

Experiences with Mahamudra

Notes from a Personal Journey

The Dharma of Meditation



Michael Erlewine
Photography
and Experiences in Mahamudra Meditation



Experiences with Mahamudra

Notes from a Personal Journey

photos and text

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**This book is respectfully dedicated
to
Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche,
Who introduced me to the true nature of the mind,
And to my good friend,
Lama Karma Drodul,
Who pointed out to me the “Lama of Appearances “**

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The Lama of Appearances



The Lama of Appearances

This book might have been called something like “Zen and the Art of Nature Photography,” but I don’t happen to be a Zen practitioner. However, after many years of working with a brilliant Tibetan Buddhist teacher and Rinpoche, I did manage (with the aid of photography and nature) to get a glimpse of recognition (not realization, mind you) as to the true nature of the mind, and it was nothing like I had led myself to expect all those years. That is why I am writing this.

There may be some of you, like me, whose expectations and imaginations are more of an obstacle to spiritual realization than a help. In fact, our expectations can make it almost impossible to have any realization. We think we know what we are supposed to be finding when it comes to spiritual experience and (by definition) that is exactly what we don’t know, and are trying to find out. For those folks, hearing my story might be useful.

Before I relate that story, it is important to say at least something about how appearances themselves, in particular natural phenomena or “Nature,” can assist us in our own

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realization.

The word “dharma” is slowly working its way into the English language, but at this point most people would have a tough time defining it. Originally “dharma” referred to the teachings left by the historical Buddha (and subsequent teachers), teachings meant to point out the method or path for us to achieve realization. That is the point of all the Buddhist teachings. Therefore the word dharma generally refers to the path or means through which we can discover the true nature of the mind - enlightenment.

Our personal dharma is the specific way or method that will work for us to gain realization, the particular signs in the world around us that we can pick up on and through which (by following this path) we can eventually reach realization. It has been said that there are 84,000 dharmas or pathways to enlightenment, and it is up to each of us to discover our personal way to realization, our particular dharma path. We have no choice. We can’t reach realization except by some particular path, and no one can do it for us. Teachers don’t somehow enlighten us. We enlighten ourselves and the guide or teacher is there to

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point out just how this can be done.

And our particular dharma, the means through which we can find realization, is everywhere around us and always has been right here before our eyes. Our personal dharma path is present in the busiest city as it is in the most remote mountain cave, but due to our various obscurations we are not yet able to pick up on it. According to Buddhists, each of us has been wandering for innumerable lifetimes trying to find the path or dharma that will work for us, the particular method that will lead to full realization. Yet up to this point we have somehow managed not to see it. We have been distracted in all the other things we are doing instead.

There are thousands of books and texts available in which the basic nature of the dharma path has been carefully laid out for us to understand and yet, even if we have read them, we still have not gotten it. And that is why great dharma teachers are so precious. They are able to point out to us the true nature of the mind. In fact, in Tibetan Buddhism the name given to the very highest lamas is “Rinpoche,” which literally means: “Precious One.”

Of course today there are many who

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profess to teach the dharma. Some teachers know what they are talking about and some are only fooling themselves and others. And even if we find a good lama, the particular dharma or path that they teach may not be the right one for us. It may not work for us. It is written that the root lama for each of us (called ‘Tsawi Lama’ in Tibetan) is that lama or guide that is actually able to finally stop our endless wandering by pointing out to us the true nature of the mind.

This, then, is the precious lama we each are looking for. Yet the personal root lama we need may not be easy to find or may not be available in the particular part of the world we happen to live in. And teachers that cannot actually guide us only waste our time and further distract us from finding a workable path, which brings me to my main point, that of the “Lama of Appearances.”

The word ‘lama’ has many meanings, but here I am using it to refer to those dharma practitioners with enough realization and experience to serve as guides for the rest of us. In the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, someone is called a ‘lama’ if they have completed the traditional 3-year closed retreat, which is a very

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rigorous practice.

It came as somewhat of a surprise for me to find out that there are other kinds of lamas aside from the particular root lama or personal guide, our main lineage lama. In fact, it is written and taught that there are actually four kinds of 'lamas' or guides to realization:

(1) The Lama of Lineage

The Lama of the our Lineage, the particular school or approach to Buddhism to which we naturally belong, including our root lama. Today in Tibetan Buddhism, there are four popular lineages, the Gelugpa, the Nyingma, the Sakya, and the Kagyu. Although all four lineages share much in common, each of the four lineages has its particular approach or path. For example, I find that I naturally am most in tune with the Karma Kagyu lineage.

(2) The Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugatas

The extant teachings and texts themselves are considered a lama. This "Lama of the Scriptures" refers to the dharma teachings themselves as guides, the actual texts and instructions left by the Buddha and his enlightened followers.

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(3) The Lama of Dharmadhatu

This refers to the final goal or state of realization, where the teacher or guide is the Dharmadhatu itself and true nature of the mind itself. I don't know very much about this form of lama or guide. The Dharmadhatu refers to the realm of dharmas, the true nature of our mind.

(4) The Lama of Appearances

And there is also what is called "The Lama of Appearances," the lama of the natural world surrounding us. In other words, the world of appearances we find ourselves embedded in is also a perfect reflection of the dharma and can serve as a lama and guide to us in pointing out the dharma path, if we will just take notice and observe carefully. Although all appearances reflect the reality of the dharma, I am mainly talking here about the world of nature that is as close as the nearest parks, fields, woods, and streams.

Nature is also a perfect reflection of the mind itself. All the truth as taught by the living lama or written down in the ancient dharma texts is also perfectly readable in nature herself. It is all the same text with the same message, and pointing to the identical path or dharma.

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In other words, there are different lamas or guides, but only one teaching that they all point out or toward.

In fact, while we are searching for a living lama that works for us, the world of nature is always present and is as clear and unflinching as any teacher could be. The message of the natural world and the message of the root lama are in truth the same. Let me give one example:

In all the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, there exist what are called the “Common Preliminaries” or “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward Dharma.” These four thoughts have real power, for only they can turn our minds away from the endless distractions of everyday life and toward real dharma practice.

That is why these four preliminaries are the entrance gate or starting point to the dharma for many forms of Buddhist practice. And although they are called ‘preliminaries’, they are hardly only that, for awareness of these four thoughts are also considered essential for the most advanced forms of meditation, such as Mahamudra practice.

The “Common Preliminaries” are also called the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” “The

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Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” or simply the “Four Thoughts.” And they are not some abstract philosophical conundrums, but are the very essence of practicality and common sense.

The Four Thoughts

- (1) This human life we have is precious.
- (2) Life is impermanent and fragile.
- (3) We are subject to karma. Every action or cause has an effect.
- (4) Undependable. Our daily world of business-as-usual is inherently unstable and can't be gamed.

When I first encountered the Four Thoughts I was amazed at how real and practical they are, just what I had always been thinking about anyway. For example, the first thought about the preciousness of having a life: I always felt that my life was precious and I sure did not want to waste it. I want to be put to good use and for it to have a purpose.

And impermanence, a thought that has always been in the back of my mind whenever I can stand to think about it. Everything that is born will also die, and that includes me! How could I avoid coming to terms with that thought, at least once in a while?

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And, although perhaps less obvious than the first two thoughts for me was the third thought relating to karma. Now here is something I am still learning about, that every action I take will have a corresponding effect depending on my intention and effort. I tend to be a slow learner, and it takes me a long time to examine the bad result again and again, before I finally am willing to stop doing the action that caused it, especially when it comes to bad eating or pleasure habits - whatever.

The last of the four thoughts is that this world around us (the Buddhist call it Samsara) is (by definition) inherently undependable. In other words, no matter how hard I try, I will never get all my ducks in a row, so to speak. I keep thinking that I am clever enough to somehow game the system and have only the upside and keep what I don't like at arm's length, but life proves me wrong consistently.

After having been raised Catholic, with Catholic school, Sunday school, and all of that (rules, warnings, threats, and admonitions), something as practical and natural as the "Four Thoughts" made perfect sense to me, a breath of fresh air. I was already well on the road to understanding these concepts on

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my own. So my introduction to the dharma was a welcome relief to the fear and trembling that my upbringing had instilled in me concerning matters of faith and certainty – this life and what comes after life.

Since the four thoughts seemed more or less obvious and natural to me, I set about learning more about the dharma and its path. And my beginning meditation attempts led to more advanced practices and so on it went. Twenty or thirty years of practice went by and I gradually moved along to more and more advanced practices. But it was not until I was introduced to Mahamudra meditation (said by many to be the most advanced and sublime form of meditation as practiced in the Karma Kagyu Lineage) that I really encountered the Four Thoughts again, and head on at that.

Of course, I never forgot about the Four Thoughts, anymore than I could forget about my eventual death or my wish to have my life used for a good purpose. Yet they were mostly on the back burner, so to speak, while I was concerned with these more "advanced" (or so I thought) practices. When teachings on Mahamudra meditation

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eventually came my way, the Four Thoughts were clearly presented not just as preliminaries, but as essential to keep constantly in mind when approaching Mahamudra meditation.

In other words, the Four Thoughts were not something to simply touch upon and then move beyond. The texts clearly point out that it is essential to keep these thoughts fully in mind (constantly) when undertaking to practice Mahamudra meditation because they keep things real and help to prevent our being distracted by everything going on around us in life.

So I discovered that in advanced meditation (like in beginning meditation), it is important to be aware that life is precious (and so very impermanent), that our every act will have results in proportion to our intent, and that try as we may (like the fable of the princess and the pea), we will never quite get comfortable in life, no matter how we feather our nest. Not only are the four thoughts important, but without them there is no advanced meditation possible. But how to keep these four thoughts always in mind? That is the question.

Of course, finding a qualified dharma teacher is key, and I have

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the good fortune to have found a most qualified lama to work with. But I am not alone in that. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the lama I have worked with for the last 27 years, has many, many students aside from me, and that involves sharing his time, and no one of us has as much face-to-face time with Rinpoche as we might like.

I am not complaining, only explaining. And the point of this whole story is that there is another very qualified lama available to us all of the time, one that is expert at helping us to recognize the Four Thoughts and keep them ever in mind, and that is the Lama of Appearances, particularly apparent in the world of nature. And nature is as near as your own backyard where you live; and the fields, streams, meadows, and woods nearby.

And she is a fully qualified and most-enlightened teacher!

Nowhere are the Four Thoughts more obviously and consistently pointed out than in Mother Nature. As the photos in this book hopefully point out, nature is beautiful. And that beauty is real beyond our imagination. But the reality of impermanence, the results of cause and effect, and the preciousness of all life are equally real in nature.

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Nature plays no favorites and she never blinks. All you have to do is observe. It is all carefully laid out, written in reality, and as clear as any dharma text. There is no confusion about the laws of nature. We don't break them; they break us. Nature is a harsh mistress indeed.

Even a casual acquaintance with the natural world takes one beyond sentimentality and into how things actually are, the reality. If you are emotional about all of this, then observing nature is an instant and prolonged heartbreak - all of time. Just look around you!

The first sentence from almost every Buddhist teacher I have met is this one:

“All beings want to be happy and no being wants to suffer.”

How simple and true! Every sentient being is struggling to be happy or at least content, just as we are, and no being enjoys suffering. That is how it is for all sentient beings. Most animals spend their entire lives looking over their shoulder, terrified of being eaten, while at the same time trying to find enough food to eat, often another being. And yet Nature is so peaceful and beautiful in appearance. Please connect the dots for me between these two

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concepts. How can something so sublime and beautiful be so terrifying?

When we observe nature, we are observing the Four Thoughts clearly spelled out for us in stark black and white. Nature shows no mercy, and the law of cause and effect is inexorably exact down to the last detail when it comes to questions of life and death. Life is so precious for many beings that it is hardly there for them but for an instant. In nature, impermanence is a stark fact, not an abstract concept.

For me (and many people), it takes something like a death in the family or the death of a loved one to remind me of impermanence. When something tragic happens in my life, I come out of my forgetfulness of how impermanent life is, and even then usually only for a short time. I tend to wake up when something terrific or striking happens to me. Otherwise, I kind of agree to forget about impermanence, which I find just too painful to remember all the time.

Well, Nature is the cure for that, if we will but observe. Everywhere in nature, the four thoughts are clearly demonstrated for all to see; impermanence, the preciousness of life, action and result, and no real



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resolution or permanent solution to life. We just have to spend the time and look around.

And Nature is a brilliant teacher. Talk about equanimity! Nature is always the same, always on the job, and she never pulls her punches. Nature tells it like it is, 24x7. But we do have to actually take a look and not turn away or flinch at the hard spots. For example:

It is painful for me to walk on the tarmac of a road after a rain and find it covered with earthworms and slugs trying to get from one side to the other just as the Sun comes up. The Sun will fry most of them to a crisp before they ever reach the other side, and I can't physically pick all of them up and move them to the other side of the road and safety. And some are even crawling in the direction the road travels! Here are these sentient beings struggling to live like we all do, wiped out by a decision they made to cross that road at sunup.

Or the broken blue Robin's egg on the sidewalk, with the tiny bird almost ready to hatch or still alive, and the cat or crow raiding the bird nests and eating the hatchlings while the parents scream and can do nothing to prevent it. There are countless examples of the day-to-

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day tragedies that are played out all around us in the natural world. The same rules apply to the human world, but we won't go there just now.

I am not going to drag out all of the possible sentimental thoughts we could share about how cruel nature is. Nature is a harsh mistress, to be sure, but she is simply a reflection of a reality that, while beautiful indeed, is equally harsh, however much we may like to dress it up and perfume it. That is not my point here.

This writing is not about getting sentimental. It is about taking advantage of these natural facts to help wake us up to the reality so clearly spelled out in nature. The Book of Nature is a tough-love read, for sure, but it is a real teacher available to each of us all the time. Impermanence is the smelling salts of the dharma, and we all could stand a whiff of it now and again. A careful observation of nature can provide that.

Where and How

I don't have to describe to you where nature is or how to go about finding it. There are thousands of books and DVDs on nature, everything from field guides on down to pictorial coffee table books. I will

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say something about how I approach nature, which may be helpful.

Obviously, first we have to go out in nature. We don't get the full picture by looking from a mountain top or even by standing up. For best results, I have to get right down in the middle of it, like: sit down. Find a sunny field or meadow or a shady brook or woods and sit.

When I first sit down, it usually takes some time before I pick up on what is going on, and this from both sides. On my side, I need to quiet down and just rest my mind enough to begin to see what is going on around me. From nature's side, my appearance probably stopped everything but the boldest critters from moving around, and it may take a while for everyone to resume their activities, but they do.

A good magnifying glass can be a help, as much to further slow you down as to enlarge things. You will soon find that there are a wide variety of insects, spiders, amphibians, and sentient life all around you, not to mention flowers and plants. And they all are eating and being eaten, being born and dying, fearlessly attacking other creatures, and at the same time struggling to escape being eaten themselves. It is all right there, and

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it is sobering. There is nothing like a whiff of impermanence to wake me up to the benefits of the dharma practice.

It is so easy to get distracted in the day-to-day hustle and bustle of modern life. I am swept away daily in a sea of distractions and it can be difficult to remember to remind myself of the Four Thoughts, much less manage to keep them in mind.

However, an hour spent alone in nature can not only be refreshing in itself but, more important, it can bring home to me clearly how things really are. There is nothing quite like seeing a beautiful butterfly suddenly caught and eaten by a praying mantis or other predator right before my eyes. It is all right there, the surprise, the struggle, the dying – the whole thing. And the analogies to my own life does not escape me.

What happens on the small scale, in these mini worlds, also happens in our own world, and a quick trip to nature can help to remind us of how the world actually works and puncture some of the imaginary balloons we have floated. I don't know who it was who said that most of us walk around as if we were immortal, with no thought to impermanence, but it is so true. Many of us have our lives set up so

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as to carefully avoid being reminded of our own mortality.

It can be hard to find a perfect teacher to work with, and yet that is what we each have to find to practice Vajrayana Buddhism. Finding a teacher that does not fit you just won't work out. However, Nature is always a perfect teacher and a good substitute until the human version comes along. You can't get it all from books and you need the interaction that comes with a living teacher, and Nature is that. You can interact with Nature, and she is unerring in her lessons, and more than good enough until the real thing comes along. With that said, here is my story.

My Experience with Mahamudra

This is the story of how I managed to get a glimpse of the recognition of the true nature of the mind. I write it not to boast or show off, but because having had this initial recognition, I immediately see how simple it is and how all those years I had managed to look every which way but loose in trying to see it. My wish is that something that I write

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here may make it easier for others to have this recognition. And, any teeny-tiny part of what I write here that is useful, I dedicate to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that they may further assist all sentient beings to become enlightened sooner than later.

Buddhism as a Philosophy

Growing up in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan meant that I was exposed to a cosmopolitan atmosphere from an early age. As early as the late 1950s I had read a smattering of Buddhist literature, although my take on the dharma was that it was intellectual, something that, like Existentialism, we would stay up late at night talking about while drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. In the 1960s I toyed with some more advanced dharma concepts and certainly played a bit at meditation, but it was not until the 1970s that I actually did any real practice, February of 1974 to be exact.

This was the date that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche came to Ann Arbor to speak. I had read some of his books with great interest and was eager to see him in person. As it turned out, since few people knew of him back then, I ended up as his chauffeur for the weekend and the

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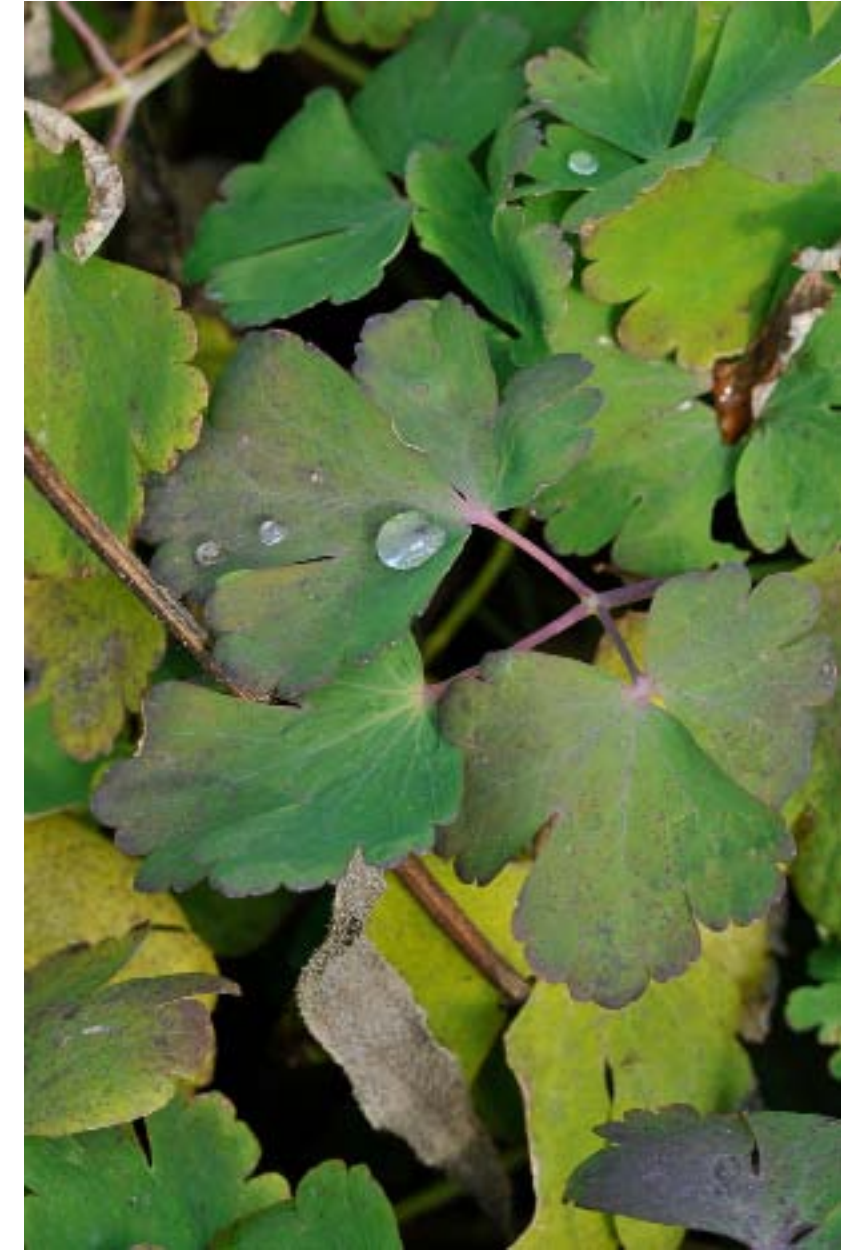
designer of the poster for his public talk.

After meeting Trungpa at the airport, one of the first things that Trungpa did after getting into Ann Arbor was to beckon me into a small office room and spend an hour or so personally teaching me to meditate, although he never mentioned the word and I had no idea what he was showing me. I was just very glad just to be with him.

It was Trungpa who first pointed out to me (and to everyone I knew) that the Buddha always intended the dharma as a method or life path, and not as something just to think about. In 1974, that was real news to me. From that year onward I tried to intensify my study of the dharma and learn to practice it. I was not all that successful at practice, but I continued to be attracted to the great tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

But it was not until 1983 that I found my personal or root teacher, the year that I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD) near Woodstock, New York. That's when I really became serious about dharma practice. Khenpo Rinpoche was the teacher I had always dreamed about meeting and I have been working with him ever since.

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And of all the Buddhist teachings I have attended over the years since then, the yearly ten-day summer Mahamudra intensive with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at KTD has been the most striking and influential. The first ten-day Mahamudra teaching was in 1989 and this yearly event (I have not missed a one) is now going into its 22nd year in 2010. In addition, sandwiched somewhere during that time were two years of intensive Mahamudra teachings and practice with His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, one of the regents of the Karma Kagyu lineage.

This article is not an introduction to Mahamudra meditation, which I am not qualified to offer, but simply a recounting of my encounter with this profound technique and its effects on me personally. Mahamudra meditation is considered the main form of meditation and practice among the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

As mentioned, I am not qualified to teach or even introduce readers to the more advanced techniques of Mahamudra meditation. Here it will have to be enough to simply say that to learn Mahamudra meditation, one has to first study it academically and then work with a qualified

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teacher who can actually point out to you (help you recognize) the true nature of the mind, after which (if you grasp the pointing out instructions), you must diligently practice the Mahamudra techniques. This much information is readily available all over the Internet. For myself, I have had a great deal of teachings on Mahamudra and have been well exposed to it academically, which simply means I understand conceptually the basic concepts.

Academic or conceptual understanding of Mahamudra by itself can never qualify as recognition, much less realization, which by definition is beyond the reasoning mind. In a similar vein, the many experiences that I have had that might be related to Mahamudra, bits of illumination for a day or part of a day, also are not what Mahamudra is about either. While many or most Tibetan Buddhist practices are designed for gradual progress toward illumination (a smooth incline), Mahamudra practice has at least one very clear speed bump right at the beginning, and that is: recognizing the true nature of the mind. You either have or you have not had that recognition; there is no “Well, maybe I have and maybe I haven’t.”

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If you have it, you know it.

Recognition

Because it *IS* a threshold event, recognizing the nature of the mind has become a huge topic of speculation among those who read about and are learning to practice Mahamudra, replete with wild expectations and preconceptions based on the imaginations of those who have never had the experience. Recognition of the mind is one of those experiences, as they say, that if you have any doubt whatsoever about your recognition, then you have not had it. This is a real arrogance stopper for most of us. If we are being honest, we know we have not had that experience, no matter how much we wish we had. In the Zen tradition, this recognition is called “Kensho,” and they make just as much fuss about it as the Tibetans. And most important, our expectations and hopes about what that experience is like are perhaps the greatest barrier to having the experience itself.

You can’t recognize the true nature of the mind many times, but only once. If you have to do it repeatedly, then you are just having ‘experiences’ of the mind, but have not yet recognized anything. This is because ‘Recognition’ is not some



kind of temporary experience, spiritual high, or lofty state of mind, like many imagine. Recognition is not enlightenment!

Instead, it is simply finally recognizing or seeing how the mind actually works for the first time, just as we might recognize an old friend in a crowd or it is like one of those figure-ground paintings where suddenly you see the embedded image. It is “recognition,” not a transport to some blissful state of enlightenment.

Enlightenment and the path toward it is what we begin to work toward *AFTER* recognition of the mind’s true nature. Of course, there is no way for me to communicate this properly with words. However, I wish I had understood this distinction early on. It would have been a huge help.

As mentioned, ‘recognition’ is like gazing at those figure-ground paintings; you can’t fake it. You can give up looking, but either you see the embedded image or you do not. You can memorize what you are told you should see, but finally you either recognize the mind’s true nature or you do not. And recognition is just the beginning of real practice, not the end or any kind of final result or stage. This is key. Recognition is



your ante in, only the doorway to Mahamudra practice. You literally cannot do Mahamudra practice without that initial recognition, so it is like the ring-pass-not or guardian on the threshold that the western occultists often write about.

Practitioners like me can study and undertake most dharma practices and work up a pretty good semblance of a successful practice. We can certainly talk ourselves into believing we are going somewhere and perhaps others are impressed too. But this is why they call it “practice” and term the practices we do “Preliminaries,” because they are just that: prelims, qualifying exams, and a getting ready for the actual work which has yet to begin.

The Ten-Day Mahamudra Intensives

My teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche had given what are called the “pointing out instructions” once before at the yearly ten-day Mahamudra teachings, but try as I might, I had failed to grasp what it was that actually was being pointed out, and so my experience remained largely conceptual. I was not able to actually practice Mahamudra because I had not yet had a glimpse of the true nature of my own mind, which, as mentioned,

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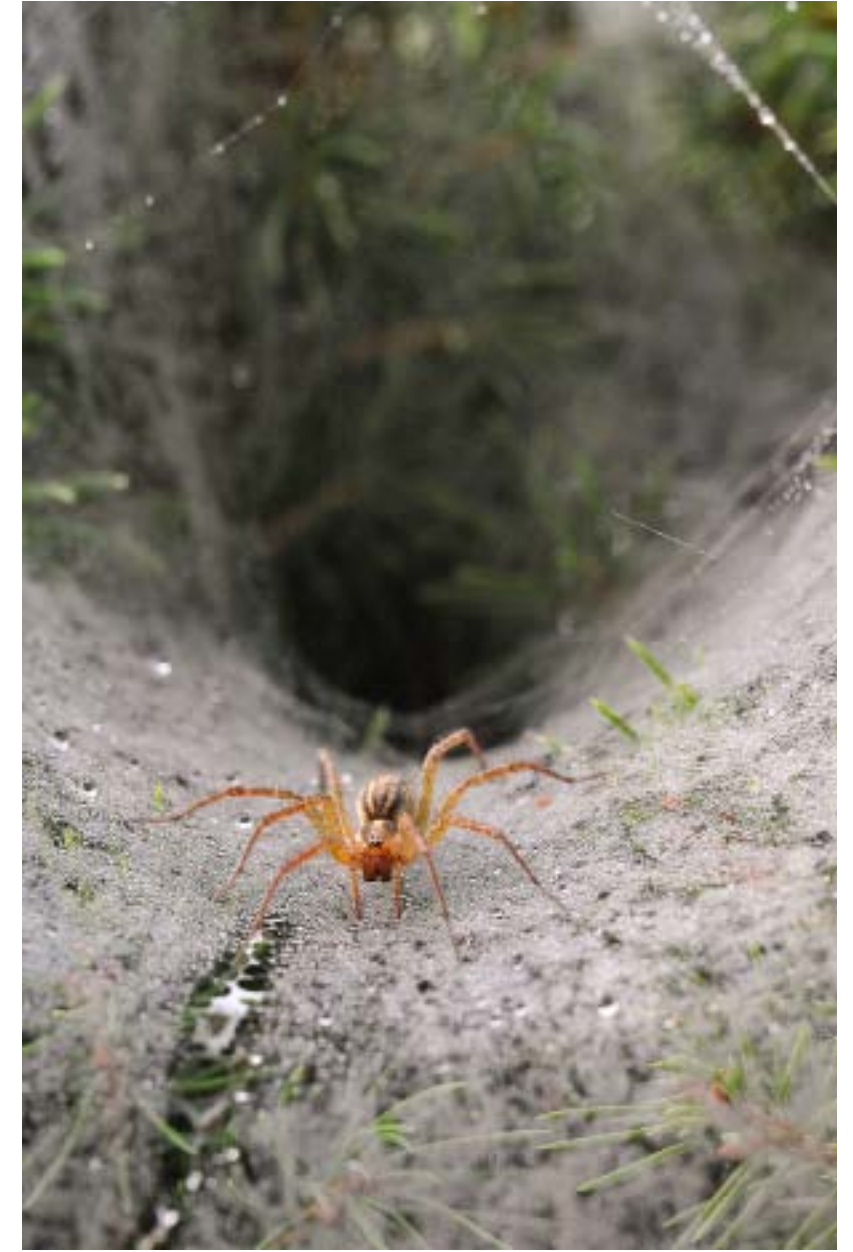
is a prerequisite (by definition) for Mahamudra practice.

Then at the ten-day Mahamudra teachings at KTD monastery in 2005, while studying a text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche called “The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen,” Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche again gave the pith instructions, what are called the “pointing-out” instructions, the instructions by and through which a receptive student may be able to recognize the true nature of the mind. These instructions were part of the actual text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche, which my teacher was presenting and commenting on.

Analytical Meditation

Of course, I had heard all the words before. I had been repeatedly exposed to what is called the Analytical Tradition, the “Middle Way” school, which is often introduced by asking the student to actually look at his or her own mind and answer simple questions like “Is the mind the color red?” or “Is the mind the color blue?” This kind of talk had always been a super yawn for me, for it was obvious to me that the mind was not red or blue. What was this all about? I could never understand why something as profound as Buddhism could resort

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to such simple questions.

So I had heard this kind of presentation for years and in many formats, and I always told myself privately that ‘this’ particular kind of teaching was probably not for me. Either I didn’t get it at all or it was too easy. I couldn’t tell, but I knew the mind was not the color blue. Perhaps some academic pundit delighted in answering such questions, but it was the best I could do to politely ignore the temptation to be condescending of this approach. Is the mind red? Of course it is not red. The mind is not red! I not-so-patiently waited until this section was over and we could hopefully get to some of the good stuff, something that would actually grab me.

But in Rinpoche’s presentation I WAS intrigued to learn that in Tibet, when this approach was presented, monks would be given a question such as “Is the mind red?” and then asked to go off and think about it for three entire days and nights, then come back and give their answers, after which they would be given a similar question, but perhaps with the color ‘green’, and this would go on for something like three months. Hmmm.

Hearing this troubled me, for monks

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(not to mention rinpoches) are not foolish people. What on earth was this all about I wondered, this asking: what color is the mind? And this is no secret teaching; this same Middle Way approach has been taught all over India for centuries. Anyway, I stopped trying to wait this section out, and began to pay more attention to what Rinpoche was presenting. It took a while, but my take-away from all of this questioning stuff was that rinpoche was asking us to actually stop thinking academically about this and simply go and look at our mind and see for ourselves if it was red or green or whatever the question was. And that very slowly began to sink in.

Look At the Mind

I meant no disrespect, but I had never before followed Rinpoche's request to look at the mind to see if it was red or blue because I felt the question made no sense to me. Yet I was also starting to pick up on the fact that Rinpoche was asking us to get off our mental duffs and actually make an effort to look at our own mind, right there on the spot. I had of course always assumed I already knew my own mind. After all, I was a dharma practitioner and it was 'my' mind, but now I was hearing

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something just a little different. Perhaps my habitual familiarity with my mind had not included actually looking at the mind itself, although I automatically assumed I had already done that long ago, back when I learned to meditate.

And so, very slowly at first (and not without some struggle), I actually began to make efforts to stop looking outward at what was going on around me, and turned and tried to look inward at the mind itself. This was not easy.

Of course I was already familiar with the little chatter-box inside my head, whoever it is that plans out my day for me, saying things to me like, "It is almost time for lunch" or "You have a dentist appointment tomorrow," and so on. Whoever that inner person is, it is not really me, and I didn't like him or 'it' very much. It is annoying and way too much of a nag. And it yammers on ceaselessly. So I began to at least differentiate myself from that uptight narrator in my head. That talking voice was no friend of mine, just not my kind of people.

And Rinpoche was asking that we look at whoever it is inside of us that is looking at all the stuff happening outside in the world. I guess that would be "me." Now, this was a

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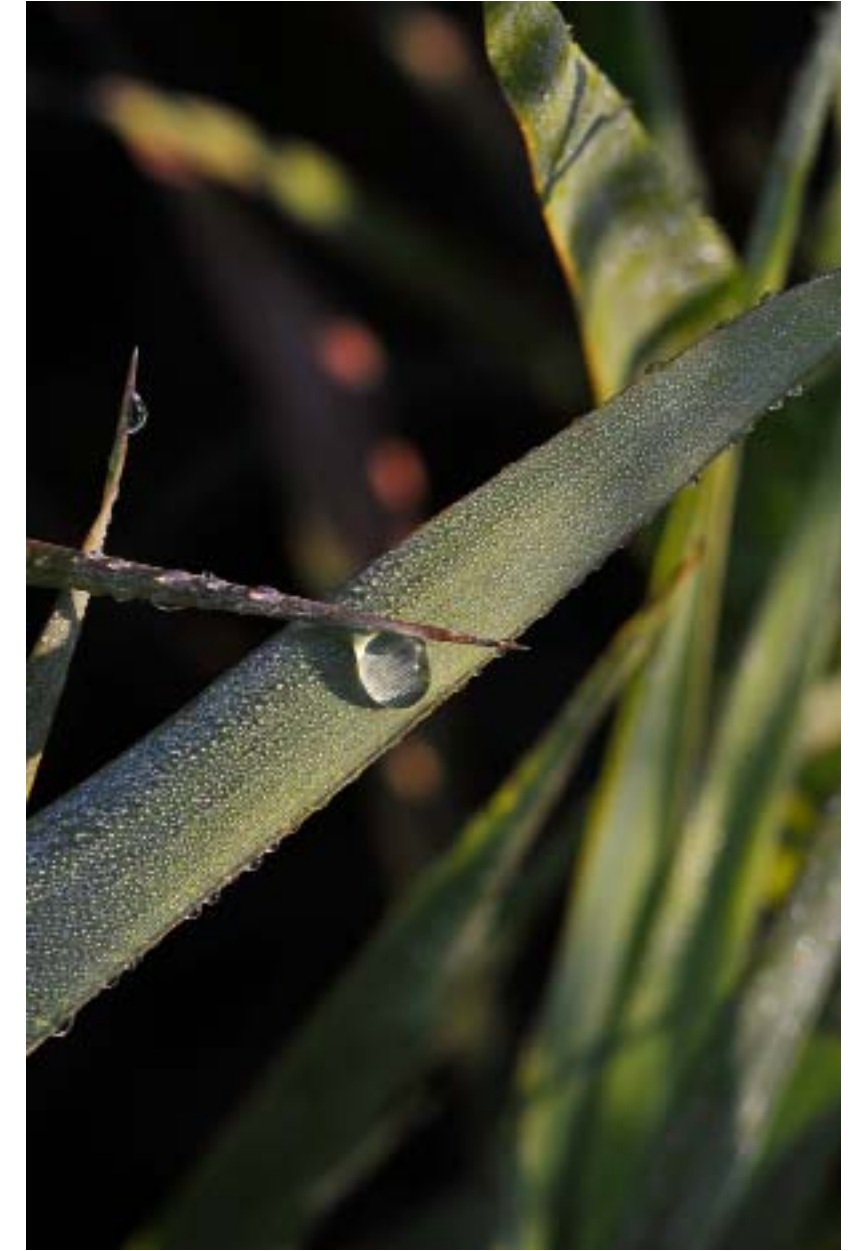


whole lot more difficult than just putting some distance between me and my internal narrator. When I tried to look at “who” in there was doing the looking at the outside, it or “I” just would not hold still. It was like those magnets that repel one another. Every time I would try to look at the ‘looker’, the whole thing would flip around. It was very tiring to even try. You can try it now for yourselves: just look at who is reading this page. Try and find the ‘who.’

What was happening through all of this was that I was very gradually beginning to exercise ‘mind muscles’ that (to my knowledge) had never been exercised before in my life. And they were soon the equivalent of very sore or very stiff muscles - hard to move around. I had never done this kind of thing before and it amounted to giving myself a mental Charlie Horse. It cramped up my mind, and was very awkward, but it ‘was’ a new experience.

The whole thing was a little like trying to erect a large circus tent in the middle of my mind, struggling to push up massive tent poles to stretch and raise the canvas until I had some mental room to just look around in there. And it was hard work, for these mental muscles had

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perhaps never been exercised before.

And as silly as it seemed to me, I even began looking to see if my mind was red or some other color, whether my mind was located in my head, my heart, or my belly, and so on. Of course, the answers were all negatives, just as I had always thought, but in the process I was up and walking around in there, getting to know the place a bit. And so it went. Was that what Rinpoche wanted us to do?

Where before I had kind of mentally slept through this kind of questioning, now I was at least going through the motions – getting some exercise. I was also following the instructions from my teacher, which I had so conveniently ignored up to that point because I thought these questions went without asking. Instead, I was asking them again, doing what Rinpoche was requesting us to do. And that little bit of exercise began to open up doors for me.

It went on like this for days, as rinpoche very carefully led us into actually looking at our minds. I was finally following along. These simple exercises, along with the fact that apparently by this time I had done enough practice over the years or somehow managed to accumulate

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enough merit or whatever it was that I had needed, so that I actually was able to recognize or glimpse the true nature of my mind - not what I had expected. There was no lightning bolt, more like an exclamation point! Needless to say, it was nothing like I had led myself to believe all these years.

Of course my expectations were whatever I had managed to distill from books and the teachings, mixed with the tales of other practitioners and then sealed with my personal take on things, in other words: a jumble. Like most of us learning this, my preconceptions had managed to thoroughly cloud and obscure an otherwise cloudless sky. Here it is worthwhile to backtrack and take a closer look at what I had expected.

The Pointing Out Instructions

It is said in the Mahamudra teachings that the main and perhaps only function of the guru is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind. After that it is up to the student. "The Nature of the Mind," this phrase immediately raises expectations reminiscent of the realm of Zen koan dramas. One thing I never had managed to understand is that recognizing the nature of the mind is not the same

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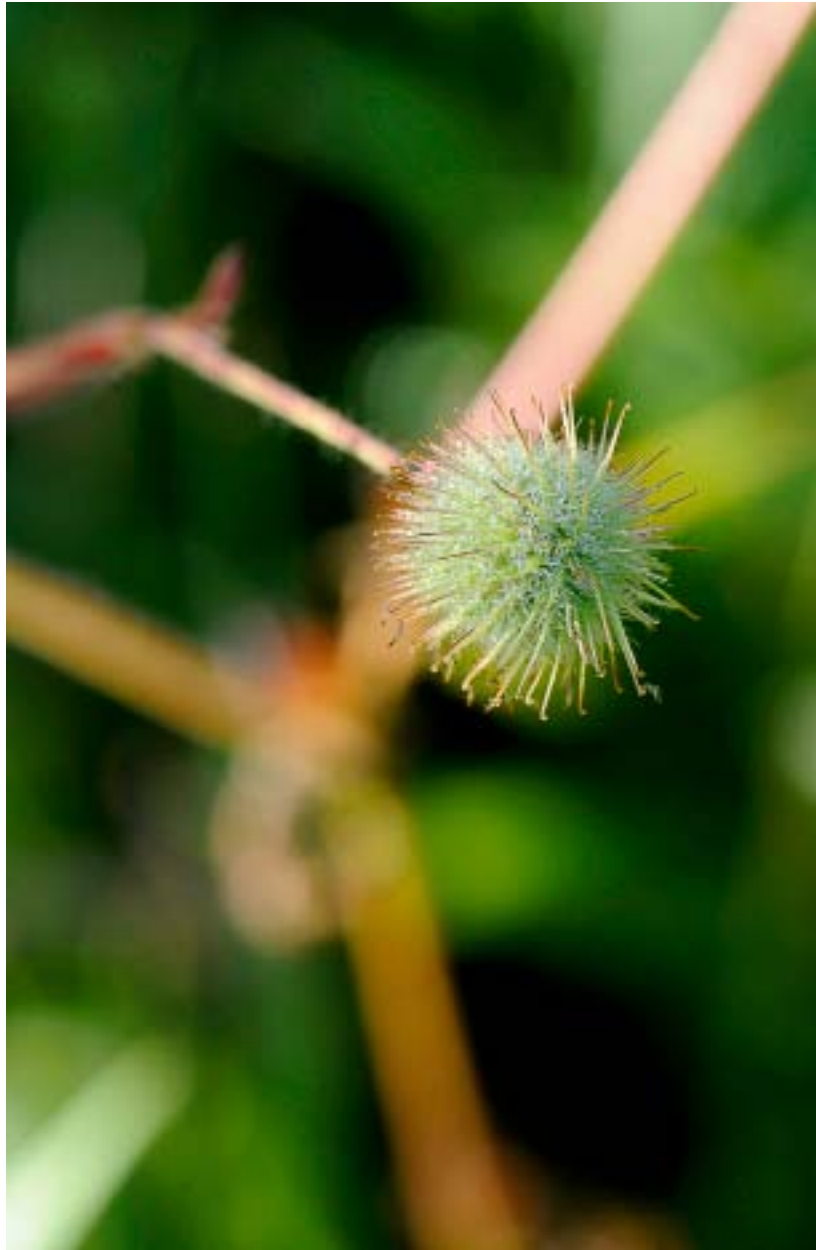
as enlightenment (whatever that is), so let's start there, and this is important:

What is meant by the phrase "recognizing the nature of the mind" as I understand it is more like being able to finally see the actual problem I was having with meditation all along, like: I had no idea what it was, and that is embarrassing.

And, having some recognition, I then saw that the nature of the mind is not something beyond my current reach (as I had always implicitly assumed), but rather more like very simply seeing how the mind actually worked, seeing that the mind (my mind) was in fact quite "workable," as in: "Hey, I can do it!" I finally could see a little into how I might work it. And being a clever guy, this was a very practical revelation. This is what seeing the true nature of the mind is all about, a new take on practice, not some euphoric rush of bliss.

Perhaps the most important result of recognition is that the responsibility for getting enlightened immediately switched from books, texts, and my teacher to me. What I saw or recognized made "me" responsible, and only me. That had never happened before. I was always looking for someone or something

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on the outside strong enough to affect me and somehow enlighten me. It doesn't come from outside!

As obvious as it sounds now, I could now see that was not about to ever happen, and I could now see why. Only I could enlighten myself. It was my job, not someone else's. In pointing out the nature of the mind to me, and my getting the gist of it, Rinpoche had completed his responsibility to me and succeeded in making me fully responsible for the first time. I responded! But with that responsibility also came the insight on how this mind training business could be done.

When I originally read in the classic texts about "seeing the nature of the mind," I assumed and expected some grand fireworks-like display and that I would be immediately transported into some transcendental state of illumination. You know: "enlightenment" or something like it, whatever I had imagined all these years.

Expectations are seldom ever your friend and almost always obscure the actual path and the reality. It might be better to say the teacher points out the nature of 'how' the mind works rather than simply say the teacher points out "the nature of the mind." The 'nature of the

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mind' seems so mysterious, and the actuality is anything but that. In my case, the less that is left to the imagination, the better. My imagination has filled me with preconceptions and impossible expectations all my life.

In other words, at least in my recognition, the 'Aha!' experience was not "Aha!, this is finally some enlightenment," but rather a simple:

"Aha! I get it now. So this is how the mind works; even a beginner like me can do that! This is actually workable, something I could actually do."

It is remarkable how in an instant my years of expectations vanished and were replaced by something simply practical that finally made real sense to me. How absolutely encouraging!

The "pointing out" instructions didn't in any way mark the end of my practice and my graduation to some higher "bodhisattva-like" level (like I had always wondered or imagined), but rather the end of my imitating what it is I thought practice was supposed to be, and the very beginning of actual useful practice. Finally I got the general idea of how to work with my mind, and understood in a flash that I had

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been mistaken about this all of my dharma life, like perhaps 30 years!!!

For the first time I saw simply how the mind works and that there was no reason that I (just as I am, warts and all) could not just do it. And that WAS a new experience, to somehow be at the same level with reality – to see it clearly. It was up to me to figure out just how to work with this new information and to put the time in. Perhaps most important of all, I suddenly had the enthusiasm and energy to make it work that I had been missing. No more boredom and laziness when it came to practice.

And while the fact was less exotic than what I had mistakenly expected, it was perhaps (if my opinion counts) the first tangible result of many years of practice, and it was not just a passing experience, but a simple realization as to what had to happen next, like: when you realize how something works, you just get it. You don't forget, because it is not a simple experience, but a recognition. That quite ordinary insight was a form of recognition, and it was permanent.

In reality, for me this was a huge result after about 31 years of meditation of the “sounds-like-this” variety, years during which I

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sincerely went through the motions, but with little result that I could see. I had been rubbing the sticks and getting some heat but no fire. Suddenly, there was some heat and also fire. While not what I had expected, this was what I had always dreamed about having happen: visible progress.

The Workable Mind

The mind was suddenly workable and all I had to do was to work it, and I could now see that even I could do it! After perhaps thirty years, I actually understood something about meditation. Not the enlightenment-revelation I had in my expectations, not the thunderbolt from above, not something beyond this world of Samsara, but something much more down to earth and already very close to me – the nature of ‘my’ mind, that is: how to work with it. After all my years of theoretical practice, things finally got practical and therefore real practice could begin. Nevertheless, as minimal as my realization was, it brought about a profound change in my approach to meditation.

I left that year's ten-day teaching with a very different idea as to what

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my practice was going to be about. For one, it was now crystal clear to me that the amount of daily practice I was able to squeeze out up to that time would never be enough to get me to any kind of enlightened state. It was like going to church only on Sunday. Being the devious, lazy, bad boy that I am, I would never get to heaven at that rate. I had never been that much of an angel anyway, more like the black sheep of my family, and that too was a problem.

I could now see that mind practice required way more effort than the small amount of practice I had been doing each day, which practice itself I had nickel and dimed to death as it was. It seemed that everything else in my life managed to come first and distract from my dharma practice and, on top of that, my whole approach to practice was cloaked in expectations, disappointment, and frugality of effort. At that point in my life, I was doing as little actual practice as I could get away with and still look at myself in the mirror. I was worn out.

Worst of all, practice was not a joyful affair for me. It was something I just did and continued to do, sometimes only because to not do it at all would be more horrible than the pain of actually doing it. I could

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not consider the consequences of just stopping practice altogether, although I was very tired of it. Quitting was just too scary to even consider. The dharma was too much a part of my ego, my identity to just stop my practice. If I wasn't a dharma practitioner, what the heck was I doing with my life?

But what I now realized was that, like it or not, my daily practice even in the best of times had been simply way too small an effort to ever get very far along my personal dharma path. At the best of times, the most practice I had ever done was around two hours a day, and even that much practice would probably not be enough to clear the various obscurations I had managed to collect. I needed some full time dharma practice and I was a part-time player.

One thing I did realize from the pointing out instructions was that all of my years chained to the computer as a programmer had given me a real ability to concentrate and for long hours at a time. That was not all bad. I often would work 12 or even 14 hours a day glued to the tube, as they say. And, although the computer work might not be particularly dharmic in nature, the concentration I had

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acquired was quite real, lacking perhaps only a more pure motive than making money, although that is not fair to me. In my life, I have always turned my hobbies into ways of making money, so mostly I loved what I did for a living and did it with a pure heart. If only I could tackle dharma with the same concentration and enthusiasm that I put into my various computer and entrepreneurial projects. I had been thinking and dreaming about this for years.

The pointing out instructions I had received from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and the resulting technique it inspired and made possible was something that actually stood up very well off the cushion, that is: in everyday life, what is called post-meditation.

Putting the Technique to Work

I slowly began to apply the techniques of mind training I was learning to what I was doing on the computer all day long. During my computer work, whenever I would catch myself in a distraction, when I popped out of whatever I was deeply involved in and found myself once again outside my concentration and looking around, I would attempt to practice Mahamudra meditation. It could be as simple as a dog

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bark, a phone call, the doorbell, an unwelcome thought, etc., whatever it took to startle me out of what I was concentrating on. The result was that I was suddenly forced out of whatever I had been focused on and just instantly there - awake. Those gaps in my concentration were the only moments I had to insert dharma into my work, but there were a lot of them.

It was in those gaps or moments that I would remember to look at the nature of my mind or the nature of the thought that I was having. In the beginning it was only momentary glimpses, brief glances at the nature of a thought, at the nature of the mind, but I persevered. After all, I had virtually nothing better to do with my time anyway, so whenever I found myself startled or popping out of whatever I was engrossed in, I took that opportunity to at least try and look at the nature of my mind, and to then rest in the true nature of my mind as much as I could. I was gradually exercising the mind.

I had seen the nature of my own mind, how it works, which as I mentioned does not mean I was enlightened in any way, only that I had seen something about how the mind actually worked or was, and even that tiny hook was enough

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to begin unraveling some of the obscurities I had labored under all my life. And I liked what I saw and was beginning to learn to rest in the nature of the mind, however brief that might be.

Those moments of resting were short, perhaps more like nanoseconds than something more enduring, but the total amount of actual practice time I was doing off the cushion added up to more than I had been able to practice at any other times in my day, including time spent on the cushion, which at that time was a kind of a joke. Every time I headed for the cushion it seemed like I put on the robes of expectation, arrogance, embarrassment, past failures, and irritation. The cushion was getting a much-needed rest.

This new process of post-meditation practice was not something I could measure in days or even months. It took about two years of this kind of exploration before I really had it down to any useful degree, but it WAS useful and it actually worked, which translates to: perhaps for the first time in my many years of mind practice, I really liked practice, something I had devoutly wished for all those years. If there was one thing I was ashamed of and feared

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all those years, it was that I could not find much joy in practicing. I knew that this was not the way it should be, but I was powerless to bring joy to something I could not find the joy in. And it took the shock of an outside event to really push me into yet totally new territory. Here is my story:

On My Own Again

I had been working for the preceding four years or so as a senior consultant to a subsidiary of NBC, one specializing in astrology, something I know quite a lot about – 45 years of experience. I was putting in long hours for them (and for myself), because I was building content, something I am well-known for in my career as an archivist of popular culture, creator of the All-Music Guides (allmusic.com), the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com) and other entertainment sites. It is not unusual for me to put in 12 or 14 hours, seven days a week. I was getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning most days, concentrating on programming, on creating thousands of tarot-like cards for astrology in Adobe Illustrator, writing courses, and other text-related projects. And I took plenty of joy in that.

All of these tasks were perfect to



test out my Mahamudra practice, which was coming along really well. All it lacked was the motivation that comes with a worthy object. In other words, I was practicing Mahamudra while working on essentially mundane tasks, instead of the 'dharma' itself, although my intent and motivation for astrology were very pure and heartfelt.

Free

In late May of 2008, while attending an astrology conference in Denver, Colorado (along with 1,500 other astrologers), the head of the NBC outfit I was working for, who was also at the conference, told me that I no longer would have a job with them after June. In an attempt to pare down expenses, NBC laid off a lot of folks, and I happened to be one of them. Of course, this was a real shock to me, since I had been working so hard at it, and the financial ramifications simply meant that I would soon have no income whatsoever. At almost 67 years of age at the time, finding a job was probably not too easy, even though I had a lot of skills and experience, plus a good reputation. But it went beyond that for me. It was one of those corners life offers us that we somehow just have to get around.

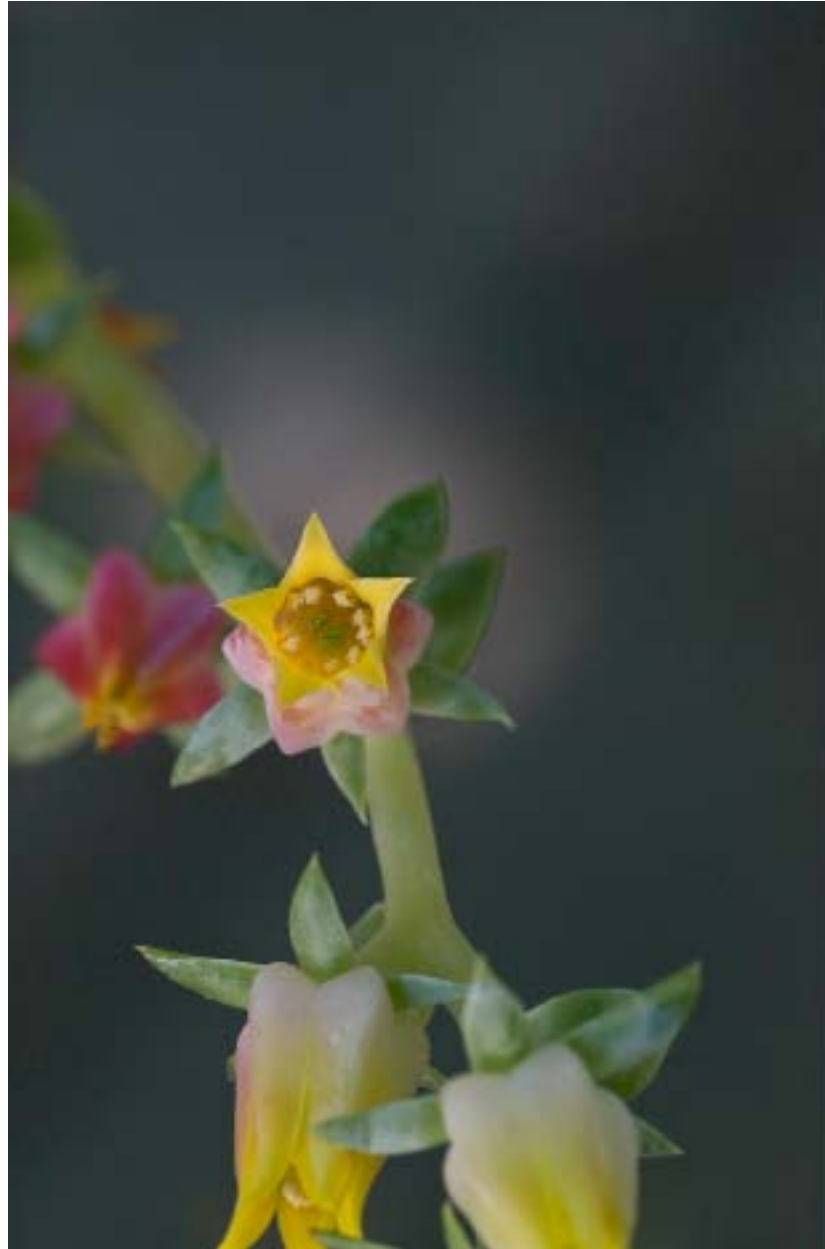
It turned out that I had to leave the

astrology conference a few days early when I found out that His Holiness the 17th Karmapa was suddenly making his first visit to the United States and to his main seat in this country, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. I could not miss that event and, as it turned out, I could be useful as part of a three-man video team to film the event, and personally was able to film some events where they didn't really want much of anyone present. I had been around KTD so long that I was pretty much some kind of fixture there anyway.

I would love to tell readers about the visit of His Holiness, but that would be a whole other story, but the gist of it was that seeing his holiness was a big shot in the arm for me. I also took hundreds of still photos of the event and after I got home, within a few weeks, I had made a 200-page coffee-table sized book of the visit of His Holiness which I made available for the close sangha. The book was inspired, not so much by me as a photographer, as by the fact that all of the people I was photographing had just been with His Holiness and were shining with happiness and a light that was clearly obvious in the



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photographs.

The time with His Holiness certainly helped to put the fact that I no longer had a job into perspective, but to suddenly be without a paycheck is a shock, and it sure went through my system like a lightning. Where before I was working long hours at my job, suddenly I had all kinds of time on my hands – a really big gap of time in my life. Talking about popping out of what you were focused in (the so-called gap in Mahamudra practice), well, this was a really shocking gap, and I popped out big time and here is how I was able to actually look at that gap:

The Photographer

I had been working as an entrepreneur without a break (or a gap) for over thirty years straight. When you work for yourself, you don't have weekends and holidays, or at least you don't live for them. When you love your work, time off and vacations are meaningless or, worse, boring. That is how I always experience them. And now with all this time on my hands, my past interest in photography (and recent photo work at KTD) began to come out, and this hobby plays an important role in this story.

I had been deemed a photographer

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by my father (a really good photographer himself) ever since he had given me a little Kodak Retina 2a camera back in 1954, when I was something like 13 and sent me on about a 3,000 mile trip across the U.S. and Canada (with a dip into Mexico) on a bus with a bunch of kids my age. He had explained to me before I left how to take good pictures, and I listened. Apparently I had taken some great pictures because he couldn't say enough about them when I returned, perhaps the only time he ever felt that way about anything I have done. The long and the short of it is that I came away from that time with the sense that (perhaps only in my mind) that I had a really good eye for photography.

And I had been toying with photography for a number of years. Like many of us, I had of course taken the requisite shots of my family, our dogs, and what not. And, as part of a large archival database that I created for documenting rock and roll posters, I had purchased a Nikon D1x system and carefully photographed some 23,000+ posters. For this, I had built my own vacuum table, had an exact light setup, and so on. So, I knew at least something about photography.

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But in the late spring of 2008, after falling out of a job, I found myself embracing photography more deeply, perhaps just as a way to find stability from my somewhat chaotic life at the time. And then there was my interest in nature. Even though this happened only a year or so ago, I have trouble pinpointing just how I happened to start going out into nature again. I was a trained naturalist and had intensely studied nature from the time I was about 6 years old until in my late teens, and I mean intensely. In my early teens I even was given a tiny office at the University of Michigan Museums building, just because I was somewhat precocious. I was into it.

My wife loves nature and for the last many years had done all she could to get me out in the woods, streams, and fields again, but I pretty much declined the invitation. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps it was because I felt that nature had been early-on my real teacher and I had learned my lessons. Certainly school had taught me almost nothing. Whatever life lessons I carried came from observing how nature behaved, and once learned, I was unwilling to open up that avenue again. Why?

Now that I think about it, here is probably the reason: My favorite

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female vocalist of all time is Billie Holliday. No other voice has moved me so utterly than she has. That being said, the fact is that I don't listen to Billie Holliday very often, hardly ever. Why? Because I have to really prepare myself or work up to hearing her sing, because she puts me through so very much emotionally that I am not always ready to let that happen. I tell you this because it is the same with nature and her lessons.

The Naturalist

I studied natural history for so many years and with such diligence that there was not much I missed as to what goes on out there in the woods and meadows. I know every frog, salamander, and snake, not to mention insects, and you-name-it. I not only know them, I know all about their lives and deaths.

Nature is so absolutely candid and direct that she leaves almost nothing to the imagination. Nature does not know mercy. It is all laid out for anyone to see, and it is not a story without emotional affects. I did not need to become a Buddhist to love the life in every living creature. I always felt that way. When I was confirmed in my early teens as part of Catholic ritual, my chosen confirmation name was Francis,



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after St. Francis of Assisi, the saint who loved and protected animals. That was me. I have often joked that I like animals better than people, and I wasn't being all that funny. It is kind of true. The Buddhists tell us that animals are bewildered. I feel great compassion for their bewildered state. I am working on feeling that same way toward human beings.

So nature, like listening to Billie Holiday, was probably something that I really had to work up to as far as re-immersion is concerned. It is just way too sensitive for words. Nature is beautiful, but nature is raw. Every last animal out there lives in constant fear. They are always looking over their shoulder for something bigger than they are that wants to eat them. And they are always looking for some smaller animal to eat. They have almost no rest their entire lives.

The whole concept of impermanence and the fragility of life are everywhere present in nature. The countless tiny tadpoles that don't mature before the spring pond dries out, the mass of worms and slugs that get caught on the tarmac as the fierce sun comes over the horizon and dries them to a crisp, the huge Luna Moth that is

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so heavy it can hardly fly, flutters in the still morning light, trying to find a tree to hide in for the day, and is snapped up by the bird just as it tries to land, etc. You get the idea. It is endless and merciless.

And this is not an isolated story, not the exception that proves the rule, but just the opposite: this is the rule, with almost no exceptions, ever! Life is brief, fear-filled, and accident prone for almost all sentient life. And humankind is not an exception, although we choose to ignore how Samsara (our confused state) actually is. We are one of the very few beings that have any real control over destiny, and we never have as much control as we imagine. The rest of the animal world are simply bewildered, too stunned by their lack of real intelligence to protect themselves.

I trust you get the idea here I am painting; it is one of a nature that has no mercy, and death that is inexorable in its presence and swiftness. Is it any wonder that I have to cross over some kind of threshold to really want to take a closer look at nature again? I already knew what nature is about. You get the point.



Back to Nature

But that year of 2008 I was not in an ordinary frame of mind. I had just been shaken out of every sense of safe I knew, at least financially. I had been put out, turned loose, and set free from any path or trajectory I thought I was on. So it is no surprise that I easily crossed over that threshold that I had avoided for so many years and immersed myself in the way things were - nature. I already was completely vulnerable, reminded personally how things can be when we have no control. I was in the mood. And the camera was probably my ticket to ride, my excuse to get lost in nature once again. It was like finding my roots, like going home. It was consoling.

I became absolutely fascinated with close-up camera work, what is called macro or micro photography. And for me, this meant close-up photography of nature and all the living things surrounding us. And in what was perhaps also a symbolic gesture, I got out of my office. For years, I had been afraid to leave my office lest I miss an important phone call or whatever next thing I was waiting for. As mentioned, my wife had tried just about everything to get me out of my stick-in-the-mud office, but to no avail. But now I just



walked out into the fields. It was dramatic.

Each morning would find me out in the meadows and woods at sunrise, lugging my camera equipment around. There in the mist and dew-covered fields I would be photographing all that was beautiful or, many times, just sitting there in the grass as the first sun rays peeked over the trees, and simply doing nothing. Here is a poem I wrote about that.

Time for Nothing

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

And I am not talking about weekends. I watched almost every sunrise from around late May through October, until it became just too cold to take my camera or myself outside for extended periods of time. Think about that for a moment: I watched EVERY sunrise for half a year and this after seldom ever leaving my office for 30 or so years. My family must have been puzzled.

As I look back on it now, it was of course a very remarkable time. Here I am remarking on it! But what was

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most remarkable about this time was not at first apparent to me, and this is what I want to present here.

Macro Photography and Mahamudra

The experience I had accumulated over the preceding three years or so doing Mahamudra practice on my computer had kind of extended itself to anytime I did close concentrated work. I am at home with drudgery, at home in very concentrated and tedious work. I need only point to that fact that I single-handedly (and later with a staff of hundreds) recorded, reviewed, and documented every piece of recorded music from 10-inch records on up to the present. Similarly, we documented every single film and movie, complete with its entire cast, and video games, and rock posters, etc. You get the idea. I am obsessive. My personal collection of CDs (which I no longer own) now sits in a warehouse in Ann Arbor, numbering well over 500,000 CDs and counting.

My point is that I have a high tolerance for tedium. And nothing is more time consuming and demanding of concentration than computer programming and video editing, that was: before I encountered macro photography.

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And I don't know for sure why I got into macro (close-up) photography, as opposed to landscape photography or just walking in the woods and meadows, but I have a guess. It could have been that looking through an open lens with real magnification at a tiny diorama, at a world that was ever so much obviously more perfect than the one I was used to, somehow was freeing to me. Every tiny fly and insect appeared so incredibly complete, so perfect in every respect at the micro level.

The outer world I knew had beautiful patches and rotten ones too, areas that were stained beyond appreciation. But here, in the micro world, you could always find some little bit of perfection, perhaps a newly hatched dragonfly that was absolutely fresh in every way. And I particularly like dioramas, miniature scenes - the tiniest of landscapes. I was transported by what I saw.

I can tell you that nothing I have ever done requires as much patience and concentration as doing macro photography. It can take half an hour of excruciating pain to hold a physical position with a tripod and camera until the wind manages to die down, just to take a single photograph of a flower or insect.

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And I am NOT known for my patience, but in photographing nature I had found a worthy teacher.

Lenses

Before long I was spending up to several of the best hours of the day (dawn) immersed in peering through various special lenses at the lives of tiny critters and plants. I soon found myself searching for finer and finer lenses, so I could see ever more clearly into these very perfect micro worlds. Yet, I just couldn't see clearly enough, so I just needed better and better lenses. The outside day-to-day world I lived in might seem dingy and worn much of the time, but these micro worlds were as fresh as a new flower or just-hatched butterfly. And: I was soaking it up.

Without really thinking about it, I was using all of my Mahamudra experience and techniques here in these micro worlds. And I literally mean: without thinking! As I concentrated on this photographing, looking deep into and through the lens, I began having extended periods of resting my mind, but I was not at first fully aware of this. I mean: it was true rest. As I look back now, I can see that I was (me, Michael) resting my mind and life in the tiny scenes I was peering

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through lenses to see.

I was finding true rest in those miniature scenes I could see. And I so much needed the rest that I was not at first aware that I was (I believe) also resting my mind in a dharmic way, and in a profound sense. When I point out that I was not fully aware of what was happening, this is an important point.

Please keep in mind that I am holding a precise position, camera and tripod in hand, frozen to a stance, so that a tiny insect does not fly away, and waiting for the incessant Michigan wind to die down long enough to take a photograph. And all the while I am peering through this very special light-gathering lens into a micro world at a tiny critter. And clarity! The world I could see in there was awesome, beautiful, and so very, very clear. I was resting in that clarity, resting my mind. And I loved what it did for me. It was beyond thought.

For some reason, through the looking glass (so to speak), I was able to rest my mind like I had not been able to do it on the cushion or even in my work, and for a long time! It would take a book to explain what resting the mind really

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is all about. No, a book could not communicate what I am referring to here. It would take being personally shown how to rest the mind, but I can't do that here and I am not a teacher.

Before I knew it, I was looking forward to these forays into the dawn as if my life depended on it. I could not wait to get up every morning, get outside in the fields, and launch myself into this particular state of mind. I knew this was connected to my practice, but that knowledge was not important at the time, which tells you something by itself. It was the farthest thing from my mind. I just liked getting my 'mind right' out there in nature. I was fascinated by what I saw through those lenses. In the end, of course, what I was seeing was related to my own mind.

Turning the Mind

As I look back today, what was really taking place is all too clear, and nature held just the reminders I needed to keep my attitude adjusted. The four Common Preliminaries of Buddhist practice, what are often called the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma" are ever present in the natural world, things like the preciousness of life, impermanence, the laws of

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karma, etc. All of these are literally magnified and obvious in nature, where kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, and things like a flower that blooms for one night, a huge moth that lives but 24-hours, etc. continually reminded me of those precious four thoughts. I didn't have to remind myself. Life in nature reminded me instant by instant, day by day. It can be heartbreaking. I had not looked at impermanence this closely for many years, but I was looking at it now. Raw Nature is the best reminder of the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind" that I know of.

For that spring, summer, and fall, I was really away from the maddening crowd, off by myself, observing my own mind in the midst of purely natural phenomena. But what I did not at first see was how much I was changing, perhaps 'stabilizing' is a better word. It was my mind and my practice that were stabilizing. When I was out in the field and flowers, I could rest my mind, I could see the nature of thoughts as they arose, look at their nature, watch them dissolve, and not drag around some sad thought all day long. I was thrilled at the crystal clarity of the mind. But most of all I was finding rest, resting my mind in all that clarity, deeply resting.



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Where before I was probably engrossed in figuring out why so-and-so did this or that or how I managed to embarrass myself in this or that situation, now thoughts like that could be seen not for their content, but in their actual nature and just dissolve like dew on the grass. In an instant they were gone, back where they came from, away, and I was not etching yet another karma track deep in my mind.

Each morning I was up way before dawn, gathering my equipment and heading out the door. It seemed I could not get enough of what I was finding out there in nature peering through my camera lenses, but in reality I was learning to rest in the true nature of my mind. I was practicing Mahamudra, but in a more direct manner than ever before.

I knew I was using Mahamudra techniques, but I was not initially aware of how deeply I was changing internally. That awareness only came much later. And I studied camera equipment like there was no tomorrow, in particular fine lenses. I just somehow could not get lenses that would gather enough light and open up my vision as far as I needed. Every spare dollar I could scrounge went into sharper and sharper

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lenses. I scavenged up and sold my older equipment for this or that more accurate lens, tele-converter, close-up diopter, or whatever would bring more light and acuity to what I was doing. And the lenses helped.

I studied lenses. I went to optometrists and discussed with them the sharpness of lenses and what was needed for the human eye to see at its very best. I got new glasses and special magnifiers for the eyepiece in my camera. I tracked down lenses that are almost never found, lenses that are legendary for their ability to gather light and to focus with extreme accuracy. I burned through the finest lenses that Nikon has to offer (and that is many) and on into lenses that are even better than anything Nikon can produce.

I worked with special architectural lenses, lenses that tilt and shift, allowing you to bring a whole flat field of flowers into focus, the nearest and the farthest flower, all perfectly clear. I stacked lenses one on another to get even closer in. I used tele-converters, diopters, and extension tubes to reach beyond what I otherwise could. I began to stack photos, which means to take a series of photos, each at a particular focal point, from near to far, and

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then merge the stack to make a single image where all parts, from front to back are in perfect focus.

I am just giving you a taste of what was a real obsession on my part, and a learning curve. I took more than 50,000 photos during that period and gradually became a better and better photographer. That is not such a lot of photos, until you take into consideration how long it can take for one macro photo to be taken.

And through all of this, it was not the resulting thousands of photographs that concerned me. I hardly looked at them. Instead, it was the process that had me spellbound, the clear looking at the subjects and the seeing. It was the seeing! And it was the resting. Ostensibly I was looking through finer and finer lenses at nature. In reality, I was learning to look at my own mind through the process of photography, and I had managed to confuse the two. Yeah, "Zen and the Art of Photography" is a book I could probably write now.

I was learning to rest my mind in the moment and allow whatever natural beauty there was to present itself to me, to show itself, to appear. Everything was clear, luminous. And the sheer exhilaration involved

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is hard to describe. Everything was lucid. I was lucid - clear as a bell!

And although I continued to practice Mahamudra during my ordinary workday, as I found this or that project to do, it was mostly in those rarified mornings out in the dawn that my mind could fully rest and appear lucid. I was addicted to it right off and could not wait each day to get out there among the bugs and flowers to get my mind right.

And, as mentioned above, this went on from late May until late November of 2008, almost every day when it did not rain. I don't know what my family thought, other than I had become a camera nut and that I didn't have a job. I don't know what I thought about it myself. I never thought about it. I was spending an inordinate amount of time doing it. My extended family and friends would drive by me where I was setting up one shot or another along the roadside and give me strange looks, like "Oops, there he is again. Doesn't he work anymore?"

I didn't have a job (I was looking for one), so I had the time and, after a lifetime of working jobs, this was the first real break I had ever given myself and I put it to good use. It was wonderful. It was transformative.

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Stabilization

All of this time what was really happening (as I look back now) is that my Mahamudra meditation was stabilizing. After all, I was doing it not only on those early morning shoots, but all the rest of the day as well as much as I could happen to remember or wake up into moments to do it, which was more and more often.

My initial fear and guilt that I was no longer interested in sitting practice, in doing sadhanas and other practices, began to fall away. I just did not care anymore what it looked like to those around me or even to my old self. Whatever it was that I was doing with Mahamudra was enough for me. I was full up and I was in love with and happy with my practice for the first time in my life.

It was just natural to move off the cushion for a while after so many years sitting there. I had done two ngondros (traditional extended practices), not to mention other more complex practices, and I imagine I had accumulated what I was able to accumulate. I was tired for the moment of on-the-cushion practice and inhaled Mahamudra practice like a breath of fresh air.

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It was clear to my family that I was no longer spending much time on the cushion and their looks and glances told me that they probably didn't approve and certainly didn't understand. After all, I didn't really understand myself what was happening. Michael, who had been more or less diligent as a practitioner for so many years, was out-and-out playing hooky.

There was no excusing it.

And I did not care. I just knew I had found my way and was progressing somewhere after all the years of anticipation. I was my own counsel in this regard. Outside approval or disapproval (my own or others) could not change my mind or my behavior. And so it went.

When summer ended and winter came on, I had to curtail my early morning explorations and gradually move back inside. I looked forward to the following spring with unusual longing, but I also found that I was able to carry on my mental training at my desk and around the house with no problem. Something had changed within me and permanently, but I was not really able to get a handle on it until the following spring when I was once again headed back out into the fields and woods.

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Spring Surprise

And out I did go, as early as January and February, a bunch in March, and constantly by April. And I had been gathering my equipment and upgrading what I could afford. But things had changed for me and in a quite unexpected way, but it would take me some months to figure this out. At the time, I was hell bent to immerse myself ever more deeply in nature, and my outings were now ranging ever farther from home.

Instead of spending my early mornings at the back of the local cemetery, at the fringe where the wild vegetation meets the well-groomed lawn, as I had done the year before, I was now actively planning trips to nature spots all over. I was studying maps. I became fascinated with Michigan bogs and the life possible in those very special environments.

It turns out that bogs only really thrive at latitudes higher than 45 degrees. Big Rapids, Michigan (where I live) is almost 44 degrees of latitude, so we have bogs in this area and just an hour or so north of here are really vast bogs.

Why bogs? I have no idea. I am an enthusiast, and there is always something that fascinates me.

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Perhaps it was that bogs are so very, very fragile, tiny microenvironments that hardly anyone has ever seen, much less spent time in. Out there, isolated from nutrients, since the plant life on them can't get nutrients from below (the peat is anaerobic and won't let anything through), many bog plants have become carnivorous, depending on insects and what-not for food. Bog plants include the Pitcher Plant, the Sundew, and the Venus Flytrap, among others. Whatever the reason, I was fascinated by bogs and found myself traveling many hours to visit them and carefully document what I saw there.

The point here is that I had taken my photography yet another step, not only shooting whatever was available each morning near my home, but now traveling long distances to sample this or that special environment, this particular plant or that one. Without realizing it, my enthusiasm had caused me to overstep the boundary between Mahamudra practice and that of becoming more of a naturalist than I already was.

From the time I was about six years old until I was in my late teens I had studied nature with a fierce passion, so I already knew all about nature. I



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already knew all the little woodland critters, and I knew them well, their habitat, behavior, and life and death struggles. And here I was further upping the ante as far as being a naturalist was concerned.

In my enthusiasm I could vaguely sense something was slightly off, but for the life of me I could not place the problem. It took time for this to gradually surface in my consciousness, but eventually it did become clear to me that I did not really want to become a full-scale naturalist once more. I was (as I do so often) confusing the baby with the bathwater again, a bad habit I have. It was like a 'Mara', an illusion that confused me. And this all came to a head during a trip up to the top of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. It is a good story.

I had been invited to join a very select group of naturalists who were given permission to enter a rare bog preserve at the very top of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to take a survey of wildlife there. Bogs are very fragile environments and even walking on them is destructive. But this conservation society allowed special teams to enter these closed reserves once or twice a year and I was to be the team's herpetologist. I had been trained in reptiles and

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amphibians since I was a child, and so knew all about them. I was geeked.

I could not wait to get to Michigan's wild Upper Peninsula and out on those bogs with my camera. My trip was to last a number of days, and I was up before dawn of that first day and in my car heading north. It must have been around 4:30 AM when I hit the road. The only hiccup was the fact that I had just had some fairly protracted oral surgery (several days of root canal work), and the tooth in question had developed a really nasty abscess beneath it. I was already on my second dose of antibiotics, this time really heavy antibiotics, the first round having not touched the problem. I was not about to be stopped by a wayward tooth.

So I was in some pain and my lower jaw was swollen. I assumed that as time passed the swelling would just go down. Anyway, hell or high water would not have kept me off those bogs, and on I went.

The Turning Point

My first stop was at a small bog at the top of the Lower Peninsula, just beneath the Mackinac Bridge. I was out on the bog in the morning sun by 8 A.M., already hours from my

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home. It was a magnificent morning. Yet already I was having trouble with that dumb tooth, a certain amount of throbbing and little sharp shoots of pain. I did my best to ignore it and told myself it would die down.

There I was in my hip boots way out on the surface of the bog, surrounded by moss and small bushes, and carefully stepping my way along in the ooze. I was maybe halfway around the small lake when I first saw them, two large Sandhill Cranes picking their way through the bog on the opposite side. I was thrilled to see them and they were incredible.

As I threaded my way along I must have somehow began to encroach on the area where they perhaps had their nest, for they became increasingly animated. Now these are large birds. They can stand five feet high and have wingspans of six to seven feet across. And their eye was on me, and they were not just looking at me. They were moving in circles around me.

Many of the bushes on the bog were several feet high, so I could not always see the cranes, but I could hear their frightening calls. I didn't say 'frightened' calls; I said frightening calls, which they were – eerie. And the cranes began running

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through the bushes, circling me, working together, and they moved fast. Much of the time all I could see through gaps in the bushes was a sideways profile of one of their heads as it circled me. I could see one bird as it ran through the bushes on my right, and then suddenly on my left was the other bird circling in the other direction. I was constantly off balance, and I had to watch my every step lest I step into muck so deep that I would begin to sink down in it. And I was carrying over \$12,000 worth of camera equipment, not to mention my life.

Or one of the birds would rise in the air and cut directly across my path (only a few feet in front of me) only to disappear into the bushes and take up running around me again. And the cries were now getting really scary. At some point I began to feel like I was being stalked, and visions of the movie Jurassic Park and velociraptors came to mind. These were large birds and they didn't like ME. It is easy to see how birds were once reptile-like creatures.

Well, that is as far as it went. I finally managed to plot a course through the bog that apparently took me away from their nest area, all the time I was moving one gooey step

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at a time very slowly through the muck. I finally got out of there, found my way back to the car, and drove to the nearest town.

By this time it was beginning to be clear that my tooth was not going to just calm down, but instead was only going to get worse. I had super strength Ibuprofen and even some Vicodin that they had given me, so I had to dip into those a bit. And this was just the first morning of the first day of a five day journey. I had to decide what I would do.

I went to visit some friends at their home near where I was at. Here I was safe in a nice home in a town only a few hours from my home. But I had the strange experience of feeling that I was somehow embedded in a scene at which I was no longer fully present. It was like a dream or the set for a movie in which I was an actor. I was kind of leaning out of it, like you might lean out the back door to get a breath of fresh air. Something had stirred or moved inside of me that day and I was damned if I could figure out what it was. Somewhere back there I had lost my incentive or my direction. Something had changed at the core.

Yet, by tomorrow I was supposed to be at the tip of the top of the

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Upper Peninsula, hours from where I was now, and miles from any town (much less a hospital) on a remote bog, and the temperatures there were predicted to be very cold, even for a spring day. After all, way up there it was still hardly spring. HmMMM.

In the end, the throbbing of my tooth and those little sharp spasms of shooting pain told me that marching through a bog miles from anywhere might not be the time to try and push this 67-year old physical envelope. As it turned out, this was the right decision, because the second round of antibiotics with its very large dose also failed to do the trick. My abscess overcame all attempts to control it and spread much farther into the bone of my lower jaw. In the end, the tooth had to be extracted and the jaw treated. And I only tell this longish story because this became a real turning point for me. Let me explain.

The Outside is Inside

Like so many times in my past, once again I had managed to confuse the inside with the outside, the important with the unessential. What was going on over the last year was that I was using the outside (nature) to look at the inside (my mind) AND I had fallen into the

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mistake of confusing the two. Since it was through the nature that I was realizing my mind, I began to elevate natural history as the goal or object of my passion, when it was only the means through which I was experiencing my mind's nature, which is my real passion. I hope that makes sense.

Here I was upscale-ing my nature trips when all they were to me in the end were the lens or means through which I was viewing the mind. And here I was buying more equipment, planning longer and more extensive trips, and ordering every kind of field guide I did not already have, and I had a lot. Well, this all changed, and that early morning faceoff with the Sandhill Cranes was perhaps the turning point. That experience was thrilling and not really that scary, so I was not scared off by what happened there. But something else did snap there or around that time.

After that I began to realize I was unnecessarily further complicating my life with all these lenses and nature trips, when what I wanted to do was simplify it. I was extruding the naturalist in me at the expense of the simple clarity of resting my mind, and it was the clarity of the mind that I was in love with, as seen

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through the lens of nature. It is the old baby and the bathwater thing. I had once again confused the two, but I am getting a little ahead of myself. Let me summarize.

Quite early on in the spring of 2009 I began to notice that the very special lucidity that came when I patiently peered through the camera lens waiting for the wind to die down was now present without any camera at all. What before was made possible by my concentration and a really tack-sharp lens had now overflowed into the rest of my life. Then one day I realized that I did not even have to bring a camera along with me at all. This clarity that I had very carefully nourished the entire preceding year through my photography had become the rule rather than the exception. It was not about cameras; it was not about lenses, but about clarity of mind. That was it. I began to get it.

Now I found that just walking along a road, looking at the vegetation or whatever, produced the same result as hours of painstakingly peering through the lens. My mind was already somewhat lucid and I could more and more just rest in the beauty of the nature around me, which would just present and reveal itself to me... and without the





need of a camera. It became clear that I really didn't need a camera at all anymore, and this at first really puzzled me. Whoa, I thought. Now I have these great cameras and all these fine lenses, and whatever technique I had managed... and I don't need them?

That's right. That's what happened. It took time, but I increasingly became aware that what I had loved all this time through the photography was what was happening within my own mind. All that gear was just a scaffold to build a stable practice and, once built, the camera equipment (as wonderful as it is) was just an empty cocoon as far as I was concerned, for I was now already gone. This was at first disorienting, to say the least.

Mixing the Mind

It is easy for me to write all this now, but it took a while for all of these thoughts to really sink in, and it was not until I made my yearly trip to see my dharma teacher in late June that it all came together. 2009 was the 21st year that Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche has offered a ten-day Mahamudra intensive at KTD Monastery and I had never missed a one. In fact, seeing and studying with Rinpoche for those ten days was the highlight of any year. 2009 was no



different.

Being with Rinpoche for ten days each summer means so much to me. For one, I found that I was always the best kind of me when I was with him, when I was present and within the embrace of his mandala. And going back home after the ten days was always something of a mixed bag, driving the 800 miles back to our town filled with Rinpoche's blessings, much of that grace which I would soon manage to fritter away as I settled into my more ordinary life.

But this year was to be different. Part of the Mahamudra practice I had been doing during those early morning camera practices included a very special form of guru yoga, which I can't detail here, but the idea is simple. Guru yoga is nothing more than connecting with your teacher, taking that connection to heart, and mixing your mind with the mind of your teacher. That's it. There are many forms of guru yoga, so it is not a secret.

I had been practicing that along with my Mahamudra training. And I had done guru yoga before, during the two ngondros I had completed, so I was familiar with this kind of practice. However, where before I had painstakingly marched through

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the practice, keeping count of how many this or that I had done and how many more I needed to complete the practice, my recent guru yoga practice experience had been different.

In the last year, as I was doing the microphotography, I was very much taking to heart this guru yoga practice, doing it as often as I could remember to do it, and actually somehow mixing my mind with that of my teacher. I really enjoyed doing it and I did it joyfully, but I had little awareness of the effect of this practice on me until I travelled to our monastery for our yearly visit with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

As mentioned, it is always a joy to see Rinpoche again and to be in his presence. I am instantly at my best and I like that. This year was different. When I arrived, of course I was thrilled to see him, as always. It is great just to be in the same room with Khenpo Rinpoche. But this year there was a change.

I soon realized that I did not feel any better in his presence than I did before I left home to see him. Keep in mind that I had been feeling pretty good at home. In fact, the rinpoche that I had been mixing my mind with through guru yoga and the rinpoche I experienced at the

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monastery were exactly the same this time. I didn't get it at first, but over time, while I was with him, I understood that somehow my practice had brought Rinpoche from out there in the world, out in that monastery in New York, into here in my heart. Now they were in most respects (at least as far as I know) one and the same. Rinpoche had been mixed to some degree with my own mind.

This is not to say that I was like Rinpoche, but rather to say that whatever I was back home on my own (with my relation to Rinpoche at a distance), that now when I was with him again in person, they were the same. He was with me as much at home as when I was with him at the teachings. Wow!

A fear I had always had was: what would happen to me when Rinpoche someday passed on and I was left alone in the world without him to be with – a terrifying thought! Sure, there are many fine rinpoches out there that I could work with, but there is no replacement for your root lama, the one who cared enough to accept you just as you were and put up with you until you could learn a little dharma.

Somehow, in this last year, I had (at least to some degree) internalized

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Rinpoche and made him a part of me forever. It was clear to me that it was the heartfelt guru yoga that I had been doing as part of my Mahamudra practice that had made this possible. How incredible!

I had brought my camera and several important lenses along with me to KTD and had planned to use them in the early morning, you know, shots of mountains, clouds, rising mists and fog – all of that. But once there, I seemed to have lost all interest in photographing anything. And I wondered what that was all about.

The Return of the Hermit

One of the 3-year year retreat lamas at KTD (whom I consider a close friend) was kind enough to listen to my recent practice experiences, what I have been relaying here to you and his comment hit me like a freight train.

What he said is that my experience with the photography and all that it entailed was right out of a dharma handbook – pure tradition. Mahamudra practitioners are encouraged at a certain point in their practice to go out in the wild, to caves and faraway places to meditate when they have received the pointing out instructions,

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and while in those places begin to actually practice and train in Mahamudra. And I had just done a modern equivalent. I had not left town, but I had spent my most important time away from people, out in the fields and woods, watching the sun rise again and again – by myself.

It was this solitary time during which my practice was able to settle in and stabilize. And my friend pointed out that once stabilized, my need for some solitary time had evaporated. That was perhaps why the camera and photography thing just naturally dissolved. In fact, once Mahamudra has stabilized, it is customary for practitioners to re-enter society and test their mental stability in the midst of crowds, day-to-day business, and all other challenges. And along with that need to be alone that went away, so did my need for cameras and interest in photography. Just gone!

And this is exactly what was happening to me. I didn't need to be alone any longer and I was in the process of separating the baby from the bathwater. The baby was my Mahamudra practice and the bathwater was all my camera gear and my need to practice through it. I didn't need the support of the



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camera any longer. I also did not need to be out in nature all the time, either. It is not that I did not appreciate natural beauty any longer; it just made no difference to me where I was anymore.

And for the first time in many years, I want to reopen our meditation center here in Big Rapids and do what I can to help others get started in the dharma. I am doing that now.

So there you have at least a brief account of my experience so far with Mahamudra. Of course, now I am just on the first step of a long journey to learn and someday master Mahamudra. And, although I am not yet enlightened in any way, I at least understand something about what I have to accomplish and something about how to go about doing that.

END of Part 1

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Experiences with Mahamudra Part II

Year 2010



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The Epilogue

Although I thought I was moving away from mixing photography and Mahamudra practice in Part 1, actually that took longer than I thought. The winter and spring of 2010 brought my interest and focus on better and better lenses to a peak. I had exhausted almost everything that Nikon has produced when it comes to their macro and close-up lenses. I had pushed these Nikon lenses beyond their limit and moved on to more esoteric ultra-fine lenses, lenses by companies like Voigtlander, Leica, and Coastal Optics. These extraordinary lenses pushed the idea of sharpness beyond simple resolution and into aspects of highly defined color.

By this time I was working with the most advanced DSLR camera bodies on the market like the Nikon D3x and D3s, both full-frame cameras that employed sensors the size of traditional 35mm film. I had by that time some forty different lenses, most of them designed for macro or close-up work. And I found when I pushed these lenses to their limits looking for sharper resolution that sharpness itself began to relate more to color.

In other words, the quality of color itself began to be a factor in sharpness due to the fact that

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with all but the finest lenses, color can affect the ultimate degree of sharpness, the very finest details. An effect called “chromatic aberration” tends to soften photographic images and produces what is called color fringing in photos at high-contrast edges where two colors meet. For the sharpest possible images, apochromatic lenses can be used, lenses that bring two wavelengths (often red and blue) into focus in the same plane, resulting in a perceived greater sharpness. Soon I found myself using only apochromatic lenses, like the Voigtlander 125mm f/2.5 APO-Lanthar, the Leica 100mm f/2.8 Elmarit R APO, and especially the Coastal Optics 60mm UV-VIS-IR f/4 APO. These APO lenses extended my vision beyond what ordinary glass offered. But in time, even these sophisticated lenses fell short of the clarity I sought, and ceased to satisfy. Remember that the clarity was in my mind and not just in the lenses.

Furthermore, I had for the most part stopped shooting a single frame when I took a close-up or macro shot. Instead, I was now shooting multiple frames to make a photo, each one of which focused on one layer of the object I was shooting. The result is that for each photo, I now had to process ten or fifteen



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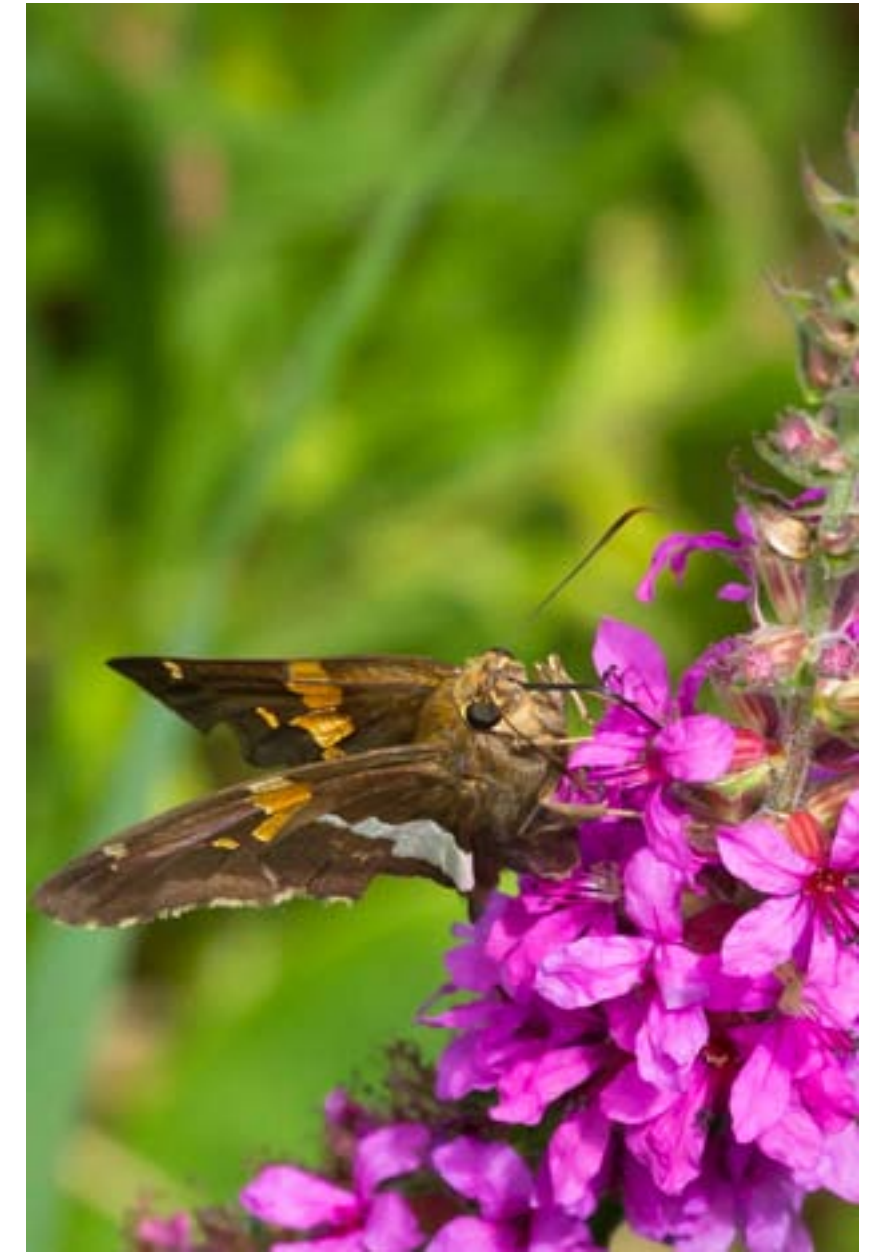
shots, each of those shots a micro-step different in focus from the one before it, so that I had a series of many clearly focused shots for any macro subject (a bug or a leaf), running from the front to the back of the subject.

I would then take this series of shots and process them on the computer so that the result was a single photo that was in clear focus from front to back. This technique is called “focus stacking. This was, needless to say, very time consuming, but the results helped to extend the clarity of what I was seeing with my mind, which a single frame shot with a camera could not reproduce. I was once again pushing the limit of the possible.

Before long, I had established a web site (MacroStop.com) devoted to focus stacking and had written a manual on how to go about focus stacking, outlining my growing experiences with this technique. And I did a lot of this, perhaps something close to 100,000 photos in a nine month period. But focus stacking had its own problems, introducing artifacts in the stacked image that interfered with the finished clarity of the photo. With this discovery, I had run out of options.

I was now using lenses that

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were considered by the best photographers and scientists as the standard by which all other macro lenses should be compared. I had reached the limits of the physical in my attempt to achieve the clarity of my mind through a camera lens. These limiting events marked the beginning of the end of my extreme interest in lenses and probably photography in general, although I was not fully aware of it at the time. I will always know photography.

Without fully realizing it, I was already in the process of extracting my meditation technique from the technique of close-up and macro photography. At this point, they were still combined, but the die was cast. I knew I had to move on, but this would take many months.

Using the analogy of a train that runs on tracks, I had simply run out of tracks. The professional photographers with whom I dialogued on various lens-oriented sites kept asking me why I needed more sharpness. They seemed irritated at my quest for ultimate clarity of vision and most were not open to any spiritual discussion whatsoever. I had even reached the point where I was about to have an internal part of my camera, the AA (anti-aliasing) filter, removed so that I could get just a little bit more

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sharpness. Well, things naturally came to a head before that took place.

Like flagging down a distant train, my internal meditation regime was trying to get my attention, but as usual it took a long time. I had exhausted the best photography equipment I could find, but not my meditation practice. It was on fire. All of this was a sign for me to once again begin to separate myself from the techniques of photography, which I had tried to do once before, only to fall deeper into looking through lenses. This time I finally got the message. I had indeed exhausted the existing technology. This realization itself was liberating.

With the lenses out of the picture, all that was left was my mind.

What I was trying to get through or at with all of the photography was not simply an excellent photo, but the clarity of mind that emerged through the whole photographic process, the ultimate in clarity. It was that clarity of mind, the 'seeing' with the mind that I was intent on, not the subject of the photo or the resulting photo itself. I could care less about that, although I was becoming a better and better photographer so I am told.

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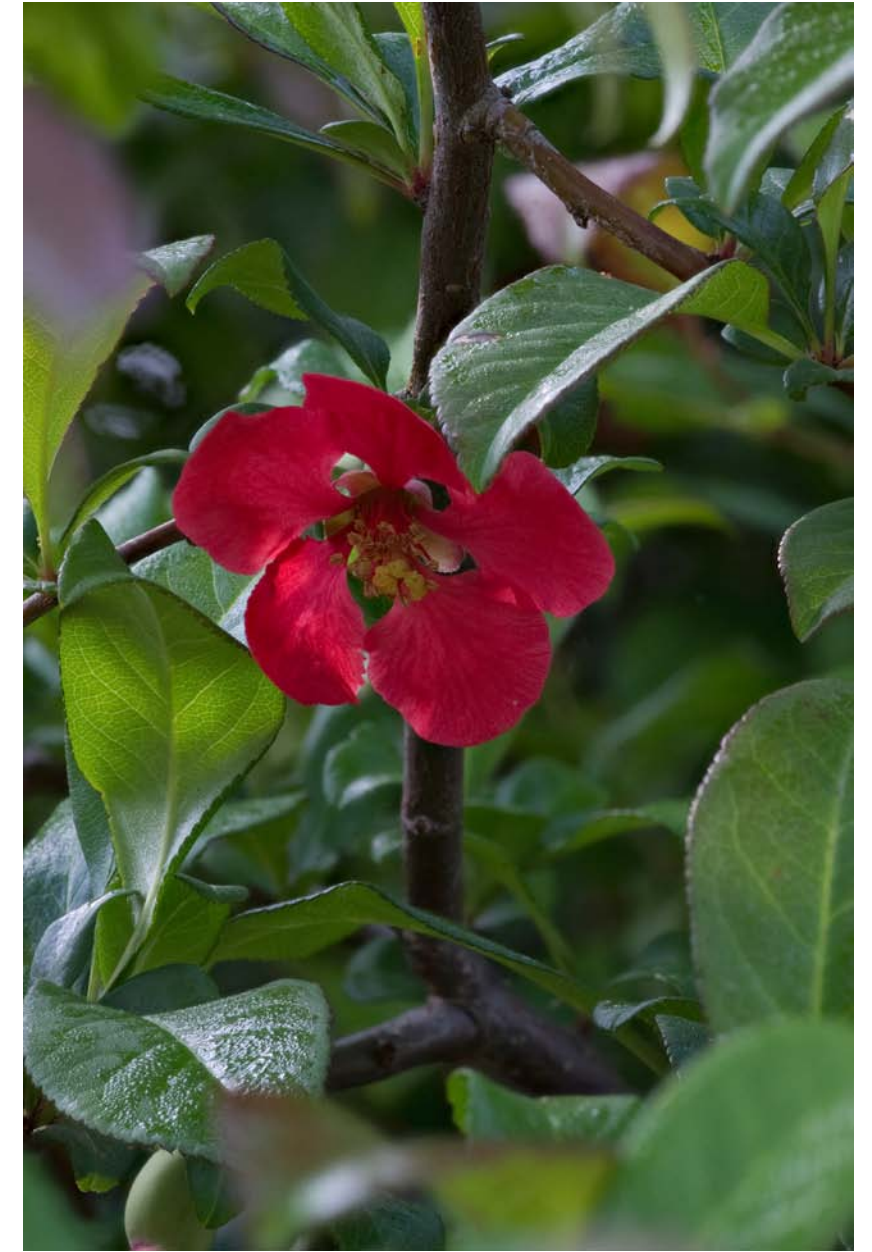


Of course my fellow photographers on the various forums I frequented could not understand this at all, and I can appreciate their point of view. I was wanting more of that clarity and even the arduous process of taking a long series of shots, combining them all, and coming up with a final photo, only got me so far. I had run out of time for that phase of my practice. Who knows which?

The net result was that I very carefully began to remove myself from my focus on photographic clarity. It was like getting up from a bed of broken glass fragments without getting punctured. The extraction was delicate. Very slowly I began to turn my gaze elsewhere, but where? The simple answer is: everywhere. I had perfected my gaze photographically, so to speak, and I now turned it on whatever I was doing and wherever I was at. It took time. There was a new sense of freedom.

My mind training through photography and my photographic focus simply relaxed and came to rest wherever I happened to be. And the clarity was still there. In fact, the clarity was sharper than ever because there was no longer any object to push to the limits, no lens to push beyond its usefulness. Instead, my gaze just wrapped

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itself around whatever was going on and rested there, held awake by the simple process of resting on the 'thing' itself. Meditation is all about resting.

This is not to say that I could do this all the time any more than I could always get my head straight by looking through a lens. But it is accurate to say that overall I had managed to extract myself from the photography process without a loss of clarity. I had mixed my mind training with photography almost by accident, and now I was extricating my meditation from the process of photographing itself.

In fact, clarity increased remarkably, probably due to not being under any particular physical constraint, like (as mentioned) the limits of a camera or lens, and so on. Again: this was not sudden. It took many months. It was like a puppy being weaned from its mom. I had to let go of the photography, at least as it related to mind practice. And I did, but gradually. This process was very subtle and delicate like the reflection of light through a prism. There was nothing wrong with doing photography; it was just that I had outgrown it as a means to assist meditation. It was a happy accident to begin with, and now I was moving on.

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What I write about here is fairly subtle and perhaps not easily understood. It is not like I was able to be aware of these changes myself all of the time either. Like most things, my awareness came in waves or cycles. There were times, long times, when I was immersed in totally ordinary consciousness, and not aware of all that much. That still is so. Then again, there were times when I was acutely aware of what is being presented here, just as clear as a bell ringing.

In other words, meditation techniques can need to stabilize, settle down, and come to rest like a leaf in a breeze gently rests when the wind stops. In the sheer resting, the mind is luminous. The mind fully shines when at rest like a lamp. By meditation technique, I am specifically referring to Mahamudra meditation, meditation where we are looking not at the content of our thoughts, but at the true nature of thoughts as they arise. The traditional Mahamudra gaze or stare comes from looking at the nature of the mind rather than at anything external. That empty gaze is gazing at emptiness.

On and Off the Cushion

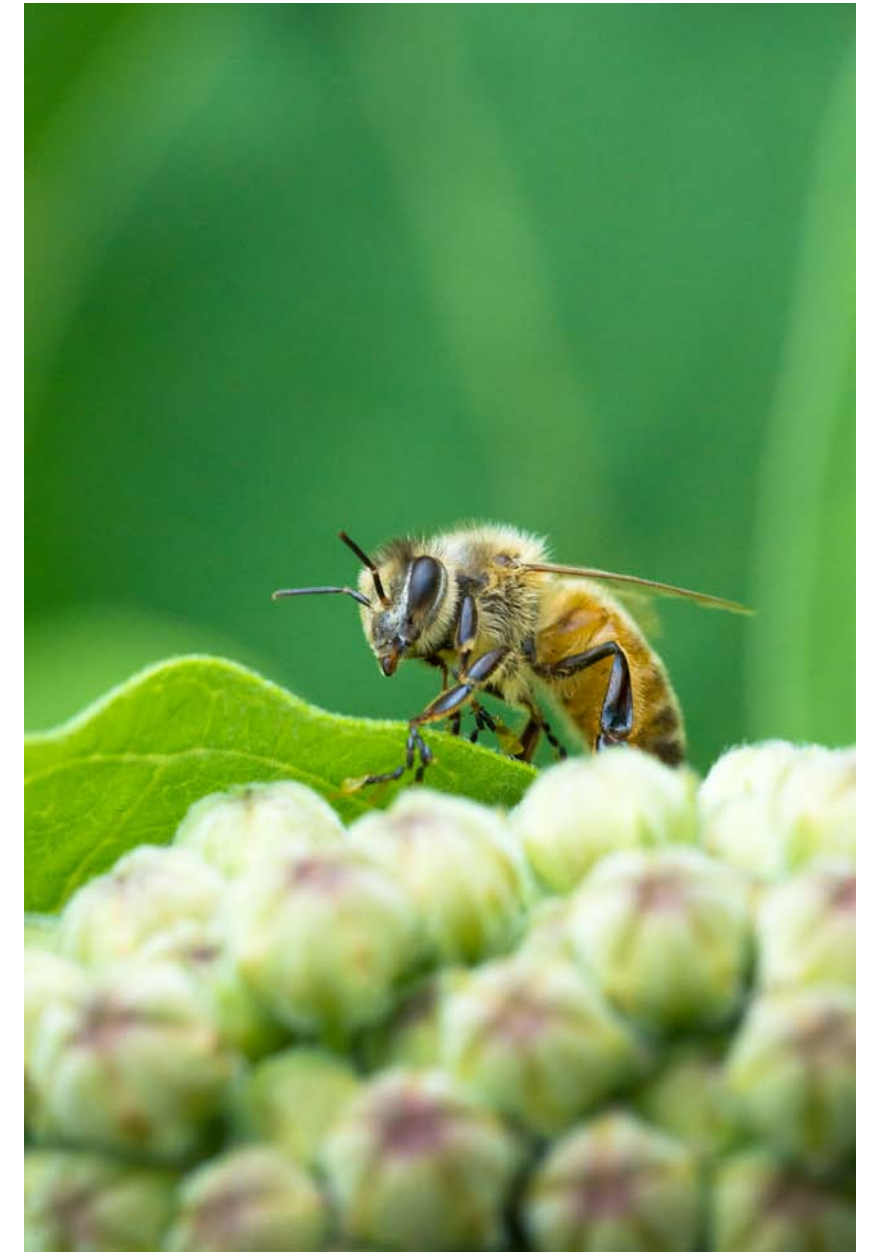
Mahamudra meditation at this point was not just a sometimes thing, whether I was on or off the cushion.

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The tendency was to practice it more of the time, rather than less, and it seems this practice is somewhat of an exponential curve. In other words, as time goes on, I found myself practicing more and more of the time, in fact, ever-increasingly. My take on this is that one does not dabble in Mahamudra. If one does it, one will do it more and more intensely, but that may just be my own experience. The drift seems to be toward doing it not only more of the time, but the goal would be to do it all of the time. And it becomes increasingly easier. In a way, it is the only way to be.

Mental Chatter

Something worth discussing is just what are the effects of Mahamudra from my view. What is this practice like, how does it appear in day-to-day life, and how does it play out with others? For myself, I don't see anything secret about all of this unless hearing about it causes a reader to build expectations that might obscure the spontaneity aspect of the whole process and delay progress. Still, there are many, many books and articles out there that go into every aspect of the technique and path, and these books are not on any list of forbidden books I am aware of. It is about time



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to discuss this wonderful form of meditation.

Clarity

I probably don't need to mention mental clarity here. I have been writing almost exclusively about that all this time, And 'rest'. Letting the mind rest in mental clarity is what this is all about. Of course, by definition, words will not suffice. They are but pointers, 'references' to an experience that each of us has to have for ourselves. Words depend on their meaning, and 'meaning' has to do with the sense words make. 'Sense' means the five senses and experience. So words cannot be a substitute for the actual sense experience they refer or point to, as in: living and being it. With that in mind, here goes.

Sitting

I have been sitting more or less seriously for some 36 years now. When I am at one of the many intensives I have attended, I end up sitting cross-legged for anywhere from one to three hours at a time, typically one and a half to two hours at a sitting. After a while my legs can hurt from just sitting in that position. Sure, I wriggle and squirm, change my position, and so on, but the bottom line is my legs hurt. And

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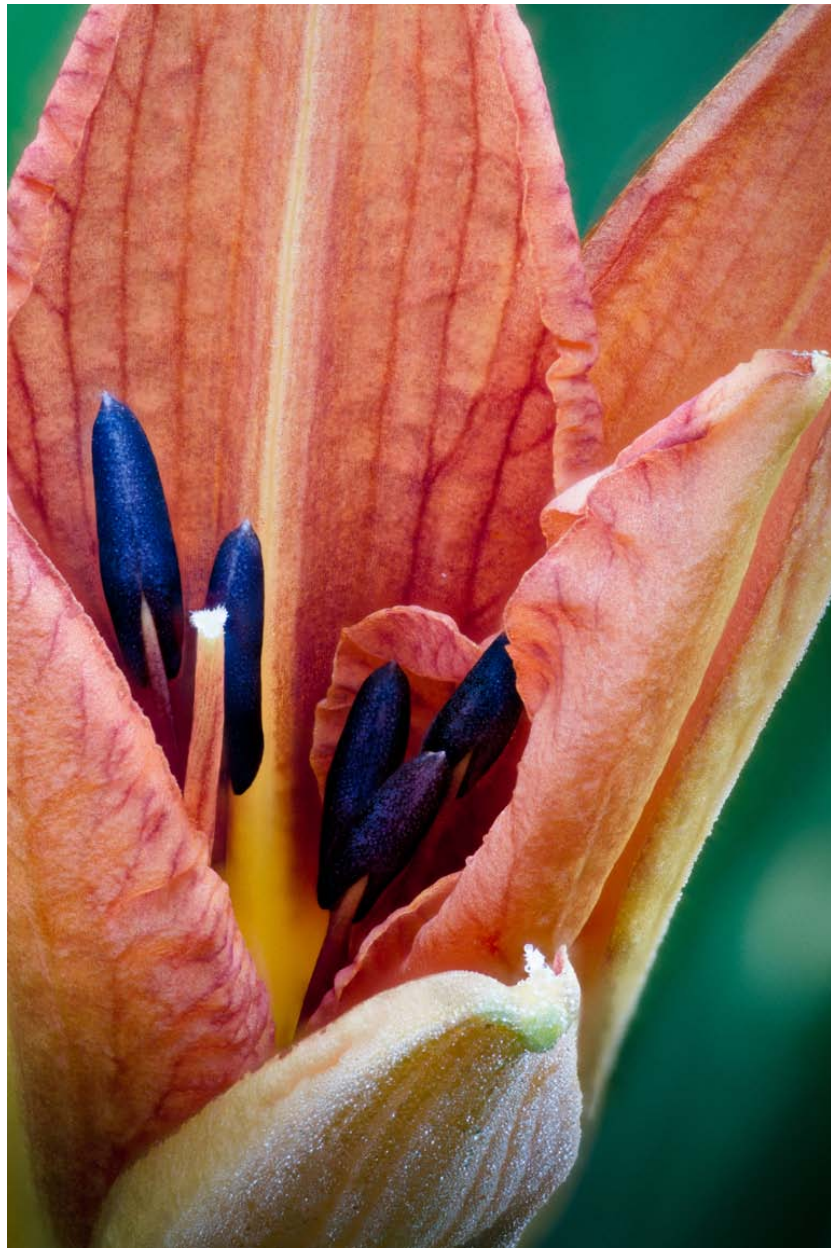
the more I try to hold still, the more they hurt until they really, really ache. A lot of this is mental.

I used to time my pain, following the schedule for the teaching or event. If the event was scheduled for two hours, I could usually manage to just make it to the end before my legs really began to complain.

But these kinds of events are flexible. Quite often the teacher would run over the set time in order to finish a section of the text, sometimes as much as a half hour and sometimes even an hour. When that happened, my legs really began to scream. I would find myself unable to listen to the teaching in favor of hoping someone up there would look at their watch and notice that we have run over. My thoughts were not always anything I am of. You get the idea. And I would try not to get a little angry about it. My legs were angry.

I am one of these people who like to sit still or at least appear to sit still when I am in the shrine room for a teaching. I don't move to a kneeling position with my legs under and behind me, or bend them off to this or that side, etc. That is for whooses.

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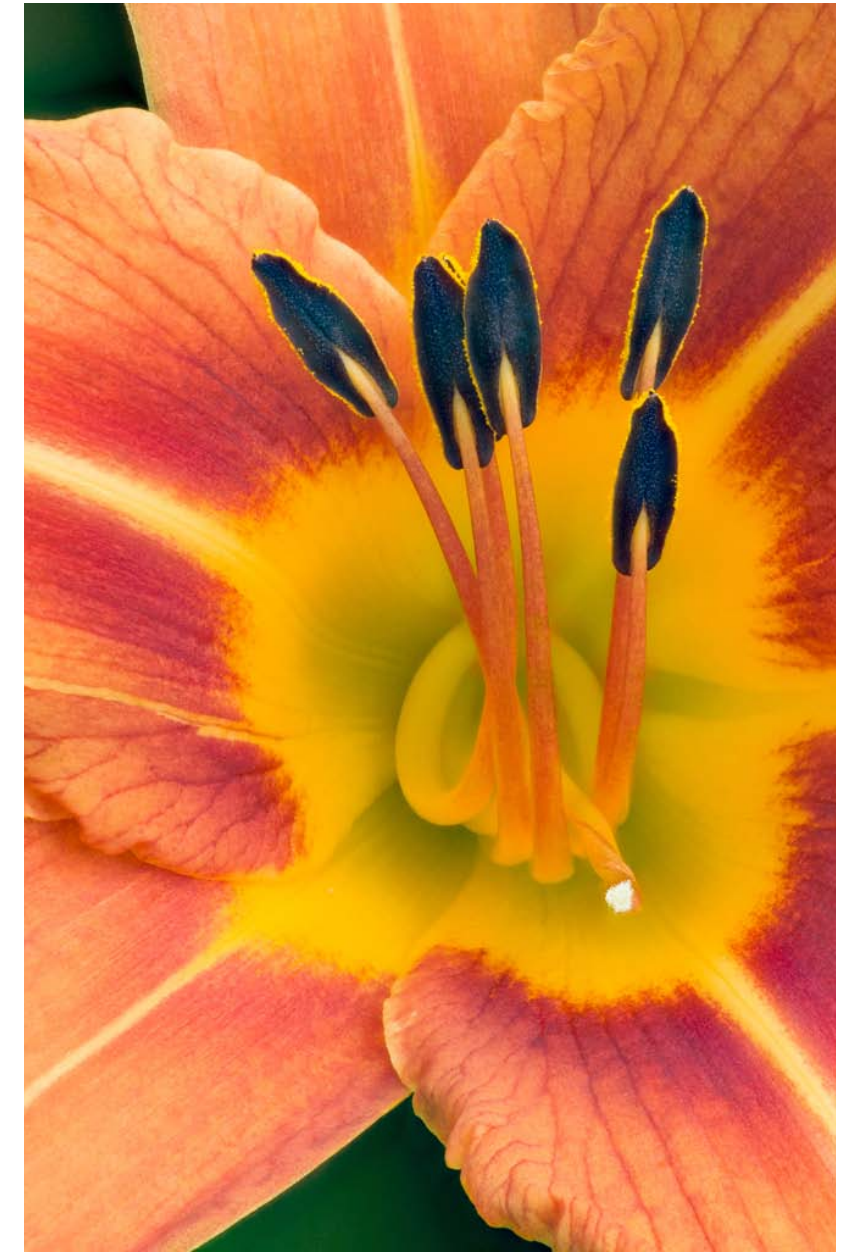


I maintain my original position and try very hard not to move... much. Micro-movements I allow, and I am expert at moving just enough to get some temporary relief, even though five minutes later, when that part of my leg again begins to cry out, I will have to move again. If you could see a stop-motion film of my micro-movements when sitting, it would be like a smooth subtle perpetual-motion flick.

With Mahamudra meditation and concentration, there is no leg pain and sitting for two hours is easy. Now why is that? As far as I can see, it is not because I am looking at the true nature of the leg pain as it arises. It is certainly not because I am finally getting more and more used to sitting for long periods of time, although that is a fact. Regular sitting for long periods does make it somewhat easier to do just that: sit more painlessly. But that is not what I am pointing to here.

What it is about Mahamudra meditation that makes sitting relatively painless is simply the 'rest'. In this type of meditation the body and mind are at rest. When we let the mind rest, the body follows. It rests too, and when resting it is, well, 'resting'. There is no tension, no tightness to get tired of or from.

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The body is completely relaxed. And because it is completely relaxed, it can just sit there for a very long time without the cramping and stiffness, rigidity, and strain we might normally have. This is one of the attributes of Mahamudra-style meditation.

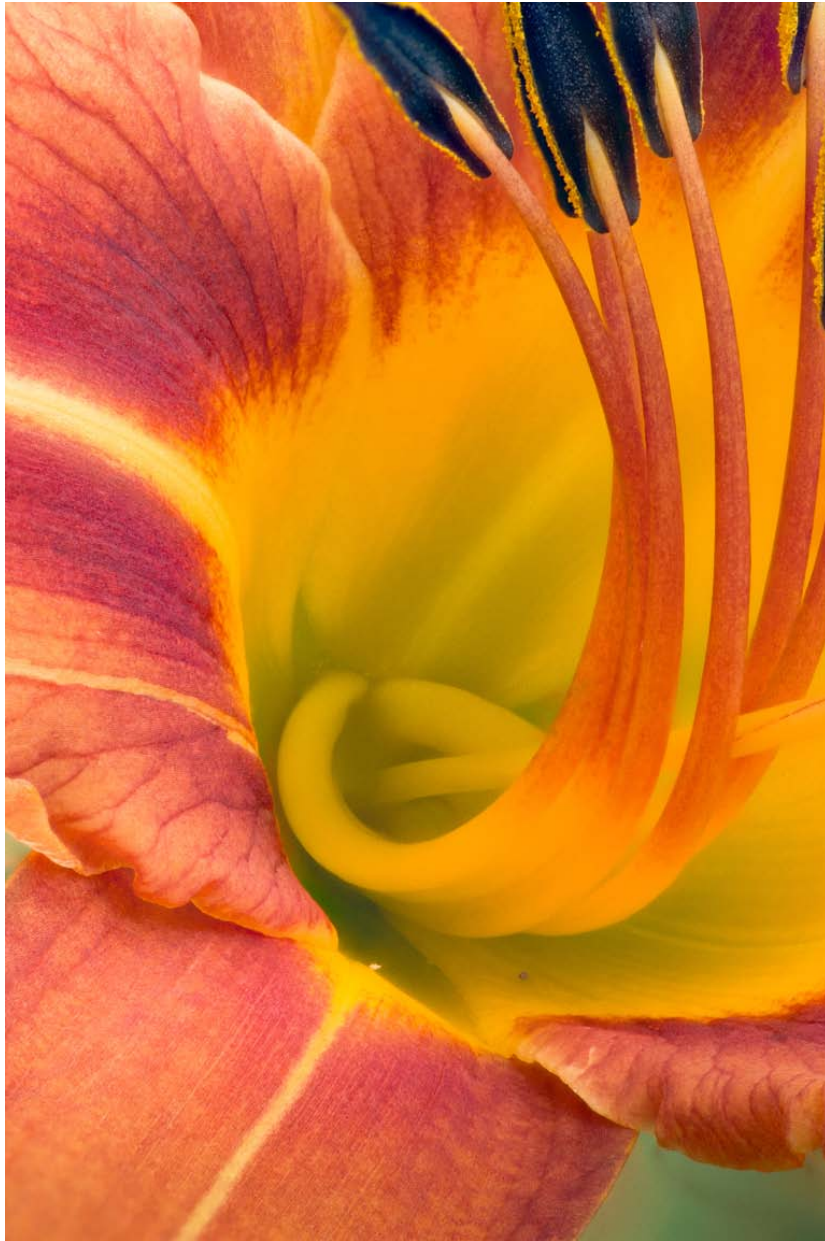
Calm and Peacefulness

As a personality type, I am active, somewhat shy, and certainly self-conscious. In other words, I am usually quite aware of where I am at all times, like sitting in the middle of a group of people. And while I 'subjectify' easily, I don't 'objectify' easily. Being an object, being seen and observed, is foreign to me. 'I' am the observer, and don't like to be looked at. As I said, I tend to be self-conscious.

For many years I have helped to video the teachings at the monastery where my teacher lives. To do this I have to sit at the very front, with others behind me and on both sides of me. This position makes me a very easy visual target for everyone and it is all I can do to keep myself calm and allow myself to objectify a bit.

When the question and answer times come (when students get up and walk to the microphone to ask

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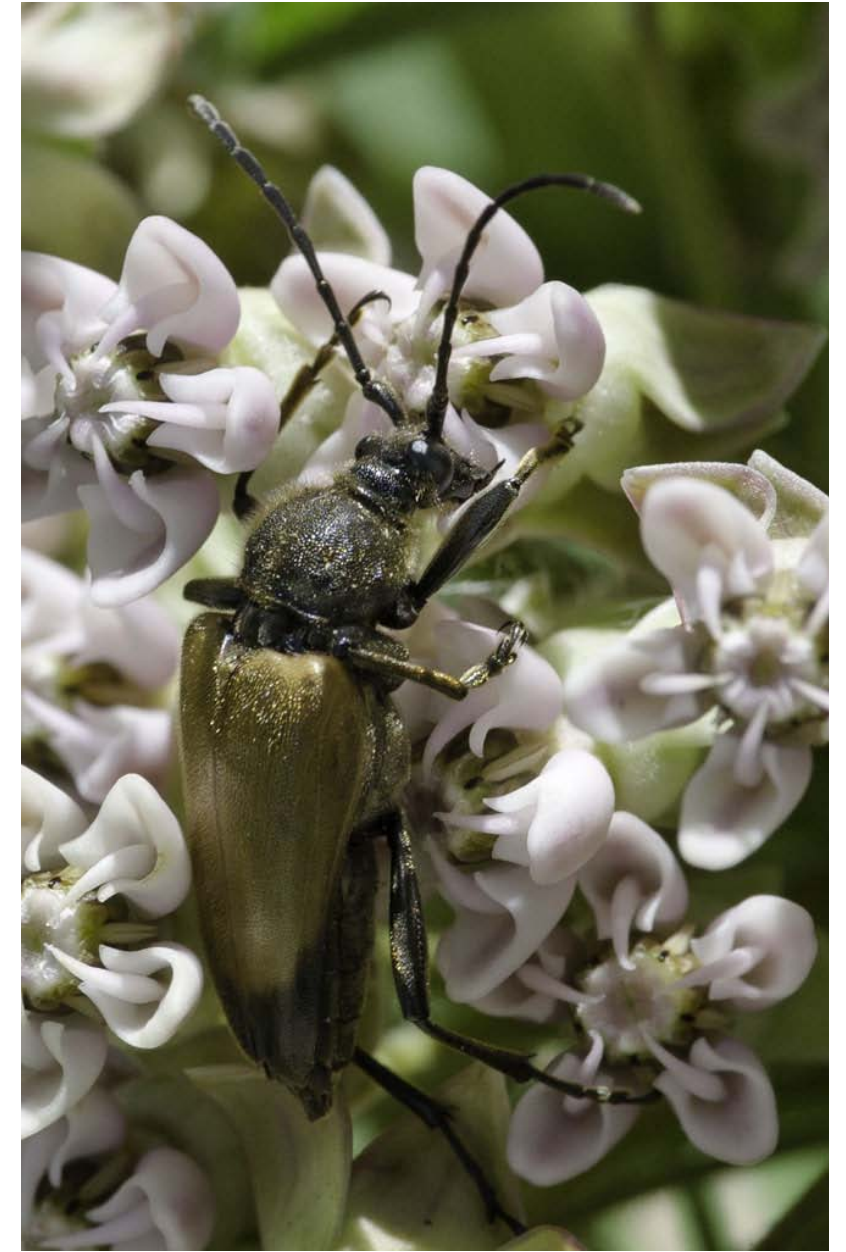
a question, I feel like I am wearing the scarlet letter or something. I tend to quickly ask my question and sit back down, while most folks just remain by the microphone. I don't like to be in the public focus, so to speak. Some of you will understand.

With Mahamudra meditation, all of this changes. I have no self-consciousness whatsoever. In fact, it is very much like I am completely alone in the middle of all those people, like I am the only one in the shrine room or anywhere. Even getting up and asking a question has no ripples. I am totally quiet and at peace. People to the right of me, people to the left of me, Rinpoche in front, and many people behind me make no difference. There I sit, with eyes looking forward. My mind is at peace. I am not socially conscious or self-conscious. This is a one of the attributes of Mahamudra-style meditation.

Catching Karma

In Mahamudra meditation we gradually learn to look at the true nature of each thought as it arises, the sooner the better, preferably before the content of the thought is even apparent to us. In other words, we meet an arising thought with Mahamudra meditation before

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we determine the content of that thought, that is: what the thought is about. We never know and we don't care what the thought is about. We care only about determining the true nature of the thought and resting in that.

If a thought arises, and we see that it is a 'bad' thought, we meet that thought with meditation by looking not at its content, but at its true nature. I have been taught that if we identify the content of the thought, even if we immediately look at its nature right afterward, it has already marked our mindstream with its imprint or karma. This is all part of the meditation technique, which I won't even try to explain here.

Conversely, if we meet the thought head-on as it arises, before we know what the content of that thought is, it vanishes and leaves no karmic imprint. Do this all or much of the time and you stop creating the most common cause of karma, which is the reinforcing of karmic tracks by successive imprints of the same thought, like worrying about something. The same goes for anger, hatred, fear, hoping, expectations, and all other manner of useless thoughts. This is the kind of thought that fills our mind most of the time. With Mahamudra meditation, we

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tend not to leave an imprint.

I am learning to do that, but I still tend to see the content and then look at the nature of the thought, almost like you might apply a remedy. This too stops karmic imprints, other than the initial one. It is best not to have any, good or bad, imprints. I am working on that. This is one of the attributes of Mahamudra-style meditation.

Meeting Thoughts Head-on

And I notice this same kind of effect when in a public place. For some reason, I can sense when someone is looking at me and perhaps even thinking of me, and without identifying that thought, I tend to meet that 'look' by seeing its nature. If I am not particularly aware at that moment, it seems I spring to awareness to meet that thought with meditation. Mahamudra meditation naturally arises.

The same goes for thoughts in general. Some thoughts appear quite mental or intellectual, but others seem to be more viscous or have emotive content to them. I am not talking about full-blown heavy kleshas like anger and jealousy here, but rather ordinary heavy or active thoughts. By active thoughts I mean that as I apprehend or become

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aware of them, they seem to have movement and duration. In other words, when I look at their nature, they don't just vanish, but rather persist for some time. You could almost say that I grapple with them. I find myself, at these times, doing guru yoga with this kind of thought.

Often they will subside, lose their viscosity, and vanish. Sometimes they persist and I can't really resolve them to their nature. This is an area where I am learning as I go.

This is particularly true when I have 'bad' thoughts. Let's discuss what I mean by bad thoughts. For me, 'bad' thoughts are thoughts that are not doing me or anyone else any possible good, like hopes and fears. And these thoughts are, by definition, thoughts that I have already identified by their content. In other words, they are thoughts about something and not thoughts that I meet head on in meditation.

It could be a thought like "the person is not nice," or it could be a thought that a person thinks that I don't like them and I sense that thought. These kinds of thoughts are legion. They are endless. These type of thoughts, although they obviously have left their karmic imprint, are prime candidates for Mahamudra

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meditation. As time goes by, I am getting better at meeting those thoughts at their earliest moment of recognition, and am gradually beginning (I believe) to catch many of them before their content is even revealed. It does not matter what their content is, good or bad.

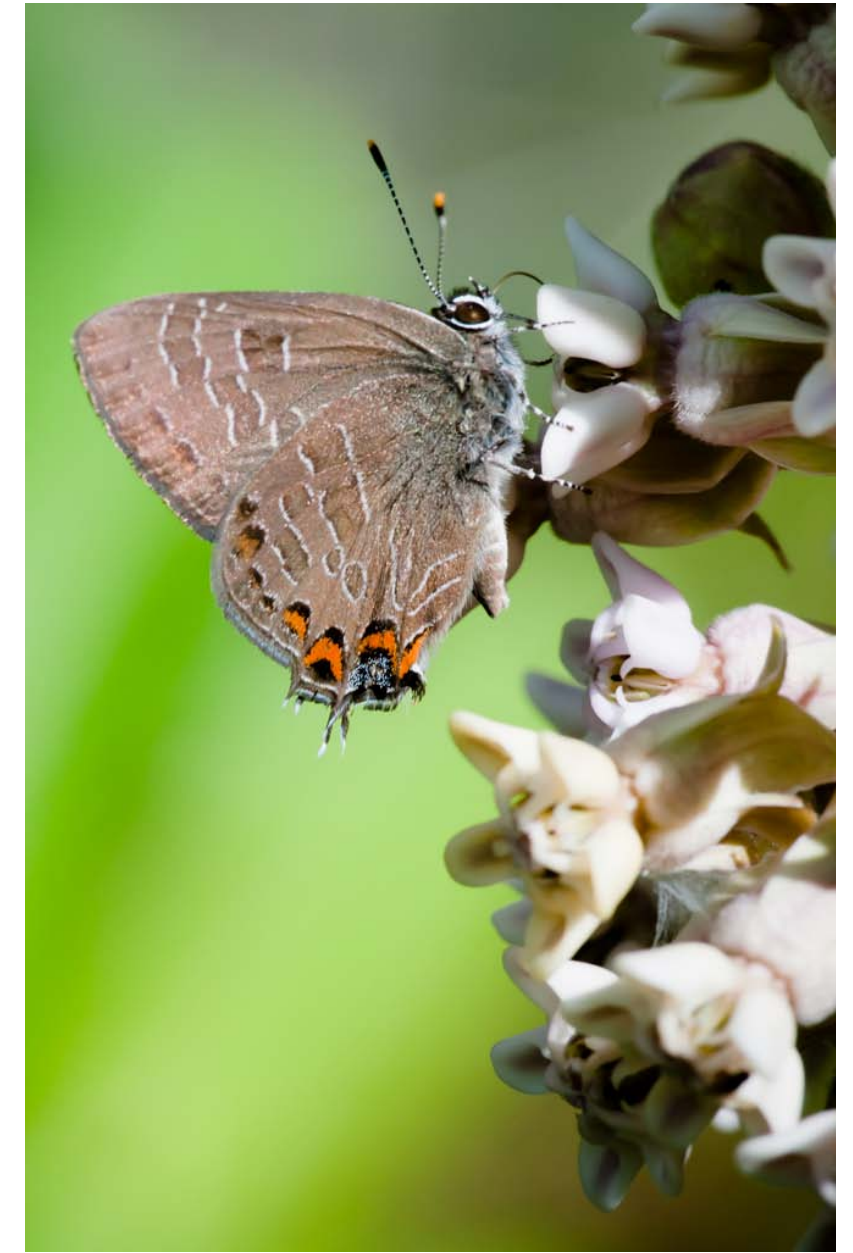
The process of Mahamudra meditation is becoming more and more of a meeting of any thought that is carrying some kind of load head on. I should separate the effort required to learn Mahamudra meditation, from the meditation itself. In other words, I am still on a learning curve here, which sometimes requires effort on my part to perform this kind of meditation. However, I begin to see that given practice, Mahamudra meditation becomes more-or-less automatic. In the end and after a while, it just happens by itself.

Something arises and I meet it with Mahamudra meditation without a thought, effortlessly. This is how I see the future of this form of meditation for me. This is one of the attributes of Mahamudra-style meditation.

Learning Mahamudra

Why don't we all just go out and learn Mahamudra? Why do we have all of these other kind of practices?

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What is the point of them, when we could just learn Mahamudra from the beginning? These are good questions.

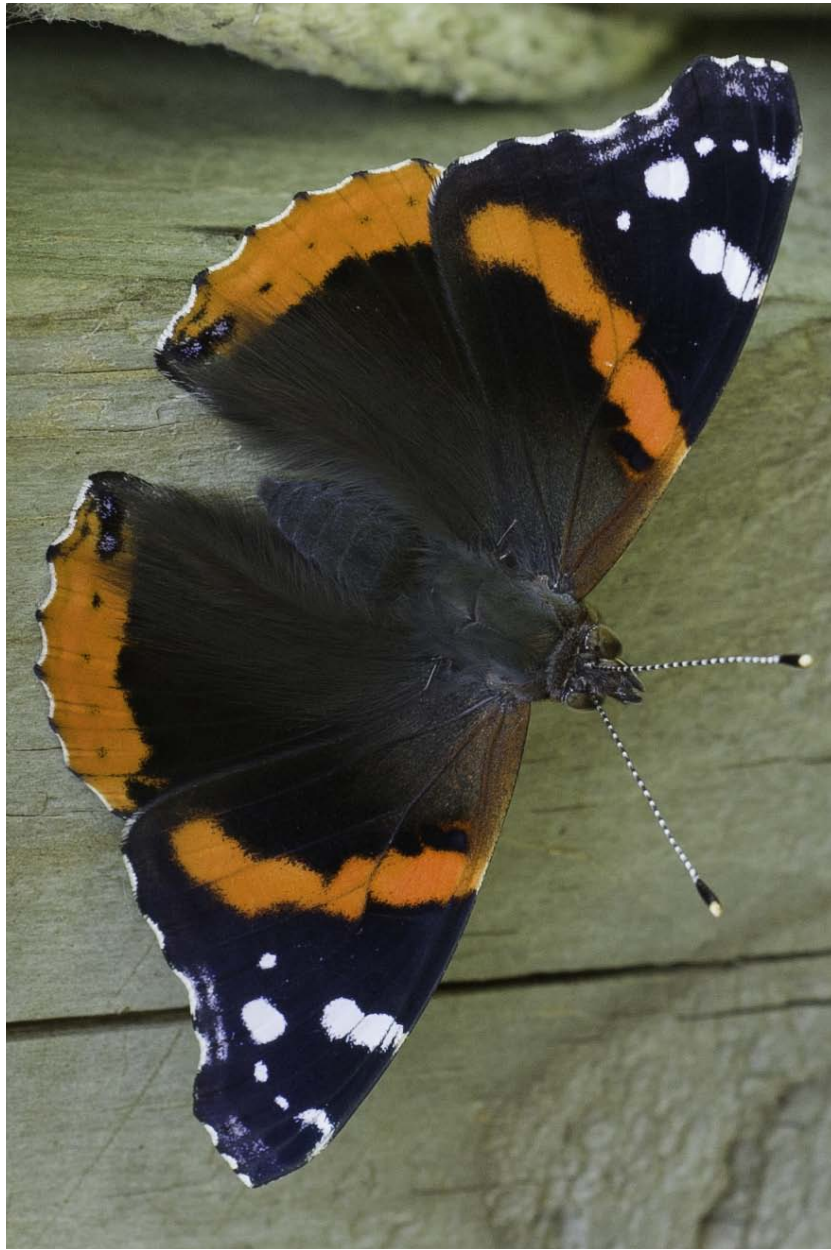
The fact is that Mahamudra is not that easy to learn. To be more exact, Mahamudra cannot be learned through books and written teachings. You can't just pick it up; at least that is what I have been taught. It has to be pointed out to you by an authentic teacher, and even then it can take many years. The reason why this is so may challenge many of you. I know it challenged me. And I will try to explain.

Intellectual understanding alone is not enough. Mahamudra technique is beyond verbal description and words can but describe it, but not point it out. It takes a living teacher to do that and that is not the only obstacle we face. Our own lack of preparedness is an even greater obstacle and there are aspects to preparation that we probably don't even know about or understand. Let me list a couple:

Merit and Devotion

Mental preparation alone is not enough to empower us for the Mahamudra experience. No matter how smart we are, we will never, ever figure it out or, if we do, I am told that it will take endless kalpas

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(millions of years) to do so. I have asked various authorities repeatedly why they don't just start right out teaching Mahamudra meditation, and their every answer is "lack of merit and devotion" on the part of most students. What is that?

First of all, I am not an expert. I am a beginning Mahamudra student and can only give you my take on all of this. Merit is something we accumulate through our good deeds and actions, and I might add through pure good deeds and actions, and a pure mind – our attitude. And it is not just obvious actions I am speaking of here, but the entire state of our mind. That too has to be purified, and that takes time, lots of time.

Over and over again it has been explained to me that the main reason why students don't grasp Mahamudra meditation is their lack of merit, not their lack of interest, smarts, or other qualifications. Merit is something we accumulate until it reaches a point where it somehow blesses us or opens our mind enough to receive some of these more subtle teachings. And merit is not something we can just go out and buy or drum up. We can't trade in our good deeds for merit, but our good deeds and a more enlightened attitude can generate merit.

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And if we have an authentic teacher, someone who can point out the Mahamudra technique to us, it is not their fault that we don't get it. I had what are called the 'pointing out' instructions at least two times before I had any hint of recognition of the mind's true nature. I was willing, but just somehow not yet ready or able to receive.

The other obstacle to Mahamudra meditation is the lack of devotion to our teacher on our part. Without the blessings of the teacher, no experience will arise. This I have been taught. A lack of merit and lack of devotion are what is missing in most would-be Mahamudra students. Lack of devotion just points to the fact that the channel between our dharma teacher and us is not wide enough, not properly established in some way. It needs to be developed and opened more. The trust and devotion to the teacher has to be out there before it can be in here, so to speak.

How Do We Develop Merit and Devotion?

Well, the short answer is: gradually. The longer answer is why we have all of the preliminary practices like the Common Preliminaries (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma), and the

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Uncommon Preliminaries or Ngondro. And of course meditation practice itself. This puts us right back toward the beginning, as in: where so we begin in practice? If you really believe you are serious about training your mind and learning the Buddhist methods, then here are the steps to do just that. First, we need to assess the state of our own mind.

How Crazy Are We?

The simple answer is that we have no idea. Up until now we have known everything through the monocle of the untrained mind. We don't know whether our mental filter is clear or cloudy, clean or dirty, and so on, because we have had nothing to compare it to. Compared to what? After all, we have never known any other way of seeing since we were born. Here in the west, it is even worse because we assume our mind is crystal clear and good-to-go at birth. What's not to like? Why shouldn't we be ready for the most advanced teachings like Mahamudra meditation from the very start?

So it should not come as any great surprise to us that the first thing we may learn that the first thing we may learn in beginning meditation is that our vision is obscured and not

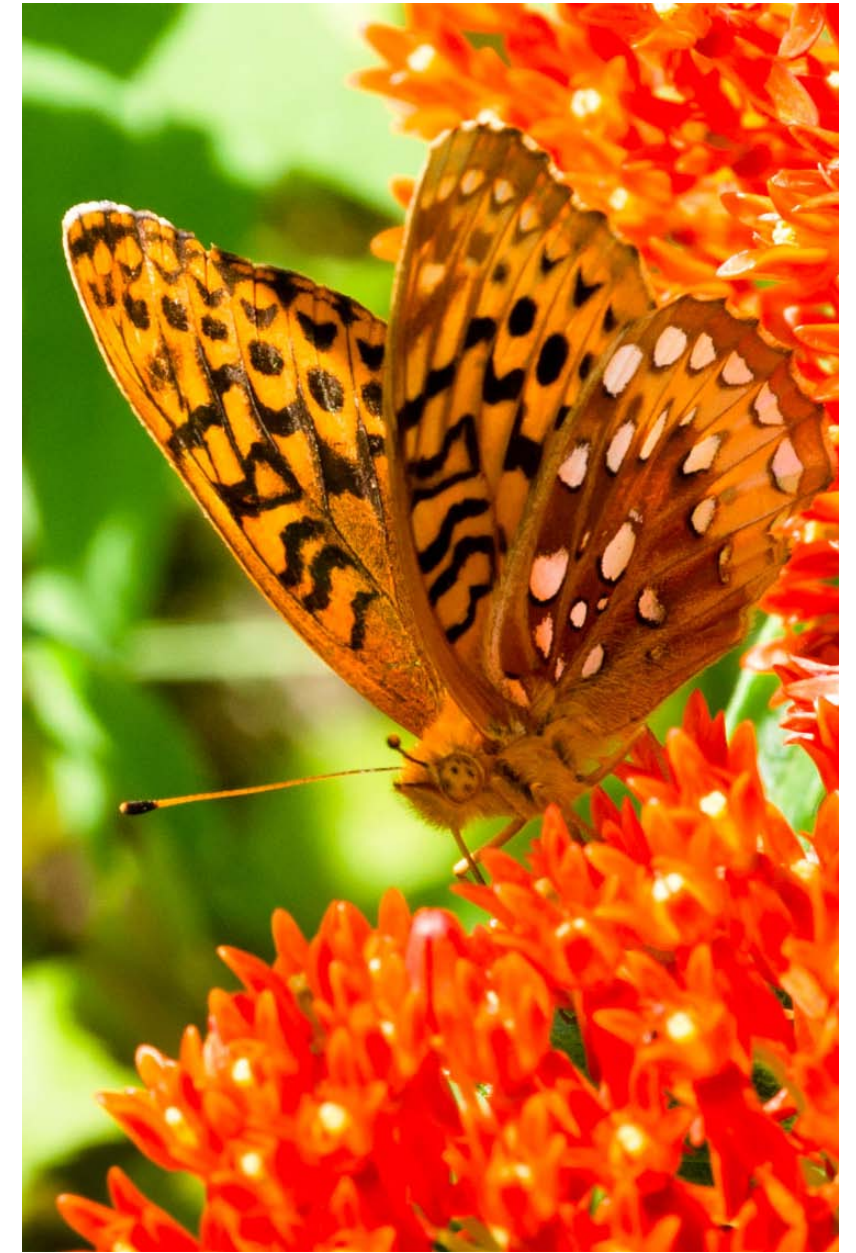
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quite as clear as we always assumed it was. It is like looking and finding dirt everywhere we look, only to discover the dirt is on the lens we are looking through.

In fact, there are all kinds of mental baggage that we have been carrying around literally forever that has to be cleared up for us in order to see and use the mind properly. We can check this for ourselves very simply. Here is how:

Just go and sit by yourself for even ten minutes. As an exercise, just focus on and follow your own breath as it moves in and out. Don't be distracted, but just let the mind rest on the breath, undistracted. Let it remain there. Just do it right now, so we have something to discuss.

My guess is that for most of you these could be ten very long minutes, minutes that include a lot of distraction, and that you find it difficult to rest the mind without distractions. Most of you probably won't even try, because you think you already know the answer. This inability to simply rest in the mind itself is considered an obscuration. Examples of obscurations might include a lack of mindfulness, a lack of awareness, mental agitation and irritation, interruptions like



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a wandering mind, daydreaming, laziness, sleepiness, and so on. These are just some minor obscurations we might run into on the cushion as we attempt to meditate.

Major obscurations would include anger, jealousy, greed, hostility, fear, hope, expectations, pride, worrying, violence, ignorance, attachment, and so on. These minor and major obscurations generally cloud the mind from being able to apprehend and register more subtle and advanced teachings such as Mahamudra meditation. We have been carrying these obscurations with us as long as we can remember and may not even realize it.

Obscurations have to somehow be clarified and removed before we can progress and see clearly enough to undertake any of the more advanced practices like Mahamudra. How to do this is the question and that is where the Common Preliminaries (Four Thoughts) and ngondro (Extraordinary Preliminaries) come in. Ngondro (pronounced nūn-dro) is tailor made to remove obscurations and work the mind into a condition of awareness and mindfulness. Ngondro may seem arduous and endless, but it is the very best way I know to efficiently remove obscurations. If not through

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something like ngondro, how do you plan to remove obscurations?

The Sequence of Learning the Dharma

Buddhists are very efficient. They like to make lists and tend to organize everything in the proper order or sequence, and that includes practice. If you one day aspire to practice Mahamudra meditation, there is a very definite order of practice that is suggested. It is not that there are no other possibilities, but all things considered, here is the order of dharma practice that has been taught for at least one thousand years. This order works not because Buddhists say it works, but Buddhists says it works because in fact it does work.

Happiness & Suffering

In the great many teachings, both written and oral, that I have attended or studied, perhaps the first and foremost statement that most lamas present is:

“All beings want happiness;
No beings want to suffer.”

However obvious this statement may be, unless we take it to heart, we will be missing the point. Every being from the giant whale and elephant to the teeny tiniest microbe that moves

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is trying to live and have their particular form of happiness. And no being known to science (except perhaps humankind) voluntarily seeks suffering for its own sake. In fact, it is just the reverse. All beings try to avoid suffering.

Beings of all kinds and sizes share this approach to life and all beings, large and small, have the same essential Buddha Nature. If we do not have respect for ALL life, most of the Buddhist approach will be lost on us. After all, there is nothing intellectual or abstract about the above statement that beings search for happiness and try to avoid suffering. It is not subtle.

The Four Common Preliminaries

And there is nothing abstract about the Four Common Preliminaries either. In fact, these four thoughts (as they are called) are probably responsible for my being a Buddhist because, after looking into a number of different religions, when I came across these four ideas, they did not seem to me religious at all. They made simple plain old common sense and were ideas I had been contemplating on my own as far back as I can remember. It was then that I realized that (at least for me) Buddhism was not religious in any way I could identify from my Christian upbringing. Buddhism is

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simply a practical method to achieve greater awareness, a step-by-step gradual path to enlightenment. Buddhism doesn't even have a 'god'. Buddha is not going to reach down and enlighten us. It is up to us to enlighten ourselves. The Buddha just pointed out to us how to do it. We have to do it.

The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind

The "Four Common Preliminaries" are also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma," because only by having these four thoughts constantly in mind can we manage to turn our mind away from the external and internal distractions that haunt us each day and toward the nature of the mind itself.

These four thoughts that turn the mind are essential to the Buddhist teachings and they are easy to understand. Here are the four thoughts that, if we can hold them in mind, are capable of turning our minds away from the many distractions and toward inner realization:

First Thought: The Precious Human Life

Life is precious! Even the least of living beings treasures life as best it

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can. Growing up I always thought and hoped that I would be good for something in this life, that I would be used up in some good way, and not just wasted.

The point here is not only that all life is precious, although of course it is to each being. The main point is that this particular human life we happen to have right now is most precious, and it is precious not just because it is our own life. The human life is precious because it is said to be our only opportunity to find and practice the dharma and thereby somehow awaken and move toward enlightenment. The opportunity of having a human life to learn dharma is what is most precious of all. My teacher would say that the fact that you are reading this paragraph means that you have accumulated enormous merit to even come in contact with the dharma, to even hear about it. You are already in the 99th percentile of all beings. In other words, you have already come a long way.

It is written that of the six realms, from low to high, only the human realm offers the exact combination we need to meet and actually learn the dharma, and so it is often called the “precious human birth.” In every other realm we are either suffering or bewildered too much to

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practice dharma (like the realm of animals) or we are too high on one thing or another (and not down-to-earth enough) to actually practice dharma. The human birth is the one happy medium. And we have it now.

Second Thought: Impermanence

The second thought that can turn the mind is the thought of impermanence. “Impermanence” simply means that we have a limited opportunity here, one that before we know it will be gone. There is a wonderful story of the great teacher the Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who opened one of his talks with these words: “Some of us will die soon...,” he said very slowly, and then took a sip of whatever he was drinking, and continued “And the rest a little later.”

Of the ‘Four Thoughts,’ “impermanence” is the most obvious to us all, if only because life jogs our memory every once in a while and reminds us that we ARE in fact impermanent.

We all get a whiff of impermanence from time to time, perhaps as those closest to us die or when we momentarily realize that we too are impermanent, that death can only come closer as time passes. I like to call ‘impermanence’ the smelling

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salts of the dharma. It wakes us up. And there seem to be several aspects to impermanence.

Witnessing the heartbreaking sense of impermanence nature displays is one way we are affected, often bringing out compassion within us for the suffering that most animals and beings experience. This helps to keep us sober. Then there is the recollection of our own impermanence, the fact that we will for sure die one day. This is harder for us to look at, so we tend to push it out of our consciousness most of the time.

A sense of our impermanence can also urge us to not waste time, because our own life will expire one day soon, and for all we know, it could be today. As the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche said to me years ago when I left his monastery in West Bengal, India, “Michael, I will see you tomorrow or in the next life, whichever comes first.”

Third Thought: Karma and Its Results

Understanding karma and its results is not as easy as it might seem. Karma is like tasting some fine cheese or food where there is an aftertaste, a taste and then a little later, an after-taste. In this analogy,

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the taste is pretty obvious: action and result. You do something in life and it provokes a reaction or result.

The aftertaste (with understanding karma in my experience) is that as you get more into looking at karma, you begin to realize that not just the big decisions or actions bring results, but that ALL actions (everything we do) bring some reaction, lay down their own track or cast some fine shadow. And if we repeat that action, good or bad for us, the track only deepens. Those tracks are also our karma.

It took me a while for this to really sink in. In other words, we would be best served if we were very, very careful in everything we do, careful in every action, no matter how trivial it might appear on the surface. It reminds me of one of the most common images used to illustrate chaos theory in modern physics, the image of the flapping of a butterfly’s wing in South America serving to modify the weather in Iceland – something like that. Little things can mean a lot. This is particularly true with karma.

Karma is not only about committing bad deeds and paying for it, but also about shaping our lives almost invisibly by every small action we do.



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This is perhaps best celebrated in the methodical care and gentleness shown by some of the great Zen masters in every move they make, like the traditional tea ceremony. The more we work our way into the practice of dharma, the more careful we become in our every deed, word, and thought – body, speech, and mind. With karma we are all walking on tiptoe.

Fourth Thought: Samsara – This World

The fourth of the “Four Thoughts” is the consistent unde-pendability of this world, also sometimes called “the revulsion of Samsara,” Samsara being this world that you and I live in. We live in a state of change that itself is changing, or as I like to say it: I will never be able to quite get all of my ducks in a row. I always believe I will, but I never have yet, and the teach-ings suggest it is logically impossible.

Like the gambling casinos, it is only our own gullibility that keeps us betting on permanency, thinking we can actually game the system. Others can't, but given enough time, we think we are different; we can do it. This is the same attitude or carrot that has led us from life to life through beginning-less time.

Only when we are severely struck

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down by impermanence do we actually sicken and become nauseas with life as we know it; only then does it turn empty of meaning for us and reveal itself as a construct. Otherwise, we keep it hopping at all times.

Four Thoughts Summary

These four thoughts: the precious human life, impermanence, karma, and the sheer undependability of life have been said to be the four friends that help to keep us awake, that keep us from totally abandoning ourselves to the deep sleep of distractions, bewilderment, and confusion.

“The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind” really are the gateway to practicing Tibetan Buddhism for many. I know they were for me. When I first heard of them, I counted through them one by one and totally agreed. I had a little trouble with the fourth thought, the one about detaching from this world, because I thought for a while that it meant I could not have any fun or joy in this life, which of course is not what it saying. I had to be sure that those Buddhists were not taking away whatever little joy in life I could manage. They weren't. And it may be worthwhile to relate a little story from my experience that



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involves the four thoughts.

Early in 1974, I heard that a Tibetan Rinpoche was coming to Ann Arbor, Michigan (my home town) to speak. I had been reading his books and was very impressed. His name was Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and he was Oxford educated and spoke fluent English. I just had to go and hear him speak, so I called up the folks at the University of Michigan who were sponsoring him to make sure I could get a seat.

As it turned out, not that many people knew about Trungpa Rinpoche at that point in time, so I ended up as his chauffeur for the weekend and also designing a poster for his public talk. I was enthused.

After picking him up at the airport (a story in itself), I drove him to the professor's house where he was to stay and helped carry his bags to his room. Then I kind of hung around on the outskirts of the group that had turned out to welcome him. I wanted to see a little bit more what this rinpoche was all about. I was watching from the sidelines and I liked what I saw so far.

Before I knew it everyone was filing out of the house to go on a tour of the U. of M. campus. I prepared to leave, but before I could do

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so, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche signaled to me and asked me to stay behind with him. He was not going to accompany the group for the tour. Suddenly, there I was, alone in the house with Trungpa Rinpoche. Wow!

Rinpoche ushered me into a small office and began inspecting every object, knick-knack, and what-not in the room with the kind of interest I would associate with a young child. I was taking this all in. As for me, I knew little better than to stare at the floor, waiting for something to happen, but he was all over the place. This was a lesson in itself for me on how to use my time.

Then Trungpa motioned me to sit in a small wooden chair and began to instruct me in meditation, only he never labeled it as that. In fact, I had no idea what he was doing, but I liked the attention, and the mere fact that he noticed or considered me at all. All the while he was drinking a bottle of Saki, a cup at a time. It was overwhelming.

This instruction went on for quite a while, and he soon had me sitting there following my breath, breathing in and breathing out. He was watching me very closely. Meanwhile, I was absorbing all of

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this at several levels.

I can remember one particular instruction he gave, as I was breathing out. Trungpa Rinpoche told me to let the breath go out, and I tried hard to do just that, just to let it go. He saw this and told me to really let it go all the way out and not to worry. “It will come back,” he said. It returns. As I took this in and tried to relax still deeper, on a more inner level my innate fear of death flashed before my eyes and then relaxed also. I never feared death as much again after that moment. And so it went. It was cosmic. There is more to it, but perhaps another time. You get the idea. It was deep and transforming.

When the instruction was over and as I was leaving, we walked down the hall together toward the front door. On the wall on our right was the poster I had created for Rinpoche’s talk. It was of an oriental dragon flying in the clouds carrying four pearls, a pearl securely grasped in each paw. Trungpa Rinpoche stopped at the poster, gestured toward it and said, “Do you know what this image is all about?” I told him that I did not, and that I just thought it was a wonderful image. He then went on:

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“The dragon has four pearls, one in each hand, and as long as he holds all four, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he will fall to the earth.” The idea was that the four pearls were the four thoughts that turn the mind to the dharma. As long as we can manage to keep an awareness of these four thoughts in our mind, our dharma practice continues, but if we forget about even one of them, things just can’t fly right. We must remember all four of them. Later, I wrote this poem.

These four thoughts are not only important for beginners. When I finished many years of practice (including working through two ngondros and a number of the more advanced deity practices), and began actually to learn Mahamudra meditation, the very first step in that practice was to once again concentrate on the four thoughts that turn the mind. So these four thoughts are not just for beginners. They are essential. I am sharing an important point with you here.

Going for Refuge

If you can get behind the ‘Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind’ and see that they make sense, then the next step on the Buddhist path, at least for me, was ‘Going for Refuge.’”

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The title sounds kind of dramatic, but it is really very simple and does not contradict any other religious practice you are involved in. For example, I was raised Christian and have never turned my back on the teachings of Jesus. They made sense. I just needed a method or path to greater awareness, which Buddhism offers. Refuge simply opens up a channel between yourself and the Buddha, his path, and followers. ‘Going for Refuge’ is a simple transmission that connects you to a lineage going back at least 1,000 years. Here is what ‘refuge’ is all about:

The vow of refuge is a simple recognition on our part that the historical Buddha was a human being just like us, and not a god or deity. He enlightened himself. Likewise, it is a recognition that the Buddha’s teachings (the Dharma) was the method or path that he took to greater awareness, and those who correctly practice the dharma (the Sangha) are fit to assist us who are beginners on that same dharma path. That is essentially the meaning of refuge.

In other words, we go to refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha, not to the exclusion of anything else we may hold precious, but in addition to what we already have and believe in. Taking refuge is our way of recognizing the truth of

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what Buddha did, the way he went about it, and those who follow in his footsteps.

The refuge vow always involves a direct linkage or transmission from Buddha’s lineage through 2500 years down to the present moment. Usually, a lama or rinpoche gives the refuge ceremony or you can request it. I have never heard of anyone being denied or turned down when requesting refuge.

At this short ceremony, the lama cuts a tiny piece of your hair and gives you a dharma name, a name which you will have until you become fully enlightened. This ceremony takes only about one half hour and never involves any money or obligation, other than to respect the three objects of refuge, the Buddha, his path (dharma), and his true followers (Sangha). That’s it.

The ceremony and refuge name are tangible, but there are intangibles as well. The actual connection with a living lineage and with the long line of teachers who have held it is a blessing of great value. This is a spiritual connection that can be felt by most who take refuge. I know I was so happy to have an actual link to such a humble and powerful tradition. Taking ‘Refuge’ for me was the first step in what has been an ongoing life-changing experience.

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And Then Comes the Ngondro

When I first heard about ‘Ngondro’, the Uncommon or Extraordinary Preliminaries, I was shocked. It was one thing to ask me to meditate on a cushion, but entirely another thing to suggest that I might do 111,111 full prostrations on the floor. And what about the 111,111 recitations, or the 111,111 100-syllable mantras, the 111,111 mandala offerings, and the 111,111 guru yoga prayers? Give me a break! I ran screaming from the thought of it.

Needless to say that I peered through the doorway of ngondro practice for a very long time before doing any, and even when I did some, it was just to test the waters. I thought: what kind of throwback to the Middle Ages are these practices? What kind of devoted crazy person would submit to this? As you can see, I had my own opinion.

The Reality

The reality is that I was a hard case. We are all hard cases when it comes to doing ngondo. Or, as my teachers says: through all the time in history up to now, we are the ones that still never got it, literally the hard cases, those who have managed to ignore enlightenment almost entirely up to this point. All of us. We have no

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trouble with taking a yoga class. Some of us even work out on the weight bench to develop our muscles and stay in shape. But when it comes to matters of the mind, we westerners seem to believe that the mind, just as it comes out of the box, is good to go – perfect. In fact, I could make a good case that most of western philosophy is about using the mind to consider this or that, but never to look at itself. In the west, we don’t tend to use the mind to look at the mind. That is something Asians do.

Asians have pointed out seemingly forever that the mind itself is a proper object of study. Western psychology is little more than a poor and relatively juvenile reflection of the ancient mind sciences of the Asian people. In Tibet and China they study the mind, which is what meditation and all we have been discussing here is about.

Massage the Mind

Earlier I mentioned that Mahamudra meditation is difficult to learn mostly due to our lack of merit and devotion, and unfamiliarity with meditation. Lack of merit? Lack of devotion? Lack of familiarity with the mind itself? These all add up to a simple lack of

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training the mind whatsoever. We may have trained the mind here in the west to look at everything outside of us, but we have not properly trained the mind to look inside at itself, at its own nature. Why have we not done this here in the west after all these years? How might we go about it? These kinds of questions lead us to topic of ngondro practice.

If we want to grow a garden, we have to prepare the soil. It is the same with the mind. We can't just leap into Mahamudra practice. We have to prepare for it. Ngondro practice, as medieval as it might at first glance appear, just happens to be the easiest and most kind way to prepare the mind for more advanced practices, like that of Mahamudra meditation. Trust me. I am the slipperiest of the slippery. If I could have found a way around doing ngondro, I would have. In fact I had to do ngondro twice because I was too much in a hurry to get to advanced practices to do it right the first time. I took too many shortcuts.

If you want to save time and move ahead quickly with dharma practice, submit to starting at the beginning and moving forward from there, because you will end up doing it anyway. In other words, there are no shortcuts in dharma, because the

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only person you can shortchange is yourself, and if you do that, sooner or later you have to do it over and do it right BECAUSE it does not work any other way. Think about that.

How could you cut corners or better yet, why would you cut corners when it comes to your own enlightenment. It can't be done. The fastest way starts at the very beginning. Take my advice or learn the hard way as I did.

Believe me, I should know, because I tried everything to get ahead and place out of dharma-101 or whatever we could agree to call it, and to no avail. When all was said and done, I had to start at the beginning, and all the time I wasted looking for loopholes was just that: a big waste of time that set me back years. Do yourself a favor. Do it right once.

The Mind

In reality, ngondro is a brilliantly designed system for awakening and exercising the mind, a system for breaking down resistance built up who knows how many lifetimes ago and working our mind into shape so that we can actually use it. You can't expect to bypass eons of ignorance except by actually changing and learning to use the mind. It takes work and that work is anything but just intellectual.

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Ngondro shapes your body, your emotions, and your mind. Ngondro practice is the easiest way to do just that. And it incorporates both the development of merit and devotion, the qualities that you will need to enter Mahamudra practice.

Enhance the Mind?

You can't enhance the mind, but you can train it. The mind is not improved by caffeine, alcohol, or drugs of any kind. These substances alter the mind, making it even still harder to use. But the mind can be trained, which is what meditation is all about.

The Blessings of the Guru

Here is a point that is relatively easy to explain, but very difficult for beginners to understand. You can't train the mind in Mahamudra meditation without having an authentic teacher. Period. End of story. You might be able to pick up on basic meditation techniques from books or on your own, but these more advanced techniques are not just "advanced" physical techniques" that can be learned step-by-step by following a diagram. They involve advances in 'attitude', which include altering your approach, motivation, and intention in ways that words alone cannot describe.

Without an authentic teacher you

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would soon be going in circles trying to know what is real and what is your imagination. It would be all trial and error and you would not know what you can trust and what is leading you away from where you want to be. In other words, you would be right where you are now, unable to do this on your own. This is what the Vajrayana path is all about: working with an authentic teacher. This is why it is considered a fast path, because there is transmission and lineage involved. These are the blessings of the guru.

In Vajrayana Buddhism you have to be able to trust your teacher in order to trust yourself. Your confidence, faith, and trust have to extend beyond your own skin. You must be able to put your complete trust in another person outside yourself, in the guru. If you can't do that, then you have to learn to do it, and this becomes part of the practice itself.

We may not be able to trust our guru right off. Perhaps we have never really trusted anyone other than our self. And it is more complicated yet. First you have to actually find an authentic guru to work with, and this is not easy. It is said that there are 84,000 dharma teachings because it takes that many methods to accommodate all of the

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different types of dharma students out there.

You may find an authentic teacher, but not one suited to your particular personality and/or current state of mind. In other words, you can find a good teacher, but you can't learn from them. They don't suit you. Or you may find a teacher who is not authentic and you can't tell the difference. In this case, both teacher and student can waste a lot of time or worse, create even more obstacles for both. Disentangling a non-working teacher-student relationship also has its complexities and dangers. It can discourage the student.

My point here is that it can be very difficult to find an authentic teacher on the one hand, and beyond that it may be difficult for you to learn to work with a teacher, even if they are authentic. This is another reason why the ngondro practice is so useful. Through ngondro, many of the possible kinks and disconnects in the teacher/student relationship are worked out early on.

Permission to Practice

And you can't just start doing ngondro on your own either. You have to have permission to start ngondro and you have to first have what is called the reading

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transmission or 'lung', which someone empowered to give that transmission must recite in your presence. Only then can you begin ngondo.

The good thing is that the teacher who gives you permission and the reading transmission does not have to be your main teacher. They can just help start you out. The process of actually doing ngondro is the best preparation for working with an authentic teacher you may meet down the road.

As you will find out by practicing ngondro, it is not just about doing the 111,111 prostrations or whatever part of that practice you are counting out. The most important results are the changes in attitude, intention, and approach that these practices bring about. Through ngondro you gradually remove all kinds of obscurations you may have had all your life, and the process purifies your mind in ways that you are not now aware of or could imagine.

This purification can open the door to your recognizing an authentic teacher that fits your personality when you meet him or her, which may be something you cannot do at this point. If you wore a pair of unclear glasses all your life, how

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would you ever know any different unless you cleared up whatever clouded them? In other words, we don't even see our obscurations because they have always been there.

We could search everywhere for clarity, but if our mind is unclear we will never just chance upon clarity, because we carry our obscured view with us. Looking will never find anything different. But the moment we begin to polish and train our mind, we start to see more clearly. Removing our mental obscurations may not be fun or easy, but until we do, we will continue more or less just as we are.

Where to Go

Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhism in general are quickly gaining popularity in this country. Today there are all kinds of centers, events, teachers, magazines, and so on. I am sure that many of these groups and teachers are authentic, but I don't know them first hand and can't recommend them or not recommend them.

Pretty much the only centers I know by experience are the Karma Kagyu centers of Tibetan Buddhism. Since these centers all teach the same thing, I can refer them to you with confidence as I know what they can

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provide. You can find a list of centers in North American and around the world at Kagyu.org. Check them out. Even with these centers, you will have to find a teacher that you can work with that suits your personality.

So there you have my account of encountering the dharma. I am not an authorized teacher, and don't offer refuge or anything else. I am just like you, but have been studying the dharma for a little while now.

What I can perhaps do is point you in the right direction if you have questions. You can reach me at the email address below. And lastly I dedicate this writing to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that they may continue to benefit all sentient beings and to help all of the beings in the six realms to reach enlightenment.

Michael Erlewine
Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol
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The Lama of Appearances

The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind

This precious life,
Impermanent and brief,
I know.
My actions keep on piling up,
And I can't quite get my ducks into a row.

Trungpa said to me,
So many years ago,
By grasping just one thought or two,
We'll never turn aside.

We must, he said, maintain all four,
And leave not one behind.
Four precious thoughts that touch the heart,
Only they can turn the mind.

Mind Practice

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

Feb. 14, 2010

Tibetan new Year of the Iron Tiger

The Dharma in Nature

Post Meditation

If I am practicing all the time,
When will I have time to practice?

Rinpoche

Just as in that dream of sleep you came,
Urging me awake,
So too, in this dream of life,
You awaken me from the nightmares of ignorance.

On first meeting,
At first glance,
You showed me compassion,
Introducing me to myself.

I wandered for days wrapped in your blessing.
Yet, due to my weak practice,
I could not hold that state for long.

Still,
Having known such kindness,
I no longer chase after imitations.
You are the bright star in the night of my obscuration,
Always showing me the way to the precious Dharma,
Guiding me back to myself.
You are indeed a precious one.

Rinpoche.

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Water and the Well

The rare times,
When nothing moves me,
And I don't feel,
Like doing anything.

Perhaps this is some kind of,
Natural meditation,
An effortless detachment,
From my day-to-day world.

All that is missing,
From just being lazy,
Is this awareness,
Of my own condition.

I don't waste time,
Pretending to be busy,
But just sit there,
And for a long time.

Nothing is missing.

Watch a movie,
Read a book,
Sit, or not,
It makes no difference.

I am right here.

The mind is at rest,
The water back in the well.

- Michael Erlewine,

February 15, 2010,

New Moon,

New Year of the Iron Tiger

The Dharma in Nature

The Dharma says:

Realize the nature,
Of the thought,
Not the content.

Seeing the true nature,
Of any thought,
Ends the thought right there,
Breaks its link to the senses,
Causes no karma to arise,
And brings about awareness.

This is why I meditate.

April 21, 2010

Thoughts Make Sense

Thoughts come.

If the thought is nonsense,
I can't keep it in mind.
Forget it.

However,
If a thought makes,
Any kind of sense,
Has any kind of meaning,
I usually follow it.

It's my train of thought.

Yet 'meaning' in itself is,
Nothing,
A reference,
Pointing toward or at,
The sense a thought makes.

Thoughts can only make sense.

And sense,
Is an experience,
That every thought will take me to,
A journey I am always on,
Mini-incarnations,
The sum of which,
Add up to a life,
Of endless just not-knowing.

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Meaning to Know

Feb. 7, 2010

Your words (or mine),
Depend on what they mean.

Meaning is only a reference,
A simple referral,
Like pointing toward:
Somewhere else.

In other words,
Meaning is only as good,
As the sense it makes,
As in:

Does it make sense?

Meaning itself,
Is not meaningful.
It makes no sense.
It is not like 'being'.

Only we can make sense.

Meaning points to:
Experience,
But only if 'we' go.

It is the only way to know.

The Dharma in Nature

Solitude

'Alone' is a simple mistake.
Like the disappearance of a sound,
Hearing cannot be heard,
And the finder never found.

September 15, 2010

Meditation is Nothing

The books say:
Seek a place of solitude,
And meditate,
But it's just the other way round.

When meditation,
Naturally occurs,
There is no place in the world,
That you feel comfortable,
Try as you might.

Not here or there,
Not doing this or doing that.

Only nothing feels right.

You just want to hold real still,
Let the mind rest,
And then park yourself,
Somewhere out of the way,
Like on a cushion,
Or

In a place of solitude,
Because:

Nothing is going on.

Sept. 13, 2010

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Mandala

A good offering,
Gathers together,
Naturally,
To a point,
Of blooming,
Like a perfect flower,

And,
Dissolving,
Is gone.

Petals in the wind.

And then:
Again.

The object,
Of mandalas,
Is offering,
Endlessly.

It is all offering.

Sept. 11, 2010



Samsara

Not exhausted,
Uncontrollable,
Recurring activities,
Animate my life,
And keep me ever moving,
Through a waste of time ...

All the things I like to do.

But every so often,
I lose my appetite,
And remain unmoved,
Not interested,
Already at the end,
Of where I would be,
If I did all that.

My time is taken up.

Empty of effort,
And motion,
With no direction,
I lose my meaning,
And just stop wandering.

I am so still.

I don't have to keep my edge,
The edge keeps me.

At these times,
I know,
That rejecting this world,
Will never work.

The Dharma in Nature

Given time,
Even this world,
Goes void,
And effortlessly,
Rejects itself.
Wait for that.

May 30, 2010

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PHOTOGRAPHY

All photographs were taken with Nikon systems, specifically the Nikon D300, D700, D3x, and D3s cameras. I use Gitzo carbon-fiber tripods and Markins ball heads with Swiss-Arca style quick-release clamps.

As for lenses, this collection (in order of use) involved the Voigtlander 125mm f/2.5 APO Lanthar, Nikkor 85mm PC-E /2.8, Nikkor 105mm f/2.8, and Nikkor 17-35mm f/2.8.

Post shooting work was done in Adobe Lightroom 2.6 and Photoshop CS3. I tend to use ISO values as close to 200 as I can get them, slow shutter speeds, and apertures usually ranging from 8 to 11.



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The End