thoughts,
Like birds aboard a ship at sea,
I let go free,
As they fly away with me.

No need to follow on,
And here's the perfect test:

There is no place to go,
All thoughts come back to rest.”

This poem is about the following the freight train of our thoughts, meaning their content, what the thoughts are about, rather than the nature of a thought, the nature of all thoughts being the same. Every dharma student learns this.

Our age-old habit is to endlessly follow the chain of a thought wherever it goes, the content (what they are about) wherever they appear to be going. For many of us it is worry, worry, worry. It’s like a deer in the headlights for us.

Mind training in the dharma teaches us to stop following the content of thoughts, and just let those thoughts go. Instead, we begin to learn to rest in the nature of all thoughts, a nature that every thought contains, knowing that all thoughts, regardless of content, share the identical nature. We learn to allow the mind to rest in the nature of a thought itself rather than to continue to follow its content ad infinitum.

It’s not that the content of thoughts has no meaning at all, but rather that because thoughts are endless, our fixation on the content of thoughts holds us fixed and busy in fascination, much like the proverbial deer in the headlights. By learning to let go of that content and rest in the nature of thought, we relax, and our awareness

naturally increases and is ever more and more inclusive because, by that, we embrace the nature of all thought equally. As the poem says, "All thoughts come back to rest."

We rest in that common nature rather than the meaning of individual thoughts.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



LET YOUR HAIR DOWN!

November 14, 2022

This is about how to do nothing. Many evenings I'm not tired, but I am tired of being busy, tired of running my mind and mouth, so I'm looking for something to 'not do', rather than for something more to do. What I really want to do is nothing at all, but 'try' that you can't. You can do nothing but not try to do nothing, because trying and effort are usually just another layer of obscuration.

Is doing nothing something we have to learn? If we want to just do nothing at all, do we just stop being busy entertaining ourselves and do what? Of course, instead of something, we do nothing, yet is nothing simply the absence of something? Do we just stop or pause with our doing of something, our busyness, and just sit there or sit there on a cushion? Is that doing nothing?

My point is that 'trying' to do nothing is just more of something again, is it not? And just sitting there doing nothing, twiddling my fingers and looking around is, of course, not nothing either. And so, where does that leave us?

IMO, it leaves us doing anything at all, provided there is no effort involved, provided we are not 'trying' to do it. And for me, this brings me right back to the quintessential advice from the Mahasiddha Tilopa in his famous words of advice, which is:

"Relax, as it is"

And so, my understanding of 'doing nothing' is simply letting go, which I like to refer to as my 'letting it go on', whatever that is, if ONLY because everything 'IS' already going on. As if we could stop it!

And so, no matter how and how often we go around and around, there we are. And to do 'nothing' is as

simple as letting go and relaxing 'as it is', as all the great dharma masters keep pointing out.

In other words, doing nothing it is not somehow to suffer boredom, although we should investigate boredom, but rather to give up any efforts whatsoever and simply relax. Whether we can do that or not is another question. Can we?

If not, how do we learn to relax without making an effort to do so? It's like the old phrase "hurry up and wait." It's the same with "hurry up and relax."

There's a whole world of 'relax' out there, if we could just relax. Yet, the way each of us relaxes is individual. Give it a rest! Take a load off. Let your hair down.

Easier said than done.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



SOMETHING ABOUT THE ELECTION

November 14, 2022

I'm 'elected' out, so to speak, but what a trip. I am so grateful that we, as Americans, have pushed back against the threats to our freedom and democracy. We have always been free and not under a dictator or autocrat since our battle with Britain. I'm proud of us for

voting in this recent election to be as we have always been, having the freedom that we are used to.

I grew up with Republican-voting parents, so I was used to having Republican and Democrat presidents. These years I feel more like an Independent, but have always voted Democratic, as I am more liberal than ultra-conservative. Yet, for all those earlier years, I did not distinguish so much whether our president was a Democrat or a Republican. Both were respectable IMO. And they often worked together. Not these last years, of course!

How the parties ended up (as they are today) at each other's throats, I can't say. How did this happen and why are there so many extremists in both parties? What happened to addressing our mutual concerns and together compromising to solve them? Serious problems for our country are being ignored. This constant blocking by the extreme right (and sometimes the left) of important issues for Americans is preventing us from getting things done during this crucial time in history when we need to get them done, like with climate change. Who can deny that?

I feel this recent election proved that both sides are tired of, even sick of, fake anything. It's bad enough we are still struggling from Covid without adding insult to injury such that fair men and women from both sides of the aisle cannot just get on with doing what we can to

address all the issues facing us.

Why are we the people more reasonable and intelligent than many of our leaders? How did that happen? Let's wake up and get back to working together.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



OUR UNIQUE DHARMA PATH

November 16, 2022

There are many dharma practices available. Dharma practices are whatever increases our awareness. Over the centuries, what are called 'dharma practices' have accumulated and are useful, although each of us probably has some of our own as well, rituals that we do that increase our awareness. The practical point of dharma practice is to increase our awareness of what is,

and ultimately develop awareness of the true nature of the natural Mind.

However, it helps to know which dharma practices will best prepare us for recognizing the true nature of the mind. These different dharma practices are each good for a particular reason. In other words, how do we get from the many dualistic dharma practices like the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries, Lojong, and the like... to the few non-dualistic actual meditations like Vipassana, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen? We all must cross that gap.

How does that transition occur, and can we help to precipitate it? I am reminded of the New Testament verse from Matthew, "Straight is the gate, and narrow is the way." And that, IMO, describes the gateway or transition from the dualistic to non-dualistic dharma practices, actual mediation, the very specific and even unique way to practice that has to happen for any one of us to reach "Recognition," the recognition as to the nature of the mind. And this path, unique to us, in dharma terminology, is often called our "yidam." In a word, our yidam is the particular set of dharma practices that actually works to introduce us to the actual nature of the mind.

In order for ourselves to recognize the actual nature of the Mind, for any one of us, this has to happen in just a certain way, a way and order that, as mentioned, actually

works for us, the particular way it works. It can happen in different ways for different people, yet for each one of us it happens in a very specific way, the exact combination that unlocks the block on our awareness of the mind's true nature. The nature of the mind is always right there, in front of us, yet we manage (and have managed) to ignore it and not see it.

In the tradition of dharma I have trained in, this 'yidam' can also be what is called the "Pointing-Out Instructions," those instructions which are pointed out to us by an authentic master, who actually knows how to help us recognize the true nature of the mind for that initial and first time. And, as this pointing-out is itself a realization, it means that once we recognize the mind's actual nature, that realization stays with us and is permanent. We can't not see it once we have realized it.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE QUILT OF MANY COLORS

November 16, 2022

“Even a blind squirrel finds a nut every now and then.” That’s how lucky we can get, sometimes. Yet just as (or more) often, the blind squirrel does not find the nut, and neither do we. Help is needed.

Yet, what is helpful and how do we find that help? For sure, we can do our best to figure it out on our own, and

God knows I have tried, and for many, many years. I did not like the idea of depending on others and assumed that I could (eventually) figure life out by myself, with no outside help.

Of course, I sort of bungled along on my own and found some useful truths. I liken this to making a patchwork quilt, where some squares were there but a whole lot of others were missing. Whatever the case, not enough squares were present in my quilt for me to make out the image they portrayed. I got some things right, but mostly many understandings were missing. I just did not get enough of the picture to 'get the picture'.

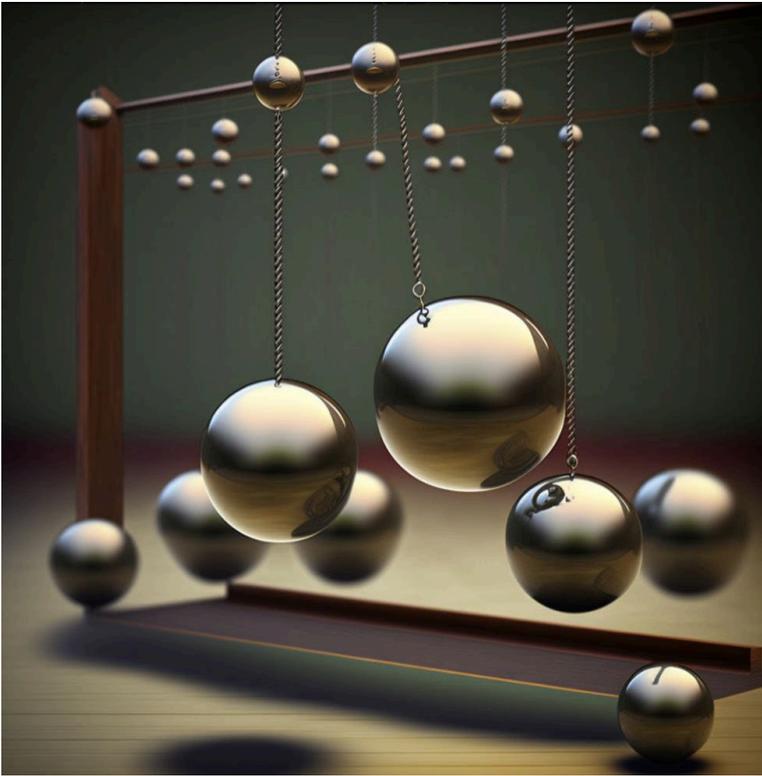
I should mention that I did not like organized religion, having been raised Roman Catholic, gone to Catholic school, trained as an altar boy, and subjected to unquestioning obedience. I had lots of questions. At that point, I assumed that Buddhism was just another religion, which it is not. The dharma is more a psychology as to the true nature of things, rather than some sort of dogma. Dharma is all about awareness, our being aware of what is.

Well, long story short, as I got to better know the dharma and also try some of its practices, I found that most of the dharma teachings were very much similar to what I was coming up with on my own, only more complete. The dharma was a natural fit for my particular psyche, and I mean natural, organic.

Once I understood that the dharma teachings were not monotheistic, something imposed on me from on high, but rather a map of my own internal psyche and nature, I took to the teachings with great appreciation. They actually helped me to better realize my situation and this life I am living.

And so, the point of my writing these blogs, as always, is to share with you what I am learning and attempt to present it so that it is easy to understand the value of dharma and how it can be helpful. It has helped me a lot. Of course, different strokes for different folks, and I know the dharma will not appeal to all of you. Yet perhaps it will appeal to some and be useful.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE CHAIN OF REACTIONS

November 18, 2022

If we are interested in the dharma and wonder where to begin, this may help. Obviously, we begin any type of dharma practice in the here and now, where we are. Many people search their schedules for a time or times to devote to dharma, yet what they imagine useful

dharma practice is may or may not be helpful. Of course, if you can find a stretch of time each day to sit quietly in a room, wonderful. That may help, but while ten minutes or even half an hour or an hour a day may be helpful, it is still kind of just a drop in the bucket. And sitting quietly on a cushion in a corner of the house is not meditation, but rather a quiet time. Learning to meditate is a particular discipline in itself.

Since dharma is all about awareness, like our becoming more aware, how do we do that? There are dharma practices that help us to have more awareness, and here is what I found to be the easiest dharma practice, something we can do all day long if we wish and it will not take away from anything else on our daily agenda that we have to do. We can do it while we work, rest, or do anything at all. And this involves simple reactivity, our moment-to-moment reactions, and becoming aware of them.

This is easy to do because our reactions by definition are involuntary. We react to what we react to without thinking. Often these have been called knee-jerk reactions. Events happen and we react. Awareness of our own reactions can be of great importance in dharma training.

For one, we don't plan reactions. They just happen. And they happen quite spontaneously or naturally while we are in the midst of whatever we are doing, taking no

time out of our schedule. In fact, reactions impede our schedule and admit to being examined.

And since our reactions are already unavoidable, we have no choice but to experience them in the course of our day. And since they happen by the hundreds and thousands in a day, very tiny ones like I don't like that tie you are wearing, we have an opportunity for this kind of dharma practice all day long. We can put in hours and hours of dharma practice rather than ten minutes or a half hour of sitting on the cushion.

And the technique could not be easier. All that is required is to become aware when we react and do this religiously. We realize we have reacted, take note that this is 100% our own reaction, and then just drop it. We don't dwell on what caused the reaction, the content, which can take care of itself. We just note the reaction, drop it, and move on.

I have found that thinking about the why and what of any reaction (the cause, response, etc.) becomes just another distraction rather than being instructive. Just note the reaction, acknowledge that it is our own reaction, and then leave it alone and go on with whatever we are doing.

You will find that the reaction itself includes more than enough of the content of the reaction, what it is about, and so on. We don't need to make it a train of thought

and then ride that train. Just acknowledge this as our reaction and drop it. Move on.

What can result from this reactivity practice is that by doing this observation of reactions regularly we gradually tone back the reaction and in time learn to respond appropriately rather than react in a knee-jerk fashion. By responding appropriately, we regain all the wasted energy we put out by reacting involuntarily. Our awareness just begins to clear up and our mindstream become contiguous rather than be an endless chain of interruptive reactions.

This is a very powerful and efficient form of dharma practice and can be accumulated in a quantity that is meaningful. And, after a short time, reactivity practice becomes almost automatic, gently smoothing out the segmented string of constant interruptions that involuntary reactions involve.

There you have it, a simple but profound form of dharma practice that accumulates a lot of hours and serves to clarify our mindstream. Give it a try and see how it goes.

REACTIVITY TRAINING

Here are several articles on Reactivity Tong-Len, for those interested.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=373&sid=d6d634b8669187d569943453da151098>

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE WIND TUNNEL OF TIME

November 20, 2022

I don't want to rain astrology on you, yet it's not going to hurt for you to at least understand something of what astrology comes from and why people like me consider it. Let's just take one planet, in this case an important one astrologically, the planet Saturn or Time. In the

dharma, the empowerment of the wheel of time (Saturn) is the Kalachakra, typically an empowerment that takes a week or more to offer. I took the Kalachakra empowerment from H.E. Jamgon Kongrul Rinpoche in Toronto 1990.

If it troubles you to consider a planet, then just think of Saturn as natural law, like the law of gravity and time. We don't break nature's laws; they break us. We all have to consider that each and every day.

Saturn is like a wood planar, a wood shaper that is adjusted to produce a certain piece of molding. Any wood presented to this shaper has no alternative but to pass through, and then only where it conforms to the desired or possible shape as set by the limits of the metal bit. All other wood is shaved away. In this analogy, Saturn is that limiter and we are the wood. We are shaped by natural laws.

Eternity or truth dictates the limits, and Saturn is the shaper or test of form. When we talk about "getting straight" or "getting in line" or "in tune," we are talking about getting within the control that already is. In this sense, Saturn helps to determine the shape of things to come. All of these Saturnian or natural laws working together: form.

Saturn is most simply the system of natural laws, the functioning of which determine what is possible in this

material world (such as mentioned, the law of gravity) — the laws that hold things in place, the walls that make homes possible. Saturn is the laws that govern the forms things take, as well as (simply put) the form things take. The forms things take is only the form things are taking (the process). Saturn represents those laws to which we each will be (and are) physically determined. Saturn is the form to which we each must submit before our evolution or unfolding may take place. Without that folding of form, there can be no unfolding, no turning inside-out and outside-in..

Saturn is also the laws against which we may ram our head, until such time as we learn, by feeling our way, to walk around or even to build upon them, to count on these laws. Saturn is literally where we are bound to learn. It is simple: as mentioned, we don't break nature's or Saturn's laws; they break us if we go against them.

To put it in astrological jargon, Saturn is the test of a lifetime and equally a lifetime of test. We are subject and tested by these laws until such time as we learn to use these laws in our own behalf and put them to use working for us. Saturn has also been likened to Satan by the religious. We rise above Satan or Saturn in proper use and obedience to the physical laws. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." Handling Saturn is the province of Jupiter, the lawyer and guide through Saturn.

Saturn is where we come to grips with ourself and thus first learn of spirit. Saturn shapes the end to which we are tending, but also affects how we tend to get there. "Call what carriage as you may your hearse," for Saturn holds you together, as much as it may appear to hold you back. That is the general idea of Saturn, astrologically speaking.

And so, when it comes to form, some awareness of basic aerodynamics makes sense. It's practical to at least consider it. And while it is easy to see how we must conform to physical laws, like the law of gravity, it is not so obvious when it comes to inner, mental, and psychological laws. Out of sight, out of mind, so to speak.

We have to learn to take the winds of time, not just physically, but psychologically and spiritually as well. Time and life are a vast wind tunnel in which we are launched and must fly or fall. Learning to take the winds of change aerodynamically is what dharma and its practice is all about. Otherwise, or so it seems, we are buffeted about by the least breeze, much less a real wind. And in life, real winds of change do come.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



IMPRINTING: STEPPINGSTONES

November 20, 2022

Essentially, I'm talking about liberation through seeing. Exactly that. Not only can we be liberated through hearing as the Tibetan Book of the Dead suggests, but we can be liberated through seeing as well, and probably by any of the other senses. As a photographer

of nature, I know this for certain because it is the way I was first introduced by the cosmos to what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana). We not only can be liberated by hearing, we can also be liberated by 'seeing' as well. We not only see by our physical eyes, but we also see intuitively by inner visions.

What is called a vision is not some image or cartoon picture up in the sky of our mind, but a moment of truth, truth here being a sense or moment of extreme vividness or reality, such that it imprints itself in our mind. The unforgettable-ness of that vividness is a vision, a permanent imprint. The imprint of a vision is often so deep that we can't think who or what we were before it took place. When we try to think of who we are, we end up thinking about that time and its imprint. That's who we are... as far as we know.

And so, one important point is learning to recognize when we have had a vision. Of course, a vision should stand on the feet of how it imprints us. If we don't know when we are imprinting, having a vision, then we have already missed a step, IMO. Most folks don't know what a vision actually is or dare to be certain of it.

To me, visions or imprints are like steppingstones bridging the murky waters of life. It is best to stay with our visions when we can, that which deeply imprint us, as they seem to best define our path. What I am saying is that first we have to be able to recognize when we are

in an imprinting or visionary moment and learn to trust it. And second, we have to remember these imprints and decide as best we can what kind of map these imprints describe for us because that is our path, at least as to where we have been. And studying that map of imprints may help us to see where this path of imprints points as to a future.

This should not be too difficult because our vision-imprints are deeply memorable and important to us. We just have to recognize them when they take place and, more importantly, learn to trust them to help point the way to the path we already are on and beyond.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE MIDNIGHT SUN

November 21, 2022

Here I am not talking about the light of the Sun, or any worldly light. I am talking about the inner light. And to make sure we are on the same page, just close your eyes and imagine any scene. I am talking about the light that LIGHTS the images in the movie of our mind.

It's there, lighting up life, but we just have never looked at it directly. It's not that we could not see it if we looked, but rather that we have ignored it from beginningless time, including through all our rebirths. We have never seen it, never looked directly at it, yet still, it is there. That's what the dharma texts tell us.

It's of the nature of Samsara, this cyclic world existence in which we find ourselves, to not look into or at this inner light. IMO, our being obscured from the light is pretty much an accurate definition of Samsara. Obscurations prevent us from looking directly at the light of the mind. These obscurations are too opaque or thick to see through. We seek transparency, that is, if we can stand to look right into the inner light, which we have never done until now.

And so, you see the problem. It's not that we could not look at the light of the mind, but rather that we don't know how to or are sure that it even exists, although it is what lights up our life and dreams as well. Wherever you are, what do you think lights these words you are reading this moment? It is the light of the mind, of course, yet we live and have always lived in the shadows, where the light does not shine. As they say, look to the light!

If we removed all of the obscurations that cloud our mind, we would be left with just that bright light shining

in the otherwise darkness of the mind. As the Tibetan teachings state, even the light of a single match can dispel the darkness of innumerable eons.

The dharma is about removing what obscures the light.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



SHINGLES AND THE PHENOMENOLOGIST IN ME

November 22, 2022

I am nothing if I am not a phenomenologist, someone who studies his own mindstream and attempts to understand it. As for the sudden onset of shingles, here is how that is going once I was able to get some

medicine for it. For those of you who have never had it, shingles is very painful. Very.

At this point, after some days, I can feel the medicine taking hold of my body. I can smell it coming out of my pores. Shingles appear on one side of your body and not the other, much like a stroke chooses sides. The doctor I met with had never put those two (shingles and stroke) together.

In my case, it is the right side. My right hand feels like I have a tightfitting but crude leather glove on it, one that is difficult to articulate, or another way of describing it is that the hand has advanced arthritis. Also, for some reason my right hand is cold, while the left is warm. I tend to run warm most of the time, so the cold hand is unusual. However, I don't have a temperature.

And so, the first sign of relief due to the medicine is that my right hand "thawed out" and returned to its normal elasticity and it also warmed up. And gradually my whole right-side stopped reacting with stabbing pain and the entire rash running down that side and back began to fade... some. However, the shooting or strobing pain is slower to go away, but it also has begun to normalize and step into the background, yet it is still there enough to make me move with caution from fear of setting it off...cascade style.

NEXT DAY

The stabbing pain is gone, but as the system contracts to withdraw, the whole thing has become like a large extended virtual scab running up and down my right arm and side with a dull pain that hurts in a new way. It is more constant. I don't mean an actual scab on the outside of my body, but a virtual scab inside it, pain in one large piece. It grows less with each day but is still very much present as it begins to contract.

I am managing it with Ibuprofen when I have to and with patience, which I never seem to have enough of. Still, I find myself looking to take a nap or sleep because when asleep I somehow step out of that painful arena if only for a while. Otherwise, I try to keep to my schedule. I do my daily physical exercises, although with caution, so as not to irritate the welts or friction them.

However, shingles are a constant reminder that they are there and in force. One has to wait them out, which is a matter of days with medicine, not hours, a discipline that cannot be avoided. No choice.

ANOTHER DAY YET

The contracting of the whole shingles enchilada, so to speak, is itself painful because now it is like a solid piece, such that any shiver, chill, or physical reaction sets off a dull pain that can also throb or strobe. No, the stabbing pain is not there, but that entire side of my body aches.

Lots of fun.

Every intake of breath demands a little reaction of pain from the shingle-mass and there is no choice but to get used to it. It is no wonder folks don't like this condition. I see that shingles is going to take it's time leaving. When I looked that up in the descriptions, it says that it can take a matter of weeks up to a lifetime to go away. That's sobering.

TODAY

And now its Monday. I seem to be improving. The overall effect of the shingles is contracting, getting smaller, yet at the same time that contracting mass aches like crazy, requiring some Ibuprofen to help my mind let go and relax, and stop involuntarily reacting to the pain. It's getting better, and feels better overall, although it is later in the day when I get tired that it talks back.

My daughter Anne and her two daughters, Emma and Josephine, arrive for a multi-day stay, so that will give me something else to focus on other than the shingles. I am not contagious.

TUESDAY

Middle of the night, but I am up as I always am. My daughter Anne and her daughters Emma and Josephine

arrived and are settling in. Great to see them. I continue to nurse the diminishing shingles with Ibuprofen, medicine, and naps. This is the last day for the medicine, yet the whole thing still throbs and strobos with pain, only less pain than before.

And for extra fun, the furnace next door at our dharma center failed, which because it is winter, means we have to keep the pipes from freezing. Working on that, and it will either take one day for parts to arrive or up to a week for a repairman to find time to help us. I was hauling electric heaters around and my shingles did not like that.

"It never rains, but it pours."

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



DHARMA PRACTICE IS JUST THAT, 'PRACTICE'

November 23, 2022

A template is something we can use as a guide, that puts us into the general ballpark but not on home-plate. The dharma is filled with templates. Anything called a dharma 'practice' is a template, a general guide, and we

have to fill in the blanks with our effort and actually practice it. Practice is not the result of practice. It is best not to confuse the two.

Trying to emulate a dharma practice or template does not usually get us too far, but there is little alternative, other than access to an authentic dharma teacher who can help us fine tune the practice template to our particular needs. Many of us are just on our own, trying to figure it all out. How do we 'practice' dharma?

Is practice just a form of pretending or 'sounds like this'? Of course, we have the old saying "Practice Makes Perfect," yet how does that relate to dharma practice and where does the crossover point between practicing meditation and actually meditating come in? Is it like a kid learning to ride his first two-wheel bike, perhaps using training wheels or dad pushing them until they can just cruise out on their own?

I know from experience that we can practice meditation for a very long time and still not just meditate. Who is going to help us and how can we help ourselves? Let's start off by emphasizing that dharma is a do-it-yourself project from the get-go. No one can do it for us, and this by definition. We have to turn the wheel of the dharma on our own, each of us.

Since that is a given, how do we get from the template or practicing of dharma to the resulting ability to stop

just practicing and meditate without any training wheels? The essential, but often invisible, ingredient in all this is 'awareness', our becoming aware. That's the whole gist of the dharma in a nutshell, awareness.

And it is important to say, to point out, that this famous dharma quote comes into play, "In the midst of experience, realization can arise." Here it might help to say, 'In the midst of meditation practice, meditation can arise.'" It happens, but not all that easily for many of us.

For example, I practiced Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) for 32 years before I actually meditated, trying to concentrate on a little object like a stick or a stone, and that it was only when I realized that I already knew how to concentrate, based on my career as a software programmer, while my 'trying' to concentrate sitting on the cushion in practice, was like trying to salt the salt. You can't do that. I not only knew how to concentrate, but to concentrate enthusiastically and with interest at that. I became aware of an ability I already had and stopped trying to force myself to concentrate on something I was not interested in, like focusing on a little stone or twig. It is axiomatic that in dharma training, realization comes from the inside and not from the outside. We seldom trust ourselves enough to look within.

I could already concentrate on things I was totally interested in. It was when I realized this, that I clicked in

to using this same skill with meditation. My ability to focus snapped into place and like the kid trying to ride a two-wheel bike, I was meditating and no longer practicing meditation. I was riding the bike.

It was this "Aha!" or crossover point that I actually had to cross over, yet it took me a very long time to do that. I wish I had had someone locally here, on site, to prompt me on a daily basis, or point out to me the situation and how best to work with it.

Eventually, I got the point and things fell into place or snapped together, and I was meditating, yet I can't help but believe it should not have taken me 32 years to reach that point. My guess is that a great amount of time was wasted that I could have used to make better progress.

It may help to realize that working with any dharma practice you are working with is a template and that the practice as it is given you is just a rough ballpark idea of the dharma experience that can come from that practice. It says it right there in words. It is a dharma 'practice' and not an exact description, much less the result that can come from that practice.

Just rote practicing the dharma technique or template, like flint striking stone, does not guarantee it will start a fire. It could, perhaps should, but if we strike wrong, a fire can be a long time coming. Yes, we have to practice

because those instructions we have been given, yet turning those rote instructions into a living realization takes a bit of magic along the way, requires the end of practice, and the beginning of actual meditation... meditating.

We all know the saying "Every which way but loose." Well, dharma practice must be loose enough to eventually strike fire, come alive, and be realized. That's living dharma and that is not rote or simply practice. In other words, do that practice, but push the edges this way and that until, one day, you experience and realize what that practice must eventually lead to, actually meditating... vividly.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



SELF-SECRET

November 24, 2022

[Of course, Happy Thanksgiving to everyone. We are not making a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, vegan or otherwise, but rather are making Tibetan Momos, which we learned to love while traveling in Tibet, with all that entails. We ARE having homemade apple and pumpkin pies.]

This world, in fact the entire creation, taken as a whole, in its entirety, must be unconditionally accepted and posited just as it is, at which time the whole creation itself becomes transparent and workable, a window into and through which we can see, and the light of realization can travel. Let me rephrase this.

We can see through (or beyond) ONLY when everything is unconditionally accepted, every last thing, including the horse we rode in on, so to speak, and even then, the 'beyond' spoken of is simply knowing for certain that there is nothing beyond, that we are full and complete as is. We are perfectly reflected and fully extended, unconditionally. This is the purpose of meditation.

In dharma-speak, this unconditionality pertains to the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen, each of which require complete immersion on our part, to the exclusion of any doubt or 'second thoughts'. Through these non-dual immersive practices, we can realize the extent of what is, but don't have words and are unable to put this into words. Dharma 'realization' cannot be described.

In other words, we can go there; we just can't talk about it. Even when we return to dualistic thinking, we can't find the words, try as we might. The great dharma practitioners have tried to express the non-dual wisdom for centuries, knowing they never will succeed, yet

hoping to at least offer a taste, and give some flavor of the non-dual meditation states and process.

In summary, we can, through non-dual meditation, realize the full extent of the nature of the mind; we just can't talk about it or put it into words. We are speechless.

Nevertheless, as my first dharma teacher used to say to me, 'Michael, this is it'.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



MORE OR LESS EFFORT

November 25, 2022

Looking in a mirror, can you see the effort that is etched in your face? The effects of undue effort leave a trace on our body. To be clear, I am not saying that we should not make an effort. I am saying that aside from perhaps using effort to begin things and get started, that prolonged effort with no results is itself an obscuration

that then has to be removed, a kind of an insult to injury. We stain ourselves.

The injury is continued effort with no result. A good question is: how do we make an effort and not be damaged by that same effort? And the short answer is by relaxing that effort until it is none. Either that or we get results. However, we overshoot with effort more frequently than fail to make any.

And we all know, when we master a skill, whatever we are 'trying' to do, that it becomes effortless, meaning it's like letting out the clutch on a car, if anyone remembers clutches. We make just enough effort to smoothly let the clutch out, and not too little to not engage or too much to jerk the car. Effort is like that, something that has to be monitored.

In dharma, effort is a big deal, both the lack of it, but especially making too much effort. And so, if it is hard to get up to making an effort, too much effort, just spinning our wheels, is equally or more damaging. What are we supposed to do when we make an effort and get no results? Are we supposed to keep trying, keep pushing, and for how long?

Of course, finding a mentor, an authentic dharma teacher that we can actively work with is the best solution I know of. Lacking that, I find it quite a challenge just how much or how little effort to make. We

are damned if we do and damned if we don't, as they say.

With an authentic teacher monitoring us, we can learn just how much effort is required to achieve results in learning to meditate. Too little and we have not tried, too much and we risk staining or burning our mindstream, resulting in not wanting to practice or try further.

Our dharma practice is very precious. It is the differential between Samsara and Nirvana. Great care as regards effort is essential, so that we don't stain our practice with effort.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



TOTAL IMMERSION

November 25, 2022

Tomorrow can't bring any more than today. What are we waiting for? Like the old saying, "Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today." The here and the now is literally where it is at. In the light of the present moment, it is always right now.

It's no wonder that all the pith dharma texts point out the present moment and suggest that we not alter the here and the now, but rather accept and relax in it JUST as it is. We have to relax enough to get our arms around Samsara, this constant creation of ours.

And that acceptance involves immersion, the total loss of our duality in a sea of non-duality. As the poet Edwin Arnold put it "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

And its more than just ducking for apples, this immersion. It's becoming like a fish and breathing within the non-duality of the more advanced forms of meditation –Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen.

The non-dual meditations are the waters of Lethe, in which we forget the river of duality and, like the poem above, slip into the endless shining sea, and are One.

Why else would all these great saints meditate? Certainly not for what those who 'practice' meditation call 'meditation'. No way. Actual meditation is exactly what the poet said, the dewdrop slips into the shining sea. There is nothing else remotely like actual meditation.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE FUTURE OF THE PRESENT

November 26, 2022

At 81 years old, planning for the future does not make the sense it did when I was 25. There is no point in planning too far ahead. In a way, the future has become the present moment. Planning for right now is quite enough.

For example, take my battling with shingles just now.

The pain and discomfort of shingles is a full-time job. It's hard to ignore and there is not much whistling in the dark going on around here.

And I especially like having all the latest gear, yet my intention to learn to use it begins to take on a sense of the absurd, since I already have more than enough to occupy myself right here and now. And my favorite mistake of all is imagining that if I can just sort out my current state of health, there is clear sailing to be had ahead, a return to normal, and a bright future. There may be some, but health at my age is a declining asset and is not about to completely clear up and fly right. That has not happened so far, and is not likely to in the future, such as things are. The distractions of the present pretty much eclipse future anticipations. They tie me down.

In fact, it seems I am gathering around me those totems and hobbies that I like to pursue, but not pursuing them. I can't seem to get around to it of late. In fact, everything is congregating in the present moment, taking up all the oxygen in the room with distractions, reminding me of the finale at the fireworks, only not as bright. I wrote this poem some time ago that kind of addresses all this:

SHORT TIMER

I am older now.

I have less time,
But more of it.

I finally have enough,
Of whatever I was saving for,
To make it to the end.

For as the end draws near,
What I need to get there,
Grows less with every year.

So, I can take a break,
A chance to look around,
To see how you are doing,
To know where you are bound.

We could even walk together,
But here is what is tough,
I am only going to the end,
And that is close enough.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE CHEESE STANDS ALONE

November 27, 2022

The richness and treasures, the insights of our past and spiritual path seldom are ever fully plumbed and exhausted. That's why we keep going back to them again and again in our mind. They are evergreen. These wells of personal insight are as useful today as they were fifty or sixty years ago, if we can remember them, and I

can because they are such deep imprints. In fact, the sum total of these deep spiritual insights we each have makes up our spiritual biography, something quite distinct from our mundane biography. The Tibetans have a separate spiritual-biography, a hagiography, that is called a "Nam-Thar." We all have a Nam-Thar, if we would but bother to collect and document the deep imprints we have treasured all this time.

Samsara, this endless world of cycles we find ourselves caught up in is, IMO, a bit like Swiss Cheese, coherent enough, yet filled with holes that are nothing but emptiness, that if examined, will not stand up to scrutiny. Yes, Samsara hangs together as a piece, because for each of us it is built around our individual direct attachments, all which naturally appeal to and distract us, yet this same Samsara that ever tightens its grip on us admits of deconstruction if approached with the right view. We can learn to deconstruct and take Samsara apart piece by piece.

And that 'right view' are the nondual meditations like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen. These nondual meditations can dissolve Samsara like water dissolves mud. However, learning and mastering the nondual-meditations requires training for most of us. Samsara, by nature, is dualistic (like having crossed our eyes) and since this is all we have ever known up until now, merging that habitual dualism down to its essential unity (uncrossing the eyes) is foreign to us, at least at

first. We have never done it.

The non-dual meditations (Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen) are nothing but a solution in which the habitual dualisms of Samsara naturally will melt, that coupled with an inner spiritual blowtorch that will see to this by removing our karmic attachments one by one, often quite painfully. We each paint ourselves into our own corner.

The pith dharma teachings tell us that Samsara itself is endless and individual, filled with every mistaken concept and attachment we personally have accumulated. Reversing Samsara's grip on us takes awareness and lots of it, and that is best developed over time with great care and attention on our part. Where do we start?

A good beginning first step is to connect-the-dots of all our deeper spiritual memories and imprints, all the way from the past to the present, and by that read about our own inner story, our Nam-Thar or spiritual biography. Our Nam-Thar is also a roadmap that points out in a very clear direction just where we are headed and how we got to where we are today. IMO, this is worth a little work on our part, to create at least a list of what has moved us deep down, a map of our spiritual journey.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



November 28, 2022

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

The poet Wordsworth wrote in his poem "Ode on Intimations of Immortality..."

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!"

For me, the dharma teachings are more to the point, and their ode might be something like 'Intimations of Mortality' in which impermanence plays a key part. I always say to myself that impermanence is the smelling-salts of the dharma. Take Saturn, the 'Lord of Time' for example.

I don't question the role of Saturn in our lives, those first 30 years it takes Saturn to circle the zodiac and return to its original place in the zodiac at our birth, a time when the body forms, defines itself, and Saturn delivers us our body formed and finished, full and ready to disincorporate and begin leaving the body. "Never trust anyone over thirty" is the old refrain, and my first dharma teacher used to say that ice melts at 33 degrees and Christ died at 33 years of age.

Something happens around thirty years of age. It is not called the 'Prime of Life' for nothing. The Western esoteric teachings tell us that we begin to leave the body after the first round of Saturn is finished forming us at 30 years, actually 29.4 years of age, the heliocentric cycle of Saturn. As to when we realize that we are leaving the body, people can become aware of this sooner, later, or never. I have studied this climactic event and lived it. I went through the return of Saturn to its birthplace with my

eyes open, thanks to my first dharma teacher who schooled me. We could (perhaps should) talk about this sometime.

However, what I would like to tease into the open here is that the teachings of the dharma don't support or agree with Mr. Wordsworth or with much of western religion, at least one core value. The Western esoteric tradition seems to follow Plato's allegory of the cave, suggesting that we come from a rarified and holy state, but due to Original Sin, we have fallen from on high and have to somehow work ourselves back to purity. Meanwhile we have been thrown out of a paradise which we can't even remember.

The Dharma does not echo Plato or agree. Instead, the Buddhist view is that we never knew, and have yet to realize and be aware of the nature of our own mind and partake of it consciously. Nor did we pass "GO" and collect original sin, which we have to somehow work through and out of. We never knew and still don't.

We are ignorant of enlightenment or realization, but we are not encumbered by sin, original or otherwise. Karma we accumulate, yes, but not just because we have somehow sinned, but perhaps because we have not done things right or correctly. We don't know how, but we can learn. This is kind of good news, IMO, to divest ourselves of the cloying sins of western

religions. As a young person, I never identified with 'Original Sin'. Who would?

With the dharma teachings, we start with a clean slate, or rather a slate that contains our own karma to be worked out. And with some training, we can work our karma out and at least stop accumulating more karma. It changed my life when I realized that I was not doomed by my Catholic upbringing, but was a free agent, able to turn the wheel of my own dharma. All I had to do was learn how to turn that wheel, which, perhaps very slowly, I am.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



ALL CLEAR

November 28, 2022

The endless blast of nature living that we call silence.

Wherever we are, however we are, is enough, and it is here right now. There could not be a better place or better time than this present moment, meaning there is nothing wrong with right now.

The pith dharma teachings say: as to the nature of the present moment, this moment right now is as good as any moment that has ever been or will be. Even the weight of any obscuration we may have or carry, if we are clear about it, is not just an obstacle, but very much a part of what we have to work through, something that has to be embraced in its entirety for us to be whole. We have the opportunity to enthusiastically accept this moment right now, just as it is, warts and all, and work with it. In fact, this kind of acceptance is the fuel of enlightenment, transforming Samsara to nonduality.

We can see through all of that, meaning here that the whole of 'all of that' in its entirety, itself, is a window which we can see through, look through that at nothing more than looking through at nothing more than that. This cascading re-cursivity is a clarion call, an all-clear signal, a pure throughput.

Hear the sounding of the Sumburgh Foghorn at 1:45 minutes.

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

And there is the Barbra Streisand song 'On A Clear Day You Can See Forever.'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nz5DLO8fclA>

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



WE ARE THE ONES WHO NEVER GOT IT

November 29, 2022

This world in which we all live, in dharma terms, is called Samsara and it is characterized as an endless cyclic existence. Where it all leads is where it is leading which is a process not a place or static state, and with

Samsara, it is around and around in circles or spirals, but yet to no place or end to ever arrive at. In the midst of that confusion, we have the 'dharma'. What are we to do with that?

The practical value of dharma is to first develop awareness as to the nature of this Samsara we are so habituated to, become aware of that, and then to carefully deconstruct or short-circuit Samsara incrementally. At least that is how I have understood it.

This world of repeating cycles, which, as mentioned, in dharma terms is called Samsara, is endless. It goes on and on, round after round. Of course, we are doing our best to negotiate it and to survive in it and have been for a very long time, or so the dharma teachings say. In fact, the teachings state that we have never known anything else but Samsara, a concept that required some pondering on my part. Think about that.

I was raised with the Christian concept of 'Original Sin', believing that we once were pure and whole, but thanks to the Garden of Eden, we ate that apple, and fell away from a purified state, and have yet to somehow regain that, perhaps through salvation of one type or another. The dharma teachings, however, do not support this concept, which was news to me,

and I asked Rinpoche about this, over and over, to make sure. Rinpoche was very clear about this.

The dharma texts state that we, each of us in Samsara, have never known the true nature of the mind, not in all the innumerable lifetimes we have (or so it is said) lived. Because of that, we are not 'sinners', but are blameless, just ignorant, having somehow managed to ignore and not see the mind's actual nature in all of this time. As Rinpoche put it to us, "We are the stragglers, those who have yet to get it." It has to be grasped and understood that we have never known anything other than Samsara, and that has been home, our everything up until now. No wonder we are habituated to it.

And the dharma and its training are the remedy for that, gradually helping us to remove layer upon layer of obscurations that have been there virtually forever. In that sense, we slowly become increasingly aware and wake up through the gradual process of realizing the true nature of the mind.

Realization is like uncrossing our eyes.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]

THE ETERNAL PRESENT...

...

December 1, 2022

and the endless freight train of linear time.

Welcome to December, as we head downstream to the turnaround of the year, not January 1st, but rather the Winter Solstice (December 21, 2022 4:48 PM EST), the point where the Sun begins to move northward toward Spring and the return of the light.

As for New Years, Yes! I would like to turn over a new leaf, at least as far as physical ailments go. How do these physical challenges like shingles, strokes, etc. affect my dharma practice?

Well, whatever is of the moment becomes my dharma practice, plain and simple. For me, I always bring whatever is happening in the moment to the path, my dharma practice, and physical challenges like pain are front and center, because there they are, front and center. Who needs anything else to work with when we have something like shingles and its pain. I sure don't. Work with and hopefully work through whatever is on the mind in the moment. There are some caveats.

Trudging through these shingles, everything seems old and cloying, like been there, done that. It's difficult to shuffle off the old skin and expose the new, like gasping for air. It is a discipline to not react and recoil from the whole thing. However, there is nowhere to run, like the old saying:

"I ran to the rock to hide my face,

The rock cried out 'No hiding place'.

The rock cried out 'I'm burning too,

And want to go to heaven the same as you’.

And nothing is over quickly, but everything seems dragged out, prolonged, and indeterminate. And I’m left counting the seconds, which is meaningless in the nonduality of eternity.

However, I am aware that I am aware....

Nondual meditation’s infinitely regressing hall of mirrors is simple recursion. That’s the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, or rather the tip of the pyramid, your choice. Either way, the tip of the top. We can’t embrace more than the whole enchilada. We can, however, embrace the whole enchilada exactly. To do that takes all of us, including the ‘watcher’, and whatever dualisms we are enmeshed in. In nondual meditation we are all in, and we can’t be in two places at the same time. What a relief!

What’s different or ‘extra’ is the duration of the present moment, which actually is not momentary, as passing moments are supposed to be, but rather extended and infinite. The whole thing is infinitely extended, the stretching of a certain subtle something that can only approach ‘being’. It’s called ‘becoming’. And that’s too new to be old. On top of that, we have no choice but to roll with it, what is permitted. And so, we do. It is important to understand that this eternal moment can be accessed by the nondual meditations such as Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen. It is worth learning this form of meditation, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]

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<http://michaelerlewine.com>

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”





GETTING PERSONAL

December 2, 2022

What if someone is not easily offended? I have met rinpoches who don't seem to be easily offended by anything. They don't react to personal affronts, but always seem to respond appropriately and with no obvious involuntary or knee-jerk reactions.

I can remember taking Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche to the local college and university to speak. And in the Q&A afterward, college kids who were smart alecks would ask Rinpoche things like "How is your sex life?" and Rinpoche never

blinked but would just laugh and say something like, 'Who me, a fat old man?' He never took offence or showed any involuntary reaction.

Many of us are probably more like pin cushions, reacting and taking to heart whatever barb is sent our way. It was obvious that Rinpoche was inert to reactivity. He was not defensive and did not seem to take anything personally.

Just how do we get personal? What does that entail and why are we so touchy about it? Where is the line we cross that makes an inquiry personal? For starters, we might inquire as to what is a personality? Is our personality private and, if so, just how is that?

This would suggest that there is also some part of us that is not personal, that we don't mind sharing or referring to, something impersonal that is public and obvious. How would we define that? Or is all this just a social norm and convention?

Is it that something is considered too personal if that attribute of ourselves is disliked or considered a detriment? If I get personal with you or you with me, how do we know a line has been crossed? How do we take offense and over what? It's all about 'reactivity'. Are we reactive?

Where does friendly end and getting personal begin? Is it a societal norm that is crossed or does it vary from individual to individual, meaning you can get personal with me, but he or she over there in the corner cannot, without hearing me complain about it? Thus far and no farther.

Obviously, sexuality is a common trigger, separating the acceptable from the too personal. Getting sexually familiar with someone obviously is a sensitive area.

We could also flip this and ask. What makes one personality more interesting than another? A personality is what

happened to a person or choices they made along the way that society later finds 'interesting' or interesting enough to make them stand out or be popular.

Just what is a personality? It appears to be a collection of likes and dislikes that accumulate on us like iron filings cling to a magnet. Our accumulated likes and dislikes and life events amount to our personality.

WHAT IS A STELLAR PERSONALITY

The point here is that one way of looking at our personality is as the result of a series of choices we have made in the past or events that happened to us. Someone who, for whatever reasons, has managed to make five or ten really good choices in their young life often appears as a most valuable and fascinating "person" today. Others may kick themselves for not having made the same choices and try to imitate those choices now, but this is usually just a little too late to bring about the same effect for themselves. Their imitation has not been forged by time and necessity. I believe the die is cast early on.

In other words, there are real practical rewards for developing our instinct for making good choices. What I am pointing out here is that a stellar personality, one filled with many points of light or interest, was made long ago (just like stars in the sky were), not only by natural talent, but through a process of making careful correct choices as well as what was permitted to happen to them in life. And here, "correct" means correct for what the future society will need. Personal attributes are like vitamins that society is going to need down the road. Some have them, some don't.

We may not all be Leonardo-DaVinci material, but we each can learn to use our own mind and intuition to make choices that will bring forth a destiny worth living for ourselves and for society. Choices that we make today, which may seem

very unpopular now and perhaps even separate us from acceptance and popularity, can in time result in a personality that is key or crucial for the society of the future, even precious. This is the idea of the last judgment, personified. It is the final or last judgment that counts.

THAT FASCINATING PERSON

When you meet a really fascinating person, take note of what about them is so fascinating and you may end up with a short list of the significant choices they made, choices that others did not make. They invested their time and energy in ways that have proved useful to society today, although at the time, that choice may not have raised any eyebrows, or perhaps even seemed like a waste of time. This is called having the courage of our convictions or something like that.

Our personality is the most significant subset of all the choices we have made, the things we have cared for and loved, and what we have rejected or hated. If most of those choices are now relevant or interesting to others, then our person appears almost unique. You get the idea. That is how personalities of note are made.

The truth is the future because the truth always wins out in the end because it (by definition) lasts longest. The truth will last until now. We may not have this or that talent, but any of us can learn to choose what is true and authentic for us as individuals. As my first teacher used to say "Michael, it is not true because I say it; I say it because it is true."

It can help to make a short list of what makes up our personality. Is it interesting to others or to society as a whole today? That remains to be seen.

If I do this for myself and my family, I come up with a list like this, choices I made or situations and events that shaped me:

Raised in the country with no neighbors until 6th Grade

Became serious student of Mother Nature early on (6 years old)

Was a born auto-didact. Self-taught.

Hated formal education.

Never finished high school

Have learned to only follow my interests.

Chose not to go to college, although was accepted at UofM with no diploma

Thus, I followed my heart as far as vocation

I became an entrepreneur

Married someone I actually loved

Had home births

Did home education

Never had a babysitter

[Midjourney graphic by me.]

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"As Bodhicitta is so precious,

May those without it now create it,

May those who have it not destroy it,

And may it ever grow and flourish.”





THE TOUCH OF A FEATHER

December 3, 2022

The traditional key element in dharma training has to be increasing our 'awareness', yet I would amend that by stating that along with awareness, we mean an awareness of our habitual reactivity. After all, what are we aware of? One thing that is ever present is our own reactions to this, that, and the other thing. Awareness of our reactivity is a vast opportunity for practicing dharma. And it is so easy to learn.

It is as simple as becoming aware when we react, whether that reaction is to a loud noise or something as subtle as that you don't like the color of a tie someone is wearing. We are very reactive. The important fact is that we are aware of each reaction and take note of it. And by taking note, I mean to note and agree that our reaction is 100% our own and no one else's. Our reaction may be CAUSED by someone or something else, yet how we react is all our own. And after noting this reaction and owning it, just drop it and move on with our life.

There is no value trying to evaluate what the reaction was to or how it went down. That is only solidifying it more, and it is best just dropped and let go. We move on.

And we don't have just a few reactions during a day, but rather hundreds and thousands of reactions, both great and small. The amount of our inner energy that is involved in our daily reactions is huge, enormous. If we can learn to tone our reactions down or tone them back, and instead learn to respond appropriately instead of reacting involuntarily in the traditional knee-jerk fashion, we will gain a massive amount of energy, otherwise lost or expended each day. Our reactions control us and we can do something about this.

I don't know any other dharma practice that is easier than 'reaction toning', plus it does not take up any extra time in our day. Our reactions are going to continue to happen forever unless we learn to stop reacting and start instead to respond appropriately to them.

I see many folks fighting for time to practice dharma on a daily basis, perhaps ten minutes on a cushion here or a half hour of quiet sometime in the day. Yet, with reactivity training, we are logging authentic dharma practice in large quantities, and getting as a result, over time, an enormous

amount of energy back that we otherwise spend and lose
each day to involuntary reactions and the process of reacting.

Even the touch of a feather invites a reaction.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



INTUITIONS AND THE MOTHER MIND

December 4, 2022

I have been writing these daily Facebook blogs since June of 2007, some 15 years. Originally, I was just picking a topic and writing about it, in the same manner as schoolkids do. It was only over time that I segued away from that approach to what I most often use today, which I will now describe for those interested. Most of my blogs over the years have dharma as their subject.

These days, I'm not beating the bushes in an attempt to scare up some ideas for blogs. Ideas do come, but in their own time and more and more I am pulling a blog piecemeal from the

mind itself rather than first determining a theme upon which to then write on.

Instead, using a form of Insight Meditation, I noodle some bit of thought out of the cosmos and perhaps jot it down, almost like a form of automatic writing. I relax deeply and usually more pieces of text follow it and before I know it something like a theme appears quite on its own. Over a short time, I kind of focus the words that come to mind into an article, and by that process just gather the words up into a contiguous piece.

In other words, some blogs just focus themselves into existence, moving from almost random noodling into a respectable blog. They literally shape up and fly right. I facilitate this process, but not so much by conscious thought or conceptualization.

And through this process I manage to discover a larger organized system of dharma that, greater than any single blog, unites all my blogs into a coherent philosophy or View. And while it is recognizable as dharma, it does not seem like textbook dharma, but rather is dharma as realized by me, almost like mixing words and thoughts through the sausage-grinder of my life and out comes one in a long series of related dharma blogs. I am impressed by the continuity and coherence of this simple process. It even gets my attention and I learn from it while I'm writing it.

In fact, I like this form of writing more than picking a theme and writing on it. Instead, if I feel like writing, I attempt to capture this feeling in words, by precipitating words and writing down some of them as small pieces of a larger whole. And then, before I know it, other words appear beside them, words that snugly fit into, before or after, the words I already have written. And so, it goes.

After a while and a respectable number of paragraphs, I squeeze it off, title it, find closure words, and post it here. I always feel a little embarrassed about its quite magical provenance, the way it came about and appeared. I guess I am reading from my own subconscious mind into the conscious form I post here.

Even the tiniest piece of word-thread can be extended into an expression that captures something of the 'real' and, intertwined with relatively compatible sentences, all interlocking quite naturally, becomes an existent aerodynamically-sound piece of writing that I can stand behind and that also says something.

For many years now, I have diligently worked to mix Insight Meditation (a special form of Vipassana) with creative writing and produce writing hopefully worth reading from time to time. And this writing is driven by what in dharma-speak is called Bodhicitta, and Absolute Bodhicitta at that, meaning I seem to have an unrelenting drive to share what little dharma I have mastered with anyone who might benefit from it.

And, through this process, I have lost my interest in the more traditionally organized way of presenting dharma, in favor of the method of writing being described here. It is definitely a form of Insight Meditation, or at least made possible by and through Insight Meditation. Insight Meditation becomes the pen and pathway through which this material appears.

And, having been produced not in the normal dualistic mode of Samsara, but rather non-dualistically, the complete immersion required with Insight Meditation to achieve this removes all obligation to defend what is produced. It seems to have a truth and validity all its own and stands on its own feet. Take it as you find it and for what it is. Useful? Use it. Not useful? Ignore it.

All that I know is that it is a pleasure to create and to share in its production. It may not fit into any imagined mold or standard form of expression, yet here it is, fresh and free of any signature. Or if there has to be some imprint, it is signed by the nature of the mind itself, as vetted by a sentient being such as myself.

Perhaps it remains for me to perhaps be a little more clear as to the writing process if I have not been already. I will attempt to do so.

As a kid I came up writing, based upon a theme and then I write on that theme like many of us do. Now, mix that with my natural tendency to write stream of consciousness, whatever comes into my mind, and work with that as an idea, rather than with a set theme. Well, fast-forward that a few decades and add in many years of dharma training.

Eventually, discovering for myself what is called Insight Meditation of the variety used in the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Mahamudra, the whole ballpark changed. All my dharma training up to that point was in what is called Relative Truth, being dualistic conceptual understanding and its permutations -- intellectual.

Insight Meditation, however, is non-dualistic by nature, meaning it requires full immersion in the process of meditation, with no subject and no objects, but rather a non-dual view and its implications.

With the full immersion of Insight Meditation, we are freed of being a subject in a world of objects and instead are simply totally immersed in the life process. With that kind of immersion, we are not restricted to common grammar, subject and predicate, but instead are one with a View that is all inclusive, which seemingly allows us to intuitively “Grok” or absorb the meaning of things in their entirety, without

having to comment or put those meanings into words. Instead, we get the gist of the idea.

Later, after coming out of Insight Meditation, we may find words that are better than our typical dualistic definitions, if only because they tend to be more poetical or free. Further, by noodling, dipping in and out of Insight Meditation repeatedly, like bobbing for apples, dipping again and again into non-dual mediation, we can describe our meditation experience, or our experiences in meditation in a manner that is fresh and vibrant. We are continually refreshed, moment by moment, with Insight Meditation, thus reminded again and again and again. We can't help but retain something from that experience.

And this process I am describing, is about the most pleasurable state I know of to be in, ever, so I do it as often as I can. It's called nondual meditation, and it has been heralded down through the centuries by meditators. I had to learn it, and it was not easy, because (at least in my case) I could not just do it at will, but eventually I did naturally fall into it, and from that introduction I learned (and continue to learn) to expand and extend it, day by day.

Again, this is meditation, of a particular kind and type, a form of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) to which we have to be introduced by an authentic teacher or by life itself. We have to break down the habitual crush of consonants and vowels in dualistic language and from that squeeze out the juice from which naturally flows a river of direct knowledge that imprints us with its perfume, some of which we can get a whiff after we come out of Insight Meditation.

I wish I could say more, but we all know that traditionally this kind of experience cannot be put into words, but perhaps only can be felt and then expressed outwardly as best we are able. I can say this.

In the pocket... in the groove. That's where I like to be, lost to duality, immersed in the moment, and soaking it in without so much as a thought as a guide, taking it straight from the mother mind, so to speak.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]

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EMBRACING THE MOTHER MIND

December 5, 2022

Well, I've done my best to describe the particular dharma techniques I use, which is what I know to write about. Now to say something about what it took to get there, which is another story, one with a lot more steps to it.

Much has been said and written about what are called in dharma 'The Preliminaries', which I am not going to attempt to cover here. Instead, I am going to go straight away to the transition from The Preliminaries (dualistic dharma

practices) to the realization practices, the non-dual meditation practices, and mastering them, since that is where most people end up stuck, IMO.

I wish I had several stories to tell you, but in my case, I only have one, how this worked for me. That will have to do, and I hope you can gather whatever sense you can from my account.

For me it started with the 10-day yearly Mahamudra intensives held at KTD Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. These started in 1989 and went on for 31 years, a ten-day intensive teaching each year and practice as led by my root lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Margaret and I travelled some 800 miles to the monastery (and 800 back) each year, enough millage to go around Earth's equator more than twice, and most of those years we brought our four kids with us and took care of them while the intensive was happening, not an easy feat.

It was something like the 16th 10-Day Mahamudra intensive, the year was 2005, when I received my first real helpful punch in the gut from those teachings. We were studying a commentary but the great Karma Chagme Rinpoche, called "The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen" as taught by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. It happened to be the year when Rinpoche gave what are called the Pointing-Out Instructions as to the true nature of the mind. Something happened to me during that 10-day intensive that marked and heralded the change that was to come from that most seminal teaching.

I had been given the pointing-out instructions before, in fact, a couple of times. The problem was that those instructions did not stick, did not register, with me, much less precipitate my introduction to the actual nature of the mind and what is called non-dual meditation. Yet, that year, 2005, on one of

those ten days, I finally understood something of key importance for me to understand.

It would be too long and arduous to relate what went down in detail. To put it in a nutshell, at long last I understood that the instructions Rinpoche was giving us as to how to approach the pointing-out instructions, were not to be taken just intellectually, conceptually, as I had been trying to understand them, but rather they required a visceral response at the deepest level, emotionally as well as conceptually.

We have to physically and psychologically explore the mind, not just conceptually understand it. Previously, when I had been instructed to search my mind for various qualities, I had kind of cursorily done intellectually. I had never exhausted myself down to my gut with searching the mind. I had never done that kind of thorough search before, and when I finally did, it was like the tumbler in the lock of time clicked into place, and the vault of inner space opened a crack through which I walked that day. That was what had been missing.

A spark of fire shot into my mind, and when I went home that year from the 10-day intensive, at last I knew what I had to do, and did it. In fact, I did certain practices religiously (so to speak) for three years straight, as hard as I could each day and all of each day. I had received the pointing-out instructions, and they were working in me like a pickle in brine. I could feel myself changing. As mentioned, this took years of work.

I had been working with dharma since the late 1950s, and ever more actively starting in 1974, and then even much more so from 1983 onward. And so, from 2005 to 2008 I was working almost all the time. I can't say I knew exactly why I was doing what I was doing in the way of dharma practice, but intuitively it felt right, and I had begun to find my own

way a bit, get outside of the box, so to speak, use my own intuition, and was doing what made the most sense to me personally.

And then in 2008, fate added some special sauce to the equation, an unexpected ingredient that shook up my world, big time. I had been working as a senior consultant for NBC, as I was a specialist in astrology and NBC owned the largest astrology site online. In 2008 I was one of the speakers invited to UAC (United Astrology Conference) held in Denver, Colorado from May 15 through May 20th. Also present at that conference was my boss from NBC, who told me on the day that I arrived that NBC was laying off a lot of folks, and I was one of them.

This news was a shock that took the wind out of my sails for the conference, as you can imagine. Suddenly I had no job, no income, and had to figure all that out as I tried to negotiate the turmoil of some 1,500 astrologers, classes, and speakers.

In fact, after my presentations, I left that conference early. I had received a call from my wife that His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, was suddenly coming to our monastery in upstate New York as part of his first trip to America, and I was needed to help work with the video crew there. In the state I was in, somewhat disoriented and even depressed, I was glad to leave, and I flew to Albany, New York where my wife Margaret picked me up at the airport and we drove downstate to Woodstock, New York.

Being with His Holiness the Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, was a very bright moment in my dilemma as to what to do as for making a living. I relate all of this, because this loss-of-job situation was an important factor in my dharma evolution. It seems that, from time to time, I need to be shook to my core and held down by fate in order to get my attention. Losing

my role as provider for my family did the trick. I was popped out of whatever groove I had been in.

When I returned from being with the Karmapa at KTD Monastery, my job dilemma was still front and center, but I was not. I was taking it hard and had no immediate ideas as to a solution. So, what did I do?

Well, aside from doing nothing for a while, what I did was to seek refuge, however to my surprise, not refuge in my dharma practice as I would have imagined I would, but refuge in natural history and 'Mother Nature', my childhood love. I simply bypassed sitting on my meditation cushion and reverted to my childhood occupation of devoutly studying Mother Nature. I embraced nature as I had not done for many decades.

I didn't even think about it. At the time I did not give a damn, so to speak, what things looked like to myself or to others. For years, since I was a family man, a businessman, I had avoided spending a lot of time in nature. Of course, I introduced my kids to nature and all of that, but as for me, the lessons of Mother Nature were too harsh for me to spend the time that I used to spend as a youth with her. Mother Nature is a harsh mistress, indeed, and I knew this like the back of my hand.

Yet, in 2008, stunned by the loss of an income-making job, I was out of joint and could care less. Nature had been like my home for much of my youth, and I found myself welcoming Mother Nature and began spending much of the day in her arms, as I used to do as a younger person. I had been jogged out of my usual orbit and was very much more a free radical in the moment. My job situation had broken the mold I had been in and turned me loose. In that sense, I was uninhibited. I did what came naturally, which turned out to be Mother Nature.

Each day, before dawn found me up and leaving the house, and somewhere out in nature, crawling around in the wet grass as the sun came up, taking close-up and macro photographs of tiny beings and small worlds, where something I could see through the camera and lens was still perfect, compared to my real-world situation, which was not so perfect.

I just melted into Mother Nature and watched the sun rise, almost every day that it was not pouring rain, from late May until the frosts of autumn took hold and forced me inside. When was the last time you watched the sun rise, and multiply that by months of doing this and you can perhaps have some idea where my head was at.

As for my dharma practice, which I had religiously done every morning and evening for decades, it was abandoned without a thought. My little shrine stood empty of me, as I was worshiping at the throne of Mother Nature, from whence I had come since I was a child. I was comforted by her presence, even with the impermanence and all. This was not in any way a reflection on the dharma, but rather my seeking refuge in what, in spite of all the years, I knew best and was most naturally comforted by.

You may wonder why I am telling you about all this. And the reason for doing so is that the recognition of the true nature of the mind, which I had worked so hard to obtain for many years, was about to happen. It just did not take place sitting on my meditation cushion as I had led myself to believe it would for all those years. It was out of my conceptual hands, so to speak. I was responding intuitively, naturally, spontaneously.

Instead, all this happened out in Mother Nature, my first love since I was six-years old. In embracing nature, I had let go of everything and found peace and relaxation in nature, as I

mentioned, watching the sun come up each day, while I peered through ever finer macro lenses at micro worlds and tiny critters. These lenses were crystal clear, and I studied lenses like there was no tomorrow.

Anyway, it was out in those early morning times, crawling around, soaking wet in the dewy grass that what I had always assumed would happen on my meditation cushion happened, that I was introduced to the nature of the mind through what is called Insight Meditation. It just happened naturally, spontaneously, and deeply.

Meanwhile, I was out there in the grass peering through the finest lenses at nature's beauty, and before I knew it, I was not just seeing the flower or frog through the camera and lens, I was seeing the whole process of 'Seeing' itself and taking refuge in that, resting in that. "The dewdrop had slipped into the shining sea."

I didn't realize what was happening right away, but I knew that whatever this was, I wanted to do nothing else but this for as long as I could, which explains why I did this all summer until the frost and cold drove me (and protecting the camera) inside as winter came on.

I had managed to invoke Insight Meditation, one of the non-dual meditations, and was for the first time free of conceptuality and the cloyingness of dualistic thoughts. I had not solved my job problem, but I was having a dharma breakthrough, not the first, but the most significant one of my life by far.

Of course, my family must have been wondering what happened to dad, and the neighbors seeing me about town in the open fields with a camera and lens must have wondered what had happened to me. I was not following conventional protocol, but rather responding to an inner need for refuge on my part. This just happened.

I have said something about what happened and how it happened. I would like to say something about what this led to and how I expanded and extended what I was realizing. I will try for this in the next blog.



BEYOND ELABORATION

December 6, 2022

First, something about the situation I found myself in. As mentioned in the previous blog, my introduction to Insight Meditation (Vipassana) happened quite spontaneously, but not on the meditation cushion as I had always assumed it would, but rather quite naturally when I was out in my first love, Mother Nature, and only when I did photography. I was very grateful, indeed, for that, but photographing nature was a warm weather habit, and neither the camera nor I did that well in the cold of winter.

I was thankful that this happened at all, and I believe it would never have happened without the pressure and suffering of having lost my job. IMO, it was like it took a perfect storm to make such a breakthrough possible. Had my life trundled along as it had been, this kind of dharma insight probably would never have taken place. Regardless, it changed my life forever.

That having been said, just what was I to do with this gift of dharma? As mentioned, when autumn came on and freezing temperatures as well, I had to move my gig inside. I also finally understood what had happened to me, thanks to a visit of a close friend of mine, a Tibetan monk who had done two closed three-year retreats.

My friend and I walked together as I explained what happened to me and to my dharma practice. He had no trouble understanding my situation and immediately explained it to me. He said there was even a dharma term for it, which he called “The Lama of Appearances,” and he went on to say that just as we have a living teacher, “The Lama of the Lineage,” so too do we also have “The Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugata,” all of the dharma texts we have studied. In addition, there is also “The Lama of Dharmadhatu,” learning directly from the mind itself, and last, and to the point here, he said what I had experienced is traditionally termed “The Lama of Appearances,” the lama of learning dharma directly from the natural world surrounding us, which is also a perfect reflection of the mind itself. I was being taught, or so he pointed out, by the lama of natural appearances. In my case, Mother Nature.

Of course, I took this in. By this point I had also explained my experience of the recognition as to the nature of the mind to my personal lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and to a couple of other dharma practitioners, including a roshi of one of the main Zen Buddhist centers in America, a person

known to me for many years. They all were very supportive, my lama even saying that my “Recognition” was not a shallow one. Yet, what was I to do about (and with) this recognition?

I will put to the side the fact that my continued attention to the process of photography, my doing it so often, almost every day, aside from being very satisfying from a dharma perspective, also eventually produced some good photo results. I became skilled in photography and I continued to do it in the studio after moving indoors for the winter, so to speak, as best I could. And I could.

Another thing that my lineage lama, my teacher, pointed out to me was that I should continue to extend and expand my recognition to be ever more inclusive. There really was no choice, and the process of extending and expanding our realization is something of great importance, which we could do well to examine in another article.

Yet, what I became busy with, and a question I had, was how do I extend the clarity I now knew from doing closeup photography to other parts of my life. It seemed that I was like a one-trick pony, I could experience this form of Insight Meditation through photography, but not elsewhere. In fact, in the beginning and up to that point, if I wanted to have Insight Meditation, I had to take my camera and go out in nature, which is exactly what I did for some six months straight, watching the sun rise. It did not happen sitting on the cushion. What about that is what I wondered, and I tried to do something about it.

What I wanted is the same clarity and vividness when writing blogs like these that I had photographing nature, so I just willed myself to do that. Nothing happened. In fact, try as I might, and I tried, I could not ‘will’ myself to extend or expand my Insight Meditation one iota, not even a little bit. I

could peer into the world of nondual meditation (Insight Meditation) through the crack that photography provided, but nowhere else.

It was like I was paralyzed and could not even lift my little finger, much less extend my photography-meditation beyond its scope. One thing that HAD changed and this was a good thing, is that along with having been introduced to the actual nature of the mind through what is called in dharma terms “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind, was the fact that I was much more in charge of myself and my dharma practice. Only, I was no longer practicing meditation. I was actually meditating, but through an unusual means, photography.

I had spent decades practicing dharma with no obvious results, much less any witness or acknowledgement and that long time had brought with it a sense of futility, like I was just treating water, waiting. And then suddenly I had some actual support. And what came from that is my realization that through this I finally had a handle on my own dharma practice that was not there before.

And the value of this to me is that I could at last guide myself as to dharma and how I went about it. With these non-dual meditations like Insight Meditation, there is no going back. We can't unrealize what we have realized, just as we can't put the toothpaste back in the tube. In fact, there is only going forward to consider and not the reverse. We can't unring the bell, so to speak. Another way to put this is that we can't go back, but only forward. It's either move forward or let the realization fall fallow and that I was not about to do. This meditation was too wonderful.

What I did do, as mentioned, is concentrate on extending my Insight Meditation to including creative writing and as mentioned, that was no small task. It seemed it was

impossible for me to make any progress in that regard whatsoever. As I said above, this was like being paralyzed, unable to even lift my little finger, month after month. Yet, I never stopped trying because this was really, really, really what I wanted to see take place. And, finally, after over a year and a quarter of concentrated day-to-day effort, I was successful. Amazing!

I don't believe I have ever worked harder at anything than I did with that, spurred on by the realization that I had done this through photography and seeing no reason why I should not be able to extend this technique beyond photography to something I did all the time, like write blogs like these.

And I write this here to let anyone interested know that we can make progress in cases like these if we never give up and pay continued attention to the opportunities at hand. Or perhaps I just matured in my meditation to be able to include other areas of my life or maybe it was just my continued effort to expand my insight to include writing. I can't say. The takeaway for me is that we are (at least I was) very, very stiff and set in my ways and could not just will something to happen and have it be so. However, I was able gradually, over time, to make progress if I was one-pointed enough about my effort. It was extraordinarily difficult.

Looking back from today, it seems that overall, I am becoming more and more inclusive, in general. I have not thought of any other area I want to expand on than writing, and so that's where it stands. That's been enough for me. However, I can "bob for apples" in the nature of the mind (Insight Meditation) and not always write it down, but rather just learn from it, and I do.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



BOBBING FOR INSIGHTS

December 7, 2022

[This is a quick sidebar for those who are interested in the dharma technique I use to write blogs like these. Other details coming in the continuation of the current series.]

The non-dual dharma meditations are not easy to learn, at least in my experience, yet they are very much worth learning, IMO. We all, or most of us, learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) fairly early on, or try to, yet that is still a dualistic form of meditation. Moving beyond that to the non-dual forms of meditation like Vipassana (Insight

Meditation), Mahamudra, and Dzogchen require a real and life-changing transition, as far as I know.

First, we have to know how to actually meditate using Insight Meditation, which IMO is not that easy. And then it is a process of letting ourselves go enough to become immersed in the present moment using Insight Meditation, experience that, and then come out of it back to our usual dualistic frame of mind, and then note whatever we can sense or remember from the immersion, and then do it again and again, like bobbing for apples.

This is a technique that we learn until it becomes automatic. We then tune into the present moment and begin to sample what is there by immersion, perhaps first seeding or pointing our mind with one thought or another. And then, through full immersion in Insight Meditation, that particular thought or concept is clarified through the immersion and often we come out from Insight Meditation with some sense of that clarity and discovery, at least the perfume of it. We then note that experience dualistically and then immerse ourselves again, again, and again, bobbing. That is the technique, if you can learn it. I did, so you can, and with practice learn to do it well and without thought – quite automatically.

IMO, the benefit is a clarity we cannot achieve dualistically, a certainty we have never achieved before, one clear of confusion and second thoughts. There is nothing like this that I know of. This is one of the great blessings of the dharma.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE WHEEL OF THE DHARMA

December 7, 2022

And finally, I would like to spend some time going over what the actual results from dharma practice can do for us, in this case, what it meant for me, since that's all I know for sure.

What is called in dharma terminology "Recognition," is called in Rinzai Zen Buddhism "Kensho," and the meaning is roughly the same, our finally recognizing the true nature of the mind and how it works. The 'how it works' part is very important, because that has to be the key to moving forward

in the nondual meditations, like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen.

The point here is that actually recognizing how the mind works means that we see how to work it and most important just how WE can now work it. That is huge. It changes everything, IMO, because this means that we begin to take over our own dharma practice, which up to this point has to a great degree been our following instructions mostly by rote and not by feeling or our own experience and knowledge. We have not been in the role of guiding ourselves. Suddenly we are.

And this is because we now realize how all this is done and, of course, that we have to do it, because dharma is a do-it-yourself project, yet we have to reach the point I am pointing out here when we grasp how we too can (and must) do this. And we see that we can. That realization is a new and deciding experience.

This is true in part because ‘Recognition’ of the nature of the mind includes a realization that we can now take hold of the steering wheel of our dharma practice and guide ourselves beyond just practicing and on into the realm of actual meditation. In fact, there is no other way I know for this to happen. After Recognition we are able to grasp and turn the wheel of our own dharma, and see to now drive the car of our dharma practice. In other words, our awareness now includes the realization of how we can work the mind we have been blindly struggling with up until now. We can suddenly see. As mentioned, this is a profound shift in perspective. It marks the advent of the nondual forms of meditation, Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen, our initiation into them.

And perhaps most of all, the nondual meditations are not just vivid clarity, they are meaningful and enjoyable. I can’t think

of anything I would rather do than meditate in that way,
within the non-dual meditations.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



AUTHENTIC DHARMA TEACHERS

December 8, 2022

Each of you, of course, will find your own way and path with the dharma, whether you study what the Buddha pointed out or just naturally find your way as best you can. I can explain how it has gone with me, yet you will have your own unique series of steps and practices that will come together perfectly (they have to) to make your journey possible and successful. I have no doubt about that.

As to how long this will take is why I write these blogs, hoping to be of at least some help in encouraging you, not to

say by any means that I am done changing or have arrived at any state or place myself. There is no such thing, only an ongoing process in which we are, each of us, always in the middle of.

They say it takes the dharma about 300 years to come into a country and take hold, after having been introduced. We have been introduced, for sure. It was in the late 19th Century that the dharma got its start here, but probably not until the 1970s that it really picked up steam. So, it is still early; statistics say only about 7% of Americans are Buddhist.

And although it seems to be catching on, there appears to be a great shortage of qualified (authentic) dharma teachers. This means that many folks like us either have no skilled teacher or access to an authentic teacher only on limited occasions. We can, however, do whatever we can to assist one another, which I have always tried to do, while at the same time doing my best to learn the dharma myself. We learn as we go.

I have never claimed to be a dharma teacher, but only someone who tries to share dharma as I know it and have experienced it, as best I can, having come up in a time when there never were enough authentic dharma teachers or even advanced students. I'd like to make it easier for others to not have to go through what I went through.

There are many more students of the dharma these days, practitioners who are practicing. Yet, I don't see a lot of improvement in students, at least not yet. Of course, these Covid years I don't get out a lot, so things may be progressing further than I have not encountered. I feel we need straight talk, lots of encouragement, and instruction in the dharma or in life wisdom. As mentioned, the problem for me has been finding enough authentic teachers at a high level that I can

even recommend. Of course, we each have to become authentic dharma students to receive these teachings, so it's a bit of a Catch-22.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



“RIPENESS IS ALL”

December 8, 2022

For me, some days it can be difficult to find the right groove that is substantial enough and easily available so that I can fit into and flow with it. I tend (and like to) wait until the moment is right, somehow ripe, and get aligned with something that is emerging from the future, if I can. Of course, I know it when I see it and can feel it when IMO it is ripe.

And things are always just what they are, ripe, raw, or rotten, but if I can let things come to me, rather than me always going after them, it seems much better. Expectation is deadly. Every day is another day, but not every day is it obvious as to what I should best be doing in the moment. I look for what is obvious to me as a sign of its necessity.

Waiting and patience is difficult for me, but waiting is what I have to do a lot of, and always have ever since I was young. We can't hurry what requires time, and this by definition. So again, just what are we waiting for?

I am not so much waiting for the right moment to come along as I'm waiting for the 'rightness' in this present moment that is happening now, if there is a difference. As to how I know if it is the right moment, I have to defer to my first dharma teacher, who would answer such a question with "How do you know when you have to go to the bathroom?" We just know.

Things happen in the moment that they happen in, so that must be the right moment for those events. They are permitted. Here for the moment and then gone. As to who I am or how am I a judge of this, go figure. We have little choice but to cope, IMO. Perhaps it's a case of trying to swim after an inner tube and pushing it beyond our reach by the waves of our own swimming.

Do I expect to be understood here in all that I write? Not really, but it would be nice to have a discussion.

Why waste time? Well, why not? Time is a commodity that is spent regardless of what we do with it. Of course, time is precious, yet who wants to live like that, counting the seconds that are wasted if we don't do... do what?

Even if time is precious, or perhaps especially if time is precious, we need to relax in it as it is. What if eternity can

only be found or reached by going between the clock-ticking seconds of time, going deeper into the 'now' or seeing through the present and perhaps we can only do that by relaxing? In that way, clocking time is separative, herding us down the linear line of events, despite all protests. Who is counting?

That would be us, if we can't respond otherwise.

And so, yes, I monitor this moment, the present moment, despite any attempts to do otherwise, looking or waiting for what? Well, waiting for the right moment or some sign or other, even though I know philosophically that no one moment is more right than another, yet perhaps for us it is. I have no excuse or no good excuse.

There are often several things out there bubbling under being present, so perhaps I am waiting for them to pop up enough so that I can fully see and freely choose them as opposed to be subject to them. It's hard to say. A good example, at least for me, is when to do my daily physical exercise. It's out there, waiting to be done, and I have to do it, and sometimes enjoy exercising, and certainly want it to be done, but when?

There is a moment when I finally stop waiting and just go and exercise, so why not do it at first light or even before then? Good question, and I'm afraid I don't have a good answer. Does it make a difference whether I am 'ready' or not? Obviously, to me, it seems to, otherwise I would not be choosy or choosing.

The well of the present moment is filled with options, not all of them clear. We are talking about looking through the present into and toward the future, so some options are foggy. In general, I tend to do things when they come up, right away when I can distinguish them, rather than postpone and put them off until later, like the old saying

“Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” I am all about that.

Yet, with some things that are just somewhat foggy and bubbling under like that, I don’t know whether to seize on them or let them mature in some way I can’t yet put my finger on. So, sometimes I wait while they percolate or whatever, like pickles in brine. They are not ready, or I am not ready for them.

In the present moment nothing is not yet written in stone its already gone beyond, past the present moment. I don’t like the idea of robbing the cradle or picking fruit that is raw and not ripe. As Shakespeare said, “Ripeness is all.” I believe that and act on that assumption.

And so, I constantly examine the present moment, feeling my way, but perhaps unable to distinguish what seems (to me) ripe and what is not, such that I would rather wait for it downstream when I can. Some things are worth waiting for, at least I believe they are, and I find myself hesitant and waiting.

And so, I examine what is present, some ideas or intuitions I feel I am ready (and want) to handle, and some are not clear enough for me to work with. I wait until what was off there in the future perhaps beckoning to ripen in the present and then go with that. And those thoughts (or whatever) that I find myself trying to pull more into the present, I try not to pull at them, and leave them out there in the future to ripen, and save my energy for those I feel are ripe for the pickings, so to speak.

I have no idea if you also do this, yet I assume you do, and that everyone does. Do you?

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE WELL OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

December 9, 2022

I love the old quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald, “In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning.” This happens to me a lot in the middle of the night when I wake up. I don't lie and look at the ceiling. I refuse to. Been there, done that. I get up, work and be busy until I am tired enough to go back to sleep. Sometimes I am not so much physically tired as I am exhausted from whatever I have been doing that day and prefer to attempt to sleep rather than

drone on with my present busyness mood. This happens a lot.

Or I could keep on with whatever I am doing yet feel that nothing more will come of it and I am just going to be treading water hour upon hour. I don't like that either. In other words, sometimes I take refuge in sleep rather than pursue what I am already clear about and just rattling on over and again. I'm done. It's like the old Ford station wagon we had. You turn it off and it runs on for about another minute, before quitting.

For me, everything is an entry into the present that either goes somewhere, even if it just goes down the line, or falls into repeating itself like a stuck record. I don't seem to like endless repetition and going on just to go on. I bail on that and instead try for more sleep.

And I don't want to take an idea and just write on it, like a schoolboy. Instead, I want to be emotionally stirred and propelled to write by a feeling rather than by a concept or thought. I prefer to be moved to write and see what comes out of that rather than take a set concept and try to give it feeling and life. Not interested in that. That's old news.

In other words, for me a feeling for something is like a firehose that can be turned this way or that, producing many intuitions or ideas, while a dry concept is just that, paper thin. I prefer not to pump feeling into what has none. Instead, I wait until I am inspired and have the feeling to write and then I write. Who knows what comes out, and often that is just the case. I start to write one thing, and before I know it I segue into another much more vital instight.

I'm not saying that both views can't work, just that I prefer the inspiration that makes me write rather than the concept I must inspire and somehow give life to an idea. It has to have life for me to respond.

And it's not just laziness on my part that fuels this. Inspiration is so profound compared to conceptualization, IMO. Who does not want to be inspired? That's my point.

And so, as for the present moment, I wait for inspiration as for the break of day. I take it up as I can feel it, and if I can't, I wait until I can. Yet, I know that every moment is perfect and good for something. However, in my case, many moments are good to wait out rather than seize upon. I do what I can, what and when I can see to do.

Right "Now", this is the deep well of the present moment. I like to rest in that if I can.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



IMMERSION BEYOND DUALITY

December 10, 2022

Insight Meditation is immersive, meaning that this type of nondual meditation requires that we plunge beyond our familiar dualistic subject and object habit, submerging ourselves in the sea of the mind for however long we are able. Of course, this is not easy.

It's not like we don't exist dualistically after our immersion. We do, and we can fluctuate, going back and forth from dual to non-dual forms of meditation like bobbing for apples. Or,

its like immersing our head beneath water, opening our eyes, and looking around, like we did swimming underwater as a kid.

Seeing and sight via Insight Meditation is non dualistic and possesses a clarity that dualistic seeing, with its subject and objects does not have. We can plunge ourselves into Insight Meditation, feel and look around, and withdraw back to our normal dualistic state, and remember what we can from that, what we saw. And we can do this repetitively, over and over, while producing a running commentary as to what we understood while immersed.

Another way to say this is that we can just barely touch into Insight Meditation and pull back, over and over, thus almost retaining some kind of conscious observation of what we see when immersed. This is a technique that has to be learned, yet is like a laser beam. Before we can do this, we have to deconstruct our ingrained dualistic habit of subject (us) and objects (rest of the world).

Unfortunately, this deconstruction is like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where we remove obstacles to non-duality, one by one, until our inner gaze is thin enough, transparent enough, that we can see through and beyond what obscures, at which time as the old saying goes “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” At that point, usually with the help of an authentic dharma teacher, we achieve “Recognition” as to the actual or true nature of the mind. And simultaneous with that, we slip from practicing meditation to actually meditating, in this case Vipassana Meditation (Insight Meditation).

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



ANN ARBOR IN THE 1960s: A BOOK.

December 11, 2022

These last few days I have been contemplating a long-term project I have had on the burner for decades, completing a book of which the working title is “Ann Arbor and the 1960s,” a large and fully illustrated compendium of as much as I know it of what went down in Ann Arbor from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s as regards cultural change, in particular from the Beatnik era to the rise of what we call the 1960s, and the more attenuated 1970s.

I have been gathering material for decades, and also interviewing many folks, in particular my friend John Sinclair, perhaps best known popularly as a poet and activist, but to me John's knowledge of music, in particular Black music, blues and jazz, and racism is profound and important, in particular because John's knowledge of music arose from his discovery of Black music and racism in general from a small town in Michigan. I also have studied Black music, in particular blues and jazz for decades.

My health, and also Sinclair's, is not getting any younger, so I feel now is the time for me to finish this book that I have held in my heart all these years and get it down on paper. Perhaps we can print it, yet I don't like the idea of a \$60 coffee-table book that only some folks will afford themselves. I would rather make the book myself, with the help of John Sinclair and many others, which I am already doing, and offer full-color digital copies to everyone for free, as I do with all my books.

In these recent days I have been re-editing a large interview of John Sinclair I made years ago and marveling at how insightful Sinclair is about popular music in America, and in particular Black music and the racism that exists in this country. He tells the story of how he discovered this music in general as he woke up to racism and the situation that existed in a small Michigan town in the 1950s and took that to Detroit and eventually to Ann Arbor.

I could use the help of those of you who know and have lived in Ann Arbor, in particular for stories and photos from that time. As I was raised in Ann Arbor as my hometown, I had little to no idea what Ann Arbor actually was, and it was not until I left Ann Arbor and hitchhiked all around the country that I realized how special this city is.

In 1960 I just went and left high school, wandered away, and hitchhiked to California where I stayed on the beach in Venice West in Santa Monica. I found and lived in an abandoned walk-in wooden freezer in the basement of the legendary Gas House art gallery and coffee house, right on Venice beach and thought for all the world I was going to be a fine-art artist, painting in oils.

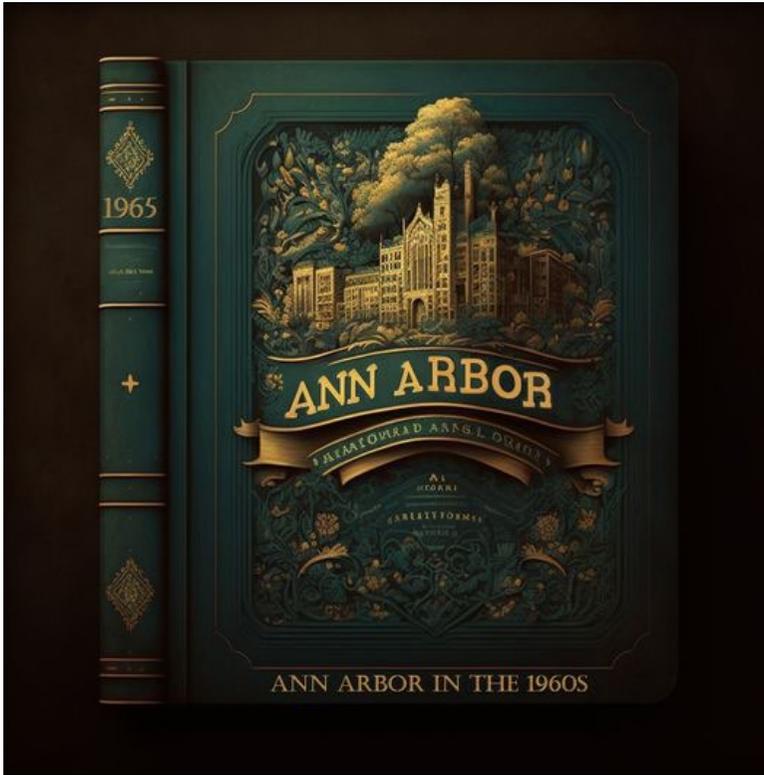
Back then I had been to Venice West, North Beach, San Francisco, and Greenwich Village, NY. In 1960 I was dead set on being a Beatnik, but that train had already left the station. And so, after having had a good look around at the rest of the country, it was back to Ann Arbor I came and saw the town in a different light, although Ann Arbor then was not what it is today.

Back then the town was humble and thought of itself as almost a kind of weak sister compared to the more flashy Berkeley and Cambridge campuses. Ann Arbor is not so humble today, yet it still is quite pure. It's now overly caffeinated and it takes me twenty minutes to even drive across town, but I digress.

Perhaps the main thing I figured out after hitchhiking all over was that the rest of the world was not the same as Ann Arbor. I had mistakenly assumed the whole country was just like my hometown, which it is not. Instead, it was more like the opposite. Ann Arbor is a very unique and highly qualified place. I consider Ann Arbor like an oracle, a very special and spiritual place, especially for the female spirit. And I was a townie growing up there. It was everything I had known, and I consider myself a direct product of it. I want to tell that story.

And so, I may be posting parts of the book as I pull it together and share that with folks here on Facebook.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



ANN ARBOR BOOK PROJECT: JOIN US

December 11, 2022

It will take a village, I mean our collective memories. And no, we will not have an embossed leather-bound book, but a modern digital book, at least to begin with. First, thanks to all of you who have commented, emailed, and messaged me about the “Ann Arbor in the 1960s” book project. I have decided to attempt to lay out the book project by myself in Adobe InDesign. I have done two large coffee-table sized full-

color books in the past, and am working to get up to speed on the current upgrade.

By doing it myself, and with community help, I intend to make digital copies available to all comers at no charge. Free. I don't need to make money from this and at my age money is not an incentive. I have enough to get to where I'm going, "which ain't far" as they say. Yet I could use some help.

Mostly, folks have signified they will pitch in. One thing I could use is an experienced editor or two, or at least someone that knows grammar and proper English. There is no money in it for you or me. I am doing this because I kept waiting for someone to really write the nitty-gritty about Ann Arbor in the 1960s, and the only one who showed up is me, and my friend Seth Bernard wrote in a song about that. I would send you texts, you clean up the obvious mistakes, and send them back. You would, of course, get listed as a project editor in the book.

And all who send texts, ideas, columns, etc. will be listed at the end of the book or in the sidebar. You can indicate here on FB, if you wish, but it would help me if you send me an email at Michael@Erlewine.net, so that I can organize what I imagine will be a lot of correspondence in folders on my hard drives and back them up. I can send text in Microsoft Word format or plain text, as you will.

I am already quite busy editing the interviews and material I have done with my friend John Sinclair over the years, much of which is remarkable. Many of you know John as an activist, poet, and author. A lot exists about John's outer political and community life, yet little has been written about his inner, more spiritual learning curve and dispositions, like how he came up, discovered music, centered on Black music, and on down the line.

I am putting together about sixty pages of an Interview I did with John, where it is clear to me that what he has to say about music, Black music, and racism is something we all should read. I could not have said it any better myself, and I mean that.

So, if you are in the mood and have the time and inclination to help me assemble this book, please jump on board. You are welcome and needed. This can be a community project for the community of Ann Arbor from which I emerged and am still indebted. I love Ann Arbor. It's overly caffeinated now and it takes me 20 minutes to drive across town, but who is counting?

[Midjourney graphic by me.]

John Sinclair

Interview



with Michael Erlewine

ANN ARBOR IN THE 1960s: JOHN SINCLAIR

December 12, 2022

The “Ann Arbor in the Sixties” project is rolling along, thanks to everyone’s input. I thought some of you might appreciate seeing some fruits of this effort, in this case and interview I did with John Sinclair.

John Sinclair is an iconic figure, a poet, writer, and political activist. At least this is what Wikipedia says about Sinclair. Yet John is all that, yet IMO this ignores more than it embraces. For me, personally, what John Sinclair has to say about modern music, in particular the evolution of rock n’ roll, and how he learned to appreciate blues and jazz is so much more important. And in particular, John’s personal take on racism and how he came to understand racism should be clarifying to any American.

Black music makes up the roots of modern American music, especially rock n’ roll. Without it we’d all still be dancing jigs. To read how Sinclair, who was raised in Davison, a small town outside of Flint, Michigan, a mostly White and segregated community, discovered Black music and subsequently Black people and finally racism itself, is eye-opening.

John’s command of the English language cuts to the quick in pithy imprinting insights that cannot be denied. His sensitivity to nuance is such that it results in direct talk, so that we cannot avoid the obvious racism that is still very much ingrained in much of America, is liberating, IMO. This is an interview I did with Sinclair some years ago during one of his visits to our center. I know you will enjoy it. I have learned from it.

For those with the time and inclination, here is that interview, which in the book will probably be broken up into sidebars.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../John%20Sinclair%20Interview...>

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”





A WORD FROM THE IGGSTER

December 13, 2022

I came across a mention of me from our bands original drummer, then a young Iggy Pop, who said this, and I quote:

“Comparative information is a key to freedom. I found other people who were smarter than me. To teach me. My first pro band was a blues band called The Prime Movers and the leader Michael Erlewine was a very bright Hippie beatnik with a beautifully organized record collection in library form of The Blues. I’d never really heard the Blues.

That part of our American heritage was kept off the major media. It was system up, people down. No Big Bill Broonzy on BBC for us. Boy, I wish! No money in it. But everything I learned from Michael's beautiful library became the building blocks for anything good I've done since. Guys like this are priceless. If you find one, follow him, or her. Get the knowledge."

Iggy was actually shy. I don't recall a single argument with him. I always liked him. Here he is talking about my record collection, which was not all that organized, unless he means alphabetical, when in reality he's talking about me and I perhaps was somewhat organized, and I not only had the records, but shared them with Iggy, one by one. He didn't borrow my records, because I don't remember loaning them out. Perhaps he heard them with me sitting down next to him and pointing out the hooks and the beauty of each one. Or with the whole band, all of us listening to them together. Yes, by all means "Get the knowledge."

And the knowledge, what was shared with Iggy, was just an introduction (and thus knowledge) to 'The Blues', like this blues song by Little Milton:

FEEL SO BAD

"Feel so bad,

Feel like a ballgame on a rainy day.

I feel so bad,

Feel like a ballgame on a rainy day.

Since I lost my baby,

I shake my head and walk away

Sometimes I want to stay here,

Then again, I want to leave.

Sometimes I want to leave,

Then again, I want to stay.

Since I got my clothes packed,

I catch a train and ride away.”

I spent an afternoon with ‘Little Milton’ in 2000 at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, seeing that Milton had a place to relax, plus food and drink. It's a classic blues, and it should be heard it least once in life:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU0apmpz_pw

[Midjourney graphic by me, and a photo of Iggy Pop, our drummer. Not sure who took this photo, but the main photographers who knew us back then were Al Blixt, Andy Sacks, and sometimes Tom Copi.]



RICK DANKO AT 'THE ARK': HIS LAST CONCERT

December 14, 2022

Rick Danko, a founding member of "The Band," and its bass player, also one of the lead singers, played his last concert at "The Ark" on December 6, 1999. I was there that night.

The Ark, the longest-running (and finest in my opinion) folk venue in the country, was empty, or nearly so. There was some screw-up with the advertisements and almost no one knew that Rick Danko, perhaps the best-known singer from the classic '60s group, "The Band", was singing here tonight. I even managed to get front-row seats, not more than a few feet in front of Danko. It was so close as to be almost uncomfortable. My arrangements to attend had been made at the last moment; I had no inkling that this would be a special night.

Danko was accompanied by Aaron "Professor Louie" Hurwitz on the piano and they sounded good together. Rick Danko joked about the empty house. He said "Since there are so few of us, why don't you all move in closer. Oh, I can see you've already done that."

Danko went on to say that it did not matter to him how many people were present. He sensed that it was a good night and wanted us all to share in the music. He was obviously very tired from the road trip of which this was the end of his tour, the last performance. He gasped for breath between verses. But these minor imperfections did not distract from my listening to the music. It sunk in and before I knew it, I was really getting into it.

As founder and publisher of the All-Music Guide and a long-time music buff, I attend a lot of these things. I've got special earplugs if the music gets too loud and all that stuff. I guess

I'm a little bit of a hard nose, so it came as a surprise to me when, during Danko singing Robbie Robertson's "It Makes No Difference," I felt an uncontrollable flood of emotion.

Danko was really singing it out. He would look right down at me and into my eyes as he sang. As I heard the words of that great song, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks and dripping onto my shirt. It had been a long time (and many live concerts) since I had experienced this kind of moment. It was great.

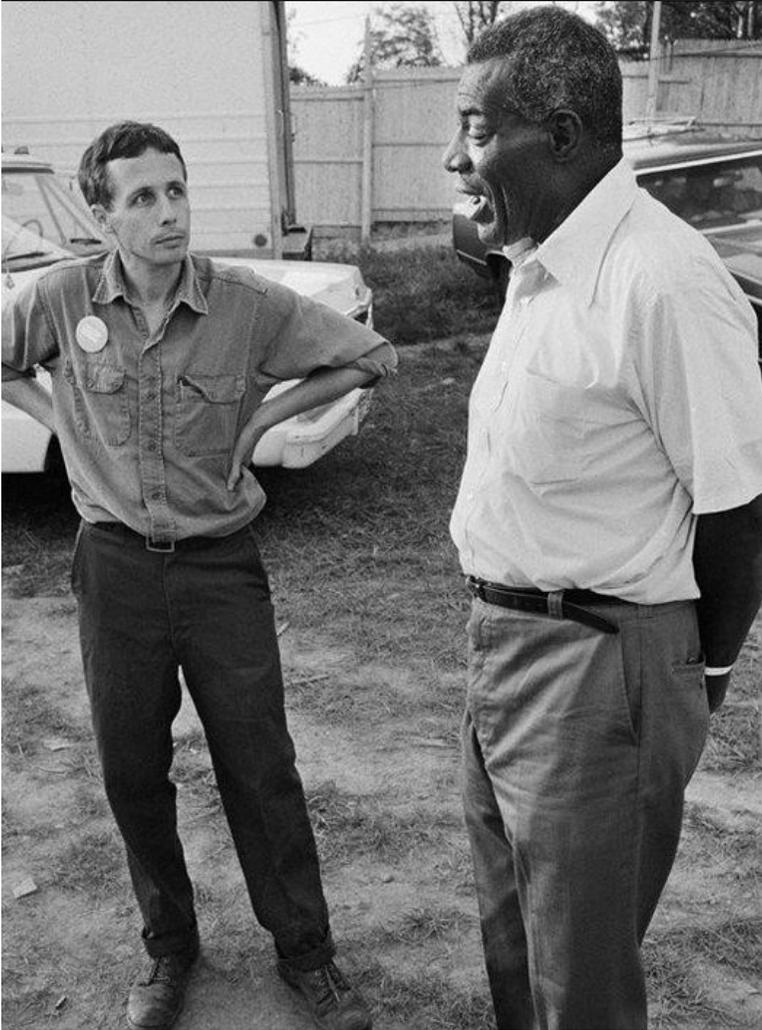
And afterward, Danko invited all who were present to come and meet with him up near where the drinks were served, to spend some time together. I was the last in line and had him sign his latest release. I told him how great he had been, and that I feel privileged to have been at this concert. And what a show it was. It turned out to be his last. And years later I heard a recording of the last song, at the end, when Danko turned to the audience and said, "That OK Guys?" and I heard my own voice speaking out loud, "Beautiful."

And then I read this in the newspaper:

"On December 10, 1999, days after the end of a brief tour of the Midwest that included two shows in the Chicago area and a final gig at the Ark in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Danko died of heart failure in his sleep at his home in Marletown, New York. He was 55."

Of course, we will be documenting stories and facts about "The Ark," Ann Arbor's wonderful folk venue. So, if you have stories or comments, please post them here and also send them by email to Michael@Erlewine.net, so I can store them properly.

[Photo of Rick Danko from Wikipedia.]



ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVAL: INTERVIEW
WITH HOWLIN' WOLF

December 14, 2022

August 2, 1969

Howlin' Wolf

Interviewed by Michael Erlewine

[Performance link with John Sinclair and the Blues Scholars below]

Here is an interview that I did with the legendary Howlin' Wolf. It was at the first 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival and there I was backstage talking with Wolf. It was just the two of us standing in the open sun and it was not your normal interview. John Sinclair, who I consider an expert in blues, said this is the best interview of Wolf he has even seen. I didn't have to say a word. It was all Wolf. And to prove it, Sinclair took this interview, put it into verse and music, made it a part of his blues program "John Sinclair and the Blues Scholars." I was happy to be part of the Blues Scholars band several times as a backup harmonica player. In fact, below is an audio clip of John doing the Wolf interview, with my playing amplified harmonica behind him, along with some of my kids and friends. And that 1969 date was not the first time I saw Howlin' Wolf. We saw him in Chicago playing music late at night, as this story tells.

As I stood there in 1969 listening to this huge man, I flashed back to some years before when I had seen the Wolf performing live in a small bar at the north end of Chicago late one night. There was no one in the place, just Howlin' Wolf and his guitarist Hubert Sumlin. My brother Dan and I stood somewhere at the back of the place, and it was very dark. We found a seat. Wolf was way up to the front, with one small light playing on him. He was sitting on an old wooden straight-backed chair. It was all light and shadows.

And Wolf was singing as only he can sing, and his music not only filled the room, it actually took over all sense of time I

had as his laser-like voice penetrated deep into my brain. For a while, I lost all idea of who or where I was. And I was not high. The walls of the room just went transparent, as did my body, and I found myself suddenly thrust outside of time, beyond any sense of myself that I knew, somewhere out there on my own in this vast universe, just a mind floating there. This only ever happened once and was more than just music. This was a life initiation, as I believe you will get a sense of from reading this interview with this great bluesman. Here is what Wolf said.

HOWLIN' WOLF:

“Some of them said years ago. ‘We will never make it to the moon.’ I said: ‘You never know.’ Today, we settin' on the moon and got a flag up there. You understand? But they told me that we couldn't do that. Don't never say what we can't do.”

“Next thing, I'm looking for a man walkin' down the street with no head on his body. And if they say they can't do it, I'm gonna' tell 'em, ‘You're wrong.’ He gonna' come down sooner or later. That's right. This is of the day. He will have no head and be all heart, just one big heart.”

“Because these performers probably have the biggest hearts in the entertainment business, and there were thirty or forty thousand kids here trying to learn about heart, about understanding, about developing their hearts. Thousands of hippies, hipped up children, with great big heads and tiny hearts, trying to lose that big head and get that big heart. The big head and the hard heart of modern rock and roll and psychedelic music has gone as far as it will go. The heart just has to be developed and this, the first of all the blues festivals, promises much to cross the generation gap and bring the old and younger Americans closer than they have

been for the last decade. Because blues performers have big hearts.”

“I’m not a smart man. You see, I got a little head and a big heart. Because blues is based on the common ground shared by all people, black and white, young and old. Blues is the story of the human life, of its loves and struggles. All rock and roll, all jazz, all American music finds its roots in gospel music and in blues. Blues is not unhappy music.”

“A lotta’ people sing, but they don’t sing with no understandin’. When you repeats your words, make sure to make some understanding of what you’re sayin’. Those men played a clear guitar. They made clear notes.”

“I’ve been pushed way back. I don’t know why the people wouldn’t let me up to the front like they did. I was just dirt. I felt like I was just dirt, so I stayed back, because I was able to back up my own self. I didn’t think I had no right to be out there trying to push and scrap. I didn’t think I had no right to be out there tryin’ to push and scrap up no few nickels, you know, which I needed... never get too many of them.”

“But, I’m a funny kind of person. I don’t never want to take advantage of nobody, and think I’m takin’ advantage of... you know what I mean. Let the peoples have it. Then if anything for me, it will come by, and I’ll get that.”

“Well, now anytime anything is pushed back, sooner or later, they gonna’ bring it to the front. They can’t keep it hid always.”

“I’ll tell you. when people can’t make or use you, they don’t need you.”

“There ain’t gonna be no trouble. Somebody gonna’ come on up to the front and say “I am the man. I’m sorry,” That’s right. There ain’t gonna’ be no hard feelings. He didn’t come for no

trouble, but he gonna' sure let you know that he are 'the man.' Supposed to be."

"Just like a flower. You see, we're trampin' on this grass. We stay here a couple months and tramp right around here, we gonna' kill it. Just as soon as we stop trampin', the first warm sunshine, and then the grass gonna' start a growin' again."

"You don't never learn it all. You just learn some portion of it, and be able to, you know, entertain. And I play a certain portion of harp and a certain portion of guitar. I'm not a smart man. You see, I got a little head and a big heart. That's all I need. You take people. When they got a big head, they don't make it far".

"You're supposed to make it pleasin' to the peoples ears, then they don't mind listening to the tune."

"I heard a negro, howlin' and moanin'. I said: I take it from you. He was an old man. I said: I'm gonna' take that someday and make something out of it. I took that howlin' and that yodelin' and put it together and made me a thing of my own."

"You got to get in the right position to where you can control your voice. I'm not a smart man. You see I got a little head and a big heart. You got to know your keynote. You got to know your notes from staff to staff. If you don't know your notes from staff to staff, I can tell when you pick up your guitar, you really don't know what you're doin'."

"I don't mean to be funny, but if you let me, I'll show you, and tell you, if you will accept it. But if you think because I'm a Negro, and you're not supposed to be told nothin', you understand, you're wrong. You're supposed to be told somethin' by anybody, when you're doin' wrong."

"Take a learnin' from anybody. Somebody can always tell you something that fit you."

"I hope I don't talk too much. No, I don't know. I'm just tryin'. So, now that's a lotta' ground your covering, when you say you know better than me. I just know some of the things that are supposed to be done. When you say you know it, that covers the whole world."

"Some people don't want to tell you how it is, but I'll tell ya."

"If we were playin' in a key, tell me your tonic and I'll tell you what else you're supposed to do. All I want to know is your tonic. I'll build the rest of it. See, but you got to have your tonic. That's your startin' off. Without that tonic, when you get ready to stop, you stop somewhere else. Anytime you start on your tonic, when you end your song, you got to be right back on your tonic."

"I don't have no education, see. Now you can take my sense and put it in a paper bag and it'll rattle like two nickels. But you see, understandin', that's all I need. Common sense, that's all a man needs now, common sense. Just get you some common sense and pass on by."

"Some of the music is too loud today, because it knock the eardrums to your ear. Them high speakers, tall as that fence there, is blastin' your ear down, all the time. Boom. Bam. Bing. You know what I mean?"

"That's uncalled for. You hear that? I played on a show one night, and I went home and cut myself all up and down the back, because I heard that thing in my sleep. It's too loud. I'm sorry. Ain't no need in me tellin' you no lie. It's too loud. That go for the white boy, and the Negro boy, and any old Mexican, anybody! When it's too loud, it's nothin' but 'knockness.'"

"Knockness, just some stuff comin' together, and you don't understand what it mean. That's

what you call real garbage. That's the worst garbage in town. That's right, but the peoples eats it

up. Just like the rabbit eatin' the carrot. What's up Doc?"

"I don't dominate no musician. I hate to hear a man dominate a musician, but I will say: music is too loud. Whether you playin' good or whether you playin' bad, you know it's too loud."

"Dominate, knockness. Some knockness. Something knockin' together. You know."

Interview of Howlin' Wolf by Michael Erlewine as performed by John Sinclair and the Blues Scholars

<https://sites.libsyn.com/.../interview-of-howlin-wolf-by...>

NOTE: Photos copyright by Stanley Livingston and may not be used without written permission. This interview also appears in the book "Blues in Black & White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," with the incredible photos of Stanley Livingston, graphic work by Tom Erlewine, and articles, interviews, and artist bios by me. The book is available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or quality bookstores near you.

[Photo by Stanley Livingston of Michael Erlewine doing this interview with Howlin' Wolf in 1969 at the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival.]



UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

December 15, 2022

What's the relationship between dharma and Samsara, or put another way, why is Samsara not sacred, because it is as sacred as we know for most of us now in it?

Just watch a roomful of moms react to a new baby, and hopefully some dads too. If we scour the natural world, all the animals in it, for signs of compassion and love, there is not much in it EXCEPT for the unconditional love of a mother for her child. Animals too. Unconditional love, meaning love

without ifs, ands, or buts, is hard to find. We would all like to be loved unconditionally, but as my wife can tell you, just as I said, that's hard to find. We are all looking for it.

And so, it's fair to ask, what's wrong with all that we love in this world, whatever for each of us that is. And, aside from the echo of my own questions coming back at me, this is what I have found.

And how I discovered this is pretty simple. I asked my dharma teacher of 36 years, a high Tibetan lama, a rinpoche. And I was asking him about astrology, because I have practiced and studied astrology for more than 60 years, and I love it and find it a great way to view the world, and here is what Rinpoche had to say about that.

He pointed out that there is nothing wrong with my loving astrology and using it, yet, and this is what he pointed out, astrology is only one of the limbs of the yoga, but not its root. And by this Rinpoche meant that when it comes to Samsara, this life we all are living, astrology can benefit us by helping us to accept where we are, warts and all, and then improve our situation by doing something about what troubles us.

However, he went on to say, it's like the old meme of "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." However, we rearrange them, the Titanic is going to sink. And by this Rinpoche meant that astrology may improve our living situation as much as we can muster, but even with that, death is certain and will come, at which time those newly-painted deck chairs will be of little worth held.

In other words, astrology is what Rinpoche calls a 'Relative Truth,' relative to this life and improving that. It says nothing about what happens when we die, and whether we are prepared for that and what happens then, when after death we enter the bardo.

So, astrology is, as Rinpoche put it, one of the limbs of the yoga, but the ‘root’ of the yoga is dharma, because dharma is the only activity that will benefit AFTER we leave this world.

Well, I had to think about that, I can assure you, and for a long time. Yet, of course, Rinpoche is right. A fancy and fancier perch in this life is not going to be something we can take with us when we die, but it can be nice now.

So, the question becomes, are we at all interested with preparing for passing on or is ‘only going around once’ good enough for us, even through we, so the dharma teaches, will be going around over and over, like in the movie “Groundhog Day” until we get it right, so to speak.

And so, I share this with you if only because Rinpoche’s words stuck in my mind and left an imprint that I’m still working with.

The way I used to explain this to others is like this: Imagine a globe covered with water, and with winds blowing and waves crashing. Now, imagine on that globe a single sailboat. What astrology can do (and what any of us can do) is learn to set the boat's sail to take the wind and using the wind, sail out of troubled waters to waters that are more calm and peaceful. Rinpoche was speaking to me about what astrology was good for, but anything we do to improve our position in this world is the same thing. We are trying to get away from bad times and get into having good times and stay there. This is Samsara.

Rinpoche explained that this kind of self-improvement activity is very important in this Samsara we are living in. Yet he contrasted this with the dharma teachings, which are not primarily concerned with our situation in this Samsaric world and more concerned with doing what in this world today will make it easier for us in our next rebirth. This is

why Rinpoche said that astrology was a Relative Truth, and
dharma was an Absolute Truth.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



BLASTS FROM THE PAST: MUSIC IN ANN ARBOR 1960s

December 16, 2022

By Michael Erlewine

[If you were there or have anything to comment on these stories, please do, either here or send stories to me at Michael@Erlewine.net. We are doing our best to remember and archive all of that time, while we can.]

In the late 1960s, in particular with the Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970, the blues were coming to town. Since Chicago is only a few hours drive from Ann Arbor, some of the Chicago blues greats were finding their way here.

I am feeling a little nostalgic. I just read the book on a friend of mine, the great blues guitarist-- "Michael Bloomfield: The Rise and Fall of an American Guitar Hero" by Ed Ward. Excellent book.. I don't blog much on my musical

background, but I have one. Here is a little taste of that both in Ann Arbor and elsewhere.

Back in the 1960s, the musicians I really loved and looked up to were players like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Otis Rush, Little Walter, Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, and the list goes on, mostly the great Chicago blues players. And I had the chance to meet these artists, interview and hang out with them, plus hear them playing live in clubs and other venues. I was a total fan of these folks.

I am sometimes asked why I didn't spend more time listening to my own peers, groups like the Grateful Dead, Janice Joplin, The Band, and so on. My answer is simple. Their music didn't interest me.

If that sounds flip, it's not meant to. It was because those players who were my peers were people much like me. No matter how great they were, we all drank from the same cup. We were all derivatives, all drawing inspiration from the same musical root-sources, those great rock, blues, and jazz players who came before us. It was not disrespect, but simple camaraderie.

For example, I met and hung out with Janice Joplin at the Grande Ballroom in the mid-1960s, where we both played. She was cool, no doubt. But I had already heard the original "Take Another Little Piece of my Heart" by Erma Franklin and "Ball 'n Chain" by Big Mama Thornton. Joplin and I spent time with each other at the Grande Ballroom, talking and drinking whiskey together. Well, she drank most of the whisky.

I also spent a whole late-night talking and drinking with Big Mama Thornton, so I know where Joplin was getting her stuff. Joplin was a popular singer, but she was no Big Mama Thornton. We both revered Big Mama Thornton. Joplin herself would be the first to say so. I do have a funny story

about Janice Joplin. This came from an interview I did with the great poster artist Stanley Mouse, originally from Detroit, and I quote Mouse from that Interview.

They had rented an old firehouse for rehearsals.

“Also “Big Brother and the Holding Company” used to practice there, and Chet Helms brought over Janis Joplin. And she auditioned for the band one afternoon, and they came up after and they said “What do you think?” and I said “it’s either great or horrible.” (laughs) It was one of the two.

“And then that night police showed up at the door and said we’ve got reports of a woman screaming in here.”

It was the same with the Rolling Stones. Of course, I like their tune “Time is On My Side,” because that is an Irma Thomas song. What’s not to like, but I like the original by Irma Thomas much better. Irma Thomas, IMO, is one of the greatest woman singers I have ever heard. Period. I had the chance to have dinner with her and hang out for an afternoon some years ago and it was out of this world. Later that night at the gig, Irma Thomas changed her set list to include many of her early songs that I especially love, just for me. We are exactly the same age. I can’t say enough about what a great artist Irma Thomas is.

If you have never heard Irma Thomas (and you love R&B), here are a couple heart-stoppers to give you a taste:

Irma Thomas: “Two Winters Long”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avfBh4Xv7tQ>

Irma Thomas: “I’m Gonna Cry Till My Tears Run Dry”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oby2fAfxacM>

So, you get the idea. It is not that I was somehow too good for the music of my peers. It was because it wasn’t their music

and in almost all cases the original was better, and they knew it too. That's why they covered it in the first place.

It's the same with the Grateful Dead. We were all studying the same root music. I remember our band the 'Prime Movers Blues Band' jamming with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead in West Park in Ann Arbor one sunny afternoon in the 1960s. It was fun, but Garcia and I were both reading from the same playbook of those great artists that we revered, most of whom were still living. An exception would be Jimi Hendrix. Although he too had roots, he transformed those roots into something really new, IMO. Hendrix was unique in this way. He blew most of the great white blues guitarists of that time right out of the water, and they knew it.

There is one other exception, only one group I can think of among my peers that I would acknowledge myself a devoted "groupie" of, and that was the Paul Butterfield Blues Band." When the Butterfield band burst on the scene in late 1965, we were spellbound. Although Butterfield and his band later made a number of albums, IMO none of those albums captured the experience of hearing that band live. And I should know. As a 'groupie' I heard them many times, mostly in Detroit (At the 'Living End' were our band also played) and Chicago.

And we hung out with the Butterfield band and even recorded them. In the spring of 1966, my brother Dan and I recorded an early version of the Butterfield band's landmark tune East-West in "Poor Richard's" club in Chicago, before it came out as an album. "East-West" is considered the first extended rock solo (13 minutes) ever issued on an album, and it served to fuel the future of any number of heavy-metal artists. It shook our world.

Our recording of East-West is the first complete rendering of this tune that is extant. If I remember right. We were sitting behind a hanging black curtain right on the stage recording this, but I could be wrong. My brother Dan might remember. Anyway, the recording we made was issued on an album called "East-West Live" by the Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin in 1996.

There were many reasons the Butterfield band's imprint on us was so profound. For one, they were just that good, and they were a racially mixed band as we sometimes were. That first Butterfield album stopped us in our tracks and our band was never the same again. That was probably the time we added the phrase "Blues Band" to our name, making it the "Prime Movers Blues Band." That first Butterfield album served as a wakeup call to an entire generation of White (would-be) blues musicians, a notice that we could go ahead and try to play the blues, "whiteness" and all, and so we did.

Even to this day, Butterfield remains one of the only white harmonica players to develop his own style (another is William Clarke) -- one respected by black players. Butterfield has no real imitators. Like most Chicago-style amplified harmonica players, Butterfield played the instrument like a horn -- a trumpet. He tended to play single notes rather than bursts of chords. His harp playing is always intense, understated, concise, and serious -- IMO only Big Walter Horton has a better sense of note selection.

When I knew Butterfield (during those first three albums), he was always intense, somewhat remote, and even, on occasion, downright unfriendly. He liked the persona of a Chicago macho guy. Although not much interested in other people, he was a compelling musician and a great harp player. But Butterfield liked to mess with your mind. Here is an example.

I can remember one time Butterfield and I were sitting out in the back alley in our van, probably smoking something or other. He was explaining that he was left-handed and that only left-handed people would ever amount to anything in this world. The rest of us were shit-out-a-luck. That was Butterfield's humor. It is true that he held the harmonica opposite to the standard right-handed player who holds it in his left hand. Butterfield held it in his right hand, upside down, with the low notes to the right. That alone makes him hard to imitate.

Michael Bloomfield (lead guitar) and Mark Naftalin (keyboards) in the Butterfield band, also great players, were just the opposite -- always interested in the other guy. They went out of their way to inquire about you, even if you were a nobody like we were. Naftalin continues to this day to support blues projects and festivals.

But it was Butterfield's lead-guitar player, Michael Bloomfield, who most stands out in my mind. Bloomfield actually was our friend. He cared about us. We could feel it. Michael Bloomfield also played lead on Dylan's album "Highway 61 revisited." Michael Bloomfield is one of the greatest guitarists I have ever heard, and I have heard a bunch. Bob Dylan thinks so too, as this quote from a Rolling Stone article (May 2009) shows:

"The guy that I always miss, and I think he'd still be around if he stayed with me, was Mike Bloomfield. He could just flat-out play. He had so much soul. And he knew all the styles, and he could play them so incredibly well. He was an expert player and a real prodigy too. He could play like Robert Johnson way back then in the 1960s. He could play the pure style of country blues authentically." – Bob Dylan

In my experience, Michael Bloomfield was always filled with light, positive, and interested in helping others into the

future. If there are bodhisattvas wandering around in this world, Bloomfield had to be one of them. I am running out of space here, but let me give you just one example of Bloomfield's compassion that I personally experienced.

For those of you who are too young, the "Summer of Love" was San Francisco and the Bay Area in 1967, when more than 100,000 hippies showed up at the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco wanting to hang out. I happened to be there with our whole band for that summer. In fact, I made a point of it.

My entire band and I drove all the way across the country (and back) in our 1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name (The Prime Movers) all over that van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company even though across the front of the van we had the slogan "Gonna Ring a Few Bells in your Ears" a quote by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song "Ooh Poo Pah Doo." Any of you remember that song? Here it is for those of you with open ears:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFnKWUjvdk8>

How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (I think there were five of us), not to mention five suitcases into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. We just did it, took turns driving, and made it a non-stop trip. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail's pace surrounded on all sides by a huge flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco and Haight-Ashbury.

And of course, we had no money and no place to stay once we got there. We just went there cold because we knew it was happening. And here is my point:

It was our friend Michael Bloomfield who cared enough about us to find us a free place to live for the summer, which turned out to be the Sausalito Heliport, where many music groups practiced. We crashed on the floor. I remember some famous woman singer gave us \$5 at the heliport for food. It might have been Gale Garnet ("We'll Sing in the Sunshine"). We had zero money.

In fact, we played blues outside on the pavement next to a local Sausalito Black rib-joint for food, just to have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs that summer. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north. However, the band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco and Berkeley, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. We also played in Berkeley at the New Orleans House and other places

And there is more to my Bloomfield story. It was also thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore Auditorium. Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay, but asked us to fill in for his band the "Electric Flag" when they could not make a gig, at the Fillmore itself. It was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium that we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don't know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit "Sunshine of Your Love."

In fact, we watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham at that time about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but

I wanted them to mic our amps through their own speakers, so our particular (old Fender Concerts) amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required in those days.

Anyway, I wanted to share with you my history as a groupie and my undying respect for the compassion and genius of Michael Bloomfield, certainly someone worthy of my respect. Also, a bio I did on the Butterfield Blues Band here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=148&t=53...f823d3c2>

[A photo of me playing harmonica in the West Park band shell in the 1960s, probably the time we were playing and jamming with Jerry Garcia, August 13, 1967.]

As to what we sounded like, we sounded like this, an excerpt from the few recordings that exist:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZ05bsagUqY>

[Poster from San Francisco's club the 'Haight-A' in 1967, during the summer of love.]



RON ASHETON FROM THE 'STOOGES' AND THE 'PRIME MOVERS'

December 17, 2022

[We are looking for more facts, photos, and stories about Ron Asheton and the Prime Movers and the Stooges. If you have some, comment here or write me at Michael@Erlewine.net]

I hear a lot of comments about Iggy Pop (James Osterberg) in our band (The Prime Movers Blues Band), because he was our drummer for a time. I hear less about Ron Asheton, who was one of Iggy's Stooges. Ron was also on the scene with us for a while.

Ron Asheton was one of only two people that we allowed to hang out with us and travel, the other one is David "Panther" White, a close friend of Iggy's.

Our relationship with Ron Asheton was real, but recently I spent an hour reading through various interviews of Asheton and his relationship to our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, and was astonished at how much bullshit there was in the accounts, even by Ron himself. It seems that the interviewers, often not much as writers, would just take a few facts and weave them together to make a story or part of a story that they liked and imagine that was the truth. It seems that the stories went with the hard drugs that plagued Ashton's bandmates later on, but our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, smoked some weed, drank our beers, but to my knowledge never did hard drugs. At least I didn't. Acid, yeah, but heroin, no.

First, I should say, we all loved Ron Asheton. He was more like a mascot than he was a player. We nicknamed him "Javalina," which sounds derogatory, but actually was very lovingly intended, believe it or not. He just was a VERY nice kid. He hung around, played some bass, a little tambourine, but I can't remember his playing bass with us for six months as he liked to repeat. He was dreaming, because although Ron could play some bass, he could not play enough bass to compete with the repertoire we had of often quite difficult blues or R&B tunes. Our keyboardist, Robert Sheff (AKA Blue 'Gene' Tyranny) could sight read a full orchestral score. Me, not so much.

What Ron did do was hang out with us, come with us on the road and to gigs, help with equipment (as we all did) and just be there with the band. We liked him enough to want him around. He was about, as I mentioned, as nice a kid as you could imagine anyone being, gentle and kind. And I believe that he loved being with us.

What he became later, I have no idea because although never unfriendly, we didn't run in the same circles after some time. Ron got into hard drugs and though it was always fun to see him, we just didn't bump into him much after a while.

I don't even have many photos to show you. Here are a couple where Ron was apparently playing tambourine with the band. I have never seen photos of Ron playing bass with the Prime Movers. If you have some, please contact me. Seeing later photos of Asheton, it sometimes is hard to recognize that this is the same person as the Ron who hung out with us. Asheton obviously learned to master the guitar, which he never played around us, if he even knew it back then. Most of my memories of Ron Asheton are not from gigs, but from Ron sitting in a corner of the band's practice room on the third floor of the "Prime Mover House" at 114 N. Division. Here are some excerpts of interviews I found on the web of Ron being interviewed about the Prime Movers, they may help some. I said "some"...

Ron Asheton: Other than that, my first real professional type situation was in the Prime Movers Blues Band, where Iggy was going to Pioneer High also and I would see him at school and say.. Hey, here is another guy with a Beatles haircut. So, we used to meet down at the Michigan Union Grill (the MUG) and... At that time, originally, he was in the 'Iguanas' but he quit and hooked up with the Prime Movers and they were auditioning for bass players.

Question: Where did people hang out in the Michigan union:

Ron Asheton: Well, it is what now is the bookstore. It was a cafeteria back then. It was the hotspot to hang out, mostly high school kids. You could stay for a while till they went around and checked your I.D. and threw you out. And you would just hang around in the halls, stay out for about 15 minutes, and go back in again. That was about THE hangout

then, as well as P.J's. and The Virginian. ... P.J's was just before the Nichols Arcade on State Street.. and Betsy Ross restaurant which was inside the Arcade. That was where all the Catholic kids hung out. Betsy Ross was this little restaurant...I think it took up two stores.... You cruised the 'Ross', the Union, P.Js and the Virginian... a little circle of action.

Question: What about more influential bands, like the Prime Movers?

Ron Asheton: That's where I really got in touch with Iggy. He is the one who turned me on for auditioning for the Prime Movers, so at that time Rick Higgenbotham was playing bass. He couldn't play very well, but they liked the way he looked and his spirit and what-not...So I went in one night, played for them, got the job. That's what kicked off the real learning experience of playing music.

Question: What kind of job was it that you got at that point with the 'Movers'? Were they playing around a fair amount?

Ron Asheton: Yeah, the Prime Movers were just really taking off. I felt really, wow. I was blown back. At that time, they were accomplished musicians, so what it did for me... I would either skip school or every day after school I would just go and practice. It's the house you live in now, the Prime Mover House. Right in that room on the third floor, for hours every day.

They taught me a lot until.... They were so much better and more accomplished than myself at that time and they eventually copped to Jack Dawson for a bass player, who was more their age group and a much finer a player than me. [Jack was a UofM Music School student.]

Question: How long did you play with them?

A: I think I was in the band for like six months and then after ... I saw it coming... and then after the boot, I still hung around, did equipment, went out on their gigs ,and they let me sit in for a tune or two.

They would even do things like tell Jack Dawson that practice was an hour later so I would get to play for an hour with them. And I still worked out with Iggy on drums, helped him learn the double-shuffle, played some bass while he practiced his ass off every day learning the double shuffle.

Question: So that was a really nice band, eh?

Ron Ashton Oh, that was a great band, the Prime Movers.

Question: People speak really highly of the Erlewine brothers.

Ron Ashton: Yep, I learned tons from the Erlewine brothers. That was my first real foot into the reality of actually being in a band, you know, and having the experience of...

With Dave and Scotty, it was like basement things. We weren't ...none of us were good enough to get that real hit from playing in a band, but those guys were like...whoah...

They would do like all the blues tunes ...at that time they were doing stuff like some Stones songs, like I sang "Not Fade Away," They were doing "I'm a Man," which Iggy sang. Then they got more blues, just more into the solid blues.

At that time they were also doing "Them" stuff, Van Morrison's band ...what else..."Pretty Things," "Rosalyn," so it was like hitting on. It was still the blues flavor but hitting on stuff that I eventually went on to really dig. I learned a lot from those boys.

Question: What kind of places did you play.

Ron Ashton: Well, in town we did mostly the TGs....

Question: What's that?

Ron Ashton: "Thank God it's Friday" ... A fraternity would have a beer bash, so I would get out of school, beat it down to the beer bash and do that for a couple hours and then... fraternities ...they would hire us to play

Question: It was a big thing back then?

Ron Ashton: It was a really big thing. Eventually after I left the Prime Movers, the band that I was in was the "Chosen Few."

Those guys, the Prime Movers Blues Band, would also do bars like they did two weeks in Grand Rapids at this bar, We lived above the club. It was called the "Blue Note" or something...

[Note: I believe we played at the 'Blue Note' in Grand Rapids for two weeks, and as Ron mentions, the whole band lived and slept up above the bar. And we had shock as the Prime Mover's van pulled up outside the Blue Note. Hanging above the bar was about a twenty-foot sign that said "The Prime Mover: the Junior Walker Sound!.

We were stunned. Of course we knew and loved 'Junior Walker and the All Stars', but we didn't and never had played hits like "Road Runner," "Shake and Finger Pop" and things like that. We ran out and bought a Junior Walker album, and learned some songs before night. At that time, lucky we had some horns in the band, so we limped through those weeks.]

Question: That was a college bar then?

Ron Ashton: No way, it was just, whoah...all types. It was just like this redneck... there were a lot of close shaves with drunken redneck types with the Erlewine brothers, with their long curly hair.

They would be ... guys would get drunk and call them "He, brillo head" or "Hey nigger hair" or something like that.

It was a lot of close shaves, but it was fun. You would just get so plowed and just transcend the danger. There was always that edge that there could be a fight any second, you know.

So I went on to the Chosen Few...got a call from Iggy, who was working at Discount Records, and said, "Hey, there's this guy down here who's lookin' for a bass player." 'Cause I'd been in the Prime Movers and I got fired because they really found a better person. I hadn't really learned how to play bass yet, I could just kinda half-ass play. I learned a lot in the Prime Movers, I learned all my blues progressions and I was actually in the band for a few months when they found a very competent player, who was actually going to the university in the music school.

Another interview went like this...

Ron Asheton: A friend of mine auditioned for a band called the Prime Movers where Iggy was now playing blues. So, I'm going "No way! You can't even play."

By that time, I COULD play- yet not very well but... This kid couldn't even play. I went up there and said "he got the job just 'cause he looks like Ringo?" So they auditioned me and I jammed with them. They made me sing and ran me through some things.

They said "Ron, you have an interesting voice." I think what won me the audition was that I could sing "The Girl from Ipanema." I got to sing "Not Fade Away" too, to show my range. But they were older, in their mid-twenties, and I was 17.

"They were really accomplished musicians- they really played well. They were as good as the Butterfield Blues Band [not true]. So, they found someone in their age range who

could really sing. There was that fateful night when I showed up to practice- "We gotta talk to you... you're fired." But I was still using their equipment man and they'd let me jam sometimes."

Well, that's all the Ron Asheton stories I have, Ron before he became one of the Stooges. Ron, may you rest in peace.

[If you have stories to add, please send them to me and we can enlarge this.]

[Photos of Ron Asheton with the Prime Movers Blues Band.]





MY TIME WITH BOB DYLAN IN ANN ARBOR

December 18, 2022

With an introduction to legendary guitar player Perry Lederman.

Of course, I get asked a lot about hitchhiking with Bob Dylan back in 1961. The only problem is that I did not know at the time that this was 'THE' Bob Dylan because he did not yet exist as famous. To me he was just another bright musician I was hanging around with. We travelled and spent time together. I was nineteen years old!

In the late 1950s and early 1960s I would hitchhike to New York City often. Back then, unless you had some old junker of a car to borrow, you hitchhiked.

Heading out of Ann Arbor the bad places to get stuck hitchhiking were down by the prison in Dundee, Michigan or trying to get around Toledo, Ohio, that sharp left turn to the

East Coast. Once you got past those areas it went pretty smoothly, usually. And we would hang in Greenwich Village in New York City.

I believe I hitchhiked that distance ten times over the years, the first in the late 1950s, where we stayed in the apartment of comics artist and friend Larry Ivy, who did some of the Frank Frazetta comics. I think I did this with Doug Fontaine Brown, an artist himself and a popular musician around Ann Arbor in the late 1950s.

And I want to include here something about a legendary musician and guitar player Perry Lederman that you may not have heard of. Lederman went to the UofM for a while and was based in Ann Arbor. That's where I met Lederman and we travelled together. I include some Lederman music below that is not to be missed.

I remember being in NYC with Perry Lederman and Bob Dylan back in June of 1961.

Lederman is how I met up with Dylan. They were already friends. Perry Lederman was a phenomenal instrumentalist on the guitar. If Dylan and I were in touch today, we would still marvel at what a player Lederman was. Lederman played Travis-style, which we used to term '3-finger picking'; his playing was unmatched and IMO still is. See for yourself below.

Perry Lederman was not a vocalist and when he did sing it was not special, but he could play like no one I have ever heard. When Lederman took out a guitar, people would listen and marvel. Each song was like hearing a mini symphony, with an overture, the main theme, with delicate variations, incredible syncopation, and an ending.

I travelled with Lederman a number of times and later in 1964 spent time with him during the year I spent in Berkeley

where both of us were living at the time. He used to play at a local coffee house there, the Jabberwock if I remember. After that I don't believe I ever saw him again. In 1964, I was by myself and I would visit Perry in his Berkeley apartment, complete with his beautiful blonde woman, and too many cats.

Lederman died some years ago now and, although there was a CD issued after his death, it was not of his early playing, but something later and not representative, a shadow of himself. Too bad, because the world deserves to hear Perry Lederman play. As mentioned, I do include some music below that is close to what I originally heard. If you like that kind of folk guitar, Lederman is the man.

Lederman was also expert at finding and selling old Martin guitars, scavenging them out of attics and garages, fixing them up, and selling them. While traveling with Lederman I have seen some of the best and rarest old guitars in the world, like double and triple-0 martins with intricate perfling around the edges, rosewood and ebony bridges, and elaborate inlaid necks and headstocks, sometimes with the Tree-of-Life design.

These guitars are worth extravagant sums in today's market. It would be hard to put a price of any kind on them. I had one for a while, an old koa wood Hawaiian guitar. I wonder what I ever did with it? Anyway, back to New York City. I also had an old Martin, Double-0 18, that was made around August of 1939. It's a beauty and I gave it to my friend and musician Seth Bernard because he can really play that thing and still does.

I have memories of Izzy Young and the Folklore Center down on MacDougal Street in the West Village. We would hang out there because we had no place else to go and also because that is where you met other players and like minds. Back

then we all smoked all the time, Lederman, myself, Dylan, everyone, mostly cigarettes, and drank caffeine, and some alcohol. That was the thing and staying up almost all night.

I don't know how many days we were in the city on this trip, which was in June of 1961, but it was probably a while. We were hitchhiking and tended to spend at least a day or so at each main stop before moving on. Plus, Lederman's mom lived in Brooklyn. I remember visiting her there and she served us matzo ball soup while I sat at a small kitchen table by a window. I quietly ate my soup while Perry and his mom got caught up. I don't remember how we got out of Brooklyn or back to the city. It could have been by bus.

What I do remember is one night during that trip being at Gerde's Folk City on West 4th Street in the West Village with Dylan. We were all just hanging out. In those days, and as mentioned, we stayed up late, usually most of the night. Who knows where we would sleep, often on the floor, but it was not so comfortable, and we were in no hurry for bed. The particular night I remember the guitar player Danny Kalb was playing at Gerdes. He was being featured that night or week. Kalb later became part of the group "The Blues Project."

I am sure Kalb was enjoying his prominence and I can remember him playing, the lights all on him, while Dylan, Lederman, and I stood off toward the shadows. Perhaps it was packed, because I recall walking around in a crowd and there was not a lot of light or places to sit. Bob Dylan was not that happy about Kalb. I think we all felt that way because Kalb did have an air about him that night of 'better than thou', and who could blame him. He was the man of the hour that night at Gerde's Folk City.

I can't remember whether Dylan played a few songs later that night himself or perhaps he or Lederman played some

tunes elsewhere. I don't recall. But I do recall his being irritated by Kalb, and some dissing Kalb a bit on all our parts was not hard to do. He was just a little full of himself at the time. After all Gerdes was 'The' place to be.

Thinking back, I doubt it was jealousy on Dylan's part with Kalb. Dylan was not petty, as I recall. He was probably just itching to let all of us know he was 'Bob Dylan' and wondered why nobody could see this right off. Back then (and it is not so different today), if you had something to sing or had worked on your stuff, you wanted a chance to play and show it off. Dylan was a nervous type and it showed.

Keep in mind that in those days Bob Dylan was still trying to find out for himself who he was. This was before he recorded his first album. I can remember another time in Ann Arbor sitting with Dylan in the Michigan Union Grill (the Mug) for hours drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes while we waited for a review of a concert or 'set' that Dylan had done the night before.

I am not sure if the set was part of the U of M Folklore Society performance or some other one, but I remember that Dylan was very concerned about how it went over. That is most of what we talked about. He wanted to know. This was before he had the world at his feet. He put his pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us back then. When the paper finally came out and we got a copy, sure enough Dylan got a good review. With that he was soon out at the edge of Ann Arbor hitchhiking to Chicago and the folk scene there.

Back in the early 1960s there was an established route that folkies like Dylan and me travelled. It went from Cambridge to NYC to Ann Arbor (sometimes to Antioch and Oberlin) to the University of Chicago to Madison and on out to Berkley. This was the folk bloodstream that we all circulated on, either hitchhiking or commandeering some old car for the

trip. Most of us hitchhiked. Early folk stars like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers did not hitchhike, but they still sat around with us in the Michigan Union drinking coffee. I remember one time having coffee in the MUG with Baez, sitting around there and talking, just the two of us.

And another time I remember hitchhiking with Dylan and Lederman, heading out of New York City down the road to Boston and to Club 47 in Cambridge. Here was Dylan standing on the side of the road with a big acoustic guitar strapped around his shoulder playing, while I stuck out my thumb. I remember the song "Baby Let Me Follow You Down" in particular. Even though I did not know at the time that this was "Bob Dylan," it still was pretty cool. This is the life we all wanted to live back then. We were chasing the Beats and playing folk music. This was years before Hippies, which came along more in the dance scene around 1965.

And Cambridge was another whole city and atmosphere. For some strange reason I seem to remember the Horn & Hardart automat there and trying to get food from it. Club 47, like "The Ark" in Ann Arbor, was one of the premier folk venues in the country, even back then. Today it is known as Club Passim and my daughter May Erlewine plays there, as well as here at The Ark.

Cambridge was where Lederman and I left Dylan that time. He was heading out west to New York hitching along the interstate 90 toward I believe it was Saratoga Springs or perhaps Schenectady for a gig. Perry Lederman and I were hitchhiking over to New Hampshire and Laconia to attend the annual motorcycle races there, which is another story. I don't know where we slept at the races. I remember it being just on the ground, and it was still kind of cold out at night.

And the motorcycle races were incredible. Large drunken crowds that, when the official races were not being run,

would part just enough to allow two motorcycles to run first gear while the crowd cheered. The problem was that the crowd pressed in too close and every so often one of the cycles would veer into the crowd and the handlebars would tear someone's chest out. The ambulances were going non-stop way into the evening.

And it seemed the crowd never learned. It was scary and very drunk out. I remember riding on the racetrack itself on the back of a big Norton motorcycle at 100 miles an hour, not something I would do today.

This all took place in mid-June of 1961. The Laconia, New Hampshire races were held from June 15 through the 18th that year. This would put us in Gerdes Folk city some days before that.

As to what kind of "person" Bob Dylan was, in all sincerity he was a person like any of us back then, a player or (in my case) a would-be player. Dylan and I are the same age, born a month or two apart. All of us were properly intense and dedicated to folk music. I was 19 years old in the spring of 1961. Imagine!

I vaguely remember Dylan telling me he was going to record an album or just had recorded one; it could have been the Harry Belafonte album where he played harmonica as a sideman on "Midnight Special," I don't know. I believe it was later that year that Dylan recorded his first album on Columbia. I don't remember seeing him much after that. Here is something I wrote many years ago about Dylan for a biography on jazz great Grant Green.

This was while people will still getting used to Dylan's gravelly voice:

"Consider the singing voice of Bob Dylan. A lot of people used to say the guy can't sing. But it's not that simple. He is

singing. The problem is that he is singing so far in the future that we can't yet hear the music. Other artists can sing his tunes and we can hear that all right. Given enough time... enough years... that gravel-like voice will sound as sweet to our ears as any velvety-toned singer. Dylan's voice is all about microtones and inflection.

For now, that voice may be hidden from our ears in time so tight that there is no room (no time) yet to hear it. Some folks can hear it now. I, for one, can hear the music in that voice. I know many of you can too. Someday everyone will be able to hear it, because the mind will unfold itself until even Dylan's voice is exposed for just what it is -- a pure music. But by then our idea of music will also have changed. Rap is changing us even now. "

[This article was also published in "The Bridge," volume No. 39, the British journal dedicated to Dylan's work.]

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

All great musicians do this to us. Shakespeare was the master at this. You can't read him and remain conscious. He knocks you out with his depth, and you wake back up somewhere down the stream of time, enriched.

Grant Green's jazz guitar playing at its best is like this too. It is so recursive that instead of taking the obvious outs we are used to hearing, Green instead chooses to reinvest -- to go in

further and deepen the groove. He opens up a groove and then opens up a groove and then opens a groove, and so on. He never stops. He opens a groove and then works to widen that groove until we can see into the music, see through the music into ourselves, into life. He puts everything back into the groove that he might otherwise get out of it, the opposite of ego. He knows that the groove is the 'thing', and that time will see him out and his music will live long. That is what grooves are about and why Grant Green is the groove master.

Perry Lederman played like this. We had never heard a player like this back then or even today. If you play this link, it will play song after song. Notice the nuances in his playing. Have you ever heard playing like that?

<https://www.jango.com/music/Perry+Lederman>



Perry Lederman



ANN ARBOR'S AMG – SOMETIMES A GREAT NOTION

December 19, 2022

[If you have stories or comments on AMG, the All-Music Guide, please post them here or send them to me at Michael@Erlewine.net.]

I was into music, big time, from back in the late 1950s when I traveled the folk-music circuit and participated in the folk revival from that time... or when I hung around as a high-school kid in Ann Arbor apartments listening to jazz by Bob James and other players before liquor by the glass made it economically feasible to have bands in bars. I was already paying attention.

And then of course, with our band the Prime Movers Blues Band, I was fanatically studying Black music which led to Black people and using some of them for the two grandfathers I never had, wise folks with real-life experience that were kind enough to see me.

And the point was sharpened with the two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals that happened in 1969 and 1970, and then the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals from 1972 and beyond. I couldn't believe it; I was in charge of feeding and providing 'drinks' for all those players and getting to know them. I personally interviewed most of the players back then, first with audio, and later with video. I couldn't have been happier. I am reminded of the Joan Baez song "Diamond and Rust" and the lyrics:

"Our breath comes out white clouds

Mingles and hangs in the air

Speaking strictly for me

We both could have died then and there."

And after that, in the aftermath of those times I clung to my vinyl record collection like a drowning man to a mast head. And while outwardly I was becoming a programmer, teaching myself how to hack it, my busy-little fingers never let go of the rosary of Black music that inspired me. It is still true today. And so, everything went along like that until, well, until vinyl and cassettes began to segue into music CDs. That was when it started, and it started with me getting ticked-off, and I will explain why.

As Peewee Herman might put it, I really, really, really liked popular music, and not just blues and jazz, but all of the rock n' roll that I came up with. Not only that, but I had also been fully initiated into classical music, and all the conductors and orchestras, and so knew a great deal about that. I had everything Mozart ever wrote and all of the Bach Cantatas, some 210 of them, to give you an idea of my idea of completeness. And I especially cared about Black music, did I mention that? And to give you an idea of what happened that upset me, I want to use 'Little Richard' as an example, a

performer I really listened to carefully. And of course, I followed all of Little Richard tunes as they came across into their CD releases. Minutely.

And to my horror, as I picked up CDs that said on their cover 'Little Richard's Original Hits,' yes, these were the original hits, but recorded some 20 years later by a faded Little Richard. Anyone who knows his repertoire knows that Little Richard was red-hot for about three years around 1957. In fact, if you listen to the original hits of Little Richard, he has almost no imitators. By that I mean, people can't even sing his songs or if they do, it's a joke. I've tried, back in the day. That's how intense Little Richards's voice back then was.

He was so deep in there, and imprinted into our brains, that other singers could not even get intense enough to measure music time as he did. He killed it. And so, when I listened to some of the reissues, they were not reissues, but re-recordings by Little Richard years later. What upset me was if folks that were new to Little Richard pick up one of these duds and assume upon hearing it that they had heard Little Richard, that was sad. They never 'heard' him and still they may reject him after hearing what is a sad attempt to pawn off bad re-recordings of Little Richard's hit by himself. I found it hard to believe that anyone who loved Little Richard would do such a thing, but you know they did just that. It's all about money.

And so, in my tiny office here in Big Rapids, Michigan, where I still am today as I write this, I rebelled. I just could not let that stand. It was not about me; I had my 'Little Richard' empowerment. It was about you and others, who have never heard him. That's not going to happen, or so I made my mind up.

And it started small, just my making lists of new CDs that were not what they professed to be. And those lists ended up

in Microsoft Word, and after that into Nutshell, one of the early PC databases. And it went from there. Yet there are at least a couple of trains running here.

As various music experts, particularly freelance writers, heard about this guy somewhere in a tiny Podunk town of Michigan called Big Rapids, who had the gall to name what he was doing the “All-Music Guide,” that’s just a big joke. Didn’t I know that all music critics lived in NYC or Los Angeles or some other large metropolis? I never thought about being small or big, but only about setting the record straight as CDs came out based on the original vinyl or cassettes.

Another problem, I was busy running a software company that I founded called Matrix Software. It turned out I was the first person in the world to program astrology on micro-computers, thus freeing astrologers all over the world from calculating astrology charts by log tables, trig, and look-up ephemerides, making what previously was a 15-20 minute task to make an astrology chart, something that now took 2 seconds, a touch of a button.

And, according to an article on me for Red Herring Magazine, Matrix Software was the second oldest software company on the Internet, the only older software company on the Net was a little company called Microsoft. I had done something of value to many people.

And there is this too. My programs were so accurate that amateur astronomers bought them until they could figure out how to do this for themselves. I was soon programming the motions of the Moon and planets to a second of arc, all in a tiny 8K computer, the Commodore Pet 2001. And my work, not to pat myself on the head too much, changed the course of modern astrology all over the world. A few years ago, at a large astrological convention in Chicago, over a thousand astrologers gave me a five-minute standing ovation plus a

Lifetime-Achievement award, but I was not present. Instead, I had left the ballroom (I had those dinner events) and was sound asleep up in my bed in the hotel. They had to give the award with me in pajamas, but I digress.

And my software company staff (Matrix Software), did not like me spending money on something as ephemeral, in their minds, as the All-Music Guide. To quote from one my staff, "It's like pouring money down a rat hole." Well, thank you very much, yet I stuck to my guns and persevered.

And finally, AMG (All-Music Guide) did something with our guide that never existed previously. Before AMG was available, the way music criticism, for the most part worked, books like the "Rolling Stone Record Guide" and others rated music based on the person who rated the music. In other words, the ratings were based on this critic or that critic's name and word. AMG changed all that forever.

We insisted that artists did not need to be compared to other artists. We only compared a music artist's work to their own work, not to others. Taking Little Richard's work again, we compared Little Richards song output only to itself. We showed folks what our freelance music experts agree on was the best of Little Richard, not comparing Little Richard to Jerry Lee Lewis or Bob Dylan. We star-rated all their work only to themselves. This proved to be very helpful to everyone. You could go right to the best stuff and not buy duds.

And as they say, "From little acorns great oaks do grow," and so did our staff, growing so fast that we outgrew our four large buildings in Big Rapids, until I moved the music part of our software company to Ann Arbor Michigan, my home town, in 1999, where it occupied two entire floors of a large office building on the corner of W. Liberty and Fifth Street.

When I sold the company, we had 150 full-time employees and 500-700 freelance writers. And aside from the All-Music Guide, which is by far the largest music database on the planet, AMG also created the All-Movie Guide, now one of the two largest film and movie databases in existence. I also founded the All-Game Guide (which was not continued after I left), and I went on to create all by myself (with minor help), Classic Posters, which today is the largest concert poster data collection on the planet. I personally photographed over 33,000 of the best concert music posters (the kind we used to tear down and keep). I did scores of interviews and have written 328 books and booklets on concert music posters, all books of which are available free to all commers. Here is the link.

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

I donated "Classic Posters" data to the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan years ago, as well as to the non-profit Haight-Street Art Center out in San Francisco, as well as sold the name and donated the data to ClassicPosters.com, which is still running.

As for AMG, I am told that today the AMG music database contains almost 3 million albums, and also documents 3 million individual artists, over 96,000 artist biographies, plus 33 million individual music tracks, not to mention sidemen, album covers, and the works. Those are not small numbers, and all were done with a little persistence and some vision.

How did I do this? Well, the secret is not hard to explain. What is hard to accomplish, because it requires that someone, that would initially be me, would perform some of the most tedious, time-consuming, repetitive, and boring work on the planet. Only a fool would go that, or someone who really was motivated to protect our popular culture, like

music and movies. That was me, and I am sorry to say, probably my family suffered most from my tunnel vision.

And, by the way, those music critics who put down the All-Music Guide, almost to a man or a woman, ended up writing something for our guide, which says something.

There is a lot more to this story, and some AMG friends and I are working on writing a book about AMG, not just because of the enormity of the project, but just as important because of the camaraderie and the beauty of a pretty large staff getting the opportunity to work, to actually go to work each day, on something they love, like music and film.

It's hard to go back once you have a livelihood of doing something you love. I know this from personal experience, because I gave up an education to educate myself, to just hang out in Ann Arbor 24x7 for much of my life, and I insisted on only working for pay on something I loved, and that's what this entrepreneur is all about. The work was excruciatingly difficult and tedious, but the joy of accomplishing it was beyond measure, IMO.

And as mentioned, I am proud of what AMG accomplished, but I am at least as proud of a good-sized staff of folks who loved what they did for a living, and hopefully some of them still are there.

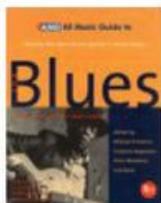
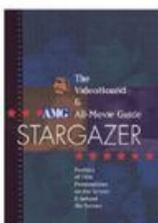
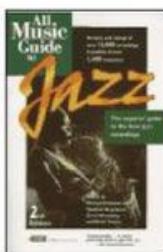
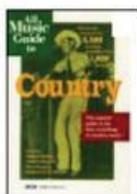
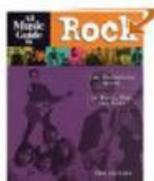
This is just an introduction to a series of articles by me on AMG, and finally perhaps a book, not written by me, but with me and the group of writers and lovers of film and music that made up and make up AMG.

My original CD collection, which turned into AMG's collection, is now housed at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, pushing 800,000 CDs. I include some graphics for AMG. I designed the logo for AMG, which was implemented by my brother Tom Erlewine.

Here is an article for Wired Magazine on AMG by Gary Wolf, Feb 1, 1994

<https://www.wired.com/1994/02/all-music/>

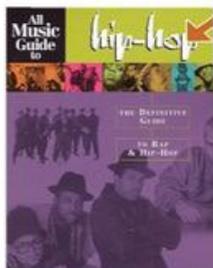




All-Music Guide Books

The All-Music guide and All-Movie Guide has been published in dozens of editions and is known all over the world. Although these books individually can be over three inches thick, the online database, if converted to book format, would take up something like 21 feet of shelf space.

Michael Erlewine was editor-in-chief for these books from their inception in 1991 until 1998. Michael worked with a staff of 150 full-time employees and a free-lance staff of over 500 writers.



Book Review

New Music Guide: Truly Comprehensive

All-Music Guide — The Best CDs, Albums & Tapes
 Michael Erlwine and Scott Bultman, editors
 Miller Freeman, Inc.
 Softcover, 1,178 pages
 \$18.95

by TS Taylor

This past summer, ISA sophomores and cousins Iotis and Tom Erlwine banded themselves in the extensive project of compiling an electronic database and book of musical recording reviews. The project was conceived by the book's editors, Michael Erlwine, Iotis' father and a former U-M student, and Scott Bultman, a 1988 graduate of the U-M.

The result of their efforts is the *All-Music Guide* — The Best CDs, Albums & Tapes and an even more extensive CD-ROM electronic database which will be available in about six months.

Iotis says that she "lived the book this summer," and that during production, they received "full consideration from the pizza delivery people." Tom, a DJ at WCEN-FM and the assistant editor of the *Guide*, worked around the clock more times than he cares to count and said that he "started with just a few artists to review, and then the project grew."

The *Guide* is a self-described "ongoing database project, the largest collection of substantive album reviews ever assembled."

In creating the book, Michael Erlwine wanted to bridge the gap between bookshoppers, whose customers can peruse the pages of books which interest them, and record stores, where would-be buyers can only base their judgments on an album's cover.

"I made this book because I needed it," Erlwine said. "I'm first in line to use it. I'd wasted too much money on lousy CDs."

Just a year ago, Erlwine decided to assemble professional reviewers, musicians and critics and, through their knowledge and consensus, to produce a music purchasing guide. The result is a compilation of material written and edited specifically for the book by over eighty professional reviewers, writers, critics and musicians.

Erlwine and Bultman felt confident that a collection of high quality music reviews would help steer consumers in the right direction and identify landmark recordings and artists who define musical genres.

"It helps people who don't know... but want to buy something important, safely," Bultman explained. "We recommend at least one album [from each artist listed] to start."

The *Guide* divides music into 26 major categories, among them Christmas music, jazz, classical, rock/pop/funk, children's music, soundtracks and cast recordings, world music, blues, country and western, 20th century avant-garde, folk, contemporary instrumental, gospel, reggae, and vocals.

"We put in as much as the publisher would let us print" for \$18.95, said Erlwine, "and that was tough to do." The first draft of the guide ran over 1,800 pages, but was trimmed to nearly 1,200. "They had to squeeze" to make it for this price," he said.

While creating a guide to all music may seem an impossible task, a brief look at the index reveals the impressive scope covered by the *Guide*. The index's 37 pages of triple-column listings cover over 7,500 recording artists and over 23,000 albums, including the background music used for cable's weather channel.

Concise artist biographies, album notes, record reviews, and notes identifying landmark works and "first buy" recommendations all enhance the *Guide*'s utility. Historical "maps" show

the growth and directions of various musical genres. Also included are the editors' "Don't Miss" picks.

Many such guides might be criticized for presenting dated information, but Erlwine and Bultman have included reviews of recordings from the time of the first LP through those appearing as recently as August. In cases where there has been a CD re-release of a recording which first appeared in the old 78 or 10-inch format, the original recording is also included.

The guide is geographically well-balanced as well with music from around the world, including strong representation of Ann Arbor. The U-M's home town also gets mention in the book's first dedication, to "The spirit of the '60s and the music scene in Ann Arbor, Michigan, at that time."

The book may be enough to keep many music fans busy for quite a while, but for those who crave even more, the upcoming CD-ROM version will also

have the capacity to track individual artists' development and influence. The CD-ROM database can contain 55 times the amount of information that the printed *Guide* can, according to Erlwine. Those interested in picking up a copy for themselves or as a Christmas gift may also be interested in the \$125 worth of coupons at the end of the book, which can be used toward the purchase of albums or CDs.

Iotis and Tom will join Michael G. Nastos, a WEMU-FM DJ, Cub Koda, the *Guide*'s jazz editor and leader of the '70s rock group Brownsville Station, Peter Meyer, the classical import buyer for Schoolkids' and George Bedard, one of the *Guide*'s rock editors for a book signing of the *Guide* at Schoolkids' Records from 2 to 5 p.m. on Saturday.

TS Taylor is a computer consultant and math tutor/teacher and a staff writer for the Review.

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The Michigan Review announces its first mass meeting for Winter Term 1993, to be held on January 10, 1993, at 7 p.m. on the third floor of the Michigan League. All are invited to attend. Mark your calendars now!



JUST A PASSING THOUGHT

December 20, 2022

Tomorrow is far away, a relatively long time from today, at least in my life, and it's always been that far away. And so, I don't know what will come or what I will be doing, at least as to my moods, twenty-four hours from now. I don't.

The future is always an outrider, skirting the present, yet never entering it. IMO, it's all about how we respond to the present moment that is key. Are we ready for that, 'that' being whatever comes down the pike? I can't say that I am

always ready, but I do my best to be open and accommodate what comes, because there is no choice, and without a doubt something comes down the road of time, as regular as rain.

And so, it's not so much about what comes from the future as it is how I respond to it, preferably not with knee-jerk reactions. Flexibility on our part is important, that we bend with the wind, so to speak. Life is a wind tunnel and how aerodynamic we are determines whether we fly or fall.

I find there is no use my being anxious about the future because it will always be there, as it is now, just out of sight and reach, somewhat unknown. The great meditation masters all seem to agree that the present is what should be monitored, welcoming each moment, rather than second-guessing the future or trying to figure out the past.

“Be Here Now” makes a lot of sense.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



ANN ARBOR'S 'BIRD OF PARADISE'

December 21, 2022

Ann Arbor, 'Bird of Paradise' jazz club is not to be forgotten. I spent many happy evenings at the 'Bird'. It was always dark in there, but after all, it's a jazz club. I remember it both on S. Ashley and after it moved to Main St. And of course, I remember Ron Brooks, who was always friendly. If I remember right, Ron and I used to date the same girl, maybe not at the same time.

And I remember, all too well, when I was there, and the customers were few, and I would commiserate with Ron Brooks with just a look. The same thing happened to me when I owned and operated the “Two Sisters” restaurant in Big Rapids, Michigan. Even today, I can’t drive by any restaurant and see an empty parking lot without wincing.

At the “Two Sisters,” we had music almost every weekend, with a hand-made red curtain from Italy, mounted lights, a real sound system, and all that. Sometimes, I would be almost the only one there when an act was performing. It’s a tough business, IMO.

The last time I was at the Bird of Paradise, if I recall, I was sitting at a table for two with jazz pianist Marian McPartland, and we were listening to Mose Allison and David “Fathead” Newman on a double bill. Now, that was a time. I love Mose Allison, of course, but David “Fathead” Newman. Wow! Just my kind of music. Here are some photos of Ron Brooks at the Ann Arbor Public Library site.

<https://aadl.org/node/578339>

https://aadl.org/N131_0148_007

And when the ‘Bird’ moved to main street, it had two sections, one room with a bar, open to all comers, and a second room for performances, and the two rooms were separated by folding doors with windows. I could sit in the performance area and look through those windows into the bar. And people over there peeked in.

And in later years, I remember, as a board member of the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, bringing Hammond organ player Charles Earland and his quartet to the festival, and hearing him perform at the Bird of Paradise on Friday September 17 and Saturday the 18, 1999. What a treat! Here is a photo I took of Earland at the Bird at that time.

And finally, here is a wonderful article by Ann Arbor News writer Roger Lelievre, used with his permission.

THE BIRD HAS FLOWN

Sunday, August 22, 2004

BY ROGER LELIEVRE, News Arts Writer

For 19 years the Bird of Paradise jazz club, owned by local bass player Ron Brooks, earned praise, recognition and crowds for a lineup that mixed local musicians with national headliners. But at a sparsely attended closing party July 27, 2004 the Bird sounded its final note.

The end came as no surprise.

The building the Bird occupied was sold in February.

By then, the club was behind in its rent, and the new owner ordered it to vacate by July 31. The once-stellar lineup of musical talent had dwindled to mostly Brooks' own trio.

How did the Bird, named by jazz bible "DownBeat Magazine" in 2002 as one of the best clubs in the nation, wind up out of business two years later? Was a 2000 move - from an intimate storefront setting on South Ashley Street to a larger, more expensive basement location on South Main Street - to blame? Was part of the problem an owner who was a bassist first and a businessman second? Or was it simply increased competition for a limited audience?

Brooks, who has said he doesn't want to elaborate on his disputes with his landlords in the newspaper, also promised jazz fans he is actively seeking a new home for the Bird and hopes to relocate by fall.

"We managed to survive for almost 20 years, second only to Baker's Keyboard Lounge (in Detroit) - that's longer than most marriages," Brooks said.

A promising beginning

A self-taught musician, Brooks graduated from Eastern Michigan University (where he was captain of the wrestling team) in the early 1960s with a degree in speech and physical education. Soon thereafter, he enrolled at the University of Michigan, where he earned a degree in counseling (he currently works for Southeastern Dispute Resolution Services in Jackson, an agency that provides mediation services to resolve disputes without going to court). During his college days, he wanted to become a jazz vocalist; however, his singing career never got off the ground. Instead, he turned to the bass.

Brooks has been making and promoting jazz in this area ever since.

The Bird of Paradise, named after a Charlie Parker tune, opened with fanfare on May 28, 1985, at 209 S. Ashley St., in a building that once served as an auto dealership and, later, a storage area for Saguaro Nursery and Plants. At the time, the Bird was considered the first legitimate jazz club in town since the mid-1970s closings of such establishments as the Loma Linda and Golden Falcon.

In short order, the new Bird of Paradise became a regional draw for some of the top names in jazz. Dizzy Gillespie, Diana Krall and Ray Brown were just a few of the stars drawn to the Bird; at the same time, local musicians found a home there too.

In an interview after the Bird closed, Brooks said he started the club in an attempt to "pay back jazz for providing me with the opportunity to be exposed to things that I probably wouldn't have been exposed to."

He said he was disappointed that Ann Arbor audiences didn't support the Bird after its move, but he also remains philosophical.

"I remember when the space I was in was Sears, and then it was Spiegels, then it was a clothing store, then it was Chianti ...change is inevitable."

Bad move?

Some blame the Bird's decline on its move to Main Street.

In April 2000, the nightspot moved to a new, larger location in the basement of 312 S. Main St.; the Firefly Club, which programs mostly jazz, opened in the Bird's former space. At the time, Brooks said he was looking for a better location and increased capacity. Unfortunately, the economy was on the downswing.

In March 2002, the club lost its signature Bird of Paradise Orchestra, led by local bassist Paul Keller, to the Firefly, where it was rechristened the Paul Keller Orchestra. Zydeco, the New Orleans-style restaurant upstairs, closed this January, dashing hopes that the two could work cooperatively in attracting customers. The next month, the building, which also houses Ann Arbor's not-for-profit acoustic music venue The Ark, was bought by developer Jerry Spears and several other investors. Although it was confirmed at the time that The Ark would remain in place, the Bird's fate was uncertain. Now, it has been sealed.

The building's new owner said police reports of a disturbance outside the club in July hastened the Bird's departure before its lease was up in October.

"We had already had discussions of him leaving earlier. The episode pushed the date closer to him vacating," Spears said.

The question asks itself: If the Bird was doing so well on South Ashley Street, why move it?

Brooks said he the club's popularity led him to believe a larger place was needed.

"I look back, and I remember the vision of Dizzy Gillespie performing at the old club and looking outside the window and seeing as many people outside as there were inside.

"I saw that in order for (the club) to sustain itself and grow, a bigger space was desirable. I was getting calls from musicians from (here to) Timbuktu all looking for work. The number of people looking for a place to play grew astronomically, which told me that there weren't that many places to play."

Brooks said he had the opportunity to sit down and talk to the late bassist Ray Brown, who was a frequent performer at the Bird at its South Ashley location.

"He took a stab at trying to operate a club in California, and we had several talks about it - what it was like, what were some of the pluses or minuses," Brooks recalled. "He provided me with some notions of what you could and couldn't do."

Did he advise Brooks not to move?

"What he said was, he lost a fortune," Brooks said.

The economics of the situation dogged Brooks as well.

"The overhead goes up because you have a bigger spot, and unless the response is that much greater, then two and two don't make four," he said. The difficulty comes in broadening the club's appeal beyond a core group of jazz lovers.

Lars Bjorn, a professor of sociology at the U-M-Dearborn, treasurer of Southeastern Michigan Jazz Association

(commonly known as SEMJA) and co-author of "Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit, 1920-60," said it was obvious that the Bird was suffering.

"Paying rent on Main Street is a very difficult thing. ... The jazz club business is not something you get into to make money.

What (Brooks) has done over the last half year, he started to compromise just to pay the rent. One night a week he starting bringing in DJs. ... That was, I am sure, a very hard decision for him."

He said the problems just got worse when the building was sold and Zydeco closed.

According to Brooks, the South Ashley Street version of the Bird of Paradise occupied 3,000 square feet, with a capacity of 120 people. On Main Street, the club boasted 6,000 square feet and a capacity of 220, or with tables and chairs removed just over 300. Rent on the South Ashley Street space was around \$3,000 a month; on Main Street it was \$6,000, he said.

"The space doubled and the rent doubled," Brooks said, with a rent hike looming when the building changed hands. No new amount was specified.

Brooks declined to comment on specifics such as how much the Bird took in revenues, other costs associated with running the club and how much musicians were paid to perform.

He did say not enough money was coming in to cover expenses. "If you've got a business and you aren't doing the business," he said, "you can't pay the musicians what you want. Nobody can work for free."

Drummer Pete Siers - who leads Los Gatos, a Latin jazz band that has played at both the Bird and the Firefly - said he blames the club's demise on a number of factors, including the move to Main Street.

In addition to the high rent, Siers said the club was hindered by its downstairs digs.

"Everybody thought there would be a lot more foot traffic off the street. In reality, the sign didn't get up for almost 6-8 months after the club opened. The people who had the upstairs didn't want to give up their frontage, so there wasn't anything visible to bring people down there."

Brooks said it's hard to tell if the downstairs location was a major drawback.

"The kind of audience who would not be deterred by a basement space in Europe might be deterred in Ann Arbor," he said.

Added Bjorn: "Things have been slowing down at the Bird gradually for a while. ... There have been less national acts coming in and so on. Everybody was asking when the Bird moved to its new location - it was on everyone's mind - 'Can Ann Arbor support two jazz clubs?'"

Firefly buzzing

When the Bird of Paradise opened in 1985, it was the only place in Ann Arbor to hear quality, mainstream jazz. Now, there's more competition all around. Besides the Firefly Club, the nonprofit Kerrytown Concert House and The Ark also offer occasional jazz acts, and Goodnight Gracie is jazz-oriented as well.

"I thought to myself, 'Ron, you'd better be careful for what you wish for. You just might get it,'" Brooks recalled. "I

wished for Ann Arbor to be a thriving community for musicians. That means more venues, more opportunities."

Other places are playing jazz, but "they aren't full-time, straight-ahead jazz clubs," he added.

What happened to the musicians who played at the Bird, and to many of the Bird's customers, is obvious. They can be found at the Firefly, which recently landed a coup by presenting jazz legend Maynard Ferguson.

When times started getting tough at the Bird, musicians - such as the rechristened Paul Keller Trio and Los Gatos, which played a long-running Wednesday night gig at the club - were dismissed or left, only to resurface at the Firefly.

Siers, who also played with Brooks as part of his trio for 11 years, said he harbors no ill will toward Brooks - quite the contrary. "Even though I took my band over to the 'Fly, it's been cool," he said.

Firefly owner Susan Chastain, meanwhile, has nothing but praise for Brooks.

"Having more than one venue makes for a jazz scene, so that people can come to town and know they will find something they'll like," she said.

She said economics probably played a part in the Bird's demise.

"The cost of doing business in Ann Arbor is off the planet - that's a huge contributor," she said. "Many jazz clubs across the country have found the way they can support the music is by becoming more of a restaurant and pulling cash in that way to pay the bills, and that seriously marginalizes the music.

"Ron has always been 'music first,' and I applaud him for that."

Bassist first, businessman second

Did bassist Brooks enjoy the business end of running his club?

He tried his best to be diplomatic.

"Those who spend a lot of time and energy being creative and consider themselves as artistically oriented, are more often than not challenged by the notion of ... I don't want to make generalizations about everybody. ...

"Certainly I was more challenged by the business aspects than I was the artistic aspects," he concluded.

"Ray Kroc, the inventor of McDonald's, once said that somebody asked him (to) what he attributed most of his success. He said, 'I don't attribute it to my math skills or my business acumen. I purely attribute it to persistence.'

"So if you have something you strongly believe in, you could use that as a model. You have to be persistent."

Does that persistence mean that the Bird will be back?

Perhaps, he said, but likely not in downtown Ann Arbor.

"There's a low probability," he conceded. "Things change so quickly in a community. ... You never know."

He pointed out that business was crippled not long after the move by the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. He also blamed liquor laws, especially those regulating happy hours, which changed at about that time. "People became conservative about their drinking behaviors. People would go home early and not stay out late.

"Our weekend business was always OK. I think people changed their habits by probably going out a lot less and not staying out as long - by investing heavier in their CD players

and cell phones and other things that would keep them home."

Bird's future

During the Bird's closing party, Brooks vowed to reopen somewhere else. There are rumors he's found a new space, but Brooks won't confirm the speculation. He did say that any future club would probably be smaller than the space he just vacated.

"The economics are such, with a larger location, the overhead is too much," he said.

If Brooks chooses not to reopen, he could sell his liquor license and use the money to pay some of the back rent, which the landlords have said is at least \$31,600, a figure Brooks has disputed.

Brooks could expect between \$25,000 and \$60,000 if he wanted to sell the license, according to Terry Conlin of the Ann Arbor firm of Selligson Deloof Hopper and Dever, which has handled liquor-license cases throughout the state for three decades.

Conlin said the demand for licenses is not as strong as it has been

past years.

The value, he said, "depends on how many are available at any given time and how anxious the seller is to sell."

If Brooks reopened the Bird of Paradise at another location in

Washtenaw County, he could transfer the liquor license pending approval from the municipal government, police and the Michigan Liquor Control Commission, according to Julie Wendt, director of licensing.

Bruce Hutchinson, a former board member of the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival, said he doubts Ann Arbor would be a good place to open another jazz club.

"I think at this point any town Ann Arbor's size would be hard-pressed to support two jazz clubs," he said. "If it could be done, Ann Arbor would be the place. But my gut feeling is no."

The Bird's closing leaves a void not only in terms of places for musicians to perform, but also for presenters trying to place those

artists, he added.

"It looks like we'll just go with the Firefly Club now, right?"

[Graphic -- Midjourney graphic by me. Photo of Charles Earland by me.]



Charles Earland



AFTER THE FALL: WINTER SOLSTICE

December 21, 2022

Happy Solstice! Earlier today was the winter Solstice, Wednesday, December 21, 2022, at 4:48 P.M. EST. The Sun has bottomed out and that was the darkest day of the year. From now on, today and tomorrow, the Sun moves forward toward Spring. My wife laughs at me staring out the windows at the snow and imagining I see just a little more light, I know, it takes a while for the light to be visible. There is a lag.

Building up to the top is at least as great as reaching the top, if only because there is nowhere to go from the top but down. The upswing slope is fun, while the downslope can be treacherous to our mental health, and we just may not like it. And the top, mathematically is infinitesimally brief, unmeasurable, as is the bottom where we are at now. The snap of a finger.

Considering that Samsara, this world we live in, is nothing but ups, downs, and arounds, it makes sense to work with the cycles, surf them if we can, or at least go with and not against the flow of their tides.

It's not too hard to note whether we are on an upswing as opposed to a downswing. We can do that. Thus, we can lean into the upswing, as long as no effort is made, and lean out from the downswing, feeling the wind in our hair.

What's not worth wasting any time on is wondering if there is going to be another upswing or another downswing. In Samsara, there will always be both, one following the other like clockwork, eternally. So, as I tell myself, "Get with the program."

I also find it worthwhile, worth my effort, to follow the lunar cycle, the phases of the Moon. Traditionally we sow with the waxing of the Moon and reap in the waning of the Moon. Just before the New Moon is a good time to hunker down and wait for the Moon to be New. In Tibet the three days before the New Moon were considered the Dharmapala days, days to engage in practice of their fierce deities. In Europe these same days were considered the 'Devil's Days.' They must be trying to tell us something, whether we believe in it or not.

And on the opposite end of the cycle, the Full of the Moon, that's the time to party and expand, reap just what we sow. I have experimented with these two opposite poles for many decades, and they seem to work for me.

And so, whether your ups and downs coincide with the Moon's ups and downs, you'd have to check that out. The phases of the Moon can also be out of joint with our own phases of ups and downs, and that compounds the whole thing, IMO.

Or perhaps we don't care to monitor whether we are up or down at all. And that's what a lot of folks do. We can just ride the waves of change as best we can and enjoy the mystery. As for me, I do my best to be in synch with both the lunar cycle and to remain aware where I'm at in my own cycles of up and down. Awareness of awareness is the whole idea.

The Winter Solstice is my New Year.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



THE INVARIABLE PLANE

December 22, 2022

Go with the flow, which just means 'flow'. Yet, how do we flow when we are snagged like a fishing line in the thickets of time? Well, to the best of my understanding, this involves relaxing in the moment, resting within whatever is happening, whatever that is.

And don't tell me that's easy, because it's not, at least for me. I've had to learn to relax in the nature of what there is. It may

be natural, yet it did not come naturally for me. Yet I am very slowly getting there.

There is an invariable plane that is, well, invariable, at least as much as anything is invariable. It's invariable in its movement, like a vast gyroscope is invariable. Moving invariably at high speed.

Rest in that, which is not somewhere else other than right here now. The invariable plane does not vary beyond being invariable. We vary. We fidget, worry, and can't come to rest. The plane is invariable.

Obviously, it's hard to say in words how to just let go and come to rest, invariably. It's something like letting go, and letting go of letting go, and then letting go of letting go of letting go, a cascade of letting go until that is unending like a waterfall. We have to let go of letting go and let go.

Or it's a matter of erasing effort until there is no effort left.

Effortless.

In other words, don't try to let go. Just let go.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



1960S: ANN ARBOR'S GAY BARS

December 23, 2022

Back in the 1960s, as to where I spent the most time, outside of the bars our band played music in, it was probably Mr. Flood's Party, where I hung out, and especially the Del Rio, where you could find me. The Del Rio had the best Greek salads with this special sauce I cannot forget. We sat around there. And they sometimes had jazz. Yet I did check in at the Town Bar and the Flame Bar, both gay bars, from time to time, and went there with friends, just to sample a different environment for a change.

Also, as young musicians about town, we went to many bars, but also to the two main gay bars we knew of, the Town Bar at 212 E. Huron, and then downtown on 115 W. Washington Street is the Flame Bar, between Main

Street and Ashley. Although we sometimes went to either of these gay bars, it was the Town Bar that I would visit most often. Why go there if we were not gay?

Well, it was not that I had no friends at these bars. One of my band members, my keyboard player was gay, whose room was just across the hall from mine in the Prime Mover House at 114 N. Division. He was one of my oldest and closest friends. We lived together in that house, along with other band members, for like seven years. So, I had gay friends.

And, years before that, I had worked for quite some time at the UofM Graduate library, first down the back drive in the postal cage, shipping and receiving goods for the library, but later working in the stacks shelving books, and later still I scoured the stacks for damaged books and papers and saw that they were put in envelopes and labeled correctly. There was a wonderful man named Bill Whitney, who worked as a book binder and such at the library. It was to him I would bring my damaged materials. He was a great person to converse with, a friend and almost a father figure.

And in the graduate library, it seemed there were plenty of gays there, some of them our bosses. And these library folks went to these gay bars in downtown Ann Arbor regularly, in particular the Town Bar, so if we went there, we probably knew someone, because we worked at the library together.

And I went there probably because the atmosphere was lighter, and sometimes more fun, and just for a change. The whole gay scene was somehow exotic, and it was OK if they flirted with us. We didn't care. Gays, at least in my experience, were often aesthetes. They love literature, poetry, and music, and seemed just a skip and a jump from the Beat movement that had been fading out. And they liked to talk about it. And so did we. That's how the gay scene was for me back then.

As for the origin of the Ann Arbors gay scene I do not know much about that. My first introduction to 'gayness' in Ann Arbor was probably in the late 1950s and early 1960s, because at the side door to the Michigan Union, was a little circle drive where folks were dropped off, and a long low cement wall that reached out to State Street. And behind that wall was a really great grassy patch, and a bunch of aspiring folk guitarists, and I was one, would sit and practice playing folk music on the lawn. It was nice there.

Yet, we soon found that maybe we didn't want to sit on the wall itself, because it became clear that this was a favorite place for gays to pick up other gays. So, that was my introduction to the Ann Arbor gay scene, playing folk guitar on the lawn, while all kinds of 'cruising' went on right

before our eyes. So, while perhaps Ann Arbor was perhaps a little shy of gays back in the late 1950s and on into the 1960s, yet they are shy no more here in 2022 and were really not that invisible back in the day either.

This shows what little I know about Ann Arbor's gay and lesbian scene, a very important part of Ann Arbor today which is why I am happy to introduce you to a very detailed account of the Flame Bar and other places around Ann Arbor. Unfortunately, I don't have photos of the Flame Bar that I have permission to use, but here are two links to some good photos of the place.

I also include a little Midjourney image I created, just to have a bit of mood for this piece. Meanwhile, here is this excellent piece by Rostom Mesli and Brian Whitener about the Flame Bar. I thank them for the permission to share it here with you.

THE FLAME: THE GAY BAR OF ANN ARBOR, 1949-1998

CREATED BY ROSTROM MESLI AND BRAIN WHITENER

The story of an Ann Arbor that became a center of gay and lesbian life in this Midwestern college town.

THE FLAME

The history of the Flame is an odyssey, one that started in the late 1940s, with a young Greek sailor in the Merchant Marine. Christos Pasaportis was born on December 25th, 1930, in a small town in Greece. Christos lost his father as a young child and when he turned 16, his wealthy and well-connected uncle found him a position as a chief steward in the Merchant Marine. Our young sailor traveled the world, visiting ports of call in France, Spain, Russia, Germany, and the Caribbean. However, after three years of constant travel, in 1950, he decided to spend a 29-day leave in the United States. Christos visited his uncle in New York City and then went to visit another uncle in Michigan... and 60 years later he is still yet to re-board that ship. Christos arrived in this country as an immigrant, as at least in part an outsider and a "foreigner," and took the name of one of his uncles: Harry Tselios. In those years, his relatives in Michigan, wanted him to marry, but Harry did not want to settle down. He wanted to enjoy his new freedom and was anxious to get back to sea. It this did not happen. Our sailor dropped anchor, in 1953, in Ann Arbor, on Washington street, at the Flame.

The Birth of the Flame

The Flame did not start out as Ann Arbor's gay bar nor as a rallying point for gays and lesbians in the area. In fact, it did not even start as the Flame.

It started in 1949 as “The Cupid,” a student bar owned by a local businessman, Bill Skinner. By the time Harry arrived, the bar’s name had changed, and the Cupid had become the Flame. Harry was hired on April 14, 1953, through his cousin’s husband who had been working as a waiter at the bar. When Harry was hired way back in 1953, the Flame was still not a gay bar. It would take a few more years for the Flame to become what it was for four decades: the only gay bar in Ann Arbor.

In 1959, Harry recalled, the “student bar was making good business,” but the owner decided to sell it to a man from Dexter, Michigan. This man’s name was Harvey Blanchard, and he was to own the Flame for 23 years. Although the Flame became a gay bar in those years, Harvey did not decide to turn it into a gay spot. At this point, there was another bar across the street, the Town Bar. The Town bar was owned and operated by two men who formed a gay couple. Harry recalled he was good friends with them. Since the owners were gay, the Town Bar attracted a gay crowd and was the gay bar of the time. The Town Bar seems to have been a cherished place for the gays of the area until the owners decided to feature live music in the bar. This change attracted a new crowd, which made gay patrons feel less comfortable there. Also, as a result of the presence of this new crowd, there started to be fights at the Town bar. Instead of creating a new bar, the newly barless gay population started to colonize the bar across the street. As Harry explains, the gays just started to leave the Town Bar and began to patronize the Flame.

In her classic article, “The Homosexual Bar,” Nancy Achilles notes that “homosexuals rarely infiltrate an already established bar and make it their own; a gay bar is gay from the beginning” (179). The Flame was one of those gay bars where this rare phenomenon transpired. The transformation did not, of course, happen overnight. However, local gay activist and former head of the University of Michigan Spectrum Center, Jim Toy, who came to Ann Arbor to study musicology in 1960, recalls that he knew the Flame was a gay bar during the 1960s. Moreover, by the late 1960s, the reputation of the Flame as a gay bar was firmly established among straight people as well. Anthropologist Gayle Rubin came to Ann Arbor for college in 1966, and she first heard about the Flame in 1968 or 1969. She had not come out yet, and it was her then-boyfriend who told her that the Flame was “a place where you do not want to go.” Gayle recalled that she had a vague feeling that it must be a queer place. When she came out around 1970-1971, she discovered she was right.

The Golden Age of the Flame

The Flame bar was located at 115 W. Washington Street, between Main and Ashley, where Logan’s restaurant stands now. The bar, throughout its

lifespan, was located in the heart of downtown. In a 1980 article entitled "Gay Bars as Private Places," Barbara A. Weightman notes that two thirds of the 60 bars that she studied were located in "what might be considered undesirable areas," the others being located "along active, usually non-pedestrian, commercial strips in association with fast food enterprises, used car lots, building supply stores, and similar activities." The Flame clearly belonged to this second, rarer, category of gay bar. The Flame, as we will see, was unique bar in many, many respects.

Just inside the door, as Jim Toy recalls, there was "a long bar that ran from the door, oh, probably thirty feet or so. And then booze." He continues: "It was a single long room. Really long. With a side door at the back end that opened up into the alley. That I recall. There was no upstairs or if there were, it wasn't used." To many a customer's despair, the Flame was not a dance bar, but it did have a jukebox. While the Flame was located in a very bustling area of Ann Arbor, it was not a high-end establishment by any means. Jim Toy nicely contrasts the Flame with its successor Logan's restaurant: "Logan's is bright; it's clean, as far as I know. I don't go there, because it's too expensive. And it looks cheerful to me from the outside as well. The Flame was dark, dirty, smoky. Harvey had in the front windows, plants which were dying. He never replaced them. And so it was for me essentially not an inviting environment." Gayle Rubin confirms that "the Flame was not particularly inviting."

In fact, the dirtiness of the Flame was legendary. Of course, the plants in the window did serve a purpose; as Weightman notes that some of the bars she observed "are enshrouded by bushes or obscured in some way." Harry's dying plants certainly provided the customers with some privacy. Private or not, the Flame was most certainly what we might in today's parlance call a "dive." In a press article published in the Ann Arbor Observer in March, 1984, there is an allusion to those "dead geraniums" which, together with "faded newspaper clippings... collected dust in the front window for years." In the same article, Anne Blanchard, Harvey's former daughter-in-law who worked at the Flame, states that "Harvey just didn't see dirt." According to Anne, "the last significant investment in the bar came soon after Blanchard bought it [that is, in 1959], when his second wife bought new barstools as a wedding gift. The same stools, missing upholstery, backs, or both, are still in place." In an article published in 1989 in the Ann Arbor Observer as well, Harry comments: "Harvey thought it [the dirt] was something cute, something different.... He thought it gave something special, the atmosphere."

However, the layout was not the only element of the Flame that was unfriendly. It is true that a few months after Harvey's death, local Libertarian Jim Greenshields wrote to the Observer that "Harvey was a

friend to all—personal friends and acquaintances, customers, and present/past employees—always having a ready hello or nod of the head for those he met on the street or in his bar. Everyone was welcome in the Flame, and unlike the attitude of some of the watering holes downtown, everyone was treated alike; no inner circle or clique.” Jim Toy, on the other hand, recalls a somewhat different picture: “He was not a cheerful person.” Harry himself seems to have gotten along pretty well with owner Harvey Blanchard: “For years, we worked together... he was a good guy.” Yet, Harvey had his problems.

As Harry related to us:

That one was a little edgy. He was not, nice guy I mean, he just did not know how to handle a bar... so he never was too much there. Anytime he was there, he caused more problems.... He would just come in and take the money.... Yeah, just, well he was not working person... So sometimes he would come in for an hour. - “Can I go home?” “Sure,” I’d say.

In fact, Harvey seems to have been perceived as fairly tightfisted by many patrons. “Blanchard reputedly spent not a penny of his own money on keeping it up,” wrote the Observer in 1989. This article also quotes a customer recalling that if one customer accidentally broke a glass, “six people would echo it. We figured he had to replace the glasses at least.” Jim Toy seconded these impressions: “That was the only so-called gay bar in the city.... that was a focal point of life.... and so, Harvey the owner, I’m sure was aware of that. He had a monopoly in that sense.” It seems that Harvey Blanchard then never granted the patrons of the bar the cleaning and fixing up they asked for so many times. Quite simply, he did not have to.

At the center of the Flame, however, was not its owner, but its charismatic bartender, Harry Tselios. In our interview with him, Jim Toy contrasted Harvey with Harry: “His bartender, Harry, was on the other end congenial. And people loved to chat with Harry. Harry was from Greece... Always polite. Always smiling. Always glad to talk, to chat rather. Absolutely.” A certain Kevin, a customer quoted in the 1989 article of the Observer, says about Harry: “He’s a very caring man... And very generous. Often, he’ll just push your money back at you and say, ‘Catch me next time.’” Nancy Achilles’s study, “The Homosexual Bar,” emphasized the role of the waiter in terms that are confirmed by Harry Tselios’s position in the Flame: “The personality of the bartender is even more important than that of the owner in drawing a particular group or type of customer. A successful bartender attracts a personal following, a large number of people who come to a bar because he is employed there. It may be his personality, his looks, his wit, or his style that brings the customers, but whatever it is, he becomes the bar’s most valuable asset” (180). This description fits the Flame to a very

large extent, and as we will see later, Harry's retirement (many years later) from the bar seems to have been a definitive moment leading to the closing of the Flame.

However, given this general commonality, there seems to be a key difference between the bars observed by Achilles and the Flame. Harry was very popular, but he was not representative of the bar's patrons, or in Achilles's terms, he did not "personif[y] the subgroup's social type" (180). Harry was not identified as gay by the patrons. They knew he was married, and he had eight children who would intermittently come over and play at the bar, especially on Saturday mornings. There was no ambiguity concerning Harry's sexual orientation amongst the patrons. When asked by us if Harry was gay, Jim Toy replied: "Not to my knowledge." Dan, a patron interviewed in the Observer also noted that Harry "doesn't have any problem with gay people... I guess that's a little unusual for a traditional Greek guy, but he's just great." One may wonder whether he was comfortable working among queers in a gay bar. Jim Toy astutely answers: "Well, comfortable or not, he was congenial." When asked by us, Harry said: "Not me, not me.... I'd bring my family. My family used to come down there, my sons.... Plus a lot of people they knew was my sons, my family.... My daughter, the one living with me, she was up there with no problem.... They never have no problem." Harry further clarified this when asked directly:

Interviewer: Did you ever feel like you know if you told people that was your job, did you ever feel like some type of disrespect from people, because, you know, because you worked in a gay establishment?

Harry: No. No, I never had a problem with that. With gays or with straight people.... I never had a real problem. Not shame that I work for a gay bar or straight bar. It doesn't matter.

In general, during all our interactions with Harry, we came away with the feeling that his candor and kindness were both unusual and refreshing.

The Flame played a distinctive role in Ann Arbor. As a small college town, Ann Arbor had specific issues in terms of homosexuality. When asked if he remembered meeting faculty members at the bar during its early years as a gay bar, Jim Toy responded: "No, no." Of course, there were gays among the faculty. Jim remembered one of his instructors in the school of music who "was gay and closeted. He was married."

Interviewer: And you met him there?

Jim: No, I was in one of his courses. And he'd invite me to come to his office for consultations late in the day as it began to get dark. Never made a

physical move on me, but just the context of the conversation. . . . So, although I did meet a gay professor at the music school and had an affair with him. But he never went to the bar as I recall.

Especially in the 1950s and the 1960s, faculty members had good reasons to fear showing up at the Flame. The university, Jim recalls, in collusion with the police, was attempting to rid itself of gay faculty members. It seems safe enough to assume that faculty members as a result had to hang out either at private parties or out of town. As Jim noted, "People drove to Detroit, Toledo. Oh, I did hear that faculty members would go to Detroit or to Toledo. They felt it was too dangerous to come [to the Flame]."

Interestingly enough, when the student bar turned into a gay bar, the gay population colonized the place completely and this drove the student crowd away. Jim recalls that was not until the 1970s that gay students started to hang out at the Flame. Bruce Frier, who was hired in the Classics Department of the University of Michigan in 1969, remembers that in those early years, "It was basically a dark and rather depressing bar, frequented by older men. . . . students rarely were to be found." As a result, he did not frequent the bar much. Yet, Jim Toy noted that "there was no resource here in the 1960s for us, except the bar. There was nothing." Therefore, the bar became for an adult (male) gay population, as Jim put it, "the focal point of life." Barbara A. Weightman, in "Gay Bars as Private Places," argued that "the bar is vital in the process of self-identification; many people first identify themselves as gay by going to a gay bar." This description certainly echoes many people's experiences in Ann Arbor; however, these processes were both more complex and occurred via more complicated mediations that are worth recalling here in some detail.

The Flame did play a critical role in the process whereby Jim Toy began socializing with other gays. A friend introduced him "to other queer students. And people who were not students. And we would go consorting with each other at the bar and piss and moan about Ann Arbor's repressive climate, but then as the 60s turned to the 70s, the atmosphere became far more liberal." However, and quite interestingly, he did not come out as gay at the Flame itself. His coming out happened in December 1969 and can therefore be read as a fascinating aftershock of that major cultural earthquake which had its epicenter at the Stonewall six months earlier. At the time, Jim was working in the radical Episcopal Church in Detroit as an organist. He recalls:

I was the director of music there. I also as part of my job typed up the Sunday Bulletin that we'd give out to people that came to church on Sunday. And I would put into the bulletin announcements. In December of 69 I'm typing. On the January calendar, January 15th, 1970, it said "Gay

Meeting.” What is that? I had no contents. There had never been in Michigan, so as far as I knew, a gay meeting. So, I went to the priest. In those years, we called them “daddy-o” at the radical church. I said, “Daddy-o, what is the gay meeting thing?” He said, he was a great big guy, six four or five. He played football at Harvard with Teddy Kennedy. And he had a big deep voice, “I don’t know what it is, but Bill in the Draft Resistance Group said could we have a gay meeting here?” (Laughter.) And I said, “If we can’t have a gay meeting here at this god box, that we call a church, you might as well shut it down.” And I was totally in the closet and I said, “Thank you,” and went back typing. That night I ran down to the Flame. My good friend John was sitting there. I said, “John there’s something very interesting going on at the God Box.” He said, “What?” “A gay meeting.” “What’s that?” “You know what it is.” We speculated what could that be. So, it’s a month away. Should we go? And we “ambivaleted” about that for a month. Should we go? No we wont go! The night before the meeting we got together at the Flame. Are we gonna go to this meeting or not? And we looked at each other and said, “If we go, that means we’re gay.” And the next day we got ourselves into John’s car and went... And that was my coming out to myself, his coming out to himself, because I was living with the self imposed belief that I was bisexual. . . . And so at the meeting were a dozen other woman and men just as scared as we were, excited as we were.

To explain this schism in Jim’s story, we could have recourse to George Chauncey’s distinction from Gay New York between the old “coming out into the gay world” and the more modern notion of “coming out of the closet.” Thus, while the Flame in itself certainly helped him “come out into the homosexual society” and to come to terms with what he perceived to be his bisexuality, the bar did not allow Jim to “come out of the closet” as a gay man, either to himself or to the community. But it is doubtlessly through the Flame and the acquaintances he made there that Jim met his friend John with whom he would go to this “gay meeting” at the “God box.” Moreover, they certainly helped one another muster up the courage to go to this meeting; the stakes of which were clear, as Jim noted, to each of them: “If we go, that means we’re gay.”

Another key element of this account which needs to be highlighted is the role that political activism played in Jim Toy’s coming out experience. The Detroit meeting led to the foundation of the Detroit Gay Liberation Movement in 1970, and John and Jim continued attending meetings. And then:

Jim: It was winter. And you know winter in Ann Arbor. It’s unpleasant and the group formed committees and John and I would go in two and three evenings a week. Well, we said this is becoming onerous. Let’s start a

group here. So, we put an ad in the Michigan Daily and this might have been March of 1970. And a guy I had met who was of student age, not a student however, Larry Glover, said you can use my apartment if you want to have a meeting. So, we put an ad in the Daily and around 100 people came to the meeting, most of them students." Within three months after this December night, Jim and John had created the first local gay political group in Ann Arbor. What is significant from the viewpoint of the history of the Flame is that the bar was only slightly related to that activist sphere of gay life. The Ann Arbor Gay Liberation Movement had its meetings at Larry Glover's apartment, and a few months later, they had them in the Michigan Union. But it never occurred to them that they could meet at the bar. The Union was for politics and the Flame was for socializing.

Interviewer: You never had the idea that you could meet at the Flame?

Jim: No, it wouldn't have been congenial....

In fact, as Jim recalls, the crowd of the Gay Liberation Movement and that of the Flame were quite distinct. He did not go to the bar with the people with whom he was advocating for gay rights. There was a clear separation between these two spheres of his life. In fact, many of those activists were not gay identified in the first place. And among those who were, some were radicals and refused to patronize a bar that was not gay owned. As a result, as Jim noted, "There were a few activists, not many, and a lot of customers at the bar." From a gay male perspective, the Flame in those years was mainly patronized by pre-movement gays. Jim interestingly compares it to today's only gay bar in town: "Now today there are a few activists, and lots and lots of customers at the Aut Bar."

Lesbians' experiences of the Flame, however, demonstrate important differences. In a 1981 article, "The Leather Menace," Gayle Rubin relates her own "coming out into the gay world" that happened at the Flame. Just like Jim, it is not the bar itself that enabled her to identify as gay, rather the bar is the place where she began socializing with gays:

I came out as a lesbian in a small college town that had no visible lesbian community. A group of us formed a radical lesbian feminist group which eventually grew into a fairly large, albeit young, public lesbian community. The nearest pre-movement lesbian community was thirty miles away, where there were actually a couple of lesbian bars. There was one mostly male gay bar called the Flame. I had heard for years that it was the kind of place you wanted to stay away from. There were vague implications that if you went there, something bad would happen. But it was the only gay bar in town, and I was drawn to it. I finally screwed up my courage and walked in. The minute I got past the front door I relaxed. It was full of very

innocuous looking gay men and a couple of lesbians. I instantly realized that these were my people, and that I was one of the people I had been warned against.

Before I walked into the Flame, I still thought that gay people were rare and scarce. Going through that door was like going through the looking glass. On the other side of that taboo entrance is not a place of terror, but a huge, populous, prosperous, bustling world of homosexuals. (217)

Unlike Jim Toy, Gayle did not experience a separation between her political activism and her social life at the Flame. To launch their radical lesbian feminist group, she recalls, in 1970 or 1971, they posted an ad in the Union and 10 to 15 dykes began to meet regularly. "And we would, five or six 21-year-old dykes, go to the Flame together. There were spider plants in the window. We would sit near the front window. And it felt like home. Even though we were not welcomed or talked to. That was the place where we could go and feel ok about being queer."

There are a few differences with gay men's experiences that are worth noting in Gayle's account. First, the lesbians of Gayle's group were students, both undergraduate and relatively young. As Gayle recalled to us: "Older dykes did not go to the Flame." This is in sharp contrast to what we know about the gay male clientele of the bar, which was older. Second, contrary to Jim, Gayle did go to the bar with her fellow activists: "There was no social life for lesbians here, so we could not have a place for politics and a place for socializing." Gayle further explained in an interview with us that the lesbian population was too small to have a division between the political and social spheres. Finally, there were no interactions between these female patrons and the male clientele. "But they were not hostile either," Gayle recalls. "They were older men and they were seeing a bunch of twenty year old dykes coming to the bar." Sadly, interactions between these two groups were made impossible both by gender and generational dynamics. Jim Toy confirmed the lack of interaction:

Interviewer: Was there, was there a lot of overlap between gay male and lesbian populations?

Jim: No.

Interviewer: You went to the same bar, but it was two worlds.

Jim: Oh absolutely, oh yes.

Interviewer: No interactions?

Jim: Very little. Very little.

However, there was indeed one moment in which gay men and women banded together at the Flame. According to Nancy Achilles, "If there is one particular issue which calls forth a unified protest from the homosexual Community, it is that of police activity. . . . The greatest sense of group cohesion in the homosexual Community is expressed in reaction to the police" (177-8). The Flame, based on all our reports, was never raided by the police. From our research, it seems as if the Ann Arbor police during the 1960s and 70s was far more concerned with public sex than with an innocuous gay bar. While there were (multiple) police raids at and harassment of the adult book stores on Fourth Avenue and the restrooms of Mason Hall, the Flame was generally left alone.

It was, then, not the police who occasioned this once-in-a-lifetime solidarity between gay men and women; rather it was the bar itself. On September 16, 1972, from 30 to 60 demonstrators picketed the Flame to protest the exclusion (or perceived exclusion) of trans-persons and drag queens (although the press reports use those two terms as if they were interchangeable) from the bar. A flyer for the protest, held in Michigan's Bentley Library, is signed by the "Gay Awareness Women's Kollektive" (GAWK) and by the Gay Liberation Front, and lists three demands:

1. No dress restriction;
2. Improvement of the physical environment of the Flame;
3. No selective harassment of or discrimination against people by Harvey or other employees.

These disparate demands probably reflect the various motivations of different protestors. In fact, as the press accounts suggests, the demands of the protestors were far from unified and not all demonstrators were Flame patrons. The protest apparently was composed of gays and lesbians whose gayness was primarily pre-movement (that is bar-defined); gays and lesbians whose gayness was political; and straight activists from SDS who (as was not uncommon) were members of the Gay Liberation Front.

It seems probable that the members of the coalition who were advocating for the improvement of the environment, the creation of room to dance, and better music were most likely patrons of the bar. There were also demands for no dress restriction and no discrimination against drag queens, which may have been demands shared by political activists and patrons alike. It seems clear that this aspect of the action was directly tied to the election in 1972 of Jerry DeGriek and Nancy Wechsler to the Ann Arbor city council on the Human Rights Party (HRP) ticket. (Both Jerry and Nancy would come out while still serving on the council in 1973; making them and not Harvey Milk the first out politicians in the US.) In July 1972,

as a result of the HRP's victory, the council amended the city's human rights code to prohibit discrimination against gays in employment, housing, and public accommodations. This decision occasioned a great deal of debate in local and regional gay communities. The Detroit-based *The Gay Liberator* described the measure as "a major failure to the commitment for full human rights," since the council "purposely excludes transvestites and transsexuals from its equal rights guarantees." In the wake of this new law, other contemporary press accounts suggest, Harvey Blanchard decided to ban "drag queens" from the Flame. Reports, however, are conflicting on this point.

While these anti-discrimination demands may well originate in the Flame's population, *The Gay Liberator* also contrasted the demands "aimed at improving the conditions and atmosphere of the existing bar" with the "many demonstrators" who "called for a total abolition of the bar itself." These are unlikely to have been Flame patrons. The *Michigan Daily*, in an article published on September 19, 1972, also quotes a Gay Liberation Front member by the name of Harry Kevorkian, who complained that Harvey Blanchard was harassing gay women and... straight people! Harry Kevorkian blames Harvey for discriminating against people both on the basis of their class and their sexual orientation: "Harvey wants a white middle class straight gay bar" (note the use of the word "straight" here). Harvey, on the contrary, swears to the journalist that "he bars people because of behavior. It has nothing to do with whether they're gay or straight."

It is not easy, 37 years later, to know if Harvey Blanchard barred straight people from the bar or not. Harry suggests that his straight friends would hang out at the bar on a regular basis. However that may be, as documented by Barbara A. Weightman, it was often critical for gay bars to discourage straight people from coming in. Therefore, it might have been critical for Harvey to bar some of them, if he wanted to retain his gay clientele. Under these circumstances, it seems very unlikely that gay patrons would have advocated for the acceptance of straight people into the bar. This demand sounds more like a demand originating in politicized groups like the Gay Liberation Front, successor of the Gay Liberation Movement whose members, as Jim recalls, were not overwhelmingly gay.

What, then, was the result of this one moment of Flame-based solidarity among gay men, lesbians, and straights? As far as the demands of the patrons are concerned, Harvey did not satisfy them. Jim Toy recalled: "I think he might have painted the ceiling, but that's as far as it went."

What the protest demonstrates, however, is that there were tensions at the Flame, some of them specific to the bar management, but some of which

reflected broader political or social fault lines within the city and society at large. However, these tensions inside and around the bar did not prevent people from having a good time there and from retaining (mostly) fond memories of the bar. Many of our interviewees' fondest memories were of moments when celebrities were found at the Flame. Writer Allen Ginsberg once dropped in, as did renowned pianist Vladimir Horowitz. Jim Toy recalls an exhilarating night when Horowitz came to the bar and he met Sunshine, Harvey Blanchard's longtime bohemian, former runaway girlfriend, who was a pillar of the Flame.

Jim: Horowitz used to come here to give recitals on his tours. As you may know he was married to Toscanini's daughter. And sometimes she'd tour with him and sometimes not. And when she was not with him, after his recital he would come to the bar.

Interviewer: No way!

Jim: Yeah. With his manager. I don't know if the manager was gay. And the manager would call up the bar and say, "Mr. Horowitz is playing a recital tomorrow at Hill Auditorium at 4:00. After the recital he will visit your establishment." So Harvey said to Sunshine, the girlfriend, "Sunshine, Vladimir Horowitz is gonna be here tomorrow. He's the most famous pianist in the world." And she said, "Yeah." Horowitz and his manager came in and sat down. Sunshine is over there. So, Harvey went over to Sunshine and said, "Come and meet Mr. Horowitz." "Sunshine, this is Mr. Horowitz." And she said, "Oh, they tell me you play the piano."

This story seems to have left an impression on many people; a 1984 article in the Observer gives a similar account. There is another story that still makes Jim laugh some 30 years later. When asked if Harvey was thought to be gay, Jim recalled this story "that proves nothing about this."

Jim: Most evenings Sunshine would be at the bar, sitting in a booth to the side. How can I explain this. Here is the bar. Right. Here are booths (showing them along the bar) and when the bar stopped these booths continued and then there were booths on that side as well and Sunshine would sit back there.

Interviewer: Okay.

Jim: Yeah. So, one day, Harvey who was soft spoken and Sunshine who was louder were having an argument. (Imitating their voices) "Give me ten dollars Harvey." "I don't have ten dollars." "Give me ten dollars Harvey!" (Laughter) "I don't have ten dollars." "God damn it! Will you give me ten dollars Harvey, or I'm going home and coming back here with those photos

of you with a lampshade on your head!" And he pulled out ten dollars. (Laughter.) But that proves nothing about this." (Laughter)

The Flame Burns Out

For decades, problems or not, the Flame was the only game in town. This began to change in the mid-1970s, however, when another bar, the Rubaiyat, located on First Avenue and Huron, which was larger, cleaner, and equipped with a DJ booth and modern sound system began to tolerate same-sex dancing, and therefore to attract part of the gay population. "They had one gay night a week," Gayle Rubin recalls. "And that quickly became the major place." Jim Toy also remembers the emergence of the Rubaiyat on the Ann Arbor scene: "Lesbians began going there, because Iris Bell, the musician and her ensemble were really popular. And lesbians began going there and dancing with each other. I think the dancing became a newspaper article. And then gay men began dancing as well."

Just like the Flame, the Rubaiyat was run by a straight man, and here again, different people have different memories and experiences of its meaning and position within the community. Gayle Rubin enjoyed the place very much. She was so enthusiastic that in 1978, after she left Ann Arbor to do her fieldwork in San Francisco, the first time she came back, she ran to the Rubaiyat... and broke her ankle! Jim Toy on the other hand says "it was not a friendly place." In a 1984 article in the Observer, the journalist cites one Dan Byrne saying that "gays never had the sense that they were as genuinely welcome there as they were at the Flame." Whether this difference of experiences should be attributed to generational, or gender, differences, we do not know. However, it seems safe to say that older gay men were more comfortable than younger lesbians at the Flame; it is therefore not surprising that younger lesbians should have found the Rubaiyat more attractive.

The Rubaiyat also had its moments and generated its good memories. Even though he was not a big fan of the place, Jim, who never misses an opportunity to laugh, recalled a story that involved another major musician:

Jim: Leonard Bernstein used to go to the Rubaiyat when he was here. With whoever orchestra. And so, one evening, I was not there. People said he was drunk under the table. He was cruising up one student, one male student, drunk under the table. Well, I did go to the open rehearsal. I think it was the Vienna Philharmonic the next morning. Well, he didn't show. And somebody came on stage and said: "Mr. Bernstein's indisposed. He sends his apologies." (Laughter.) Well, that night he just bounced out and you know did his thing. And it was apparently that evening as he was

leaving a friend of mine was coming in and he pinched my friend on the cheek and said he's the one. And my friend said, I beg your pardon. Who do you think you are. He didn't recognize him. So, his buddies said: "That's Leonard Bernstein." "I don't give a fuck who he is, people don't pinch me on my cheek and tell me that I'm the one."

The Golden Age of the Flame came to an end in August 1983, when Harvey Blanchard died of a stroke. Helmut Puff, who now teaches German and History at the University of Michigan, remembers that day. A young student from Germany, he was visiting Ann Arbor for the first time. He had checked a guidebook and read about the Flame as the only gay bar in town. He went there the very first day of his very first visit, which was the very day of Harvey's death. In the aftermath of Harvey's death, the bar was closed for about a year and a half. Many gay patrons missed the bar and wanted it to be reopened. Harry Tselios recalls gay patrons offering to buy the bar: "I had that guy had two, two gay guys. One of them was a doctor, and they were gays, professionals though from university. They offered me to buy it. . . . So they offered me the money to buy the bar to keep it a gay bar." Harry, however, wanted to buy the bar himself. He tried to do it with his Greek friend Nick Manikas, who owned a restaurant on Main Street, but it didn't work out, and the bar was purchased by local businessman Andy Gulvezan. Patrons were disappointed. The Observer quotes John, a musician who frequented the Flame, saying: "He [Harry] would have done it right. . . . Andy's just obviously in it for the money." Andy Gulvezan is indeed a successful local businessman who, in addition to the Flame, has owned at various times the Full Moon, the One-Eyed Moose, the Crow Bar and who currently owns two upscale Ann Arbor establishments: the Jolly Pumpkin Café and Brewery and the Melting Pot (both located on Main Street).

Andy Gulvezan and Harry seemed to get along well, and Andy's management of the bar worked in two directions. On the one hand, in keeping with the patrons' feelings, he acknowledged more than Harvey had ever done the role of the bartender, honoring Harry. By the end 1980s, Andy had created Harry's beers, bottled outside Detroit, which were the only beers served at the Flame. He also created Harry t-shirts; one of which was sown into the AIDS quilt on the panel of David Stidwill, a Flame patron. In his house, Harry has a picture of this panel hanging on the wall, together with a postcard addressed to this patron, who, sadly, will never receive it. Andy also introduced some changes that Flame patrons did not like. He fixed the bar a little bit and added colored lights. The patrons complained that it was not the Flame anymore, and they started missing the dark, dingy atmosphere. Andy also considered adding a dance floor. But the most dramatic change Andy introduced was still to come. In the

early 1990s, he moved the bar to 112 W. Liberty Street. All that had made the old Flame the Flame was then left behind: no plants in the window, no old barstools, no antediluvian leaflets in the window, no dirt, no darkness. The old Flame was gone.

In 1997, after 44 years of unstinting devotion, Harry decided to retire at the age of 67. Andy set up a huge party at the new Flame. According to all accounts, the party was packed. They served food for the first time in that bar, and it was a memorable night for all. Jim recalls: "The last night that Harry was there, when he, quote, retired. We went down to say goodbye and thank him. You know, for being such a good friend." Harry in fact did really retire: "Since I retired, I haven't been to one bar." One year later, on April 11, 1998, the Flame poured its last beer, almost 45 years to the day after a young sailor decided to make it his only port of call.

Town Bar

<https://aadl.org/taxonomy/term/8311>

<https://aadl.org/node/204624>

<https://aadl.org/taxonomy/term/8311>

Flame Bar

<https://aadl.org/node/376654>

<https://aadl.org/node/576634>

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



EAR EXERCISE

December 24, 2022

I know, this blog is not very 'Christmassy.' I'll do 'Christmas' tomorrow on Christmas. Here is just an interesting bit of music understanding that may be of use, at least in my opinion, yet I doubt it will interest everyone here, so ignore it. It's about directionality acquired from our history of listening to sounds, in particular music. It has to do with the power of sound vibrations, and the sound in music that penetrates our brain and leaves an impression, and we can

start by asking ourselves just what is this thing we call music? For one, it is sound and vibrations.

I became a student of what the Tibetans call 'Liberation Through Hearing', way back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when I discovered the Evens-Wentz translation of the "Tibetan Book of the Dead," "The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo." I found this book in Bob Marshals bookstore at 211 South State Street. There it was, sitting on the shelf with its green and black cover, almost impossible for me to read and even more difficult to understand. Yet, I persevered.

Then flash-forward to 2022 and by now I have had a long and sometimes arduous introduction to the dharma, including 36 years of working closely with a high Tibetan Lama, who never spoke any English. Everything was translated, yet we became very close, nevertheless. That's one train that's running.

Another, and more immediate train, also running, is my listening to music. I can hear music really well, much better than I could play it, which makes no sense. And for me music goes into my ears and penetrates my brain in various ways. It indelibly imprints and shapes my mind.

I imagine each of us records in our brain sound that is heard, from which a thread emerges that we learn to create over time to manipulate and give us the maximum impression our mind likes, for our ears the most bang for the buck, so to speak. Let me tell you something about my love affair with the sound that we call music; Of course, you will have your own threaded history, yet all I can point out here is my own take on this. And I include examples if you have the time for a listen.

And let me ask again, what exactly is music, aside from how it is popularly described? Obviously, music is sound, a set of

vibrations that we can synch with or not. We can vibrate to music and sound wavelengths and do, each of us probably quite individually, even if we all hear the same sound. It seems I crave certain sounds much like I crave certain vitamins in foods.

As far as being exposed to music, probably the most impressing music I remember came from my Catholic upbringing, church music, and the Gregorian chant, often heard at a Requiem Mass, 'Dies Irae' and its poem 'Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning.' Trust me, that dirge left a deep impression, and I could feel those vibrations. It scared the bejesus out of me, yet it was beautiful.

"Dies Irae"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDJTN8L1JT0>

It affected me as a young child. And it came from way back in the church's history and was not joking around. For a child, this was some serious vibration. And I had a long diet of it, not only this particular chant, but ones like it. Of course, this was amplified by being taken to church each Sunday (and other times) and, as the oldest kid, wedged between my family (the little ones) and some large ladies reeking of patchouli oil. All this kid wanted was out.

Yet, despite that impressive introduction to music I was able to shake free of it over time, or at least put it in perspective, mostly thanks to being a teenager immersed in rock n' roll. I think it was those seventh and eighth grade parties in somebody's home with my schoolmates, in their rec room or down in the basement with a little 45 record player, dim lights, and actually dancing close with a girl to tunes like "Earth Angel". This was in the mid-1950s in my American Graffiti experience. That experience was a tune up from my Catholic heritage. How innocent was that!

And of course, the slow dancing and tunes like that were the perfect remedy for church Latin and church in general, and church on Sundays, which I got out of as soon as I could find a way. I am not a fan of organized religion. Spiritual vision and experience, of course, but compulsory attendance to church, no thank you. What were my parents thinking?

Either way, all those years my hearing was logging all this sound and already beginning to have directionality, a way that my ears liked to listen to vibrations. Just consider the training those of those of us from that time period underwent: Little Richard, Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, and the most powerful of all was Chuck Berry. My hearing was honed by those years to quite a fine point, without ever having to work at it. My ears went to this music school, happily. What does sound do to us in its imprinting?

And there came a time when my ears developed their own unique directionality, what they wanted to hear. They then knew what they wanted and not only took everything in but began to seek out the particular kind of music my inner brain wanted to hear. By then I was on the hunt for the music vibe my brain wanted. And here comes the individuality I mentioned. What I sought and what you seek are probably two different types. Let me tell you about mine, since that's what I have to tell.

And this for reasons it might be hard to explain, which I can explain, but I would have to resort to astrology as a descriptive language to do so. Probably best not to say too much about that just now. Suffice it to say, I find that while I am sensitive to music, at the same time I have a high tolerance for, I will say here, 'pain', but what I mean by pain is strong music, music that penetrates the brain, and digs deep. Blues would be an example, yet even then I gravitate to a very special kind of blues, including the bar-walking, honking and the squeal of a tenor or alto saxophone, just

blasting in your ears. For me the raunchier the better, sax players like Eddie Harris, Earl Bostic, Willis “Gator Tail” Jackson, Big Jay McNeely, Rusty Bryant, Arnett Cobb, King Curtis, Illinois Jacquet and Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis. You can’t get much raunchier than that.

And if we slide up into jazz, you can’t do better than Les McCann with sax player Eddie Harris and the tune “Compared to What.” What a brilliant tune! This world, compared to what? We have nothing to compare it to.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCDMQqDUtv4>

And my ear also hunts for the sound of the Hammond B3, and for that matter almost any free-reeds instrument. I was an amplified harmonica player myself. Back in the old days, at the end of a hard day I could think of nothing better than a quart of beer and listening to a Hammond B3 player like Jimmie Smith (and Stanley Turrentine on sax, Kenny Burrell on guitar, and Donald Bailey on drums), something like “Back at the Chicken Shack.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuMd8ldLqxo>

And if you drift into classical music, and I have very much done that, I end up with Johann Sebastian Bach and pieces like his St. John’s Passion, and there is another threatening overture:

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

Or my most favorite piece of Bach, his very late composition “The Art of the Fugue in D minor BWV 1080:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZ_qoS1_uPA

Or clean out your ears with:

Bach’s Trio Sonata No.6 in G major BWV 530

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bs267MSadc>

Or almost any piece of Bach.

And if that does not do it, I end up right off the charts and out of music altogether and listening to the Tibetan longhorns or even the great foghorns at sea

The Sumburgh Fogorn (starts at 1:43)

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

Tibetan Monks Playing the Longhorn

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1_C3TLXRII

And last, but far from least, one of my favorite musics of all time is the Japanese Imperial Court Music, called Gagaku.

I promise, this will clean your ear-clock for you:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXtez8HyUS8>

And the point of all this is to say that our ears get trained by hearing, so that we each seek out the vibrations that are going to tweak our brain just right. For me, it is pretty rough sounds that I like. You may be totally different, but it will be your difference that you seek out.

And I can trace my brains music requests down to specific types of music, and specific artists that scratch that itch. And so, behind the singer and the song is 'sound' itself, insistently penetrating our brain like a perfect perfume.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]

MOVING A BUSINESS TO ANN ARBOR, MY STORY

December 25, 2022

'Living Large and Losing Large in AZ'

These lines from the old tune "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out."

"Once I lived the life of a millionaire

Spent all my money, I just did not care

Took all my friends out for a good time

Bought bootleg whiskey, champagne and wine."

"Nobody knows you when you're down and out."

Well, I was not interested in alcohol, and I did not have that much money to spend, and I never was a millionaire except for maybe a New-York minute, when signs pointed in that direction, at least for a short while. As far as being down and out, well, I had that part, but even then, only for a while. I was trying to move my company, AMG, (the All-Music Guide and All-Movie Guide) down to Ann Arbor and install it on two entire floors of a large office building at 301 E. Liberty, at the corner of Liberty and Fifth streets. We had 150 fulltime workers, and between 500-700 freelance writers working with us. Here is that long story short.

The company that bought my company wanted me to move down to Ann Arbor, my hometown, and have me run it. After thinking about it, there really was no choice and

after a few months of waffling I set about looking for a good-sized house around or in Ann Arbor.

First of all, they rented me quite a lovely house at 632 S. 1st Street and W. Mosley, a corner lot. It was some kind of centennial home, and had a plaque on the front porch. The house was furnished, and was really nice inside, except it had carpets almost all around. And it even had carpet in the kitchen, which with kids (and ourselves), not to mention Kota, our good-sized Siberian Husky and Lab mix. I had to run a wire outside the house along the yard, so we could let Kota roam a little, and of course dogs love walks, anytime.

I didn't really have an office there, only a little desk on a landing at the top of the stairs, just outside our bedroom. Since the house came partially furnished, we had strange (strange to us) furniture and all that. It was a very nice house, but nothing compared to the house that was soon to appear in our lives and which we actually bought, and at a very high price, for us, some \$900,000. Who knew that would happen? Certainly not us. Here's that tale.

Finding a house, even back then, was not an easy task. "Seek, Seek and Ye Shall Find" was a song our band used to sing. Well, we sought, and looked and looked and looked and did not find. And then up popped one possible place, a house more than large enough for our crew of kids, and a dog, soon to be two dogs. Yet it was not out on the edge of Ann Arbor where we had been looking, but right smack in the middle of what is probably the most in-demand part of Ann Arbor, and horribly expensive as well.

As mentioned, who wouldn't like it; it was right in the middle of Ann Arbor's most sought-after neighborhoods, where all the U-of-M fraternities and sororities are, a house up on 1921 Cambridge Road, all 5500 sq. ft. of it.

The place was, for us, like a museum and from the very start, I felt I didn't belong there, yet of course we gave it a try. It was so lovely.

As mentioned, it was \$900,000, and I was making a lot of money then, plus my boss approved of it. I drove him past the house and got a thumbs up. Who wouldn't give that house an approval? It was almost like something we might find in Greenfield Village, or a place like that. It even had its own name, the "Henry Moore Bates House."

By that time, we were really pushing this envelope. Nevertheless, we put money down and signed our lives away. After all, it was a real beauty, and since I am long past owning a house of that stature, I should at least show it to you, now that I'm back home here in Big Rapids, in our (just a little funky) house and liking it.

In truth, despite the hugeness and the grandeur of the place, that vast house was something to worry us. If we had a lot of friends and liked to throw parties, that would be a place to do it. We had some friends but were not into parties. We just lived there, and even then, just for a while, like a couple of years.

Even so, I was somehow ashamed every time I drove my car out the end of that sweeping driveway. I didn't belong here. And I even went to one of those neighborhood gatherings, where they talked about, of course, the state of the neighborhood. And I soon found out they were all about keeping people, which would include many of my actual friends, out of their neighborhood. I got the message and never thought to go back to such a meeting. I felt like a spy.

One problem is that the house had a second floor back porch that had been entirely rubberized. Ice would form

on it, and I injured my back just trying to use a 6-ft iron spike to break up the ice. And the same thing happened on the front porch, the ice literally formed stalactites (coming down) and stalagmites (growing up) until they would meet. And there is me, not so big, pounding away with a 20-some lb. iron spike.

And for all that space, the garage was too small for both cars, and the turn-around angled, so you could get in OK, but getting out, much less turning around, was a lot more difficult, unless you wanted to back down a steep and winding driveway to the street. Shall I go on? No need. Before I forget, although the house was as big as all outdoors, the kitchen was small and cramped, nothing compared to the kitchen we have here in Big Rapids, which I will add a photo of here. A kitchen means a lot to me.

My point is that just because a house is big, fancy, and expensive does not mean it is trouble-free. On the contrary. And I didn't even use the pool table that much, yet we did like the hot-water furnace, and hot water heat, which had an array of pipes that looked like a miniature pipe organ.

My oldest daughter and her fiancé came and lived in the house for a year. They just melted into the house but could be found if you looked. And my youngest daughter May Erlewine, with her blue and pink hair and long chains on her belt, after traveling the country, hopping freight trains, and busking in major cities would, along with some friends, infrequently come into town and set up camp with us, along with her dog Molotov. They took over the basement which itself was huge, and we were glad to have her back.

And so it went, until it didn't. I reached a point where I had sold AMG, my company, and found myself sidelined because I was in the way. I had little choice. So, we packed up our things and moved back up to Big Rapids where we live today. It seems like a dream now, but also a little like a nightmare. Been to the big city, the big house, the big job, and the big bucks, and ended up back here, quite content. Our current house here in Big Rapids cost \$30,000 in 1980, and we added some space and rooms onto it. No problem, it is comfortable and suits us fine. Just thought someone might like to see the trail of houses we left behind. LOL.



Rented house at 632 S. 1st. Steet and Mosely.



Rented house at 632 S. 1st. Steet and Mosely.



Rented house at 632 S. 1st. Steet and Mosely. Stairway to my office.



Rented house at 632 S. 1st. Steet and Mosely. My mini-office..



Rented house at 632 S. 1st. Steet and Mosely



Rented house at 632 S. 1st. Steet and Mosely.



Rented house at 632 S. 1st. Steet and Mosely.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Front lawn.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Garage.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Driveway.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Left to right May and Anne Erlewine, punked out.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Pantry.





House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Master bath, also has shower.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Living room.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Living room.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Study.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Back porch.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Dining room.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Kitchen



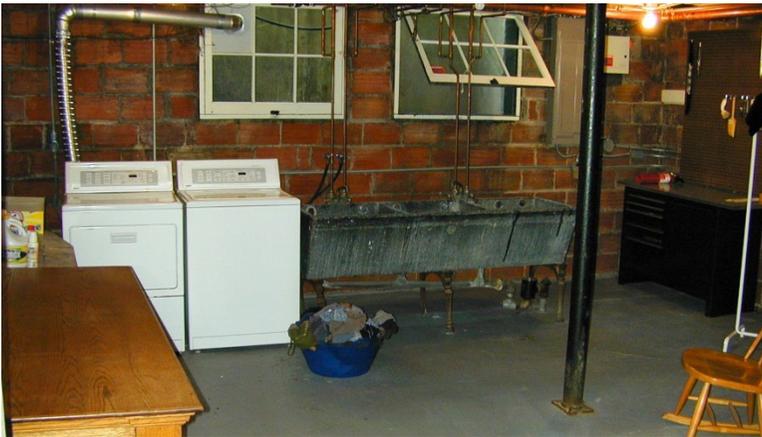
Our current kitchen in Big Rapids, which we finally just redid, floors and counters.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Basement.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Basement.



House we bought at 1921 Cambridge Road. Basement.



THE BRINK OF NOW

December 26, 2022

We are heading for the New Year, but we first have to cross this week between Christmas and the New Year, this bardo-like period of time where nothing happens and everyone is either on vacation, or else waiting for life as usual to resume. I don't have a business anymore, but I still have a residual dread of this dead space, the week between.

And I'm not drifting too far from the shore because there is no shore that I can find. Everything is now equal, shore,

water, water, shore ... it's all the same, not just in my opinion, but in life itself. So, what are we to do about that kettle of fish?

Tread softly? Awareness is up to each of us to maintain. What I really mean is 'Awareness of Awareness', not just awareness itself. We have to be aware that we are aware, and for that to become a habit, automatic. Armed with that we can go anywhere in Samsara without fear or worry. It's all sacred, all of the time.

And if we are afraid or try to look around, then to that degree, we are not meditating, but just looking around, pausing on the brink of entrance rather than entering meditation.

What is accomplished by this approach? IMO, what is accomplished is the freedom from the effort to be dharmic, from the cloying habit of having to be 'being dharmic'. Actually, being dharmic is just being, without HAVING to be 'dharmic'. When we build a house, to complete it we have to take the scaffolding down. It's the same with dharma practice. We have to take the practicing out of dharma, however that is done for each of us.

Dharma 'practice' is just that, practicing dharma, and that must come to an end, this 'practicing' of dharma. Purity does not retain a trace of impurity, and dharma does not retain a trace of practice. We stop practicing meditation and just meditate from there on out. Yet, first we have to know how to meditate, which is not the same as practicing meditation.

And the boat must shove off from the shore out into the shining sea, and then what? And then just that, anything and everything. Be here now. If that's disappointing, then you are still practicing and not meditating. Meditation is

its own reward and end because the only 'out' from meditation is non-meditating. Until we achieve this, I believe we go back and forth between meditation and non-meditation, in and out, and in and out, as many times as it takes to remove the line and difference between the two. Meditation is what we are talking about here, meditating.

“The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

That's meditation.



SAMSARA IS AN ISLAND IN A SEA OF TRANQUILITY

December 27, 2022

Here is something I think about.

Why, when I set out to write an article about something concrete from this Samsaric world, I all too often end up unable to do so. Instead, I find myself gravitating, like a swimmer coming up for air, toward and flirting with non-duality, sampling full immersion in the sea of the mind. It's like skipping a flat stone on the tranquil sea of non-duality,

touching again and again into the shining sea of full immersion.

This dualistic world that we know as samsara is but a temporary island in a vast sea of meditation. There is nowhere to go beyond duality other than out of it and into the shining tranquil sea of non-duality. We are totally surrounded by non-duality.

And so, as we awaken, we can't help but find ourselves leaving the solid ground of dualism we are so habituated to, all that we have ever known, and dipping into the surrounding sea of tranquil non-duality, like bobbing for apples.

This is why meditators in the caves of Tibet sang dohas, songs of spiritual experience, because there was nowhere else to go and nothing else that could be done but that, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



MOVE TOWARD THE LIGHT

December 28, 2022

As the poet John Milton said, “Come, and trip it as you go,
on the light fantastic toe.”

I’m dancing, up where the air is thin and the light is bright,
pushing that envelope into the blinding sun. I need
snowshoes if only for the snow. Yet with dark glasses,
wind in my face, and my arm held up to block the sun, I

walk the edge of Samsara, peering into the non-duality beyond which I cannot see.

And then I'm there, immersed, back again, not to return once more, but gone, at least for the moment. Is this the speed of light? Who knows or cares, because I've been in the blinding light and the whole world is suddenly right here in the expanded present, everything, including me.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



HOW TO TAKE THE WATER

December 28, 2022

William Blake, in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” wrote “Eternity is in love with the productions of time,” that is what we are talking about here, the love of a mother for her

Child, even a difficult child.

In dharma-speak that says that the sea of non-dual wisdom embraces the works of time, meaning that

Samsara (where we live) is an island of duality embedded in an ocean of nonduality.

CHERISHING

Samsara is an island of distraction,

Embedded in a sea of solution.

At all the edges of Samsara,

An ocean of acceptance,

Waits to embrace, enjoy, and cherish,

If we plumb the depths of Samsara, which we all do now and again, get down, and then slowly relax and rise toward the top, as we reach the high notes of this dualistic existence, the obscurations start to thin out, and we can at times almost see-through Samsara somewhat and beyond. In recent years, it seems that I spend more and more of my time in those upper regions, kind of bobbing on the surface of Samsara and sampling the non-dual sea of Tranquility that exists beyond duality.

Of course, the only way I know to do this is with the non-dual meditations, like Vipassana, Mahamudra, or Dzogchen meditations, because they exist beyond even the top tiers of Samsara, and so I like to spend as much time as possible meditating in that way. However, this is not a walk in the park. It took me a long time to learn this type of nondual meditation because I am a slow learner, yet it was worth the perseverance.

Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs, is not in the majority in this creation we all live in, but very much the minority. The true nature of the mind is non-dual, and

surrounds Samsara like a salt crystal that is surrounded by an ocean of virtue. However, it just so happens we are born in Samsara and not yet in the process of Nirvana.

I find it somewhat helpful to remind myself that in all directions, every which way from Samsara is toward Nirvana, and not vice versa. And that Samsara is, if I read the pith dharma texts right, just an accumulation, literally a crystal rigid formation of mistakes and attachments, like an island of misconceptions and attachments, surrounded by an ocean of dharma. Such a brittle crystal can be solved, and put back in solution, if we work it just so. How to do this is why I continue to write articles like these, under the aegis of Bodhicitta.

Not that I am enlightened or out of Samsara myself, but with the help of years of dharma training by authentic masters, I am slowly learning to transform Samsara, a bit at a time. We all can.

[A Midjourney image created by me to represent Samsara as an island of salt surrounded by an ocean of non-dual wisdom."]



THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

December 29, 2022

Without Samsara to bounce off of, I'm not sure how the dharma of actual meditation is taught or learned. We probably don't need dharma if we are already all dharma. Yet, right now, dharma is a process that we are learning, and Samsara is not yet in the rear-view mirror, but very

much still with us, and that by definition, that Samsara is our own attachments.

In any case, Samsara is what we mix our mind with for Insight Meditation, much like a carburetor in an automobile mixes gas and air, at just the proper ratio.

Using Insight Meditation, we riff off thoughts, words, and facts, touching in and out of duality as smoothly as we can manage. As in so many things, it's the border, the transition zone between dualism and nondualism where all the action happens. If we are beyond that and deep into the nondual, that is beyond the border zone, there is nothing there but nothing, immersion.

This border zone between the dual and the nondual, like rolling a bit of grit between our thumb and forefinger, is something we can feel. Beyond that or before that, not so much, so in my experience the vast sea of the nondual 'functions at the junction', as they say, at the border zone between the two, between Samsara and Insight Meditation. This is one thing Samsara is good for, being a touchstone to awareness. Without it, my guess is we would be enlightened. That's not the case, so we will reflect and riff off it until we are.

What is one without the other? Apparently not something we know or can know. It's where duality comes up against nonduality that we find and can feel the difference. As they say, "Do you feel me?" What does feeling depend on? Duality.

As I have quoted before, William Blake, in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" wrote "Eternity is in love with the productions of time." Well, eternity in this example is the nondual forms of meditation, and the productions of time, well, that's Samsara in a nutshell.

In fact, try and perform “Insight Meditation” without an object. It makes no sense, literally. You’re either already there and feeling nothing or you’re feeling something, and all ‘somethings’ are dualistic by definition. We (the subject) feel ‘nothing’, the object – duality.

And so, at least in simple Insight Meditation, we hover at the border zone between Samsara and Nirvana, where there is something to feel and something to not feel, and the difference is everything. There is nothing else other than that but nothing.

Like rolling a grain of sand between the thumb and forefinger, hovering at the border zone between the two, duality and nonduality, and moving back and forth, in and out, between the two. From that movement, the mind opens, and we can see what is to be seen based on the repeated movement into nonduality and back, again and again. We can feel the difference.

As for rolling the grain of sand, I could not get Midjourney to behave enough to do that, so I just took a photo of a thumb and forefinger and a tiny sphere of pearl. It will have to do.



THE TIME IT TAKES FOR A SIP OF TEA

December 30, 2022

A problem I'm having is that I would rather write more than edit what I have already written. And there is a reason for that.

While both activities can be done using Insight Meditation, the writing rather than the editing is a better launching pad for Insight Meditation, and once in process, is the more immersive process. IMO.

I can remember when I could only invoke Insight Meditation while out in nature, crawling around on my belly in wet morning grass, peering through fine camera lenses at little critters or small dioramas. If I did not do that, then no Insight Meditation. So, I have come a long way, but it required work on my part. There is no one else that can do it for us.

And then, as I have explained many times, through a very arduous practice that took over a year and a quarter, I was able to learn to use Insight Meditation while writing words, and that is where I've mostly settled, especially when its winter as we are in now, I can't go out and crawl around with my camera in the snow, and there are no flowers.

If you have ever golfed and teed off with a long drive in which the ball kind of vanishes in the air and distance, invoking Insight Meditation is a little like that. One is ejected into space, where full immersion is the norm. Yes, we come out of it, but not without some trace of light on us from what we have experienced. From the residue of that immersive experience, well, I write with that. That whiff of the perfume of realization is my ink.

Also, I prefer to spend time with Insight Meditation, regardless of what the results are. My dharma teacher used to say that a session of meditation can be as long as it takes to raise a cup of tea and take a sip.

Well, with this type of Insight Meditation I am describing, sessions are only a second, and they are experienced back to back, one after the other, so it's like skipping a flat stone on the surface of a calm lake. The flat stone skips all the way across the surface, sampling the water as it goes: this, this, this, this, this, and then coming out of Insight

Meditation with some reflection and the freshness of the experience. And then do it again, a few moments later.

So, think of this type of Insight Meditation, not as one long session, but a series of very short sessions strung together.

By recursively sampling through Insight Meditation, immersion back-to-back, over and over, one can spend a long time in the state of this immersive process, noodling, and clarify the mind remarkably. It's like tempering molten hot steel in cold water, but repeatedly. Aside from being a joyous state to spend time in, the clarity involved confers certainty on what otherwise can be uncertain and filled with doubt and worry. With Insight Meditation, there is certainty, with no mistakes, no subject and no predicate. We are all in.

I wish there was a pill one could take and suddenly learn Insight Meditation. Even after I was introduced to it, I found it very difficult, and I had to work, work, work at it every day, all the time, and I did this because the results were so worth it. Yet, I had the fuel of having had the idea of the true nature of the mind pointed out to me. Not the, actual experience, but just how one might go about it.

Just hearing about Insight Meditation has its value, and is itself a start, a seed planted. For those of you who may develop a sense and taste for this type of meditation or want to, aside from first having the idea firmly implanted, one has to learn and perfect (or at least understand) what is called Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), allowing the mind to rest naturally.

In truth, all of this is practically impossible to achieve. Know that for starters. You can't do it, meaning you can't do it now, yet you can learn to do it, but that's what you are in for, a difficult learning process. It helps if you

somehow get a taste of realization, which is the fuel we need to keep going.

First, we have to practice, practice, practice, and then, when we have practiced enough, we have to remove, remove, remove the accumulated effort that we made to practice, effort, the scars of which remain as an obscuration.

Then we are ready, as the Bard put it, for something
“Brought on by a simple twist of fate” to jar us loose.

It takes all that, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]



SONGS OF REALIZATION

December 30, 2022

I have had little realization, just a tiny bit, and even that is a little subtle, the idea came to me that the great dharma saints like Milarepa did not just set out to write or sing dohas, the sacred songs of spiritual realization.

I believe that they could not avoid it, because wherever they turned, after a certain point in their awareness, songs of realization just naturally emerged. These songs can be sung as music or just read out loud as poems.

Anyway, that's my understanding. These great meditators could not but do just that. There's nothing else out there as an alternative. I know, this takes some explaining and I may fail at that, yet I will try.

I find what I am trying to communicate here is very encouraging, because it explains to me, perhaps in my own slow way, why I find myself just naturally gravitating toward the edge of common sense, the very edge of time, yet always just shy of sheer nonsense, my stretching of time thinner and making the veil that we have over us more transparent than it normally is. It gets thin at times and we can almost see through it..

It seems that, ultimately, everything verges on or points to nondual meditation until our immersion is unavoidable and, as the poet Dir Edwin Arnold so aptly put it, the "dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

In other words, behind Samsara, beyond our usual dualistic conceptual mind, is 'meditation' and nothing else at all. I am not talking about 'practicing' meditation. We all have done this, but that is not meditating. I'm talking about actually just meditating, and in one of the so-called nondual meditations, like Insight Meditation (Vipassana), Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and the like.

The conceptual mind and all dualisms are but a collection composed of our habitual graspingness. We call it Samsara, an island of our attachments, surrounded by the sea of nondual meditation. In other words, dualism (Samsara) is the exception and not the rule in this universe. This is to me a rather big deal, that the ocean of awareness and spirit is dominant, and Samsara just a small part, an island, in relation to the vast sea of tranquility.

Most of us have just not yet managed, according to my Tibetan dharma teacher, to learn to meditate in a nondual fashion, and thus not taken the plunge, full immersion, into meditation in all these lifetimes we have had up to now.

And so Dohas, these songs of spiritual realization, are not something of this Samsaric world, but at least they already point beyond that world. That's what these songs are, sounds and light from another realm, filtering in and joyously sung so that we can at least sample or get a whiff of the perfume that these words and songs naturally emanate.

And we, struggling in Samsara as we do, can also touch upon or reach out into this sea of non-dualism and immerse ourselves. We do this through actual meditation. Not 'practicing' meditation, but meditating.

Even as beginners on the dharma path, we also have a voice in this. We can be assured that as our voices arise from Samsara, as we rise to the edge of that, we too will break free from dualism and immerse ourselves in the nether world of non-dualism, there being no other choice. It's but a matter of time.

That's the point here, that the nondual world of meditation does not just belong to the very few but is open to all who can meditate and thus get there.

And so, what keeps us here is habit and fear, IMO. We don't know anything else but Samsara and never have. And so, there is nowhere to go but up, 'up' meaning venturing from duality out into non-duality, and that until full immersion in actual meditation is accomplished.

Intellectually, we go out like a light in immersive meditation.

We don't know how to meditate or even what actual meditation is, although we think we do. That's a problem. Let me repeat, we don't know HOW to meditate even if we think we do. Yes, many of us know how to 'practice' meditation, and do that, but unfortunately that is not meditating. Once we can meditate, there is no need to practice meditation, we just meditate, develop that, and go from there.

At some point we learn how to stop 'practicing' meditation, which also takes learning, and we just meditate. And in meditating we naturally find ourselves singing. I wrote this little poem many decades ago.

OUTSETTING SONG

That song is sung,
That singing,
Sets inside itself,
Out setting song,
That sings,
And singing,
Sets itself,
In song.

Song that sang,
Which sung,
Is singing still.

[Midjourney graphic by me.]

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