

Opening the Door to Pure Perception

Essays by Jason Espada

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Preface

Beginning with Right View - that all life is sacred

In Buddhism, the liberating Eightfold Path begins with Right View, and that is followed by Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Samadhi, or Concentration. If the first step is off, or if there is anything at all lacking about our view, then everything that follows will likewise be mistaken, to some extent at least. We're not Buddhas to begin with, so, what to do? I think we're encouraged to keep this outline of the Eightfold Path in mind, and then to continually examine our view, to adjust and improve it, in line with what we find in our study and contemplations.

Recently, I have begun my morning readings and meditations with teachings on the Middle Way. At the conclusion of one collection, it became clear to me that our usual way of seeing the world and ourselves is mistaken, and, if we are not to continue this wrong view, called self grasping ignorance, in our life and ways of thinking, we need to aim to cultivate insight, and to practice it continually.

If we begin with right view as it has been expressed in the Middle Way teachings and after, then everything that follows in the prayers and reflections appears differently:

Appearances are said to be *like the reflection of the moon in water*, or unimpeded. This is the result of insight;

Refuge, reflections on our precious human life, mortality, right action and its results are all viewed differently;

The ones we would care for, the methods we use, and the result, are seen as an appearance to the mind.

Before I go further, I want to highlight here that Right View has different meanings in Buddhism, as it is explained in the different transmissions that have come down to us to this day. All of them are correct, but in my view, the latest in the development of Buddhist teachings are the most complete.

They proceed from the teachings on liberation as found in the Pali Canon, to the Mahayana view and activity, to the Vajrayana.

If we begin with Right View as it is expressed in the Vajrayana, that of Sacred Outlook or Pure Perception, the other views are included, most tangibly. If we were to begin in our thinking from the language of one of the earlier stages of the development of the teachings, the same truths would be there, but they would be implied, or more hidden and needing to be revealed.

Sacred Outlook is a way of seeing and being in this world with pure perception. It is the culmination of spiritual practice, as well as a path of training.

Sacred Outlook recognizes the divine nature of this earth, and our ancestry, Holy Beings, Saints and Benefactors.

This is the most complete expression Right View. It is what each of the different paths lead to, in my opinion. It makes the most sense to me, then, to begin as best I can with Pure Perception in the morning, and then to aim to maintain this way of seeing throughout all my prayers and meditations.

Tenets of Pure Perception

Adapted from Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture, and American Buddhism

In Tibetan Buddhism, basic ignorance manifests as what they call 'impure perception', or 'ordinary perception', the mundane view of the world that we carry with us, and this is seen as the root cause of how we limit ourselves and suffer. The opposite of this is called an enlightened view, pure perception, or sacred outlook. This is a way of experiencing the world as essentially divine in nature, having great beauty and potential.

The following principles go beyond Buddhism alone, to reflect something of what is seen and lived with in other Traditions as well, and in the lives of contemplatives. They stand in radical contrast and in eternal opposition to the common, mundane view. Here are few tenets of a magical world view, pure perception or sacred outlook:

That all life is sacred;

That the Divine, freedom and peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us all

That our fundamental nature is pure

and therefore,

*That we all have the potential to become free from suffering and attain happiness;
we can accomplish great benefit for ourselves and others*

*That this world is sacred, intelligent, alive and responsive, and that we are
inseparably connected to it;*

That we are always connected to each other, to our whole family

That there are other realms of existence

That there are past and future lives

That karma works, negative actions create suffering and positive actions create happiness, and bring light into the world

That the way we experience ourselves and each other and the world depends on our mind

That true mind sees things the way they are, and naturally has right values, and is healing

*That the purpose of our lives here is to care for each other,
and,*

Those who show us the best ways to do this are our venerable teachers

That there are many levels of beings, seen and unseen

That we are not alone in this world

That there are powers we can call on, Saints and Saviors, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Ancestors, and divine beings that will respond and help

That we are multi-dimensional beings, and so, things such as distant viewing, absent reading, and distant healing are possible

That there are faculties beyond the ordinary that can be developed, each according to our unique temperament and gifts, but to some extent by everyone

That vows are powerful

That prayer is effective

That ritual works

and,

That mantra works

An enlightened world view, however we come to it, offers us spiritual food, expansive vistas, and the means to accomplish our aims; it offers us support, whenever and wherever it is needed. Whatever methods we then use, there is a workable operating basis for living that is full and rich. We are empowered by such views, and the heritage of our great resources is again, as ever, open to us.

From an enlightened perspective of this kind, the spiritual practices we do, such as study, meditation or prayer, are to know the truth about ourselves, and our lives here; the fullness of the gifts our teachers and benefactors have given to us, and what we have to draw from to act, to set things right as much as we can here in this world.

*May we all be aware of our true heritage,
and live lives of generosity,
great joy, and fulfillment,
of great peace, well being,
and benefit to all!*

From Buddhist Paradigms , version two

This very world is the Pure Land

and all beings have in them everything that we need to create peace.

What they call *Sacred Outlook* sees the divine everywhere in the world, in our environment, and history, and in all living beings. It is not samsara or nirvana except how we use this mind, and these opportunities we now have in this moment. Even those who are deluded, or who cause themselves and others harm contain all the buddhas, and all the wonders of heaven in them.

As Rumi said:

Human beings are mines.

World-power means nothing

Only the unsayable, jeweled inner life matters

- if they only knew!

From this perspective, things here are eminently workable. It's not just that we are empty vessels, needing to find water from someplace else, or needing to work with ourselves and others as essentially flawed and limited beings. Rather, each one of us contains enough to sustain and nourish ourselves, and our families, and our community, and our planet.

Opening the door to pure perception

From 'We See the World As We Are'

How we see makes all the difference, and this is expressed in Buddhism by the fact that the path begins with *Right View*. If the view is off, they say, by even a hair's breadth, then everything that follows is also mistaken in some way, or not yet what it could be.

What is Right View? It is fully seeing things as they are. If we see only a part clearly, it could be called an aspect of correctly seeing, but it is not yet complete. We are not taking into account all of that is present.

For example, if we see ourselves and others as ordinary people, struggling, suffering, confused, and in competition with each other, the result is very different than if we see the intelligence in people. A whole world of possibilities opens up. And if we see the potential for liberation, *and the divine* in one another, we can feel joy, and devotion, naturally.

We don't need to insist on right thought, speech, and action if Right View is there. We don't need to approach change in ourselves and the world from the outside, as it were, with laws, and ethics insisted upon. Those may support learning to see, but they don't replace it. They can also lead us to think that fundamental level of education is all we need.

The truth is that living responsibly, with love for each other, follows naturally when we see the preciousness of this world, and all these lives, mother, father, sister, brother, friend...

To the Pure All Things Are Pure

To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure; both their minds and consciences are corrupted....

- From Paul's letter to Titus, 1:15

Although we live in an extraordinary world, with miracles all around us, people don't see it. They don't feel their own worth, or that of others, or of our sacred earth. This is the cause of all the injustices that we see, all the neglect and exploitation, and all the desecration of our home.

Spiritual traditions have always offered an alternative to this fundamental ignorance, in their teachings on sacred outlook, or pure perception. Although the paths are different, traditions arrive at the same insight - understanding, as a lived experience: that knowledge of the perfection and divine nature of all that is here.

It seems a stretch to refer to *everything* as divine, and so we need a place to start. We have temples and churches, and private devotionals. Eventually, if the paths are followed in an inspired way, over time we begin to see and sense the same life outside as was found at home, or in the church, or temple. We begin to see the divine everywhere in ourselves and our loved ones and strangers, and in our world, afflicted or not, and however it is to ordinary consciousness. There is always this potential, this transcendent beauty. In the Great Perfection teachings they call this *the all encompassing purity of all that appears and exists...*

In Paul's letter to Titus, we have the line

To the pure, all things are pure...

- which is a direct challenge to all of our mundane perception. It turns it around to the viewer, or the experiencer, rather than what is being experienced in the moment.

What does it mean, to be pure? In Buddhism, it means a couple of things. One, it means to be free from obscuration, and ignorance, and free from the afflictive emotions, such as greed, aggression, dullness and despair. These negative emotions obscure the mind, and all they can be lessened, and removed. These veils can all be seen through, and dispelled.

On a more basic level it also means that *things are pure in their original nature*. The afflictions or delusions are not part of this original nature, so they can be cleared away. This is the aim of spiritual practice.

When I was young, I remember my father used to tell this joke to us kids:

First he would make a wave gesture with his hand, and ask, *What's this?*

We'd ask, *What?*

and he'd say, *I don't know, but here comes another one (with the wave gesture)*

Then he'd make a gesture with his hand in the shape of holding a ball, palm up, and ask, *What's this?*

We'd say, *What?*

and, turning his hand over, he'd answer, *An upside down one of these*

It's the same way with this mind of ours. Sometimes it is upside down, sometimes it is right side up. It depends on what we do with it, and how we care for this heart and mind of ours. *It's the same mind though.*

This same pure nature is everywhere, which is the holy amen hallelujah of Buddhism:

*It is not created, or destroyed
not made worse by forgetting,
or improved by its recollection*

- from the Buddha Nature teachings

The essence of mind is intrinsically pure

- from the Sixth Zen Patriarch, Hui Neng

But you ask, What of the wars? the abuse of our most vulnerable? the corruption of politicians, and all the addictions, and waste? And *of course* we ask these questions, *we have to* - and it is right here, when we are at our worst, that the teachings *must* prove themselves, if they are to be of any value to us at all.

They say, 'cut all doubts about the view', and the only way we can really to this is to investigate thoroughly.

To the pure, all things are pure? All things? Really?...

Although this first part of the quote from the Bible is somewhat well known, the second half of it is less so, and I think it offers a key to unlock the experience of what is being talked about.

The remainder of the quote is:

but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure; both their minds and consciences are corrupted....

- and we all know that for some, nothing is sacred. There is no limit to the amount of harm a person with such a distorted mind can do, and think nothing of it. We make laws to protect ourselves against such people, and fight wars against tyrants who are without conscience. But looking closer to our own experience is where we can really begin to understand what is happening everywhere, on personal and interpersonal and collective levels. When it comes to understanding the mind, we have to start just here, with ourselves, with our own mind.

*If the doors of perception were cleansed,
every thing would appear to man as it is - infinite*

- William Blake

We live in a world full of miracles - there is endless beauty that we need to be reminded of, so that we care for ourselves and one another as we should. There are fresh breezes blowing; there is the blue sky, and incredible flowers growing; graceful, amazing animal life, rich ancestry, beautiful children and parents and elders, abounding creativity, and altruism. It's a surprising truth that with all that is profound, mysterious, inspiring, and enriching, *we still forget*. Our experience can grow small, and benighted, bereft. Isn't it so?

When the letter says, *their consciences are corrupted*, that should alarm us. There is nothing more dangerous in this world of ours. Humans are not acting as humans then. They don't see the truth, or act on it. On the contrary, they do the opposite.

This is what it means to be corrupted. We've lost something essential when this happens, and this is the essential sacred knowledge we need to recover.

How do we get this way, and how do we renew our senses?

It's not easy, these days especially, but if we know how we got here, and the dynamics that effect us, we can make our way again to truth, which is sacred outlook. The pure see things as they are.

To the pure, all things are pure...

In our capitalist society, it seems sometimes that everything is for sale, everything is seen as a commodity, everything has its price. This de-values everything, it debases and degrades everything in people's minds. It is a result, and it is also a perpetuating cause. We learn to see again by turning in the very opposite direction of such a gross, materialistic view.

No matter where we find ourselves, we can begin by loving ourselves and each other and this world, inclusively, by having respect, appreciation, and gratitude. We clear away the obscurations this way. We can recover our vital, human sense. This is the proposition that is offered in traditions, and by our compassionate teachers, needed now more than ever.

Our vision clears. Gifts return to our hands. Our own clean breath and reason for hope returns to us, in full. From here, everything we would want for ourselves and our loved ones will follow naturally.

Three Buddhist Paradigms

From Ordinary Perception to Right View

To begin:

A view is the way we see ourselves, and each other, and this world we live in.

These are the maps we use; the way we orient ourselves;

Another word for this is our paradigm;

*In every moment we have a view of some kind, even if we don't have language for it.
It's the basis of all that we think and say and do;*

A view can be less or more true;

And,

*A view is something we start with, and it can be something we can have as an aim,
as when we are developing and maintaining Right View.*

The way most people experience their lives and this world is one we that can call ordinary view, or mundane perception.

It has a few characteristics that are easily identifiable.

From a Buddhist point of view, it's said that,

We take as impermanent to be permanent;

We take what is suffering and the cause of suffering to be happiness;

and we see what is not a self at all, to be a self.

We can add that we take to be ordinary what is in truth extraordinary.
We undervalue ourselves, and others, and this world.

Lama Zopa calls such relative truth of the common view,

truth for the all obscuring mind -

and the idea here is that our mundane view continually projects ideas onto reality that do not match what is here. Until we learn to see correctly, with a profound change in our consciousness, we will find ourselves perpetually in conflict, and unfulfilled.

Lama Zopa also taught on what he called

pervasive, compounding suffering -

a phrase I found to be very interesting. It means - in all places, at all times, and, increasing, like compounded interest increases, not only on the original amount owed, but then on the interest itself also. Ignorance, confusion and suffering are like this - they are always increasing, and are so difficult to get out of for that reason.

I would like to introduce here four views, or paradigms - the view of the ordinary person, also called mundane view, or impure perception, and then *three Buddhist paradigms*, those of Liberation, the Mahayana motivation, and Sacred Outlook, or Pure Perception. These correspond generally to what is taught in the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. There is overlap between these, ideally, or we can say, they are each inclusive of the others. This is just my own opinion, of course.

I.

For someone without any training, or education, or insight, these are the general characteristics of what we can call

the paradigm of samsaric view, or the samsaric mind:

it is one that is ceaselessly wandering through the six realms {the hell, hungry ghost, animal dispositions, human, angelic and Divine realms} - sometimes up, sometimes down, without choice or control, and without knowledge of what is needed.

{It should be noted, they say in the Tibetan Tradition that most of our experiences throughout countless lifetimes are those of the three lower realms.}

The experience of an ordinary person can be compared to being in a room without doors or windows - to such a mind, there seems to be no way out. Moving through the experiences of the six realms of samsaric suffering and change is all that is known by ordinary view, or mundane perception.

There are however other views we should know about.

These Buddhist paradigms are presented one at a time, so that they are accessible.

II.

The first one says that there is a way out of suffering.

This is what the Buddha taught from his very first talk, Turning the Wheel of the Dharma, and throughout the rest of his life.

This is the paradigm of the knowledge of liberation,

and such a view makes a great difference to someone who until that time has known only confusion, suffering and dissatisfaction, and seen only that in the lives of others, those he or she has cared for, strangers, and adversaries if there are any. Hearing this, and believing in this possibility leads naturally to the aspiration to be forever free.

III.

Then, when joined to love and compassion for those we see around us, that view leads to the thought that *what we all need* is this freedom and ease, the health and safety, that the Buddha taught and that was then realized by his followers, and generations of followers and teachers, right up to the present day.

This thought brings with it great courage and power, and the willingness to do whatever we can to realize the teachings ourselves and to share the benefits of that with all.

We call this then

the paradigm of the Mahayana view and motivation,

and it opens the way to connecting with holy beings, guardians and protectors, to kindred spirits here on this earth, and to enlightened understanding and activity.

and,

IV.

From there, and completely based upon the Mahayana view and motivation, and meditations

the paradigm of sacred outlook, or pure perception

becomes accessible.

This is the Vajrayana View, that is taught and the skillful means practiced in the Buddhist Tantras.

This is the way of seeing and being in the world is where we know and express our own divine nature, with the knowledge that we are living in a sacred world.

The First Order of Business in the Middle Way Teachings: Clearing Away Wrong Views

For practical purposes, it's helpful to know that there are two distinct teachings offered in what has come down to us as The Middle Way. One is negation-only, while the other negates and then affirms some aspect of truth.

These each have different functions, and it can be helpful to know this - to clearly identify what kind of teaching we are reading or listening to, and see if it matches what we need at any particular time in our life. There is a reason for each, as we will see.

Perhaps someone hearing the teachings on *anatta* receive all they need from this, and they are liberated from self grasping and realize freedom and great compassion. Other teachings have come down to us, based on those very liberating insights of the Buddha. Why was this so? Why not just keep the language of the original teachings? One reason could be that the realized sages that followed the Buddha, out of their wisdom and compassion found and developed other ways to guide their students. At their best, they explain the meaning of the teachings with greater accuracy and precision.

In terms of the history of Buddhist wisdom teachings then, *anatta*, or no-self in the Pali Canon was followed by *the Prajna Paramita*, including the Heart Sutra and Diamond Sutra. These were then followed by *the Middle Way*, *Great Perfection*, *Mahamudra* and the teachings on *Buddha Nature*. Each subsequent teaching explains more clearly what came before, chronologically, and so, for example, the learning about the Middle Way and practicing according to those instructions makes what is taught in the Heart Sutra easier to understand, and to practice.

This *Middle Way*, in its two aspects, looks back, to the earlier Prajna Paramita and *anatta* teachings, and then, even in one discourse when it

begins to use affirmative language, speaking of clear light, spaciousness, freedom, and joy, it looks forward, to the subsequent teachings, of Mahamudra, Dzogchen and those on Buddha Nature, and the Vajrayana View, the basis of Buddhist Tantra.

Where am I? You are here. Prasangika / Svatantrika, Madhyamaka / Maha Madhyamaka, Rangtong / Shentong Madhyamaka

It helps to know there are different views within Traditions, and that each approach will order the teachings in their own way, stating their view as the pinnacle, encompassing and surpassing all others. These are matters of debate, and for the philosophically minded.

Practically speaking, I find it more useful to consider all these teachings in terms of their function:

Jamgon Kontrul said that the teachings that just negate, such as the Prasangika approach, are the best for removing wrong view, while those that negate and then affirm, speak of our true nature.

The teachers and lineages who would speak of both aspects, for the sake of clarity, sometimes distinguish Madhyamaka, from Maha Madhyamaka, Middle Way from the Great Middle Way, or Rangtong (empty of self) and Shentong Madhyamaka ('empty of other' or, as Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche expressed it, 'empty of the habitual negativities and obscurations that cloud the beauty of our inherent nature').

We do need both, it seems, and organically, in this sequence too.

If we were to try to affirm something about ourselves, without clearing away the residue and habit of our wrong views - what Lama Zopa said, as ordinary beings, we project onto everything, all the time, there will be conflict; the view will be obscured, or else we will reify those experiences, as we have so often in the past. To get beyond this tendency, and the even

the very subtle remainder of ego grasping, practicing the deconstruction through analysis of what we think of as self that is offered in the Middle Way is most effective. Then all that follows becomes clear.

At that point, the second aspect of the Middle Way teachings, affirming some aspect of truth can be taken up, with less danger of grasping, and making the same old samsaric mistakes of mind. These speak of non-duality, freedom, clear light, being unimpeded, and lead naturally to what's referred to as the Third Turning of the Wheel, on Buddha Nature.

Examples of Middle Way teaching

Lama Lodro Rinpoche taught the practice in this way:

Look from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet for whatever you are called by name, for 'I', 'me'...

{Investigate... look thoroughly...then,}

You can see it's not there. It's a concept....

When you don't find it, stop looking. You found it (the point of this meditation) already... stay with that...

Look one time each session, then, when you come to the point that you realize there's nothing there, then stay there. Don't analyze further...

Ringu Tulku expressed it like this:

The main method here is to cut through all your concepts, to cut through all your projections, so therefore, there is no affirmation.

If there is any statement, 'This is it' - then, with logic, through reason, you say, 'No'.

In this approach, it's seen that, whatever you say is a concept. So in this way, you let go, you cut off, you dissolve all your concepts...

And in the modern classic *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso says that, after analysis,

'We will confine ourselves to refuting all views, but not asserting any counter argument establishing any views of our own. This amounts to a complete destruction of all conceptual views of the nature of reality...

and,

The aim of the Prasangika is to silence completely the conceptual mind, allowing the mind to rest in absolute freedom from concepts...

This is the first delineated method of Middle Way insight practice. We use a precise and thoroughgoing analysis to bring the mind to the point of 'a non-affirming negation'. *This insight should be well established first, before moving on to other meditations.*

This first aspect of Middle Way practice leads to the cessation of grasping and believing in, and taking to be true all concepts about ourselves, and others, objects, places, and events. Then what is true is revealed. It is implicit. Going step by step, we can realize this.

On The Middle Way and Buddha Nature

{Originally titled 'The self that is not and the life that is'}

When we talk about Buddhist Wisdom, we seldom hear of the life that is being validated. The method that most lineages teach us to get free from suffering is to *see through* the false self, the ego we project and take hold of as if it existed independent of our thought.

In the historical development of these teachings, *anatta*, no self, and *shunyata*, emptiness or the actual non existence of the imagined self were followed by the Middle Way teachings, that are about finding the balance of accounting for the mistakes not only of ego grasping, but also of nihilism, that is negating too much of our experience.

When we fall into nihilism we would to think, for example, that because there is no ego, then nothing exists, no karma, no interdependence, no relative truth as it appears to the minds and in the experience of living beings; that there is no inherent value in all of us, and no need for ethics and loving and compassionate engagement with one another. This is focussing too much on negation, and not on what is revealed if insight practice is done with a clear and distinct purpose.

The Middle Way doesn't minimize or replace what is taught in the annata and shunyata teachings, rather it indicates the fuller truth that is implied in them. What is revealed when we go beyond the false self is our relationship with one another, our connection to our spiritual and biological ancestors, and community; cause and effect, the need for ethics, and our fundamental virtue, our inner light, and our true loving nature.

From this point of view, we can say there is a self that is not, and a life that most certainly is. Going beyond the first leads us to the second, even if this not explicitly mentioned in First and Second Turnings of the Wheel (respectively, the teachings on the selflessness of persons, and all

phenomena we take hold of in our thoughts), there remains this truth that is spoken of in what is sometimes called the Third Turning of Wheel, on our Buddha Nature.

First, the self that is not - is seen and felt by most of us to be something separate, permanent, and unitary, or of a single nature. We have to see for ourselves how this is in our own experience... I'll wait....

Ok?

It's important to directly know how the false self appears to us, so it can be seen through with a bright, clear, and awake mind, repeatedly, and its effects can diminish and eventually disappear from our experience altogether. This takes time, surely, but it's this liberating wisdom that makes the difference between feeling separate from others and from our own depths and profound qualities, and embodying the knowledge of our truth here.

Then, the life that is, by contrast, is essentially connected to others, and to all of this life, to lineages, ancestry, and the natural world. It moves and manifests in profound ways, via art and teaching, illuminating worlds that were not seen before or enjoyed. We are beings of light, and light is our sustenance. This is what is revealed when we go beyond the false ego, and both the conceptual and emotional obscurations.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in his teaching on the Avatamsaka Sutra and Indra's Net, describes how a person living an awakened life is touched and nourished by the light of others who are awake. We take pleasure in the gift of our being here together, in this vast world, full of beauty and endless possibility.

Thinking of both the self that is not and what is revealed is safer than just saying the first one, and then possibly negating too much. And it's certainly safer than saying nothing, and continuing to suffer because we mistakenly

identify with the false self, the self that is not. *There is something seen through, and then, this life that is affirmed, that is sheer luminosity. There is celebration, creative work, divine resourcefulness, and fulfillment.*

From Insubstantiality and the Illusory Body

'If it can be grasped, it's not a rainbow' - Tilopa

It's possible for an intuition of our deeper nature to be awakened in us. We can then be aware of our greater life beyond the surface of what is seen and talked about, all the while making use of common appearances to the mind. The difference now is that we remain awake, and *see through* these simple images. The light of our knowing continually shines through them.

Intrinsic Intelligence and Buddha Nature

*Don't be surprised, don't be startled;
all things will arrange themselves.*

*Don't cause a disturbance, don't exert pressure;
all things will clarify themselves...*

- From the Huainanzi

*Sitting quietly, doing nothing,
Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself*

- Basho

Depending on the person, it may be enough to just sit quietly in meditation, letting the mind become clear, for wisdom-insight to manifest. It should be known that *it can* happen this way sometimes, and that this is only possible because we have a wonderful, innate intelligence that can guide us.

In this paradigm, Buddha Nature is the potential we all have to find freedom and ease, and awakening, and revealing this potential is the purpose of all Buddhist study and practice.

It can also happen that our innate intelligence remains covered over, and, lacking good instruction and encouragement, a person can waste a great deal of time and effort in sitting, standing, and walking meditation, and not get any meaningful result. They may even end up worse for it.

The reason some people do not gain a good result is they are not suited for this kind of meditation, and, they have not been given useful guidance to realize their nature. Their teachers are partly to blame here as well.

It should be said though that *there is* a basis for the idea that just sitting is enough to free the mind from wrong views and the afflictive emotions.

Every yogic tradition, from those of the solitary forest meditators, to the Great Perfection, Mahamudra, Taoism, Chan and Zen base their practice and realization of our indestructible, innate intelligence, and its natural unfolding.

For many through the generations the efficacy of this approach has proven its validity. For the right person at the right time, they will tell you, it works just as they say.

When the Chinese sages said that *all things will arrange themselves*, they were speaking a profound truth about this inherent intelligence we all share, and its marvelous functioning.

There's an ease, or an effortlessness to this approach, allied with a deep trust in our inherent nature. When the conditions are right, and we do not interfere, *all things clarify themselves*, and *Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself*.

What could be more amazing than that?

Contemporary teachers emphasize that we need to look honestly at our own capacity for what may be a very simple practice, after all, realizing the nature of mind. They then add that there are other practices we can do, if needed, so that this method is most effective.

They tell us, look carefully: If through sitting and walking, our mind becomes more clear, dispelling ignorance, then we are on the right track.

See for yourself what you need, and what is sufficient for you. Is this not a vital matter?

The Essential Characteristics of Buddha Nature

{Based on the teachings in the Uttara Tantra Shastra}

All beings are equally endowed with Buddha Nature. It is not something that saints and sages have in a greater measure, and ordinary people have less. In all places and times, in all cultures, for all people, this essential, perfect, true nature is exactly the same. Seeing this at once removes both self denigration, and any pride we may have.

Although their sum is limitless, inconceivable really, a few of its attributes can be described:

What we call Buddha Nature is the source of all positive qualities, up to and including enlightenment, which is freedom from suffering, nibbana, coolness, as well as the realization of all that is good in us.

A few of these qualities inherent in our fundamental nature can be named, as kindness and compassion, intelligence, strength, patience, gentleness, generosity, joy, and peace. These are there simultaneously.

All of the spiritual practice that we do is to reveal and manifest this true nature.

This Buddha Nature in us is indestructible. No matter what sentient beings go through, no matter how deluded they are, no matter how much they suffer or cause others to suffer, it remains the same, and to be realized.

This is the holy amen hallelujah of Buddhism.

Glimpsing this for even a moment can change everything for a person. It can be like finding a single gold coin, when before we thought we were poor; seeing it for a while, in more depth and fullness can be like finding a whole chest of gold in a field - we then have enough for a lifetime, or

several lifetimes. Seeing our Original Nature even more fully, is like seeing first a single ray of light, and then, the dawning of a new day. Everywhere this light illumines, enriches, and brings joy.

It's been known as our intrinsic intelligence, that is self refreshing. We need not look outside of our present experience for it, but certain conditions have to come together for it to be known. The process for knowing it can be understood this way.

The Third Turning of the Wheel depends on the Second, and First

In Buddhism, the teachings on anatta, or personal self-lessness developed into shunyata, the selflessness of all dharmas;

The third turning comes after that, organically, with additional elements active for a person.

Each realization in Buddhism needs a number of factors to come together. The wisdom teachings of the first and second turning need ethics, and meditation, and inquiry, or the kind of clarity that understands directly the nature of our experience. First we remove the conceptual obscurations, and then the qualitative obscurations as well.

The Third Turning of the Wheel, recognizing Buddha Nature in addition to these then is more an awakening of the heart.

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, as it says in The Little Prince.

Appreciating beauty, having gratitude, humility, and a sense of humor; practicing kindness and compassion, joy, and steadfastness all help to recognize this our true nature.

Buddha Nature is the foundation of the Tantras. This is what we draw from for all our practices.

All of the divine qualities we can access and make use of in our lives, and use to benefit others are contained *right here*, within this very nature of ours:

The Wisdom, Compassion, Healing Nature, Strength, and Purity, and others.

All these qualities are inseparable aspects of one essential nature.

How wondrous!

If we understand the poetry expressed through the names and forms that are used in our formal practices, then we understand directly how this fundamental nature is, everywhere, at all times. It is beyond any one name and form, custom and time. We can say it is a mystical realization.

This Buddha Nature, the clear light nature of mind, the Dharmakaya, the unconditioned, innate freedom is contained within the earlier Buddhist teachings. Here though is it emphasized, and brought into functioning more fully.

From Buddha Nature arises spontaneous beneficial activity, as needed, and for as long as is needed. It is effortless in a way, inexhaustible, creative, and adaptive, bringing joy and peace, and fulfillment.

The bridge between the Mahayana and the Vajrayana

From *A Collection of Buddhist Healing Prayers and Practices*

In order to practice tantra effectively, we need to move at least to some extent beyond our habitual ordinary view. This is necessary not only so that we can believe in what we are doing and apply ourselves, but it is needed also so that we can access the resources we all have within us.

Although it is not usually expressed as I'm going to say it, I think there's a reason to speak explicitly about the natural bridge that exists between the Mahayana view and vajrayana view and meditation.

When a person sees through the ego, or sees that they are much more than they usually conceive of themselves as, the experience can be one of light, warmth, and richness. We could say they have a glimpse of the view, a truer experience, one that is more reliable. This happens when other elements, other than merely changing one's concept, are present.

There is a bridge linking the Mahayana Buddhist practice, of moving beyond ordinary, common ego grasping, and the vajrayana practice of mantra and visualization practice, and that bridge is what is referred to as Buddha Nature. When a person arrives at this from the study of various texts, and in his or her meditation, that can be the basis for all the various expressions of this fundamental nature. After all, where else can we get the energy, power or qualities that the different bodhisattva-divinities represent, other than from a source that contains all these potentials? Such is Buddha Nature.

Awakening the Heart as An Aspect of Right View

(formerly 'Vertical Depth')

*Don't ask what love can make, or can do -
look at the colors of the world!*

- Rumi

When we analyze self and phenomena, we can have the experience of breaking through our simple concepts about them. We begin to see causality, the relationships that presently support what we know, as well as prior causes. All this opens up our experience, and it feels as though it is describing an extension of what we know *on a horizontal plane*. It is correct to say *this* is supported by *that*, influenced by, and conditioning *this*, and so on, but there is so much more that needs to be accounted for if we are to have a full understanding of our lives here.

As true as they are, what is missing from descriptions of emptiness, mere interdependence, or impermanence, is what I think of now as the qualitative aspect of our lives here. *Included here is the experience of beauty, a sense of richness, joy and wonder, as well as all our human values, the wisdom of our feeling nature*. All of us have this, inherently, and it's easy to see. This is what responds to seeing a beautiful child with the spontaneous feeling of, Oh, how precious! Infinitely precious!

Without this aspect of our lives here being brought into wisdom study, no matter how refined the concepts are, what we are left with is an incomplete idea. After all, it may not matter that things are interdependent- by itself, that's no guarantee people will act ethically, or in any kind of responsible way.

Wisdom study and awakening then necessarily includes both our mind and our heart in relation to this whole ten direction world, and all our relations.

We find that we are not just related, but when there is an awakened heart, there is an ethical side to it as well. True, universal values are known, and affirmed, embraced and cultivated, and ethics, compassion, and responsiveness to social justice are all included in this, naturally.

Systems that first divide the conceptual from the qualitative obscurations then have to find a way to re-unite the two, and arrive at a complete view, one that is not abstract and cut off from positive engagement with the world. Wouldn't it be better from the beginning to train in both aspects?

Wisdom As Knowing What is Important in Life

In the West, we commonly think of wisdom just as intellectual understanding, or the accumulation of knowledge, but there is much more to it than that.

Wisdom, throughout time and across different cultures is the knowledge of what is truly important.

I've been thinking about this lately in regards to my own country, the United States, in this, the early part of the twenty-first century. It's easy enough to identify the first two of what they call in Buddhism 'the three root poisons' in this culture - those of greed, and aggression, but the third one, and the root of *all* suffering, that of ignorance, is not as easy to see. It is unknowing, like a dull grey mass, and all our personal strife, barbarity, and social and environmental imbalance come from this.

Here, in this case, more specifically, ignorance is not only not knowing - we also believe things to be significant that are completely unimportant, while what is really precious here in our lives and in our world is overlooked, or greatly undervalued.

If we had wisdom, we would see the preciousness of all of life, and our place in this wondrous world, not as owners, but as stewards of all we have received, and care for, for this and coming generations.

Our ignorance is complicated here by this being the foremost consumer society, imitated worldwide, and all our commercialism and mis-education limits or distorts what we think of ourselves and one another. Advertising trivializes everything, and even if something is not important at all, it can be made to seem so, through the power of the media. This is really an enormous tragedy for us all.

We have been taught here that accumulating wealth and power, getting the approval and admiration of others, and enjoying sense pleasures is what this life is about. These things fall apart though, and if we depend of them, we fall far short of the happiness, peace, and satisfaction we all naturally wish for. This is a hard lesson to learn.

We have many thousands of homeless, and undernourished here, and yet we waste our money on trinkets; people here are indulgent, shallow, restless and dissatisfied. We spend a big part of our national budget on weapons, feeding insatiable corporate greed, while the poor here and all over the world struggle just to survive.

Why is it that we do not know, do not care, and do not feel responsible for one another, and this precious earth?

I would say it is a matter of people being caught in their ego. They are not liberated, and so the average person is acting from ignorance and the afflictive emotions. Once a person is freed from the shell of the ego, or wrong view, though, they become naturally compassionate, generous, and inclusive. It has always been this way, and it is this way now. We need more liberated people, in truth, many thousands, and tens of thousands, and millions more.

The absence of wisdom here may be hard to see at first, but once a person *does know* what is important, then ignorance can be seen in countless meaningless motivations and actions. I say this not to criticize or condemn, but simply because I believe we all have a responsibility to speak the truth. If others hear it, and take it to heart, in time it will be for the good of us all.

When I remember that the purpose of our human life is to care for one another as best we can, it greatly simplifies things for me. Whatever today's difficulty, or uncertainty, all is held in a greater vision.

Right View comes first in Buddhism, followed by Right Thought, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, and Meditation. If the view is wrong from the beginning, then everything that follows is also misguided, leading to dissatisfaction, our aims not fulfilled, or to suffering. When the most important things are clear, then conversely, every thought and action follows course, and helps create the beautiful world we know in our hearts is possible. This is universal.

One of the things I admire about Buddhism in particular is that it offers us methods we can use to see how things truly are. We're not asked to accept anything before we know it for ourselves, in fact we are clearly told to test out these propositions, and accept something only when we've verified it ourselves. Then we can share what we have known with others.

Beginning with a kind of wisdom that is insight into our nature, and the nature of others, and the preciousness of this life and this world, the way is open to fulfillment. Each day, and each activity can be known to have purpose, as part of our greater life in this place and time.

In every moment, we are connected

From Mindfulness As Keeping Our Purpose In Mind

I've been thinking a lot lately of what *only appear* to be separate worlds. Sports, cooking shows, amoral, mind-less materialism in all its vulgar excesses (especially this time of year) all *seem to be* removed from one another and from the rest of our lives and this greater world. The truth of it though is that the feeling of being a world apart is *an illusion*, that has tragic consequences for us all. We ignore needs all around us, on account of this forgetting. Our values collectively are deluded - ignorantly selfish, and ultimately destructive of even our own ends.

Waking up to our lives here, and responding as well as we can to the human, animal, and environmental needs of this time, from wherever we are is all included in being mindful, and aware. We may deny it, or avoid it, but then, from a human perspective, such lives are immature, and smaller than they could be, and there is bound to be a lack of fulfillment, and conflict between us, as individuals, or as groups.

And so I offer this prayer:

*May we all awaken,
care for ourselves
and for all of our precious family, with wisdom,
and find meaning,
and the fulfillment of our lives here on earth!*

From Buddhist Paradigms, version one

This very world is the Pure Land

and all beings have in them everything that we need to create peace.

What they call *Sacred Outlook* sees the divine everywhere in the world, in our environment, and history, and in all living beings. It is not samsara or nirvana except how we use this mind, and these opportunities we now have in this moment. Even those who are deluded, or who cause themselves and others harm contain all the buddhas, and all the wonders of heaven in them.

As Rumi said:

Human beings are mines.

World-power means nothing

Only the unsayable, jeweled inner life matters

- if they only knew!

From this perspective, things here are eminently workable. It's not just that we are empty vessels, needing to find water from someplace else, or needing to work with ourselves and others as essentially flawed and limited beings. Rather, each one of us contains enough to sustain and nourish ourselves, and our families, and our community, and our planet.

When I lose this thread, I go back to the view of the Mahayana Bodhisattva, and take my vows again; and when I lose that, I turn again to the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, with the aim again to live in harmony with others, understanding cause and effect and the peace that comes from caring for myself and others well, with understanding.

All these are ever present choices.

From Sitting Practice and Sacred Outlook

If we practice sitting meditation with Sacred Outlook, we are sitting in the Pure Land, of light and peace. Just as the samsaric world comes from our mind, so does the experience of this being a Pure Land.

With sacred outlook, we are seeing ourselves, and one another, and our world as we truly are; we are accompanied by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we all have Buddha Nature, and this world is infinitely precious, and beautiful. Especially when sitting with bodhicitta, the dedication to all beings, it is blissful and clear, and a wonder to behold. This is how it truly is, when our obscurations are removed. We can also practice, to familiarize ourselves with this recognition.

The starting place for learning to see is love. There are the two kinds of obscurations: those of the obscuration of conceptual thought, and the qualitative obscurations that veil the mind. Removing the conceptual obscurations, through quiet meditation then frees us from wrong views, or the ideas we have had, and cultivating the heart qualities removes the qualitative obscurations, so that our experience is bright and clear, deep and rich. This leads to what is called sacred outlook, or pure perception.

I'm sure some people have found their way to Sacred Outlook, Pure Perception simply through sitting in the zendo. This happens when a person has a good heart already, or, if they cultivate their warm-hearted nature, their kindness and compassion for themselves and others. Then when they sit, those qualities mature even further, and this world is gradually revealed to them as a sacred place.

Sitting practice can be a delight and a wonder. It can reveal our innate good qualities, and enable us to help others in many ways, through this one simple and profound practice.

Inuit Song

*And I thought over again
My small adventures
As with a shore-wind I drifted out
In my kayak
And thought I was in danger,*

*My fears,
Those small ones
That I thought so big
For all the vital things
I had to get and to reach*

*And yet, there is only
One great thing,
The only thing:
To live to see in huts and on journeys
The great day that dawns,
And the light that fills the world.*

In The Commentary on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith, it says,

'The true Mind of every sentient being itself teaches and leads each sentient being.'

*May we all find our way to truly liberating and enlightening teachings,
practice in a way that is comfortable, and compatible with our own unique nature,
and reveal the heart of the Buddha's wisdom*

Who is the one we have compassion for?

From To Bring Light Into This World - A Buddhist Commentary on the Tanya, Chapter 45

Who is it that we care for? Who is it that helped by our reaching out to them? Who is it that is redeemed by spiritual teachings and practice?

It is not an ordinary person, as our mundane thinking would have us believe, oh no. These are holy ones suffering, infinitely precious ones in need of our love and care. How can we make this more clear?

I. As a story in the Midrash puts it:

A rich merchant was to marry the king's daughter. Everything he gave her, however, was somewhat inadequate and inappropriate - for she was born a princess...

**The soul too is a princess, and can never be honored sufficiently... it is a spark of the divine...*

How can I restore the Divine to its rightful place?

How can I save these Princes and Princesses, and bring them home?

The Divine in one needs to be lifted up, and cared for in every way, and all spiritual teachings and actions are for this one purpose alone.

Knowing the World As a Sacred Place - An Invitation to the Vajrayana View

We are not here on Earth to be alone, but to be a part of a living community, a web of life in which all is sacred... this is something we each need to rediscover and honor anew...

- Llewelyn Vaughn-Lee

I.

If we begin with the view that this world is sacred, then everything that spiritual traditions teach us follows naturally.

This earth, and all that is in it is sacred: the trees, the mountains, and the rivers;

the fertile soil, the flowering plants, and the forests;

the air we breathe, and the sunlight, and the rain;

{Indigenous peoples, and all those who follow wisdom traditions have always known this, and it has sustained them}

Our bodies, breath, and movement are sacred, and those of all other people;

Our senses, our music and art, and silence;

And other species too- all these can be known without a doubt as sacred...

Knowing this brings great equality, solidarity, and affection, and we can begin to use words to describe our experience in this world such as

wonder, and awe, and exultation; reverence; holiness, divinity, blessings, and miracles.

A person with an ordinary view would not even dream of using such terms. For the time being at least, they are not in his or her vocabulary.

Spiritual traditions are here for us to know the sacred fully, and to share our knowledge.

We can see how life is when we are without this essential spiritual view—witness all the exploitation, and neglect, prejudice, and despair there is in the world. Beginning with an enlightened world view, by comparison, there are more possibilities, as well as the energy and inspiration to accomplish our aims on this earth.

To say it plainly, our world view is expressed in what we value, and what we feel is possible.

The prevalent world view at this time, tragically, is that of an impoverished scientific materialism, that excludes beauty and poetry, and so many aspects of our lives here. Remarkably, even the Buddhist traditions that have made their way to the West during the last century are mostly based on this limited view of ourselves and our world. It seems almost as though we walk on a different earth. We are all a part of something *magnificent* here, if only we knew it!

Once you see the sacred nature of this world, and all that is in it, you'll wonder how you could have missed it for so long; you'll grieve the loss, but then quickly turn to encourage others as much as you can, and you'll find you have abundant resources at hand for your work.

II. The Vajrayana Perspective

The starting point in Vajrayana Buddhism is an enlightened world view, one that affirms our spiritual nature, and the spiritual nature of all of our ancestry, and our world. This is how it can function as a spiritual path.

It is a view that includes the understanding of samsara and liberation, delusion, the six realms, and enlightenment, and Buddha Activity;

There are angels, and saints, and Buddhas and bodhisattvas everywhere, pervading all conscious life;

Our inherent Buddha Nature has traditionally been described as being 'like oil in sesame', or 'like butter in milk', as it's said, only needing to be churned to reveal what is within. The meaning is that we need only practice the teachings to know these things for ourselves.

If you ask, What is a Buddha? and, What is Buddha Activity? we can look at mythology, art and iconography-

Manjushri illumines, and cuts through illusion

Avalokiteshvara with one thousand arms, each with a different implement, shows us something of the innate creativity of our compassion;

The Healing Buddha cures all sorrow and affliction;

And Tara, ever youthful, quick to respond, fearless, bold, protects us like a mother, and awakens fresh energy and enthusiasm

- all these bodhisattvas, and more, inspire faith.

As I see it, the difference between the Mahayana and the Vajrayana then, is that in the Vajrayana these are not just stories. They are realities we can

know and actualize. We ourselves can *become* Manjushri. We can *become* Tara.

In the Theravada and in the Mahayana, wrong view is defined as self grasping ignorance. By comparison, in the Vajrayana, wrong view is referred to as mundane view, or ordinary perception. There is this great difference. Sacred Outlook, or Pure Perception is in direct opposition to the narrow, materialistic perspective, and it overcomes it, because it is verifiable for anyone who takes up the invitation.

*There are these fresh streams, flowing in the night, and at dawn,
where love is the light we see by...*

We take to be ordinary here what is in fact extraordinary in ourselves, and each other, and in the world all around us.

As the Saint Niguma said,

*On an island of gold,
You search in vain for common earth and stones...*

Now, we may ask, Why don't we see ourselves and our world this way? This is such an important question- in fact, I'd say it is *the* urgent question of our time, and of all times. Traditions tell us that it is because of our obscurations, and that these can be cleared away.

*Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places...*

- Wendell Berry

Our view can change, as when we wake up and become aware in a new way, and celebrate a fuller understanding. Then all that follows changes as well. This view will then become the basis for a new life, in a new world, with all our family.

For those who would make use of the miraculous in their experience, helping themselves and others, the teachings on Sacred Outlook offer a complete way of life and thought.

Every man, woman, and child, every animal, whoever has mind, has this great, indestructible potential for liberation and enlightenment. We each have an innate richness to draw from, and ever-present divine help.

The Vajrayana then also makes use of its View, and its Meditation, and Action. It takes up the practices of Sila, Samadhi, and Prajna, calm and insight, and compared to other traditions, to my thinking, it does so with a deeper understanding, and with more resources to draw from.

In Buddhism at its best, of course, there is no one size fits all, and no dogmatism. This is simply honoring fact that our spiritual lives here are unique, and most personal. In Buddhism, in truth, we should be warmly met right where we are. When we find a functional world view, we'll know it for ourselves. We can say, *'It works for me to think this way'*. It is practical, and onward leading.

This much can be said as an invitation...

The State of Wonder

Wonder is a state of mind in which we do not look at reality through the latticework of our memorized knowledge, and in which nothing is taken for granted...

Wonder, rather than doubt, is the root of all knowledge...

- Abraham Joshua Heschel

When we feel this emotion we call *wonder*, we lose every desire to dominate, or to exploit another, or to call attention to ourselves.

Wonder sweeps us *upward*, and we are left wanting only to praise this world and this life we share, and to celebrate with all our family.

With wonder, we lose any willingness we may have ever had *to possess* any one or any thing- we see how absurd that would be - like trying to fit an ocean into a tiny teacup.

Wonder then, is a door that *opens* to this endlessly greater world we share.

I've seen photos of the sky at dawn in the desert of the South West, here in the United States, and I understood right away why the lives of native

peoples are woven *with reverence*. I've *seen* those extraordinary, living colors too, and I can say that it's as though *they breathe*. In their immediacy, they bring us the feeling that *we are held*, and that we are living in a truly divine world.

Without such beauty, we know with certainty right then and there, the soul or the inner life of a person would be very much closed in on itself. We can see so clearly that, absent joy, we humans experience and cause so much unnecessary suffering and hardship. All this begins to change in a moment when we feel wonder, even a little bit of it.

It is intimated, even in Winter, or in times of drought or plague, *This soul is a garden that can blossom magnificently, and offer delight to everyone we meet*, and it is here, with this insight, that we find our breath returning.

If you see someone without any ease or happiness evident, oh, you can be sure, they are without wonder. At least for a time, it is like deepest Winter for them, or, like they are stricken with drought, and so I implore you, I implore you!, *Pray for rain! Pray the rain and sun be known by them! Join in their broken prayers, their desperate cries!*

What this world and all those who live in it *need* is to be fed; we are beings of light, and light is our sustenance. Without question, this what makes us healthy and strong, and humble, and honest, and straightforward; we then become willing and able to take our neighbor's hand, and to meet their gaze, and to walk them home.

It's a privilege to be here, an honor, and when we know this, *with all the awe and wonder we feel*, we naturally find ourselves dedicated to restorative justice; without having to be told from any external source, we each become stewards of this wondrous earth, and all we've received, for the sake of future generations.

I remember now, it was Autumn, 1997, and I was walking along the road in the foothills of Rishikesh, North India. Looking up as the clouds parted and the Himalayas were revealed, I found myself every few steps saying, Wow... or, Waahhh... *and, I tell you, this literally went on for hours*. I remember smiling also when I noticed how the local people set up chairs outside to watch the light on this supreme mountain range, much as anyone would watch a show. I could tell they were being fed by *all of this beauty*, surely.

When we feel wonder again, we know that this is our natural state, that we people have somehow, incredibly, strayed from. We see with new eyes, and everything else then, at least for a time, seems like madness. After all, who would willingly be so deprived?

Whenever people are petty, or lacking gratitude, then it's a sure sign that there is no wonder awake in them at that time. *So many things in this world*, after all, can bring a person into this state of grace. There are *an endless number of things*, in fact! - here are just a few to start us remembering again:

the sight of a beautiful child, at any time; the stars and half moon... *really seeing* the gift of art, seeing the movement of the trees in the wind, or flowers... hearing music, reading poetry, or remembering something of what we have received from heroes, saints and saviors, from our parents and teachers. Suddenly, the world opens and reveals itself to us, in all its endless beauty and mystery, and depth.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel also said that:

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder.

and this is something the heart *knows*.

The truth is, there is nothing small or insignificant here, despite what our oh-so-ordinary state of mind believes. Those lacking faith may regain it though, and that's the good news here - the holy *amen hallelujah*. Half a day awake to these truths should be enough to convince anyone, and to turn them into ardent believers.

See how it is: for those still sleeping, the world is flat, affectless, an impoverished place, where we have to struggle for every little scrap of pleasure or significance. Compared to this exalted state we call wonder, materialism, and so much of what passes for religious teaching also comes across as grim, and calculating, and offering just a bare finger tip's worth of what really matters. That such things hold appeal, I'm thinking now, must be because of the great need for any light at all in this wilderness that is our modern world.

But it's this way: when you hear music, you want to dance, or sing along; and when you see something like the Northern Lights, you want to do whatever it takes to wake your family and neighbors and share the majesty with them.

Whatever dampens our enthusiasm and joy then should be shunned, and denounced, and driven from our homes, and communities. Envy and

competition, small minded arrogance and putting others down has no place in this celebration, where everyone is invited to open in their own, incomparable way, and to share in this grace.

I remember now how it's this way with the great joy of playing music too: we may not share a language or religion or gender or life experience, but this common ground of wonder so beautifully reminds us once again, beyond question, that *we are all family*. There's a profound intimacy we can know, that for a time at least quiets all conflict and division, and all of those so common lesser values and identities. For a time today, we may step out into the open, inviting others, all of us reclaiming our noble heritage here on earth, and our original dignity and place in world.

Love is the Eye that Sees Beauty

For many, the days and nights here are experienced as moving from the mundane, and the commonplace, to states of want. The usual starting place is one of ordinary life, with only brief moments of being uplifted by some heroic feat in sports, or beauty in music, or in nature, and then back to what are seen as being plain lives. This is actually a state of great deprivation, and it is holding ourselves and others and this world in such low regard that is at the root of how we all treat each other, and other species here, and this, our beautiful natural world, our home.

Our breath, digestion, eyesight and voice, each movement of our hands, and our memory and dream are actually all divine, just as they are, with nothing commonplace *at all* about them, if we only knew.

*A man sleeps heavily,
though something blazes in him like the sun,
like a magnificent fringe sewn up under the hem...*

- Rumi

Far from being ordinary, and something to be taken for granted, each one of our lives here is actually something magnificent, and to be celebrated. Not seeing this we demean ourselves, discriminate, neglect and exploit one another, and animals; we see this earth as merely an object to be used for our gain, instead of it being something extraordinary and precious.

To say we are at all ordinary is like saying that Everest is just a hill, that the Grand Canyon is a but hole the ground, it's like saying that Baryshnikov could dance a little, or that Mozart and Bach could write a few tunes... Oh how we underestimate ourselves and others!

This is where wisdom and compassion meet

Being Westerners, we associate wisdom for the most part with book learning, with being educated and articulate on the level of intellect, but there is more to true wisdom than this. There is an aspect of it that has to do with *heart knowledge*, cherishing our own lives and the lives of others, and responding to the needs and wishes of all our fellow human beings and the precious animal species here with great care. This is what Martin Buber was referring to when he wrote about going from an *I - it* to an *I - Thou* relationship, to one of not only respect, but of *reverence* for life.

What is called sacred outlook or pure perception is just this kind of awakened understanding that is then expressed in our every thought, word, and action. It is the single most important realization we can have, and not only is it essential for our very survival here, it's something vital to our personal and collective flourishing.

How we arrive there - *Love is the eye that sees beauty...*

When we take hold of our experience just where we are today, we may have to move first from suffering or despair to regaining some kind of normalcy, but we shouldn't stop there. When the time is right, and we have some more space in our lives to consider how our views about ourselves and others and our world come to be, then we're at the threshold of a new world and a new life.

I'm sure we can explain something like a sunset, or the colors of a flower in scientific terms, and see them dispassionately, but then nothing *moves* in us. We don't really receive them as we could. What we need is *to feel beauty*, to begin to treasure our every breath, sight, and gesture, our family, ancestry, and home, and our dreams and visions.

The awareness of the divine begins with wonder, said Abraham Joshua Heschel, and this is where we can each begin, from wherever we are just now, high or low, busy or not. If we make the effort, we can almost always take hold of

at least one of the gifts that are all around us. This then becomes a habit, and the light dawns in us, as we begin to see how bless-ed we are, how we are fed, and sustained, as well as the beauty of our neighbors, family and friends. Compared to the mundane view we once had, it is without question the truer perception.

The challenge is that we've grown far too accustomed to thinking of ourselves and others in small ways. The language we use follows how we have learned to see ourselves, and our world. The saving grace here, without a doubt, is that such conditioning is not fixed. There's an awakening to be had today, this hour, if we but look for it, and the poets and sages teach us how to see. They are the guides who gently help us awaken our hearts to beauty:

"This grand show is eternal... It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never dried all at once; a shower is forever falling; vapor is ever rising... Eternal sunrise, eternal dawn and gloaming, on sea and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round earth rolls..." - John Muir

This ecstatic vision then reaches far, and it is what we need most in this life, in this world. Let us dance then, my friends, and each day serve each other with the best of gifts.

In the Healing Buddha's Pure Land

In the Healing Buddha's Pure Land, there is an amazing blue sky, just like this one. Multi-colored birds sing and take wing. The warm sun reaches everywhere, and brings us all life, health and strength. It brings joy to all it reaches, and helps us all to open and to share our unique gifts.

In the Healing Buddha's Pure Land, there is music played on divine instruments; music that is ever new lifts our hearts. There is a profusion of creativity, spilling everywhere, a cornucopia on every block. There are gardens and varieties of flowers growing, and there is painting and dance, poetry and prose, play and people's dreams unfolded for us all to see and delight in.

Here, friends and neighbors smile and greet each other, with and without words, and care and concern are naturally the rule, sharing in each others joys and trials. We may not know each other, but in this place we support and encourage one another.

And we are fed. Delicious healing herbs grow from the ground, amazing ripe fruits that grow everywhere are shared widely, and the baker's skill and love is handed directly to us; recipes from our grandmothers, bearing their love down through the generations are prepared, and the house is rich with the fragrance, nourishing our body and our heart most of all.

We are fed by our family who love and look after us, even after their passing, as well as our spiritual ancestors, and the great benefactors of us all. We are all kept company on our paths, guarded, guided, and encouraged by them.

Here in the Healing Buddha's Pure Land, there is beauty all around, and streams of kindness are flowing everywhere. We are upheld by the light, by the courage and commitment of our brothers and sisters, the boldness of our parents, and the heroes and heroines of these and other times.

The beauty of our children today, our dreams made manifest, delights and inspires us more and more, day by day. Here, we have loving pets that heal us, and ritual and remembrance, and traditions and sacred objects we call books that sing with healing energy.

Here in the Medicine Buddha's Pure Land, we watch as our old afflictions fade away and a full day wakes in each of us, reaching from East to West. Here, therefore, every day is a celebration, a sacrament, a holy day.

We all live in this Pure Land right now, but only few actually see how this is so. The rays of light, the ancestors and protectors, the food and love and friendship is here, but a person can shield themselves from it, or cover themselves over and miss the music of our being here. You can tell because they have no dance in their step, and the look on their face is not one of satisfied desire, but instead is pinched and sour. Tragically, they neither give nor receive much of the spirit food that really is everywhere.

It is remarkable, but in their abysmal confusion, people turn instead and become addicted to shadows that offer no sustenance. Barking like mad dogs, or building weapons and organizing armies to fight imagined enemies, they miss all the beauty, they arrive and depart empty handed from this isle of jewels. What's worse, deprived themselves, they harm others.

And this brings me to the greatest joy of this divine place I call home, which is that it awakens in us compassion, and the resourcefulness to work to free others from their confusion, and help them to awaken to and enjoy the pristine perfection that is all around and within them.

Here in the Medicine Buddha's Pure Land, everywhere I see there are countless workers and teachers and spiritual friends teaching in ever evolving ways, at once speaking new languages as needed, engaging, struggling along side us, and celebrating with us every great and small

victory. This work is ongoing and will be until all of us realize just what we have here, just where we are, and what we are all heirs to. As they say in Zen, This very land is the Pure Land, and this very body is the Buddha.

The Heart and Mind of a Person on a Spiritual Path -

From Mundane View to Pure Perception

As soon as we begin to practice a spiritual path, we become aware that we are seeing things differently than the average person. To the ordinary mind, there is not much to celebrate here, and certainly not anything worthy of reverence; the common view is jaded, corrupt, and impoverished, and it offers very little to depend on in difficult times.

By contrast, those who follow a call and begin to study with a teacher, or within a tradition sense that a fuller life is possible. If they are really fortunate, they connect with a skillful guide, or with good teachings that help them to uncover what is true.

We human beings, on the whole, believe so absolutely in our perceptions that it's difficult to communicate with most people, that what we see and feel to be so isn't all there is of this world, and our lives here. When someone is lacking depth and insight, then their world view seems to be entirely self-explanatory, and beyond any questioning.

There's a saying,

We don't see the world as it is, we see it as we are...

- which is another phrasing for what Eastern Traditions in particular base their philosophy and practices on. There's an evolution of consciousness that has to take place, if we are to free ourselves from confusion and all the suffering it brings, and create communities here on this earth that honor all of life.

I recently came across a name I had written down, and had forgotten about. I looked up Michael Casey OSCO, and recalled that he is a Christian Contemplative writer. I found a truly astounding article online by him

called *The Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among us*. I remembered again that *The Word* in Christianity is known to have spiritual power, beyond literal translations, and so I was intrigued. He describes the sacred in this essay, saying

The infinite and eternal Word who dwells in inaccessible light became accessible in space and time. Thus we could hear, see with our eyes, and touch with our hands, the mystery that had been hidden from human perception during previous ages...

In Buddhism, we do also have the tradition of recognizing that some words, mantras, Sutras, termas and tantras, images and teachers are the very manifestation of Divine Activity. It's not often talked about here in the West in the twenty-first century, but for some, this is an undeniable experience.

I have to wonder sometimes, what people think, when they hear of the Divine helping people in their lives. Buddhists here especially are prone to underestimating the great spiritual gifts, and the blessings that are available.

Some people wrap Buddhist texts in silk, place them on an altar, and offer before them flowers, incense, and butter lamps; they bow, revering those teachings, and the saints and sages who guide us along the path; Public ceremonies are attended by scores of people, and sometimes hundreds, or thousands, praises are chanted, or sung. What to make of all this? Is it merely superstition?

I reckon that viewing devotional practices, or picking up Buddhist teachings with an ordinary mind is like seeing in the dim, half-light. There is something there of value that is slightly recognized, but we're not fully awake to its significance. This is because of the tragic, mundane view that is so common.

How do we see ourselves, and each other? How do we see this world? Is it all little more than organic functioning, and are we little better than machines, as ubiquitous scientific materialism would have us believe? When such a diminished world view is there in a person, it reaches to everyone, and to every thing.

Wendell Berry said in one of his poems

*There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places*

Missing the significance, the beauty and power and potentials of being here, we doubt and despair; we mistreat our own bodies and those of others, and this whole precious earth. Only a spiritual remedy at this point can make us whole again, and this is what I rely on, where I turn again, in yearning faith.

In the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, there is a teaching called *The Three Visions*. The great saint, Dezhung Rinpoche has a commentary on this called *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception*. In *The Three Visions*, they describe ordinary perception, its functioning and limitations, and the suffering that comes from it. On the level of a realized being, they say, this very world is one of endless beauty, and every life is cherished. The main focus of this text then is on the mind and heart of someone on the Spiritual Path. We alternate between confusion and clarity; between feeling uplifted and inspired, and suffering, being driven by the winds of karma, in the shadow of wrong views.

In Michael Casey's essay, he highlights the divine help that is always reaching out to us, and always finding creative ways to communicate

The Life-Giving Word presents itself through marks on a page; mysteriously mediating the power of the Holy Spirit...

and he traces how someone responds to divine help, and this call of this inner life:

First, We feel strongly drawn beyond our normal sphere of thought, and so become aware of a desire to go deeper;

then, in some way, our eyes are opened and we catch a glimpse of the glory of the spiritual world that is invisible to our senses...

This opening to spiritual realities changes *everything* for a person. Even if it's just a glimpse, that alone is enough to be a catalyst.

This fifteenth century Indian poet said of the Divine:

*Kabir saw this for fifteen seconds,
and it made him a servant for life...*

How is it we don't see these things?

The mundane mind is stirred up and obscured in so many ways. It's no wonder that, universally, people on a spiritual path will choose to remove themselves from common society, at least while they are training, and stabilizing a new way of being.

Recently (this being 2020) I've felt like we are collectively meditating on health and illness, on the resources we have available to us as human beings, and on what is ultimately important, and unimportant. Most of those who are now thinking of disease and death, and the uncertain, precarious nature of our lives here have never, or almost never done so before. They want to escape, and return as quickly as possible to their so-called normal lives, and not want to think about these fundamental realities.

It's said that,

for an ordinary person, the only way they have to deal with unpleasant feeling is pleasant feeling...

This is so clear, really. Eating, drinking, drugging, binge watching tv, and so on - this is avoidance, and it creates even more problems.

But our time here is uncertain, and great suffering exists in our world. Economic inequality and racism, the indifference of the monied classes, and the insipid, uninspired materialistic world view are also now on full display. What's a person to do?

I've found it's essential these days to separate myself as much as possible from the news, much of which is fear driven and reductive. It can so easily narrow a person's sense. Following those views and emotions, we see less and less of what is here, and who we are, and the means we have at hand.

Now, more than ever, we need what can come to us from our sources of spiritual support, and that needs quiet, and some amount of faith and devotion to come to the fore. It's so personal beyond that, that I hesitate to say much more.

It should at least be known that the heart and mind of a person on a spiritual path is changing, from ordinary perception, to sacred outlook - from mundane view, to pure perception.

All of our spiritual study and practice, if I may say, involves purifying the heart and mind. In various ways, through study, meditation, and prayer, we remove what are called '*the two obscurations*' - those of *the qualitative obscurations* - the negative emotions that veil the mind, such as greed, anger, depression, and fear - and the wrong thinking, or *the conceptual obscurations*.

Ceremony, simple acts of devotion, and thinking of our teachers with faith in our heart opens a channel for their great blessings. Only a humble person will know this, of course, but these spiritual influences are always available, if we are receptive. From time to time, I'm thinking now, at least this much at least should be said.

When we find the key point, that the state of our own mind and heart determines what we will see and experience, then everything changes. The focus shifts to the inner life, and to all that can be accomplished through spiritual receptivity and practice, through love and compassion, for ourselves and for all our beloved family.

A few notes on Catholicism in its broadest sense

Before the moment of inception for this study is too far removed, I thought it worthwhile to sketch a few thoughts that have converged, leading me to where I am now.

A couple of months ago, I was making my way through a rather dense Buddhist treatise, one I had been working up to and looking forward to, when I came to a point where I had to at least take a break from it all for a while. A deep wisdom teaching can be peculiar in a way. There's a place for what it says, but if it doesn't match where we are at some particular time in our life, there's not much effect, and I continue to suffer.

I know I have been looking for a complete vision, and the richness of a devotional element is essential.

I mentioned to my sister how Buddhism here in the West is more like psychology than religion, at least so far, and that I am in some ways more like the Catholics in their devotions, and their veneration of Saints, and their world view or cosmology that includes angels, and the help and support we can receive from subtle realms. I have written about a few of these things, from a Buddhist point of view as well as I could.

For a door to open, for anyone, whatever is in the way needs to be navigated successfully, and each tradition, from what I can tell, has their own unanswered questions. If we can accept these, the rest of the system opens up for us. It can be viable, at least for a time, to take the tradition on its own terms.

Buddhism, for example asks us to accept on faith such things as the workings of karma, past and future lives, and the nature of liberation and enlightenment. We accept these provisionally, and take up the practices to know truth directly.

For me, to approach a theistic tradition, and learn from it, I have to set aside the whole question of why a compassionate, all powerful God would allow suffering. I've never been satisfied, as others seem to be, with the answers tendered, and this has mostly stopped me from pursuing studies in the Christian Tradition, at least past a certain point.

Others can accept, and move forward, continuing to learn. I've seen how there can be different amounts of what is accepted on faith, to begin with. Some start with a world view, and base their spiritual practice on that. The danger there is that a view can be confining, and self reinforcing. If engaged skillfully, sincerely, and with good guidance though, a person can mature to the point where they can explain the descriptions based on their own insight.

Other people begin with what they can see and feel and work with, and allow their view to develop from experience. Perhaps at some point these two approaches can meet, one would hope.

I've found that I'm more a mystic, I think, than someone who identifies with any one tradition, even Buddhist ones. That this is almost impossible to explain has left me with relatively poor options, as far as communicating what is true for me, and essential, but it is the ground, still, that I can base my faith on, and continue to learn.

The teachers I've connected to most, I believe, are mystics too, in that they have taken their experience to a profound and universal level. Anything less and it feels restrictive, and self referential, instead of opening outwards, to greater life.

I am so thankful for these teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, Lama Yeshe, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, Ani Tenzin Palmo, Ajahn Pasanno, and others. I don't know what to make of these connections with excellent teachers, other than to recognize that they provide something that no other relationships offer. Philosophies are fine, as far as they go, but these

realized teachers communicate much more by who they are than what they say or write. They are lights in the world, and breath and food and music to me.

I had an interesting experience recently, that opened a door again to Christian mysteries, and, following my intuition, this has led to some surprising and wonderful progress.

There is something Christian teachings call *an anointing* that is recognizable. There is a spiritual power that is palpable and known in comparison to our ordinary way of experiencing things.

The best we can do to talk at all about the presence of spiritual energy is to say what it *is like* - saying things such as it is *like* an electric current, or a fragrance, or like something awakening. By comparison, even a moment before, we were living an ordinary experience, and just then a new world appeared.

I have had this experience before with one other modern Christian evangelist who is on television, by the name of Joyce Meyers. A few years back, for some reason, at times I would come across her programs and she would usually be speaking to exactly what I was going through, with real depth and clarity and conviction and helpful insight. At first, we write these experiences off too easily, but then it become undeniable that there is some connection.

An energy flows through certain teachers, and this is one of the gifts of the holy spirit, they say. It is tangible, a blessing power, a quickening at the right time for those with a connection.

I had this same feeling again about a month ago meeting the Catholic teachings of a traditional nun named Mother Angelica.

I can see in her how anointing does not mean infallibility, and this has been broadly instructive. How often it happens that a person or group will get some revelation or strong energy of the spirit, understand it only so far, and build a whole school or philosophy up around it!

But I recognize there is something about her that is profound, and mysterious, and illuminating, opening the way for seekers. Of course, I realize there's a subjective side to it as well, but now here I am. I am astonished, and delighted.

I mentioned to my sister how she knows my connection to the Divine Feminine in Tara, and how devotion to Mary feels very similar. This is a way to access this broader Catholic tradition. It gets so personal at this point that it's not easy to say much more, only that this is fruitful, and joyful, and healing on many levels.

Which brings me to a review of what makes the most sense to me, and also what I need to somehow accept or to recognize directly and set aside so I can keep learning. (see my criticisms of the Church) I know that I look at Western Theistic traditions with a strong prejudice against them to begin with.

On the other side of the balance, undeniably for me, I am as surprised as anyone to say, given all I've said so far, there is the Divine Person of Jesus, and the blessings of Mary, and the transcendent, holy lives of the saints, which I do believe in, have faith in, and draw sustenance from, especially now.

There is something in the view of theistic traditions that I feel is much needed in our world, and that is *a personal, and vivifying sense of the sacred*. This is missing in almost all Buddhist teachings in the West, until we get to the Vajrayana, but even there it is remote for most. We are closer, at times, to speaking about these things through the language of western traditions, even if we are not members of any church or group.

It's this need, to be complete, that has led me here. Whew. We'll see what comes of it.

The traditions of prayer, and social engagement, having love for all others, and wanting to serve them in whatever way is needed then- these are common ground between traditions, and for that I am most grateful. In this way, these studies feel like a continuation, rather than beginning something entirely new and unfamiliar.

May we all receive everything we need to heal, to be whole, and to have joyful, creative lives. May we all live in harmony with each other, caring for one another in the best ways.

Speaking of Angels

Preface

There's a story only I can tell. If it were not so, I'd leave it to others to say. Trying to use other people's language doesn't quite work for me either. I find myself stuttering, and getting lost too easily.

By far most of what people write never makes it into print, or it is not seen by others - indeed, it is not *intended* for that - but is set down just for the sake of clarity for the one writing it.

Sometimes there is a part of ourselves that understands perfectly, while another part is in the dark. The writer stands between the two, making apparent what had been obscure, making tangible what had seemed remote, making practical what had been inaccessible before.

When I read others' accounts the spiritual life, I enter their world view, and I'm constantly aware of the need to translate what they say so that it makes sense to me. Another part of me flows on, understanding the inner world in my own way.

So much is not born because it receives no encouragement from others in this world. A very few truths make their way to the surface on account of some encouragement felt from within. There's freedom in this, since the work then is only partly my own, shaped as it is by these finer forces I've come to know and write about for my own understanding.

On World View

For me, telling these stories is an act of faith, more than for curiosity. Since a world view *is comprehensive*, it covers all we think and feel, and do, and aim to do. Starting anywhere, as with a circle, will soon bring the full sense of the view that is intended.

Having an experience of a different order from the common life, whoever we are, changes *everything* for a person. It can be denied - 'I must have been dreaming', or it can turn a person's world upside down. It can also fit, somehow, and then our world is made larger, more beautiful, and interesting, with more possibilities.

The knowledge of angels or shining ones is usually kept secret, because of how personal these experiences are for people. We naturally draw back from any disbelief, or doubt, or denigration from others. We organize our inner life around these truths as we've experienced them, and so, until our knowledge is firm, we protect the light that guides our lives.

* * *

Angels I have known

I can tell of healing angels, guardian angels, and those who support my life in this world, 'money angels' I have called them.

As others have pointed out in their traditions, as with God, the angels, devas, and all those we can say are of a higher order of being are not bound by time and space, as most humans believe and experience themselves to be. They can appear as a circumstance, illuminated with the same feeling of warmth and intelligence as when they appear to us clothed with divine form.

One thing their appearance very often has in common across traditions and folk's telling of angels is that they come when they are most needed.

They can permeate our dreams, or rise up as a feeling when we're just walking down the street one day; they can come as a voice, or as a righteous impulse, or a sense of direction when we're lost.

Their nature is love and wisdom and power, beyond our usual thoughts. They communicate spiritual truth, and help us wherever we are in our lives. As an order of spiritual being, they have this function everywhere they are found. This is most personal. If we're receptive, we can learn a lot from them.

* * *

When the Buddha taught, it's often recounted that *the light of devas filled the grove*. Beings from other levels came to hear him teach the path to liberation and enlightenment. In subtle ways, they celebrate his teaching, with songs of praise and offerings of celestial flowers.

* * *

There is a class of beings who respond to our spiritual efforts. At times we can feel how they rejoice even when we just have *the thought* to practice.

I remember once when I was on retreat in 2012 and I thought of studying an in-depth introduction to the Pali Sutras, and sensing what felt like happiness and encouragement from the local spirits. I don't know the extent of their powers, only that they can facilitate learning in myriad ways.

{As a side note, on the day I left my one year, one day retreat in the mountains of Washington State, it had been raining, and I saw *a double rainbow*, the first time I had ever seen one. It felt like the local spirits, the ones who had been with me there the whole time, were thanking me for being there, and celebrating with me, and sending me off, with their blessings.}

* * *

I've heard one definition of blessing as 'removing obstacles'. There was a time in my early 30's when I felt like the road was cleared of obstructions to

learning, and that whatever I turned to study came to me with very little effort on my part. We can say part of it was karmic affinity, but, truth be told, it felt like there was more to it than that. I felt like a part of it was help from the spirit world, surely.

Back before the days of the internet, I found out about the existence of *transcripts* by one of my beloved teachers, Lama Yeshe, and I sent letters out to centers all over the world, asking if they'd be willing to send me copies of whatever they had. Lo and behold, within a couple of months, from every continent, photocopies of the books of these teachings appeared on my doorstep.

Now, you can say there was nothing exceptional happening, but the *inner feeling* was one of being helped.

* * *

An experience at work

I worked for an unusual bookstore for about six years. Perhaps this needs a little explaining.

When I first came to San Francisco, I noticed at the corner of Valencia and 16th that there was the ruins of what was formerly an apartment building. Written in graffiti on one of the few remaining walls were the words, 'Arson for profit'. Terrible things had happened there, and it always felt to me like this particular bookstore was there as a kind of counterbalance, to heal the place. Many years later, I worked this store. Ok.

There was a period of time when I would do my prayers and meditations at the beginning of every work day there. This sometimes took up to three hours, and it often happened that I had not a single sale during that whole time, but that *within a minute* of completing my practice, someone would approach the counter with books they wanted to buy. This happened so

regularly that I almost came to expect it- and this was during a recession, mind you. I knew it was unusual, and that I was being helped by unseen, benevolent forces, and yet, such is the life of a person who is on their contacts, as they say, in touch with the spiritual world, and divine helpers, the shining ones.

* * *

When I was living in the South West, I heard a story from the father of my host. He was disabled, without the ability to walk without crutches, and he told me about the day his second son was born. He said he pulled into the hospital parking lot, and felt unable to move and be with his wife. He told me he felt so angry and that he prayed powerfully, in a way that shook heaven and earth, and he felt a heat moving from the soles of his feet upwards, unlike anything he had ever felt before. Once this power entered his body, he was able to walk without difficulty to the maternity ward. He also said nothing like that happened again to him.

We keep stories like these in some hidden place, since they don't fit in with our culture's consensus reality. I imagine in another time and place and culture we'd openly discuss these things, and encourage our receptivity to the divine.

{See: Miracle stories, from *A Belief in the Miraculous - Buddhism, Magic, and a Sense of the Sacred*.}

* * *

How it feels at times

I recall staying at Tushita Retreat Center, in Dharmasala, India, in the late 1990's. By that time, I'd already had my fill of *the theory* of meditation, and the wisdom teachings, and I wanted to practice. Soon after arriving, I remember I made what felt like a half hearted prayer that, if there was

anything I could learn while there about what is meant by Wisdom in that tradition, may it be so. Right away, I felt like a gentle breeze had blown open a door- that was the image that came to mind- and, sure enough, I was able to take another step in my study while I was there.

I'm reminded of a verse by Rumi where he says,

*Bring even your dry, hypocritical prayers
God, in his Mercy, accepts even bad coin....*

Why sometimes great effort is needed, and why at other times the slightest movement of thought can change the world is a mystery to me. All I know for sure is that there is this interchange between the worlds that people speak of, and that we can know and facilitate in our own lives. If it weren't for that, I'd not be writing these words.

* * *

Our Guardian and Protector

The divine has these two sides to it. One is what we feel and see, and trust in; the life we share with others, and our family. The other side of this divine realm is far more personal than that. It is uniquely individual, and can only be talked about in terms of its being *a feeling of Companionship*, beyond this one life even; of a Guardian and Protector; like an older, wiser, loving guide. This connection is one we cherish, and can learn from our whole lives.

It comes to us as healing most often, because when we suffer and are stripped down to what is essential, this is what we spontaneously turn to. This is the one that reaches out to us, and that carries us through the most difficult times; that reminds us of our heritage, and of all the other times that a way was made out of no way;

If we have any capacity to care for others, it's a reflection of the grace and encouragement, the warmth and love we've received from our guardian and protector.

Some may say we're anthropomorphizing- giving a human form to experience, but it does feel true to say it this way. There is an intimacy, and a trust that isn't being referenced if we're just calling it our true nature, though it is that too. These incredible gifts come to us, inspiring many to try to find language that begins to express the extraordinary.

What to make of these few hints? Well of course that our world is richer, more complex and benevolent than we commonly believe. There are intimations of a greater world, invisible to a gross worldly view - one that is truer, more hopeful than reductive materialism.

The way is open. Our world is filled with loving and intelligent, spiritual force, and if we trim our sails we can receive these blessings. The current of divine help can carry us to the shore of freedom, fulfillment, and peace.

* * *

Deities and Their Retinues

What I have been calling 'The Shining Ones' are naturally existent phenomena. They are talked about in every time and culture. That being the case, there are some ways of thinking about them, and their Activities.

If we read about them, and approach them from the outside, they appear to us in one way, and if we relate to these truths from within, then it is a completely different experience.

We use art and poetry to communicate about things that don't come across when we only use ordinary language. An example of this can be found in the descriptions of Deities in Tibetan Buddhism - which are not creator

gods, as in monotheism, but are *enlightened beings*, and aspects of our own nature. I remember something I wrote a number of years back called *The Power of Symbols*. In it, I said that what are called Archetypes are aspects of the universal soul we all share. They also exist outside of ourselves, or we could say in the realm where the inside and outside are one.

It's axiomatic across spiritual traditions that we don't fully know ourselves. Vajrayana practice can be a great help in that respect. Meditating on these divine forms brings out their qualities, helps us to awaken to who we are, and gives us the means of benefitting others.

It is often asked if that's all there is to these 'Yi-dams' - the names and forms used in meditation, that I now call 'Celestial Bodhisattvas', and the question is an interesting one if we look into it carefully. It assumes we are here, our ordinary selves, in an ordinary world, with perhaps, we hope, some light in the sky we can use to help us see and make our way through life. The Divine, as I understand it, has no such limits. We can't say it is there, but not here, or that it works in one way, but not in others.

How can we begin to speak of these things? And, what does this have to do with liberation and enlightenment?

If we take the Buddhist path as exclusive, in the sense of it being the one and only way to Universal Truth, and to living fulfilled lives here, helping each other as much as we can, then it would seem that Enlightened Beings as represented can be a help, but only somewhat. Another view is that the Buddha discovered and taught a universal path, with many ways to express liberating teachings, including though visionary forms that then get passed down as poetry and religious art.

Such is the case, I believe, when we come to these Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They are given names and forms, and they act to free us from confusion, and to benefit us in countless ways. How to speak of them more fully?

Art does this with a *mandala*, with the main divine form in the center, surrounded by his or her *retinue*.

One way I heard to describe the retinue is that when a King travels, he has his Queen and Ministers, his doctors and Generals and soldiers with him at all times. Wherever we have one, we have the others.

Esotericists would say that the retinue of Divinities are elements that are 'enfolded' in their nature. Practicing any mantra and visualization will make all this clear as can be. These are qualities that are here for us to be revealed from within, and then they are fully self evident.

In the Vajrayana practices from Tibetan Buddhism, they take refuge in the Three Jewels, and they also have what they call Tantric Refuge, which is refuge in the Lama, the Yidam, and the Dharma Protectors (or Devas). Here are lines used for this combined practice:

I take refuge in all the Glorious, Holy Lamas;

I take refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the mandalas;

I take refuge in all the Buddhas, those who have conquered and gone beyond;

I take refuge in all the Supreme Dharma;

I take refuge in all the Noble Sangha;

*I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis, Protectors and Defenders of Dharma,
who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness*

In this practice, it's taught that the Lama is the Blessing Root, the Yidam is the Accomplishment Root, and the Dakini is *the Activity Root*. This is a way of talking about Divine Activity.

Dakinis are called ‘Sky Goers’, and the reference is clearly to their abiding in the space of the mind.

Without understanding the poetics of these practices, we’ll take them all too literally, and they will become fixed in our perceptions and traditions, instead of liberating us, and moving throughout our lives, illuminating and healing, providing for our needs, and and those of our loved ones.

A couple of examples: in Medicine Buddha practice, both in its Sutra and Tantric forms, the main Medicine Buddha is accompanied by healers and what they call oath bound protectors, who are described as having the ability to help us with material resources;

The well known practice of the loving Bodhisattva-Divinity Tara often makes use of prayer to the Twenty-One Taras, which are different expressions, or manifestations of Tara, that meet different needs. Experiencing these individually increases the sense of richness, and our understanding of the basic practice.

Tara is also known as ‘the Queen of the Dakinis’, since she is the Activity of all the Buddhas.

One verse of praise says:

*Homage to Tara, she swift and fearless,
whose eyes flash like lightning,
born from a lotus in an ocean of tears of Avalokiteshvara,
Lord of the Three Worlds...*

And one teaching has it that the Bodhisattva of Compassion, on seeing how much more needed to be done in samsara, felt great sorrow, and from his tears Green Tara and White Tara manifested, and told him, *We will help you!*

With love and compassion, and an understanding of Buddhist Wisdom, all this makes much more sense than reading about it as if it were something separate from the Mahayana in general.

In practice from the heart, all that is said in the mytho-poetics, about the mandala, the Buddha and retinue unfolds beautifully, and quite naturally.

Engaging in these practices from within, faithfully, and over time reveals everything we need to know about them, and accomplishes the purpose of both ourselves and others.

* * *

Angels, Devas, Shining Ones

Sometimes a strong prayer opens the door
for you to manifest,
sometimes a few words on a page;

Sometimes you arrive unbidden,
and you are always welcomed

You always bring comfort,
and encouragement,
and increase faith
in divine activity in our world

Whenever I hear stories about you,
no matter the distance,
or how long ago they happened,
they feel as if they are talking about *today*,
and in *this place* where I am now

Honored Friend,
companion throughout all my lives,
guardian and protector,
help me to remember you

and may Devas kindly guard and protect
all children,
all mothers and fathers,
all elders,

all those who are poor,
the vulnerable,
the infirm

the doubting,
the despairing,

all travelers,
all those who struggle and suffer,
all those who are lost,
and all who are in need of healing

I pray,
comfort them,
and lead them all to safety,
health, and peace

Devas and the Arts

There are countless ways the divine can communicate with us, and remind us of our true nature, our heritage, that to be born here is to be in a sacred place at all times. We forget, remember briefly, and then forget again, and we struggle and suffer so, having lost our true identity, having misconceived who we are and who others are, and the nature of this our holy earth.

There is *no limit* to the beauty of nature , and to the arts, and often they are the nearest we come to re-mem-bering, to embodying this profound knowledge of the sacred. What *is* voice and instrument, color and movement, the inspired word, the unity and enrichment we experience through the arts? We know it as ancient and eternal, and we know ourselves and all others as worthy of reverence and celebration.

When I think of experiences of listening to Bach, or Mozart, or Telemann, for example, and being lifted out of the sense of this struggling, suffering world, it seems the angel of grace herself is with me then. I know it is this way for others also today, and every day, and I'm left wanting to clarify and enjoy just what has moved through this day and this form. It is light and subtle nourishment I wish for everyone, for all beings, at all times, this wonder and ease.

The arts will go on forever because these are eternal truths we are graced to be here with, and to enjoy. There is no end to the inspiration today, and it is something altogether outside of time, reaching into our experiences of name and form, and time. My joy will also go on forever because of this.

And oh how we need the grace of inspiration in our lives! We need this as we do air and food and water, and we need to share the gifts we have received every day, in as many ways as we can. This is all entirely natural, without effort.

Praise to the holy form, the sound of the divine, the loving heart of the world!

* * *

Can we become angels?

In the Taiwanese Buddhist and Taoist Tradition, a person can ascend to the level of a God, through having lived an exemplary life. If we ask how can we become an angel, I have to admit my vision dims at this point. The most I can say is that it seems we'd be speaking not of lifetimes, or aeons of spiritual development to reach that level, but of evolutionary time.

What we can do is aim to go in that direction, of being more purely loving, more dedicated to the benefit of others, more gentle, and patient, and more generous. We can celebrate all the things the angels do, the right efforts people make, every small success, and every positive motivation, and every great action that benefits living beings. If we do these things, we feel we are in the company of the angels, holy beings, sharing in their work, being cared for and supported by them.

* * *

Healing with angels

It's natural to ask whether we can use prayer and meditation to heal ourselves and to help others heal with the help and support of this Divine Activity. It seems to me there are Beings of Light that exist for exactly this purpose, that we can align ourselves with them, and their energy can flow through us. This quickly reaches the limits of language, but at least this much should be said. For those who disbelieve, it's almost but not completely impossible to offer convincing evidence. For anyone with receptivity, and a willingness to consider other possibilities far from the usual, some perception of this pure spiritual life can happen.

* * *

The 'How-to', in part

For accessing angels and witnessing their extraordinary Activity, the first thing I think we would need is a world view that allow for such things. Even without that, at times, the working of the Divine makes itself known, but, we may also block out any awareness of such subtle and profound events.

{See *this wonderful story*, for an inspiring example, *Frank Martin's Miraculous Journey to a New Life*}

We can be open to the thought that such beings exist, and that they communicate in many ways. This is a start, and it makes the rest, of contact, and understanding, and being in harmony with them easier, beyond anything that can be expressed in language.

In addition to this *receptivity*, we can *take care of our physical environment, and our ethics*. When we keep these clean, the spirits are happy, and we can feel their presence and support.

Angels can come through in times of despair and disarray, but then it's a more difficult revelation. We are loved, and for the divine, for holy ones, there is no barrier to that. When we *pray* for help in times of need, we can feel the presence of what can be called the angels of comfort. When we pray for others, if our inner vision is open, we can see and feel their blessings being shared.

Celebrating all the wonderful things in this life, in particular those of a spiritual nature, puts us in accord with the divine. When we praise and rejoice in activities of good people, and of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we join the angelic host.

We can also practice *gratitude*, and *humility*, a part of which is *deep listening* and attentiveness throughout our lives. Then we'll see more and more of what is happening in the spirit realm, woven throughout our own lives.

It may seem strange to add, but because it's so obvious we may miss it, and that is to say that if we want help in some area of our lives, *we should ask*. There is some spiritual help that comes to us in part because of our willingness. It's as if it's waiting eagerly for our assent, for our own openness, to change or to learn.

* * *

More can and should be said on this subject, but for now, perhaps this is enough.

May all beings benefit

May we all receive all the help we need in our lives

May the sick and injured be completely healed,

May the lonely find good friends all their lives,

*May those who need work and material resources receive all they need
in abundance,*

*and may this whole world be a manifest place of love and harmony,
peace and celebration!*

Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture, and American Buddhism

'Beware of confining yourself to a particular belief and denying all else, for much good would elude you – indeed, the knowledge of reality would elude you. Be in yourself for all forms of belief, for God (Truth) is too vast and tremendous to be restricted to one belief rather than another.' - Ibn 'Arabi

{I write this for myself, and my family; Here is the great 'what if it is so?'...}

So much of our pessimism and despair comes from the limited views we that hold of ourselves and this world that we live in. This is not entirely our own fault. It comes as well from our culture and upbringing.

We would expect that religions, such as Buddhism, would offer an alternative to the one dimensional world of consumerism and competition, and to the flat, affect-less life of scientific rationalism. Instead we find that Buddhism is often presented strictly as another philosophy, or just as psychology, and divorced from many of the elements that would classify it as a religion. This is understandable- to a point. Many people come to Eastern religions because Christianity and Judaism didn't work for them. And what's worse, they've had those teachings proselytized at them by arrogant, narrow minded fanatics.

We like to joke that many American Buddhists are in recovery from Western religion. For many, the straightforward, practical teachings on how to take care of our minds are of great appeal and benefit. This is all good, but, if this is all it is, there are some profound and precious things that are being left out of our understanding of ourselves, and our world and of Buddhist teachings.

One of the great things about these times is that we are able to look at how other people received and practiced these teachings. One thing we can

notice is that the starting place for many other people, in other cultures and times, has been very different than our own.

In most places, Buddhism is a tradition that is alive with wonder, rich with the presence of the sacred, and with the guiding influence of Enlightened beings. Here are a couple of quotes from modern teachers: The first is by Ani Tenzin Palmo, a British born nun, ordained in the Tibetan Tradition. She says,

We are not alone. This universe is full of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are on our side. And, as is known in all Buddhist countries, although it is not always emphasized in the West, we can pray to them.

And Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said:

You are not alone because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do....

Now, if we compare this way of thinking to the general way people view themselves and this world, and the way that Buddhism is usually taught in the Theravada and Zen centers in America, there is a very great difference. One perspective says that we're pretty much on our own. Another perspective says that there are many enlightened beings we can call on, and that can help us. Now, suppose for a moment, What if this were so?

If this is true, as I think it is, then we've reduced our view of this world and ourselves, our traditions, and our options, and this is surely a great loss to us all. What we have when this is the case is a tradition that has been greatly dis-empowered, and therefore generations of students, and those they are connected with, are being deprived of very great benefit.

I recently heard an interview with Sister Joan Chittister, where she said that the maps we use are important, because they are what will be followed by future generations to make their way in the world.

My world is rich, but many modern day Buddhists don't share this view, and they explicitly or tacitly deny so much of our potential and possible experience. There are abundant resources available by which we can actualize our aims, and if these are not taken advantage of, then it's like going hungry, and having our whole family go hungry, while there are fields nearby that can satisfy those needs. It is such an unnecessary tragedy to not see this much.

Ani-la added that:

This is not being theistic – this is being practical. If there's help out there, why not invoke that help?...

May we all be well and happy

May we all awaken to the blessings that are continually here for us!

In a rich world view, Saints, Buddhas, Enlightened Intelligence, Bodhisattvas, and Divine help are available. If we don't know this much, then what are we left with? – a string of doctrines, and we're on our own? No! Our lives, our world, our Traditions hold inconceivably so much more than that! And while it's true that not everyone can perceive these things, or has an affinity with thinking this way - this is how it is in the world - they should at least consider the possibility of help from these sources. And they should at least not dissuade others who can draw great benefit, solace and inspiration from the presence of enlightened beings in their world view.

Another thing that leads people to reject all religious views is that prayers or the methods used don't always work in the way they want them to. It's the truth that many factors are involved either in bringing a result, or when something does not work. Our lives have this inconceivable complexity to

it, as much as we may want to over-simplify things. I can say with many others that the sum of it is beyond me. What then to do?

Where the methods, and the views they are based on enter into it, and I think the reason they shouldn't be rejected outright, but taken up where and when we can, is that they are born of our collective instinct for knowing, and for making things right in our lives. These are methods that have been reaffirmed in every generation. They are our inherited wisdom of what has worked in the past, very often beyond anything that was thought possible.

Let's look at this together. This is how it is in these times: the common, mundane perceptions we live with and pass around are really more accurately de-valued, degraded views, of ourselves, each other, and our world. This reaches these days, unfortunately, even into how religions traditions are taught and received.

I wrote this poem a few days ago:

*A grey scale teacher
splashes his grey scale paint-views
onto everyone and everything
They are a danger!*

*There is no joy there,
no color,
little depth of feeling,
little or no poetry or wonder,
richness or inspiration*

*Deprived themselves,
they deprive others...*

Part of the problem for us Westerners is our over-reliance on rational thinking. This function has its place, but there are also some things that only come to us through the door of the love, the door of the heart, through faith and intuition, or direct experience. If we rely too much on the intellect here, it blocks us.

I've thought that one analogy that works to describe both what's true about the rational view and what it leaves out is a black and white photograph of a color scene. It's true as far as it goes, but there are many elements that are not seen.

Another analogy I thought of is this:

*If we look at an ocean through a pinhole,
what we see
is a pinhole's worth of the ocean
It's like this.*

Many spiritual truths don't lend themselves to being contained within concepts, and those who live just in the intellect suffer the loss of so many things, like the perception of beauty, mystery, wonder, intuition, inspiration and delight... These things are seen with the eyes of the spirit, and not with the eyes of the intellect alone.

Another element that plays into a common, mundane view is our pride. Every tradition, and common sense too tell us that humility is necessary for learning. It would be one thing if we knew we were arrogant, but when even this much self knowledge is lacking, it's really hard to learn from our teachers, this world, and our deeper nature. This is related to our receptivity. We can say: great humility, great receptivity; small humility, small receptivity; and no humility, then no receptivity whatsoever...

From culture comes a self created world view, and self fulfilling prophecy

Here is a sketch of how de-valued, ordinary perceptions of ourselves and our world develop, and how they can be undone. Like any sketch, it leaves out many things, but hopes to catch enough of the essential structure of what's going on to communicate its message.

We live in a culture and a time that is lacking in its sense of the sacred. Wherever the best of human values are not given enough attention, or where religious culture is mocked or ignored, and where a sense of the beautiful is overridden by the volume and quantity of meaningless things, then we become inwardly impoverished.

We live in grossly materialistic times, that deny of the existence of everything beyond the reach of our ordinary five senses. Be assured, this has not always been the case in other times and cultures.

We may pride ourselves on having gotten over what we haughtily call 'infantile' views, of a spiritual world, or any higher order than what the average person can see. We denigrate 'magical thinking' as naïve, uneducated, false and misleading. We're so proud of our reasoning and science, and we set that as the standard for everything.

Modern consumer culture then isolates people, and over time, the human connections we all need grow thin. We become suspicious of our neighbors and friends, and set apart from family. The prevalent perspective is actually nihilistic, life denying, a tragic distortion of who and what we are.

The views many of us have inherited, just by the fact of having been born here, are then reinforced by our emotional reactions, which are then reflected back to us as appearances that are colored or tainted by our own minds. If our mind is not dealt with skillfully, a patina can cover everything. What all this adds up to is a disempowered view of what it is to be alive, to be a human being in this precious world of ours.

Collective views are shared in mostly unnoticed ways. They are pervasive, and are the ground of our sense of the choices we have, for change or development, or to remedy the problems we face.

To counteract this perception, or rather, misperception, we should be able to recognize diminished values, and degraded views wherever they exist, in ourselves, our family and neighbors, and in the world, so that we can replace them with something truer, something ever closer to the ideal. At the very least, our religions traditions and philosophies should offer us an alternative to nihilism. Life is available, and someone should say it out loud.

To love is to begin to remember who we are

What is it that brings light back into our lives? What will cause us to see ourselves and our world as it really is? Where will we find strength for all we need to do, and vision, and grace? Everyone, no matter whether they are affiliated with a tradition or not, can love. It can be a love for family, for art, for nature, for our teachers, for our young...

Love is the eye that sees beauty. In that one virtue there is light, and strength. There is daily food for the journey, courage and healing. We can add to this affection for our world a basic practice of meditation that quiets and clarifies the mind. Together, these two can enhance and deepen each other.

We struggle more than we need to, when we do everything but our inner work. That, we give short shrift. But this is that 'one needful thing'. With love, and regularly taking time for meditation and self cultivation, as a basis, and a way of life, we can begin to appreciate what Traditions offer, their great gift to us all.

In Tibetan Buddhism, basic ignorance manifests as what they call 'impure perception', or 'ordinary perception', the mundane view of the world that

we carry with us, and this is seen as the root cause of how we limit ourselves and suffer. The opposite of this is called an enlightened view, pure perception, or sacred outlook. This is a way of experiencing the world as essentially divine in nature, having great beauty and potential.

The following principles go beyond Buddhism alone, to reflect something of what is seen and lived with in other Traditions as well, and in the lives of contemplatives. They stand in radical contrast and in eternal opposition to the common, mundane view. Here are few tenets of a magical world view, pure perception or sacred outlook:

that all life is sacred;

that the Divine, freedom and peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us all

that our fundamental nature is pure

therefore, that we all have the potential to become free from suffering and attain happiness; we can accomplish great benefit for ourselves and others

that this world is sacred, alive and responsive, and that we are inseparably connected to it;

that we are always connected to each other, to our whole family

that there are other worlds, other realities

that there are many levels of beings, seen and unseen

that we are not alone in this world

that there are powers we can call on, Saints and Saviors, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Ancestors, and divine beings that will respond and help

that we are multi-dimensional beings, and so, things such as distant viewing, absent reading, and distant healing are possible

that there are faculties beyond the ordinary that can be developed, each according to our unique temperament and gifts, but to some extent by everyone

that prayer is effective

that ritual works

that mantra works

An enlightened world view, however we come to it, offers us spiritual food, expansive vistas, and the means to accomplish our aims; it offers us support, whenever and wherever it is needed most. I find such views closer to the truth of how things are. Whatever methods we then use, there is a workable operating basis for living that is full and rich. We are empowered by such views, and the heritage of our great resources is again, as ever, open to us.

From an enlightened perspective of this kind, the spiritual practices we do, such as study, meditation or prayer, aim to clear away what keeps us from knowing the truth about ourselves, and our lives here; the fullness of the gifts our teachers and benefactors have given to us, and what we have to draw from to act, to set things right as much as we can here in this world.

*May we all be aware of our true heritage,
and live lives of generosity,
great joy, and fulfillment,
of great peace, well being,
and benefit to all!*

Every Letter of Every Word of Prayer

I had an experience a little more than two ago that set me on a journey to understand the nature of prayer more deeply. I was in the process of gathering as many teachings as I could on the subject, when I came across one modern American Zen teacher who said simply that, while Buddhists here pray, they don't give much attention to how it works, and that on the whole, 'such matters have remained peripheral' .

I could see right away that this is true, but what moved me was the feeling that something vital is missing when we don't understand this practice, and how it relates to our living. The thought came to me vividly, that we need a world view that supports prayer, if it is to be as effective as it can be.

Around the same time as I was reading this, I was also studying the teachings of a Jewish mystic named the Baal Shem Tov, who said that,

Every letter of every word of prayer is filled with worlds, and souls, and divinity...

- and it has been within the polarity of these views on prayer that I have been conducting my study, contemplation, and writing. I asked myself, and all the teachers I could find, *How can we realize prayer as something essential?*

I have been feeling for some time that the Western world view in general is materialistic, and lacking any sense of the sacred. As a result, we don't pray, or meditate, or care for ourselves and each other and this precious earth.

But there was more implied in the casual comment from that we really don't think too much about prayer. It indicates a devaluing of language in general, and prayer in particular. So when I found this quote from the Baal Shem Tov, it set the contrast between views in bold relief.

Studying his teachings on prayer, he speaks then of how we can know what is contained especially within the sacred language of prayer. He said,

Every letter of every word contains worlds, and souls, and divinity,

and,

For all the words of prayer to have the maximum effect as sanctuary and means of transformation, we need to enter into them...

While your inner eye is gazing at these letters, your mind and heart should be directed towards their meaning...

I note here that if it had only said that 'every letter contained worlds, and souls' we could easily accept this, theoretically without it being much of a challenge, but when he adds, 'and divinity', it calls for our full attention. For what does divinity imply? It means that there are blessings in this world, guidance, strength and peace of another order than is usually known.

We can define it in any way that appeals to us, but the truth of it remains - that we are in a different world when divinity is known. It becomes a priority. Everything changes for a person.

And this is what I have been responding to across the years - the mundane view that is tragically common here, and that needs to be addressed and overcome to create the world that we all long to see. We undervalue ourselves and each other, and from this comes all the greed, all the violence, all the discrimination and despair.

Buddhism and other world religions at their best aim in the direction of remedying mundane views, I do believe, and when they do not accomplish this, they have fallen short. They have failed to communicate to people what is essential, and inspire people.

Western Buddhism in the United States is very much a product of so called 'enlightenment' thinking, materialism, and the very limited views of

psychology. This could be changing, but it is the starting point of a lot of what we find in the Zen and Theravada centers here. It is a mundane view that is being perpetuated, with few exceptions.

We say that Buddhists are often in recovery from Western religions, and so we reject a spiritual world view, and language that reminds us of those teachings, but it's our loss when deeper universal truths are excluded.

I have used this one line then to remind myself to go slowly when praying or reading the Dharma, to appreciate the hidden power of language, and traditions, great beings, and prayer. When I bring to mind that *every letter of every word of prayer...* I want to give this sacred activity all the time and attention it deserves. I want to be able to learn from those who know more than me what this life is for, and especially those Noble Ones who are our guides.

For example, there is a preliminary prayer in the Karma Kagyud Tradition for taking refuge in the Three Jewels and the Three Roots, that says:

I take refuge in all the Glorious, Holy Lamas;

I take refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the mandalas;

*I take refuge in all the Buddhas, and Arhats,
those who have completely conquered and gone beyond;*

I take refuge in all the Supreme Dharma;

I take refuge in all the Noble Sangha;

I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis, Protectors and Defenders of Dharma,

*who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness*¹

- and when I go slowly and pause for a time after just the first line, it can open up for me.

With faith and devotion, I think of Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Thich Nhat Hanh, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Atisha, Je Tsong Khapa, the Sixteenth Karmapa, Longchenpa, and teachers from the Thai Forest Tradition. I bring to mind all their incredible, *glorious, holy* qualities, having themselves realized the teachings, and I think about and can feel what it means to take refuge. There is the feeling of safety and protection, and of guidance and inspiration.

It's possible to meditate for a good amount of time on this, and receive the benefit of this prayer, far more than if we skimmed over it on the way to something else. There is the precious opportunity to find depth and meaning when we pray.

Every letter of every word of prayer contains worlds, and souls, and divinity...

It is my hope that we all receive the full measure of the sacred energy found within teachings, prayers, ritual, and spiritual arts, just as our teachers intended. Our world speaks in thousands of ways to the need for this every day.

Buddhism at its best is non-dogmatic, and it has said from the very earliest times, *ehi passiko* - that we should *come and see* for ourselves. It is an *invitation*, and I believe that anyone who searches with all humility and persistence will find the deeper truth of our being here together. This has been the testimony of sages across traditions:

¹ See the essays *The Profound Practice of Taking Refuge*, and *Tantric Refuge* for an explanation of these terms.

That our world is a sacred place, and that we are upheld. We are each of noble ancestry, and we each have a place here. With all the gifts we have received, grace and blessings then, may we always care for each other and this earth in the best of ways.

*May the Great Healing Light of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,
of all Holy Beings,
and of all that is sacred and pure in the universe,
pacify, completely pacify,
and fully remove the sufferings of living beings,
and bring them all true and lasting health and happiness*

From The Continual Practice of Right View

During practice itself as presented in the Vajrayana

The Buddha's activities are magical displays that dispel the sufferings of living beings, taught Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

And Freda Bedi said, '*Mahayana is the philosophy, and Vajrayana is the practice*'.

We can represent *our motivation and Right View* to our minds symbolically in practices that use visualization.

The following is adapted from a teaching by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche:

(In Vajrayana) We aspire to a nonconceptually performed practice, free from grasping or clinging. This means that when we practice or meditate, we should not relate to our visualization as if it were a solid object.

Our visualization must be experienced as a dynamic display of the true nature, like a transcendent wisdom rainbow body. We must understand that the visualization is totally empty of inherent existence, yet totally full of dynamic energies of love, compassion, and wisdom.

Here is where we can use meditation to integrate our understanding.

We train in seeing the world we live in as translucent, made of light, and holy, and that we are upheld by countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Sages, ancestors, and the sacred powers of the earth, sky, water, and fire. In this way, the tantras affirm that divine help is always available in abundance. Visualization in this way is the expression of Right View.

We can represent the way things are by the practice of seeing ourselves and others and this world as transparent like a rainbow, with light shining

through, appearing and yet ungraspable. What's more, when we realize our inherent worth and the preciousness of ourselves and others and this world, we can intentionally visualize all this as being divine in nature, poetically adorned with jewels, exalted, and uplifting to behold in every way.

I call upon my Teachers and Spiritual Ancestors,
Lord Buddha with your Retinue of Holy Ones,
please come to this place

May we all receive your blessings
May we all receive your light, inspiration, and strength

A Simple Visualization

In this practice, we imagine the Buddha, ourselves, and others, as having bodies that are made entirely of light... and we see ourselves as being in a Paradise, or in a Pure Land...

Imagine that you are in a large, open, sacred space, beautiful, adorned with flower gardens, lakes, and wonderful trees, with birds sweetly singing...

The sun is brightly shining, as a few clouds float by... It's a lovely day... perfect in every way...

We see before us now the Buddha, the Divine Form we are meditating upon, or our main teacher, at the center of what appears as a great Refuge Tree, surrounded by Bodhisattvas, and all our ancestral teachers, going back generations, right down to our very own Root Teacher or Teachers...

These holy ones are all made entirely of beautiful light, and appear in the space in front and above us, on celestial clouds, on lotuses and moon cushions... They smile upon us...

Whatever is most pleasing and uplifting, that is what we see and feel before us now...

Imagining yourself to be praying in a Paradise, or in a Pure Land, or in the Garden of Eden can be very helpful.

Imagine that you are now praying in a perfect Pure Land, together with, and in the presence of all the exalted souls of the Saints and righteous people of the past and present...

*Imagine, as you are praying, that the Saints you have personally known, physically seen, or have heard about * are praying with you...*

Feel the elevated bliss, light, and power generated from such a visualization flowing through your prayers...

Have the sense that all these Noble Ones, the whole company of heaven and faithful here on earth are present...

'All should join together - one to the other and one above another - so that they all can receive the heavenly flow of blessings, by way of those above them who are closer to the source of supernal goodness...'

{The Baal Shem Tov}

With this Right View and a pure motivation, as we recite verses of refuge and aspiration prayers, meditate, and recite mantra, we visualize that we receive blessings from the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, from all the Bodhisattvas and Devas, from all Holy Beings, and from all that is sacred and pure in the universe, in the form of light and nectar. These dissolve into ourselves, and into all those we see as being with us now, our family and friends, those we don't know, and those who are experiencing any difficulty at all...

We visualize that the light and nectar purifies, heals and calms, nourishes, strengthens and inspires us all...

May all share in these blessings...

May all beings receive all they need to awaken and be free...

May all beings have happiness, and all the causes of happiness flourishing...

Meditate like this... Make prayers of aspiration...

To conclude, dedicate the merit to all beings.

A Useful Map of Four Stages

Imagine that you were lost, in an unfamiliar place. It would be hard to know which way to go. Of course the experience would be frightening, and it could seem to be endless.

Imagine then that you heard of *a map*, and that one actually came into your hand. Even before testing out what it shows, we'd be uplifted by it.

Such is the nature of our lives here, before we meet spiritual teachings that we can relate to. Once we hear that others have described the way, it's bound to be energizing, and onward leading.

I remember coming across a reference in East Indian spiritual teachings that described four stages of becoming familiar with Divinity.

The first was the external level.

For someone whose life is a struggle, and who meets with all kinds of oppression and hardship, to hear about something of another order and to believe it's possible is a life changing experience. Where there was fatigue and fear before, we find the energy to search.

We may find our way to a church, or to a temple, or a retreat, searching for what the books and teachers describe as the Holy One, the Sacred, or Divinity.

When we have found a place or a tradition that presents this well for us personally, we have a reference point in our life. It can be like knowing where a freshwater well can be found. We need never go thirsty for long again.

This is the place of devotion to our Spiritual Ideal, keeping that One in our mind continually, or trying to the best we can; It is a relationship of great love, unlike any other in this life.

I have heard that our faith and devotion can be like a magnifying glass, concentrating the blessings of the one we pray to, so that they enter our life in marvelous ways.

We can sense something of the power of devotion when we visit a holy place, or a temple, or a church, or view a holy object, such as a statue or a painting, or text that has been consecrated through the strength of people's prayers.

Even just hearing someone talk about their spiritual teacher, with tears in their eyes and a halting voice, brings the power through. In that moment, we can know something of the source of their faith, and it's incredible....

Of course, our faith, or our belief fluctuates, and it can be throughout our life that we lose our way, and have to find the path again, but some deep impression has been made, and I do believe this can carry over, even across lifetimes.

The second stage in knowing the Divine, as I remember it, is recognizing that this One we find in church or in the temple, and the One we connect with through our prayers and remembrance *is with us always*. There is always this connection.

In Tibetan Buddhism they have the practices of meditating upon a yi-dam, usually translated as Deity, or Celestial Buddha or Bodhisattva. The meaning of the word, yidam, as explained by my teacher Lama Lodro Rinpoche is, 'held firmly in mind'.

In Christianity there is a well known book by one Brother Laurence called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, that is keeping the sense of the Divine with one always.

It's natural at that point to be drawn more and more to solitude, and to prayer, to communion, and greater understanding.

Of course we have so many questions, and doubts to be resolved. When we feel we are always connected to the divine, we feel protected, no matter what we go through. We have that to turn to.

From this point, we become more comfortable in our own unique path, even if we lose the way at times, or fall. We know that we have a Companion, a Guide that will never abandon us. This is the nature of Benevolence. What the outer worlds offers can never compare, and so our relationship to it changes. We can stop asking from this world and from others what they cannot possibly give.

We can say at that time that we live primarily a spiritual life, or a life guided by the inner light, the light of the spirit.

After some time, the teachings tell us that we can reach a third stage, where we see that the divinity we known outside ourselves *is also within us*.

This also is truly a remarkable breakthrough to have, because from that point on we gradually become independent of external places, books and traditions, and formal worship. It's a process that can take some time, and it is surprising anytime we see this, even a little, but it is undeniable when it happens.

As with the first paradigm shift, from ordinary perception to knowing there *is* something of Divinity in our world, to feeling always connected to that One, to this, the third, where we know this same Holiness is in ourselves - these change *everything* for a person.

You can go down the whole list, of relationships, the importance we place on our bodies, or work, or recognition - all of these change when we know something of the Divine in our lives, animating, enlivening, enriching, and illuminating them.

Finding this *within ourselves* changes the reference point in our spiritual search as well. The questions and receptivity can then be directed inwardly.

With more reliance on divinity within, gradually, we develop greater sensitivity, and responsiveness. As we do this, more and more, we can hear what they call 'the still, small voice', and aim to follow what it says.

From there, greater insight can gradually develop into the nature of spiritual subjects and experiences. It is possible to recognize this Divinity that is within ourselves as the source of all the exalted names and forms in the external world.

Even if we are not a Christian, or a Muslim, or a person who practices the Jewish faith, or someone deeply connected to indigenous traditions, still, we can begin to have a sense of familiarity in all these. We start to see one divine life there in all forms of worship.

This is where we can begin to speak of mysticism, or a way of knowing that goes beyond any one expression of universal truth. We are on a very different ground then, clearly.

The fourth level described, if I remember it correctly, is about who we are, and our own relationship to this Truth. Now, this is somewhere between - not easy and impossible to talk or write anything about. If the teachings about this experience are true, then, slowly or all at once, we can sense our own identity as partaking of this divinity.

We may not jump up and claim, 'Hey everyone!, I am the creator of heaven and earth!', as we think with usual ingrained idea of divinity we have here

in the West, but the kindness, the enduring quality, the strength and joy we find in the object of our worship we can also find in ourselves, and, *as ourselves*.

As with the previous paradigm shifts, this is another breakthrough. It may last just a few moments, as some visionary experiences do, or, it can be more lasting. From what I can tell, there is no one way. The impact though is always that this changes everything for a person.

One poet said,

*Kabir saw this for fifteen seconds,
and it made him a servant for life....*

This general outline of how we know divinity can be useful because we are always somewhere along this continuum. We can see this for ourselves.

For the jaded, materialistic, doubting person, there is no sun of truth, no inspiring name or form that leads them forward and gives them hope through it all. This is by far the norm in this world at this time, it seems, and I find myself there too often as well.

Once some inkling of another kind of Being, or Possibility is felt or remembered though, or is somehow stirred in us, the search for truth is rekindled. And again, from the external, to the ever present, to the both external and internal, and then the primarily internal, to knowing this as our true nature, these remain constant, reliable references throughout all our lifetimes.