

Mind Training: Selected Articles

by

Michael Erlewine

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Michael@Erlewine.net

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Introduction

This is a collection of articles on meditation and training the mind, many of which first appeared as blogs. They are not overly formal and most contain personal stories and anecdotes as illustrations. The type of mind training detailed here is the most common form of meditation as used by both the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists.

There is repetition here, which is good.

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Michael@Erlewine.net

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BENEFICENT OR MALEFICENT?

How's that for an either/or selection? Choose one to label each thought that you have, at least that's what Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, my teacher for the last 30+ years, told a group of us at the recent ten-day teaching on Mahamudra Meditation (and its preliminaries) at KTD Monastery in upstate New York. Rinpoche never says anything without having a reason, so I had to think on this one.

What he actually said is that our every thought (or reaction), day in and day out, is either intentionally beneficent or maleficent, one or the other. This seems a little (as mentioned) either/or for me, and since we are encouraged to always to test the teachings out (rather than just accept them unchallenged), I did just that.

And I found that, be it every so slight a shade, what we think (and speak) does seem to fall into our being beneficent either in intent or the reverse, however so slight, maleficent, even if it is just an edge. Of course, I asked for a discount if my thought or comment was a humorous one, but I didn't get it. On scrutiny, even some of my wryest remarks, although certainly funny to me, make some kind of micro-cuts in the mind. If I drill down on them, they are not nice, plain and simple. I try to defend them, but in fact they are indefensible.

Of course, Rinpoche left it all up to us. He always does. If we want to be accumulating karma (and not the best karma) with our micro-ninja remarks, that's up to us. At heart, he was just asking us to consider what we are thinking, and I have. And he's right.

I have been unable to find, and I have spent many days on this, a single thought that does not have either a beneficent or a maleficent edge to it, no matter how fine or subtle it might be. We are (at least I am!) not neutral, but act more like a switch. I am either “ON” or “OFF” with my thoughts.

I’m imagining that the reason Rinpoche pointed this out is that he wants us to consider if we want to be accumulating all that karma, even if it is micro-karma, from those of our thoughts that have a negative edge to them.

Sometimes I am just being a little sarcastic, sardonic, ironical, mocking, cynical, etc., trying to be funny, but often at something or someone else’s expense. What good do they do? And the answer is “no good,” and even if they are very, very subtle, the ultimate effect is a thousand razor cuts to the mind.

The beneficent thoughts are not a problem, although if we are exaggerating or otherwise “reifying,” even the so-called good or beneficial thoughts cause us bad karma. I know, it is like a swarm of a million mosquitoes, one more thing we have to be aware of in our already hectic life, so you can, if you want, ignore this blog, but I’m not. I can embrace this concept. Just spend a day or two examining your thoughts, reactions, and comments and you will see just how negative (or not) you are.

Apparently Rinpoche’s reasoning is that if we really want to get serious about removing obscurations, stop creating them. And it is no good if you keep an eye out for the big no- no’s, like “Do Not Steal,” etc. It is these little buggers that clog up our mental windshield until we can’t see through it.

The answer is simple: to become aware that we are

creating thoughts with maleficent (i.e. bad) intention and gradually stop indulging in them. Recognize them one-by-one as they arise, own them, and drop them. Make this a habit and you will stop accumulating an avalanche of micro-karma. Your windshield will become clear enough to see through.

This practice is something that anyone can do and all the time. We can do it as we move through life in our ordinary ways.

BESIDE THE POINT

Too often I am beside the point, instead of “on point.” I don’t want to belabor this particular point which I have made before, but the traditional confusion between intellectual understanding and the actual experiencing of something, much less ultimately realizing it is painful for all involved. And I apologize for explaining or “intellectualizing” it for the umpteenth time, but we have to understand the difference or, to put it more correctly, we have to “realize” the difference in these three terms: understanding, experience, and realization. This realization thing is that important, and in dharma practice it is everything, and I am not talking about mundane conversation either, but rather spiritual knowledge.

I am sure we all have had the experience of talking with someone who basically is parroting what they have learned from a book or a teaching, but have forgotten (or don’t care) that this is just something they have read or been taught, but never experienced for themselves. And you, who perhaps have actually experienced the subject, are sitting there, fully aware that they don’t “know” what they are talking about. They are just talking “about” it. Sure, they may have the words right and, if we were in a classroom situation, it would be OK to repeat what we have been taught and understood, provided we are only the messenger of some other author.

But there you are, someone who has perhaps actually experienced the subject, practicing your patience, while this person drones on about something they understand intellectually, but have never known -- experienced. Or worse, they think “knowing” from

personal experience is the same as reciting knowledge from a teaching they once heard, etc. And it's not easy (or perhaps polite) to interrupt them and get at the point that they are just regurgitating something they have read, like a cow chewing its cud.

And the situation only gets worse if, instead of comparing "understanding" to "experiencing," we compare "experience" to "realization," although at least there is a simple way to distinguish the two. "Experience," so my dharma teacher has told me many times (when I would tell him of an insight or vision I have had), is something that (however true it may be) comes and goes. You have a spiritual experience, but two weeks (or however long later) you no longer have it. It was great, and it came, but not to stay. You have returned to normal or the new-normal, after the influence of the experience, etc. Basically you no longer have the experience on you. It came, was wonderful, and then went away.

As my dharma teacher would always tell me, "Michael, that is just an 'experience' you have had. Forget about it and keep practicing." It is not "realization." Yet, if that spiritual experience is the only one we have ever had, it is like rain in an arid desert, hard to ignore, much less forget. In other words, once we have had such an experience, it is hard to just turn around and forget it. The tendency is to hold it up in our mind as an example of why we are practicing, share it with others, and most of all try to repeat it, to get back there again. And it is in this last phrase that the damage is done, trying to repeat it.

If we fixate on that one (or most recent) spiritual experience and then endlessly compare that key experience to how we are doing today (and come up short), we have just short-circuited our dharma

practice situation. This is a recipe for failure that has been endlessly detailed in the tradition of dharma teachings, i.e don't fixate, even on the good stuff!

Fixation, like a blood clot, stops the flow of life and quickly becomes just another obscuration on our already obscured mental windshield. Or, my favorite analogy, fixation is like if we had a breath of spiritual fresh air (finally), and we tried to hold it, what would happen? Sooner or later life would knock that breath out of us, so that we could breathe again, like the doctor who whaps the butt of the baby to start it breathing if it has trouble doing so. Like that. And now for the hard part.

If we find comparing "understanding" and "experiencing" hard to differentiate, then comparing and "experience" and "realization" is going to be really difficult, especially if we have not had any realization, i.e. almost impossible. There is no way to know what we do not know, especially if we don't know we don't know. I wrote a little poem about this, so that I could keep the difference in mind

IMAGINE WHAT I DON'T KNOW

Imagining what I don't know,
And I don't know,
I imagine what I don't know.

I know what I imagine is what I don't know,
And what I know is not what I imagined.
That much I know.

I can only imagine what I don't know.

There remains here to discuss how "experience" is different in kind from "realization," and there is an

entire dharma tradition that does just that called “The Pointing Out Instructions,” which focuses on pointing out the actual nature of the mind as distinct from ordinary experience. However I don’t do that; Rinpoches do that. In a future blog, we might talk about it, since I at least understand what is involved. It is something we should begin to be acquainted with.

BLOCKED CREATIVITY

Many people have told me that they don't feel as creative as they would like. And they point to folks that in their opinion seem to be just naturally creative. I used to buy into the view that creativity might be just something in our genes, until I gradually understood that from the Buddhist point of view there is no normal person who cannot attain enlightenment, and this has an interesting correlate that relates to creativity.

As for attaining greater awareness (much less enlightenment), no one ever said it would be easy. However, any of us can begin to painstakingly remove our various obscurations. Actually, it can be done. I, for one, am working on it. My dharma teacher clearly points out that as our obscurations lessen, the awareness and clarity of mind automatically increase. Of course they are talking about the road to enlightenment, but the same principle works for unleashing our innate creativity, so it's worth taking a look.

Definition-ally "creativity" requires clarity of inspiration and utility, i.e. our creativity has to be of some use to the world. We can be creative in our own sphere, but the usual definition of creativity requires an audience, someone (the world, society, etc.) to receive and value our creation. Otherwise, every crazy person spouting original gibberish would be valued for their creativity, which is not the case.

One important point is that creativity arises always in relation to the static status-quo. That too is definitional. Somehow, beneath the status-quo for each of us (and all of us) is a well of creativity waiting

to arise. Creativity brings new things into existence and, when those things themselves grow old and become part of the status-quo, further change and creativity takes them out of fashion, because the status-quo, despite all its attempts to remain the same, is ever changing. Creativity is always the remedy for the current status-quo. Those of us who don't feel creative enough are tired of the same- old-same-old. There is something we can do about it.

And brute-force attempts to be creative seldom work, because "trying" to be creative is not the same as being creative. In the same way, being driven to creativity by competition or "comparison" also naturally tends to obscure true creativity. Creativity requires receptivity. The idea here is that the new insight we need, the creativity which is waiting to be born, is always just under the layers of the current status-quo and very much ready to appear. We just have to discover (uncover) it.

If we look at our personal creativity (or lack thereof), there are things each of us can do to increase being creative. And it is relatively easy. For starters, we can begin consciously to remove the layers of obscurity that obscure or prevent our innate creativity from being accessible. Not surprising, this is the same kind of practice that the Buddhists suggest for increasing our basic awareness.

I have been working on this myself for many years. Here is just one small example that may illustrate my point. As you know, I write a lot, perhaps too much. The reason why I do this would be another story, but it involves writing being part of my daily dharma practice.

Years ago I had a come-to-Jesus talk with myself

about caffeine, i.e. coffee. I loved everything about it and still have at least two very fine espresso machines gathering dust around the house, but here is the story.

As mentioned, I love coffee and was making espresso and cappuccinos long before Starbucks ever thought to exist. I could not wait for my morning cup of coffee, and a strong one at that. But there was a gotcha!

I gradually realized that the caffeine sped up my system, which should not be news to coffee drinkers. After all, that is part of why we drink the stuff. I confess to be a rather sensitive thing and I noticed that my morning Cup of Joe went beyond just speeding me up. It was like a kind of white-noise for the mind and drowned out some of the finer intuitions in me so that I could no longer sense or be aware of them to the same degree. It put a buzz on.

This was disappointing because, as mentioned, I like to write, and I know exactly when I am on-point with my writing, when I am on my contacts. The process of writing creatively is important in “creating” the finished result. I found that when I wrote with caffeine in my system, the results, when read the next day, were somewhat disappointing. They were less crisp and, yes, I hated to admit it, less creative. Perhaps readers could not tell the difference but, alas, I could. What a bummer.

It seems that caffeine, aside from making it hard for me to sleep at night, was acting like a drone or, as I said earlier, 'white noise', that along with the fact that caffeine is speed, managed to overdrive the mind, and drown out the more subtle and creative impulses that gently bubble up from within the mind. I no longer could sense them when on caffeine. I had lost that

subtle fringe of intuition that, like the tips of my fingers, could feel things.

And you can bet that I tested this not just a dozen or so times, but hundreds of times and always came up with the same result: when I drank coffee my creativity suffered and when I did not, it was present in a way familiar to me that I counted on. In the end, I valued my creativity more than the caffeine and, much to my dismay, stopped drinking coffee. That is just one “creativity” story, but I hope you understand the point.

Stimulating my mind artificially with caffeine added what I call a white-noise filter to my mental clarity, clouding or veiling my mind, which I came to be aware of to the point of finally giving up caffeine entirely.

It is the same with creativity. I don’t need to tell you that, like the old saying, “you can’t salt the salt,” you cannot improve the mind with any substance, be it caffeine, alcohol, drugs, or anything else, even certain foods, etc. That should be common knowledge, so I will not mention that again, but there is more.

Our Self, like a vacuum cleaner, is a sucker for gathering attachments, prejudices, likes, dislikes, and all of the many things that obscure the mind. This is how micro-karma accumulates. And our mind is already deeply obscured if we are to believe the Tibetan Buddhists. And here is the interesting part.

The same mind-training practices that the Tibetans recommend for removing obscurations to meditation also free up our creativity. They go hand in hand. Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, when we remove obscurations one by one, ultimately the clarity and creativity of the mind itself shines through. There is nothing stopping it. It is this lucidity and luminosity

that is available to any one of us, despite what gifts Mother Nature has (or has not) given us. Anyone can have a clear open mind, and that is the avenue that all creative intuition travels.

In other words, we don't have to be a genius to be creative. All we have to do is begin to remove our mental obscurations by various mind-training exercises. Of course, it also helps if we can keep the dharma-accumulation down to a gentle roar.

For those of you who want to experiment, here is a free e-book called "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction" that contains several articles on "Reaction Toning," which is an easy-to-do practice for removing obscurations:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len-Second-Edition.pdf>

CREATIVITY REVISITED

I blogged about this recently, but I want to add something about having more creativity, where it comes from, and how to access it. Of course, there are all kinds of ways to be creative and each of us knows what that feels like for ourselves. At the same time, we may wish to be more creative or creative all the time. How is that possible?

In my experience, creativity comes from the inside, not often from the outside. In most respects, my own creativity is linked to being aware of and taking advantage of the spontaneous flow of change within the mind, moment by moment; let's call it the immediacy or "freshness" of the moment. For me, connecting with our intuition is always key.

Methodically thought-out and planned creativity can also work, but in my experience I look for that degree of freedom or spark in the moment to synch me into creation. Let me give you an example. Often I will write a blog to be posted the next day. However, when morning comes around and I read through the blog I plan to post that day for one final review, I see that it is already outmoded, even though it is less than eight-hours old.

Something has changed internally overnight in the mindstream and I am not quite the same person getting up as I was going to bed. In that case, and it happens quite often, I have to synch into the moment right then, check my contacts, get my bearings all over again, and write a brand-new blog. I have all kinds of blogs that never got posted because the change-factor in time moved too quickly and the

material was no longer fresh. It was no longer me.

This freshness and natural sense of creativity of the present moment is part of the mind itself and it is available to each of us all the time. The problem is that our own distractions, obscurations, and habit of ignoring (ignorance) this instantaneous moment creates what we could call 'White Noise', static that drowns out the subtle bubbling up of creativity, with the effect that our creative intuitions do not get through, do not register.

We just can't quite feel it. It remains beneath our radar.

Yet, we each have this incredible mind. It is sad if we cannot get in touch with our creativity to its full extent because of our own self-created (or imprinted by society) obscurations that dim out, drone, and mask out this subtle creativeness.

It is not that we have no creativity within the confines of our obscurations; we do, but we can be missing the tip of the top of creativity, which is what makes my writing fun for me to read and write. That very tip-top of the spontaneous moment brings space (aura) enough to shake things out of the ether and into a sentence in a way that I find authentic. That subtle authenticity is what is confirming and makes writing real for me.

And I am not the Lone Ranger in this. Without that degree of spontaneous freedom, the mind will always be slightly dulled for us, until we take the time to, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, carefully remove one by one, that which is obscuring our ability to feel and see creatively. We may not be able to make a fortune in the stock market, but we all have the capacity to enjoy the richness and creativity of our own mind, with

just a little work. The Tibetans call the mind the “Wish-Fulfilling Jewel.”

Life can be so hectic, and its pressures so constant that we are like a freight train hurtling through the night of time, quite far from being able to slow down and just smell the roses. Unfortunately, in the rush of things, we continue to pile upon ourselves obscuration after obscuration, which just keeps dimming out the light.

To remedy this, we would first have to recognize and acknowledge the fact that we ARE obscured and (with kindness to ourselves) begin to carefully remove what obscures our vision and creativity, one bit at a time.

I am amazed when I look around at all of the projects, therapies, remedies, medicines, etc. that folks are putting themselves through, often to little gain, except perhaps momentarily, i.e. for a short time. And with all that, there remains almost complete ignorance (ignoring) of the blinders we have on when it comes to these simple obscurations that could easily (or fairly easily) be removed.

I know first-hand what an obscured mind feels like and I also know what a mind is like once we begin to free it up from some of its obscurations. That is why I am writing this. Removing obscurations allows us to actually “see.”

With our mind relatively obscured and unable to get at our own innate subtle creativity, we end up wanting or longing for what we feel we do not have, while everything we need is mostly right here. We become so future-oriented (hope) that we are hardly in the present at all, much less creatively feeding off the spontaneity of the moment. And we are anything but content.

On the other hand, learning to remove some of the obscurations, taking the blinders off (so to speak), we can begin to see that we already have within us so very much to work with just as we are now, warts and all.

Once we can feel and begin to use our own innate creativity (that subtle edge), we see for ourselves that even OUR particular situation is in fact workable, and we are content to work it out. Notice the word "content." With access to our creative edge, it is fun to work on ourselves. It's creative.

I know this first-hand from experience and not just from intellectual speculation. I came out of the 1950s and searched through the 1960s for methods that actually work. In the 1970s I began to find those methods and, while I cannot say that I am out-of-the-woods yet, I can positively say that I do see, as they say, the light at the end of the tunnel.

There IS a way to take advantage of Samsara (the vicious part of cyclic existence) and anyone of us can learn the methods to achieve this. It is called dharma training.

Perhaps the difference between average creativity and this subtle and more refined creativity I refer to here is very small. But for me it makes (and may be) all the difference in the world. My point here is that this living edge of the present moment presents a degree of freedom that is unmatched in my experience. It is worth the effort to get to this very fine edge and, once there, to rest in the nature of the mind that is exposed and laid open in the space or gap there.

My first dharma teacher often use to say this to me about Samsara: "This is hell, but we have to make our

heaven in a little corner of it.”

CULTURE COLLISION

This blog is bound to raise hackles because I am going to touch on one of our most sacred cows, psychological therapy and therapists. Psychological and emotional problems are found in every country and culture, but the methods and approach to remedying these conditions vary widely. I can't say that I understand our national fixation on therapists and endless therapy sessions as really helping to get our collective mind right, so let's talk about it. My knee-jerk response is that here in America we are so preoccupied with therapy and therapists mostly because we have as yet no general mind-training programs in this country, so what amounts to endless therapy is what here in the West we have come up with to work through our emotional problems. That's my take on it.

The bottom line for me is that I don't believe-in or generally support the idea that ongoing psychological therapy is all that useful, except in extreme cases, which few of you reading this qualify for. I can't think of any other statement that I make around people that causes such an adverse reaction. It is almost like the very thought of criticizing therapists is taboo. I am always surprised by the almost virulent response this thought provokes. Folks love their therapy and their therapists. How did I miss that boat?

And it is not that I have no experience with one-to-one counseling sessions. I have been doing astrological counseling for, well, something like fifty years, so I have a lot of experience. You may not care for astrology, but what goes on in these sessions is not so much about astrology, but rather using astrology to

look at relationships, vocational issues, family problems, and “you-name-it, I’ve seen it.”

In other words, I don’t teach clients astrology or even use astro-jargon during a “reading,” but rather I use astrology as an alternate way to look at the same old areas of life that psychologists do, but without labeling my clients manic-depressive, paranoid, masochistic, schizophrenic, neurotic, etc. And I am always clear with my clients that I am a diagnostician and not a therapist. I like to see a client one time only. If they insist, I will see them in perhaps a year, just to update their situation, but not next week and certainly not regularly. There is a huge difference. If you need someone to talk to, I perhaps could be helpful, but if you want to go over the same stuff, week-in and week- out for therapy, I question the value of that.

I guess, without knowing it, I was always into the Tibetan tradition of pointing out problem areas and trusting that, once they are pointed out, we each will find a way of working on them. However, as mentioned, many of us probably don’t know how to work on them. We have had no mind training whatsoever. Aside from pointing out the problems, the Tibetans also provide the methods to remedy them. It’s called the Dharma.

The great Indian Mahasiddha Tilopa (and later Patrul Rinpoche) clearly said “Don’t prolong the past.” The past has traditionally been shadowy. The memories of our past change form as we do, every time our mind changes; they are even subject to our moods. Just how are we to rejigger our past in order to come to some kind of terms or peace with it? The answer of course has to be, from the present. The present is how we deal with anything we call our past. Like a puppet on strings, as we adjust our memories (and

our attitude toward our past) in the present, our view of the past reflects these changes. It is like trying to hit an ever moving target. In other words, even in therapy, the past (or our view of it) can be changed only in the present; it all depends on how we have come to look at it.

That being the case, instead of trying to change the past via various therapies, at great expense (and often with little success), why not just create a new “past” by living each present moment properly and letting those new experiences accumulate, eventually resulting in a new past. This is the Tibetan approach. Trying to dust off and repair a distant bad experience or memory by manipulating it long-distance from the present is like trying to grab one of those stuffed animals we used to see displayed in a large clear-plastic cubes at airports by operating a little manual crane – not simple to do.

There is an easier way.

The problem of course is fixation on the past, particularly past events that are troubling. The past is just that, past. We can't change the past no matter how much therapy we have; we can only change how we view it, which I agree can be helpful sometimes. Not only do we fixate on the past, but we often identify with it as being who we think we are. Rather than spend years in therapy somehow trying to come out even, it can be much easier just to create a new past in the present and gradually identify with that, in which case eventually our troubled past no longer concerns us all that much.

Perhaps this is why most Tibetan Buddhist mind-training techniques are concerned with clearing our mental windshield by carefully removing obscurations,

one by one. As the obscurations are removed, our mental clarity or awareness automatically increases. It is analogous to cleaning a pair of dirty glasses. Remove the dirt and we can naturally see better.

And a personal aside: an unwelcome byproduct of many years of counseling others who have previously been in therapy is that (at least according to my clients) apparently many so-called psychotherapy counselors of others can't even sort out their own lives, much less those of others. This seems to be a common hazard and I will not double- down on this point here, but I could, and perhaps should. Too many psychological counselors are as crazy as their clients, not to mention being a huge time and money sink.

Instead of putting my clients on a regimen of prescription drugs (or even herbal remedies), I recommend mind-training practices where they can begin to get themselves into mental shape to work through their own problems. My answer to perpetual therapy is mind-training. I am happy to work with someone and to advise, but ultimately I can't do it for them anymore than the Buddha can enlighten me. Like the Buddha, we have to enlighten ourselves. What the Buddha did was point out how to do this. It is called the Dharma, but it is up to us to practice it if we are interested.

In a word, my beef with much of western psychological therapy is that it puts too much emphasis on the help of others (the therapist), rather than pointing out to us how we can help ourselves. It is like what often happens with chiropractic work, the client becomes dependent on the chiropractor, literally, for life. In the same vein, too many become addicted to and dependent on their therapists, even though ultimately we each have to come to terms with

our own problems and solve them for ourselves. And for me there is another issue and this is just my opinion:

Compared to the training I have observed within the Tibetan Buddhist community, western psychologists have nowhere near that degree of mind training and often seem subject to the same emotional problems as their clients, IMO a case of the blind leading the blind. I favor the Tibetan approach of pointing out what needs to be done, how to do it, and letting each of us enlighten ourselves, subject to ongoing guidance as needed.

We should discuss this, and I may have to write some more on this topic.

DISAPPOINTMENT

I am frequently reminded of the myriad of little disappointments life offers me on a regular basis, such as the unreturned email or phone call and, in general, the lack of response from others (or the world and life itself) to my initiatives or dreams. Facebook has been a superior form of training in this regard and this is perhaps why the Buddhists say that hope and fear are certainly not our friends, in this case my hopes or expectations. And they, indeed, are legion. I appoint myself, of course, and, in turn, life disappoints me.

Disappointment is often my response to “no response,” you know, when there is nothing coming back, not even an echo. And there I am, as they say, “flat out.” I expected better or at least “more,” but life did not appear to provide it.

However, for me, disappointment has by this time in my life become more of a temptation than a requirement. While I used to be really disappointed many times a day, now it is less, although I still have the temptation to respond or to take these “Slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” personally. Yet, more and more of the time I am opting out of that response.

What is wonderful is that we have any control over our response whatsoever, something every prison inmate knows perfectly. Try as we might, we can't control what comes or is thrown at us, but we do have a modicum of control over how we take it, how we respond. Often, my response is all that remains of what I used to call dignity.

Of course, on the personal level, with others, much of

it is what the Buddhists call “ignorance,” the knowingly (or unknowingly) ignoring of whatever, most often me, of course. As I get older, it is also getting harder and harder to get a word in edge-wise, although I have a long habit of doing just that, a natural skill with verbal intercepts.

But I am slipping or don't have the heart to, as they say, maintain my part of a group conversation. Instead of waiting for the opportune moment to interject, these days I would rather just raise my hand when I have something to say. Years ago, they used to marvel at and write about the amount of time a computer CPU chip has to wait around for an event to occur. That is how I feel more of the time, only in reverse, waiting for an open line in a group conversation. Of course, it is perfect karma for me. I deserve it.

How slowly we change. As mentioned, I do seem to be getting to the live-long end of disappointment, having followed it out until the last dog dies. I have been disappointed. How disappointing!

More recently, as mentioned, I forego the temptation to be disappointed. Oh yes, I see the opportunity to be disappointed, but more and more of the time these days I decline to go there. As they say, I have been there, done that ... like a million times.

So, instead, here I am, flat-out, suspended in time and not waiting for the other shoe to fall. In all truth, the end of disappointment is something like me stopping pinching myself.

So, as this poem I wrote years ago points out, I now have more time for nothing:

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.

DO TELL

What is it that I don't tell here on the blog? For one, I probably don't make it clear enough that almost all of my blogging is spontaneous, just off-the-cuff, and not planned out. Of course, I write for myself (and for possible readers), but most of all I write for the clarity of mind that the process of writing itself brings me. Think about that for a moment.

I have pointed out often here that some time ago (years) I began to mix my mind (meditation) with photography, then later with writing, and other activities as well. Therefore, as mentioned, I don't just write for myself, for possible readers or, for that matter, anyone at all. I write primarily because writing for me is a way to get my mind clear that involves pulling words and phrases out of the ether and allowing them to assemble themselves meaningfully - fishing for treasures of the mind. Or, writing is very much like spinning wool into thread, only here what is spun is a thread of thoughts that point at (or attempt to describe) something I hold in mind.

And I itch to do this because I want to get my mind clear and then rest in that clarity. Juggling my thoughts in an intuitive manner is a convenient method of meditation to transform my ordinary distraction-oriented mind into something clear and luminous. It would be even better if my mind was always clear and luminous, but at this stage in my practice, I still have to actually meditate. Life does not yet, in my case, meditate me.

Of course, meditation is ritual action or technique, a process that I enact, the result of which is, as pointed

out, clarity of mind and luminosity. If I want that clarity, I perform the ritual of meditation. And, as mentioned, I don't always meditate by sitting on a cushion. I also meditate through the process of doing photography. I meditate through the process of writing. And the various kinds of activities that serve as fuel for meditation continue to grow, much like the rings in still water spread outward in concentric circles when a single drop hits the surface. That single drop is realization, however slight.

It no longer takes me effort to meditate, but it does take enacting the ritual process of, as mentioned, sitting on the cushion, taking photos, writing text, and so on. In other words, I mix my meditation with photography, with writing, etc. I have to do it if I want that particular clarity.

Someday, perhaps, it will just do me, and I will be meditative in all that I do. However, right now, my mind is quite ordinary if I do not meditate, i.e. I am not aware of that clarity and luminosity without the ritual act of meditation. However, when I meditate, I rest or float in clarity within that ritual, within that activity. It is very much like the analogy I came up with to explain the difference between Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation:

It is like trying to thread a very small needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation calms the hands, so that we can use Insight Meditation to thread the needle. The meditation that I refer to above is a combination of both Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation, using the focus of writing, photography, etc. to calm the mind (Tranquility Meditation), so that Insight Meditation (clarity, luminosity) can take place. This form of interactive meditation is called Mahamudra Meditation. I have been studying it and

practicing it for going on 26 years.

DON'T PROLONG THE PAST

Working here with the first line in what are called the “Six Words of Advice” or the six nails or key points. The original in Sanskrit (or whatever) amounted to just six words that the Mahasiddha Tilopa gave to his main disciple Naropa. These are considered to be the very essence of Mahamudra training, not just some nice dharma words. In our lineage they are very much treasured. They are:

Don't recall ----- Don't prolong the past
Don't imagine ----- Don't invite the future
Don't think ----- Don't dwell in the present

Don't examine ----- Don't try to figure anything out
Don't control ----- Don't try to make anything happen

Rest ----- Relax, right now, and rest in the self-liberating nature of ordinary mind

Later, Patrul Rinpoche further boiled it down to this:

Don't prolong the past,
Don't invite the future,
Don't alter your innate awareness,
There is nothing more than that!

Although we are now looking at the first line, that third line deserves special consideration, perhaps in another blog.

Again and again I find that the dharma confirms and gives me confidence in what I already intuitively sense and know, but have had no support in. This first

slogan, “Don’t Prolong the Past,” is the one that caught my attention and confirmed what I had discovered on my own, which went something like this:

The past has passed and is over, done with and finished, except for its residual imprint. It is only a memory for us, perhaps a bad one sometimes, but still a memory that changes as we change our mind. This is the idea of the “Last Judgment.” It is not how we view things right now that is the decider, but how we will view things when we finally get it all together that counts, i.e. our last judgment.

In other words, everything short of our last judgment is prolog and premature. We may see it all differently as we become more kind, aware, enlightened, or whatever-are-the-words, so why stick our finger in the wounds of the past, when we can change our attitude about whatever our past is/was in the present? I can’t change my past by monkeying with it and my attempts to do so have been close to futile. My personal history is not like a time machine such that if I jiggle something in my past I somehow will turn out different than I am. I can’t fix the past by fiddling with it. It is what it is, what it was, and it is gone, except as a memory. Yet the past often overshadows our present mind.

I have only the present now and it is the present that remembers the past – any past. Moreover, most attempts to analyze, re-think, re-imprint, regress, and otherwise modify the past do little to no permanent good in my experience. And IMO this includes many (but not all) kinds of therapies, counseling, analysis, and so on. There is another approach we can at least look at.

The Tibetan Buddhist mind-training methods that I have been taught are remarkably free of the concern with the past that many modern psychological therapies invoke. It is not that the Tibetans are oblivious to the imprints that our kleshas (destructive emotions) make on our mindstream – far from it. However, as far as I can tell they are not interested in sifting through our emotional debris in hope of resolving whatever issues remain. They have another, and -- apparently to them -- a more useful approach that is worth serious consideration.

In my experience it involves a series of practices in the present moment that gradually purify the past without giving it any more attention. Practices like the Common Preliminaries, The Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), Lojong Practice (Tong-len, etc.), and other remedial practices serve to purify the mind and lay the foundation for a special form of Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana) which, working together, make Mahamudra Meditation possible.

As to what Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation are about, I came up with this analogy. It's like trying to thread a very small needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) calms the shaky hands so that with Insight Meditation (Vipassana) we can thread the needle.

And “threading the needle” refers to this special combination of Tranquility and Vipassana Meditation that leads to what is called “Recognition,” meaning recognition of the true nature of the mind. At that point, in our lineage Mahamudra Meditation techniques are embraced. Other lineages have similar techniques, like Dzogchen or Maha-Ati Meditation. The methods vary, but the end result is the same.

In my experience with the dharma, in all of the many interviews and private discussion with lamas and rinpoches, I cannot remember even once a suggestion that I examine or spend a single moment on the past, in particular any experiences I have had, spiritual or otherwise. And it is not because I did not bring them up. In each case, I was told that these are just experiences and to just let them go.

What was suggested was to just keep practicing, to be present, mindful, aware, and so on. As mentioned earlier, I have always been encouraged to NOT examine the content of my past or present thoughts, but instead, through Mahamudra practice, to learn to look directly at the actual nature of the thoughts themselves. I am not the Lone Ranger here; this is standard dharma practice in our lineage.

So it seems to me that Tibetan mind-training, while fully aware of the conflicting- emotions (kleshas), seems to prefer not to deal with the content of kleshas, but instead move forward and develop the techniques to look at the nature of kleshas successfully. They certainly do not, in my experience, dwell on or go over past experiences as we seem to do in therapy here in the West.

Instead, they work to replace the worried-past with a nice, clean new “past” by first purifying the mind, and then expanding the clarification of the mind. In the midst of Tibetan mind-training, that old tar-baby past gradually loses its grip on us in the same way that we gradually learn to see through what we call the Self. They both just become increasingly transparent and less and less of a problem or obscuration.

So the point here is not to throw out the therapy, but to examine its value in lieu of the import of this

Tibetan approach I am describing. I am sure they can be combined, but they also appear to come at the same problem from a different angle. Isn't that what is called perspective?

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Sometimes things are just backward. The zeal and energy that we need to drive on toward enlightenment, we get that when we achieve “recognition” of the mind’s nature, which, while nowhere near enlightenment, itself is an authentic form of realization.

Otherwise, most of us are kind of stuck where we are right now, with nothing but our own idea of enlightenment as a guide, and not realized enough to easily tap into the energy needed to get there. Indeed, at worst we are in a painful Catch-22 and at best a bottleneck.

The idea here is that it is hard to achieve realization “on spec,” i.e. armed only with our “idea” of what realization is, usually something we have conjured up, a concoction of what we have read, heard in the teachings, or garnered from lamas and friends. In other words, we don’t know (and have not yet personally experienced) realization, much less whatever we are talking about when we imagine enlightenment. Yet, for most of us, our expectations too often are our main guide and beacon; call it the “expectations” of practice. While apparently unavoidable for most of us, this is a flawed approach.

Sure, we are hearing and reading about the dharma, and some are practicing, but not yet tasting the results of realization, so there is definitely a quality of passivity here. In other words, we are still taking it all in, yet, like snow falling on a warm rock, there is little to no accumulation. In other words, nothing adds up to actual realization... yet. Of course, we are

practicing, and initially, dharma practice for most of us is a slow and tedious process not unlike a camel crossing a very wide desert with no oasis in sight.

We cannot (and do not know) what we do not yet know, so we are stuck with what we 'imagine' we know about enlightenment, which is not the same as actually knowing. In fact, it is still simply not-knowing and, when it comes to realization, a miss is as good as a mile.

About the best we can do is to 'realize' (and this actually IS a small authentic realization on our part) that we don't know and stop using our expectations for any kind of guidance, which is like the blind leading the blind. Although it sounds like small potatoes, to realize that we do NOT know anything (about what greater awareness that we now have IS) helps. At least it is an actual realization, and that's a start.

Many imagine that Realization of the Mind's Nature is a big mountain to climb, but in reality, at least for starters, it is more like a big mountain of obscurations to remove. In fact, it struck me deeply when my dharma teacher explained that it was not necessary to worry about attaining greater awareness or continue to maintain the other expectations that we have. Instead, so he explained, just begin to remove the obscurations, one by one, and realization (and greater awareness) will follow, automatically. It is like a natural law: remove obscurations and the result is realization. It's all quite doable, if we will patiently do the work and have the proper instructions.

So, any expectations and energy spent on future awareness or our future enlightenment on our part is perhaps misplaced. Instead, the smart advice is to put

100% of our effort into removing what obscures our mind right now and that is all that has to be done, at least on the technical level.

Matters of devotion and a pure bond with our teacher are, of course, another matter. Here is a poem I wrote years ago about what we imagine:

IMAGINE WHAT I DON'T KNOW

Imagining what I don't know,
And I don't know,
I imagine what I don't know.

I know what I imagine is what I don't know,
And what I know is not what I imagined.
That much I know.

I can only imagine what I don't know

EXPERIENCING REALIZATION

As many great Buddhist teachers keep pointing out, it is not our Self (whatever we can agree the self is) that is the problem, but rather our fixation on the Self. Fixation is, obviously, just that, “fixation,” but it also is simply another form of reification, trying to make things more real or stable than they actually are. It is like trying to find an island in the white-water stream of Samsara in this world we live in. It reminds me of the old folk song:

NO HIDING PLACE DOWN THERE

I ran to the rock, to hide my face.
The rock cried out, “No hiding place.”
The rock cried out, “I’m burning too,
And want to go to Heaven, the same as you.”

The difference in Buddhist teachings between what are called “Understanding,” “Experience” and “Realization” is crucial. Experiences come and go, but Realization, as my dharma teacher says, is irreversible; it comes and stays. We may have a sky-high experience one week and a week later it is just a memory that we wish would happen again. And Experience always involves a subject and an object, like “I had an experience” and “My experience.” That is the nature of experiences. They are not permanent.

With Realization, there is no subject and object; it is non-dual. We are one with it. Once it happens, it never goes away, because it is a realization as to how things are, rather than an experience that you go through and come out of.

And both Experience and Realization are different in

Buddhism from what is called “Understanding” or “Comprehension,” which is just grasping the intellectual abstract idea, the concept of something. And the sequence is usually: understanding, then experiencing, and finally realization. We comprehend, we experience, and eventually realize. As mentioned, realization does not fluctuate; it does not come and go; It not only remains, but is irreversible, a one-way street.

Realization is exactly like realizing how to turn a simple light switch on and off. Once we get it, we never forget it, but in the case of spiritual realization, we are realizing the nature of our own mind. When we get that, we also don't forget it. Why? Because it is a realization and not an experience, much less simple understanding.

From out of the middle of experience, realization can arise. Anyway, I find it more than helpful to understand these differences.

EXTENSIBLE REALIZATION

Stabilizing realization is an art as well as a process. It's a little like, in bread-making, taking a little bit of the "mother" and starting your own bakery. Realization is like that, infinitely extensible and endlessly expandable, but we have to actually do it.

Realization, dharma or secular, tends to have a ritual that goes with it. By ritual I mean that, although realization of any kind is permanent and general, there tend to be certain acts that, like any ritual practice, are most clarifying. Like most forms of meditation, there is some technique involved, if only it is sitting on a cushion or looking out a favorite window at the sky.

If we will look around our life, we will find that there are places and actions that facilitate clarity, be they formal meditation techniques or just what happens to work for us. Just as lamas employ mudras and sacred instruments like the bell and dorje, so each of us have rituals that enable clarity in our life and through which we can rest our mind. We all are already doing this.

For some, it may be the old rocker on the back porch and some time to sit there. For others it may be cooking, sewing, or some hobby. It can be helpful to locate and acknowledge what rituals work for us. Call it your favorite part of the day. It's what you like most to do, because the ROI is so great. For me, sometimes it is just watching a movie, while the busyness of the day gets sorted out in the background of my mind.

What I am getting at here is that these private rituals

can be extensible and expandable. I tend to think of this kind of ritual as we do the “Baby and the Bathwater.” We like to think of our favorite hobby as special, even unique for us, but in the end it comes down to the old baby and the bathwater scenario.

For example, as you all know, I like to write. In fact, writing is one way I relax and clarify my mind. The upside is that my mind gets clear when I write, and the downside is that if I want my mind especially clear, I have to go and write. What is important for me to understand (and I am getting there) is that the clarity is the “baby” and the writing is the “bathwater,” and not vice versa. That would be just the opposite of what I always thought it was.

If I look very, very carefully, I find that there is no reason why I could not extract my clarity-ritual from the experience of writing and extend it to other things that I do. Then I would find clarity not only in writing (or whatever), but in doing all kinds of things.

In my case, this clarity is all wrapped up in various meditation techniques, but my thought here is that each of us have built little rituals that relax or clarify life for us. In some sense, it is what we live for. And my suggestion is that I see no reason why we could not carefully extract the ritual technique, whatever it is, and transplant it to anything else we do in a day that lends itself to such a ritual.

As I see it, as mentioned, we first would have to switch priorities and recognize that this clarifying and enjoyable ritual is the “baby,” while our hobby or whatever (in my case writing) is the bathwater. Why not enjoy many things the same way we enjoy a few things.

I perhaps first saw this in the flesh when I met the

Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche back in 1974. I was in a small room, an office, in the home where Rinpoche was staying while visiting Ann Arbor. He had taken me in there and sat me down in a chair. But rather than initially talk with me or anything, what he did was to spend about half an hour thoroughly inspecting every last thing in that office.

While I sat there fidgeting, Trungpa Rinpoche picked up and examined every little kick- knack and object in the room, holding them up to the light, feeling them, and so on. He obviously was enjoying each moment and each object, while I sat there like a corpse, trying to be inconspicuous.

It was immediately obvious to me that he had a little ritual that was totally portable and very exact, that he could (and would) use wherever he was at. I had never thought to do something like that or didn't know that I was allowed to enjoy myself so thoroughly, you know, like just any old time and anywhere.

So, the moral of this story is that even if we have not achieved any grand realization in our dharma practice, we have already established personal realization-rituals of our own that we look forward to based on what we have found that we enjoy. This too is a form of realization. And my point is that these little realizations are, as mentioned, extensible and expandable.

So, you might want to consider doing what I am doing, which is examining my life for the rituals in my day that clarify my existence. That kind of joy, clarity, and rest I have found to be quite portable given a little attention on my part -- not localizing it to one or a few favorite pastimes, but expanding it to include many more, is well worth the effort.

I will keep you posted, but is this something that any of you recognize as useful?

GET A GRIP

As they say, if we want to learn dharma practice we have to get involved, if not at the big-picture level, then at the micro-level. We have to grasp the subject or, as they say, “come to terms,” if not high, then lower down. It makes no difference. The point is to find a grip somewhere and work from there.

Somewhere between the high-intellectual plateaus of Buddhism and where the rubber meets the road in our lives, there must be a level that makes sense to each of us, i.e. something we can actually feel and act on. Call it the differential-calculus of living.

If we find it difficult to bring the ideas of Buddhism into our daily life or have trouble feeling compassion for others on a moment-by-moment basis, then don't worry about it for now. It is natural. There is plenty that we can do just working on having some compassion for ourselves, working with those we are most familiar with, you know, the Three Stooges: me, myself, and I. At least its familiar ground.

As one of five boys (no sisters), I can remember one of us yelling “Jam Pile” and all of us piling on top of one another. We do that with our own moment-to-moment reactions, let them just pile up until we can't lift it. And it's just more karma that we don't need. As the occultist Aleister Crowley used to say, “Snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel.” Here we are on the lookout for big “sins,” while being engulfed by a tidal wave of micro- karma, the kind of stuff we generate all day long through our reactivity. There has got to be some humor in that!

If you can't manage to grab some time to sit on a

cushion and learn to meditate (or are not even moved to), then work with your own reactions as you go through the day.

That's what I do and I have done it for years. And I was amazed to find that it works. How great is that!

It's so easy. Just start with whatever reactions you find yourself going through (like right now) and work from there. I understand we may not pick up on the subtle reactions below our radar, but good grief! We must be aware of something sometimes. We react. Start with those. I did.

Whatever reaction you become aware of, look at that. Examine it until you can acknowledge that, regardless of what caused it, this is your reaction. Your wife or husband (or dog) may have caused it, but only you control how you react. Own it, and then drop it, and move on. By recognizing when we react (and how we react), we can gradually stop knee-jerk reacting and learn to respond more appropriately. The ability to respond is important, like "Zen and the Art of Responsibility."

Sure, if someone throws us a zinger of a comment, something will happen. Watch it happen and then, instead of reacting in kind, respond reasonably. You can tell them to take a hike gently instead of with anger. The person you are helping here is yourself, by not stacking-on karma, and your reasonable or appropriate reaction may benefit the perpetrator of the comment as well. No harm done.

Let me remind you why we are doing this. Meditation involves stability and tranquility of mind. We all know that. But not everyone knows about the clarity that comes in time. If the clarity is not there, much of the motivation to practice is not there either. One method

to get that clarity is to wait however many years needed until it somehow naturally arises.

A much easier and faster method is to begin to remove our accumulation of obscurations AND not to continue to add more to the pile. One very effective and very easy method to do this is the one we are looking at here, to begin to be aware of our reactions as they arise and come to terms with them. By recognizing reactions one-by-one as they come up, accepting each as purely our own reaction, and then gradually toning it down. Recognize, accept, and move on. Look for the next reaction to come along and do the same thing. Do it until it becomes automatic and effortless.

If we do this, so-to-speak, “religiously,” we gradually lessen our knee-jerk reactions and cease recording much of this micro-karma to our mindstream. Less accumulation of micro-karma means less obscurations. Less obscurations mean increasing clarity and awareness. We remove the causes of reactive karma and we stop accumulating more.

I’m sorry, but I can’t make it simpler. This IS simple. If you can’t manage (or don’t want) to work with something as easy as reaction-toning, what can I say? Perhaps now is not the time for this kind of dharma practice. For those to whom these dharma blogs speak, I am doing my best to point out some useful things that we can do all day long, a practice that adds up into something worthwhile. And it works!

IN RINZAI ZEN, IT'S CALLED "KENSHO"

In Tibetan Buddhism there are events that take place at some point or another, such as Taking Refuge, Taking the Bodhisattva Vow, and so on. However, short of enlightenment, there is only one natural event-horizon that we cross (if properly pointed out) and this is called "Recognition," which refers to when we first recognize the true nature of the mind. And while it is nowhere near enlightenment, it is an actual realization, rather than another spiritual experience that just comes and goes.

I wish someone had explained this to me early on, so I want to share something here about what in the Tibetan Tradition is called "Recognition" ("Kensho" in Rinzai Zen), a realization that is permanent or, as my dharma teacher of 32 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche says, "irreversible." Mark that word "irreversible" because it is a one- way street.

Since "Recognition" is irreversible, it never goes away. Therefore it only can happen once to each of us, which is why in our lineage the "root guru" is declared to be the one (and only one) teacher that first points out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it, thus the term "Recognition." We recognize. That is why he or she is called our root guru. We have either recognized the actual nature of the mind or we have not. It is nice (once in a while in life) to have something that has very little gray area, so that it can serve as an actual landmark, a beacon in the dark. Indeed, recognition is that!

And dharma realization is not like realizing something-

or-other in mundane life, although it is similar in that they both are irreversible. The gateway to enlightenment in dharma practice is, as mentioned, this event called "Recognition," recognizing for the first time (in all the time that's been!) the actual nature of our own mind. It can't be planned. It just happens, thanks to our particular teacher pointing it out to us and we may experience the pointing-out instructions a number of times before we get it, if at all.

And in dharma training there is only one thing to "recognize" (as mentioned), the actual nature of the mind itself. Some writers talk about a glimpse of recognition, whatever that might mean. My comment is that it would have to be enough of a glimpse for the true nature of the mind to be recognizable or it's not "recognition," by definition, so I can't say I understand that argument very well. I should hasten to point out that once "recognition" has taken place, it can take many years to stabilize and expand that recognition to a complete view, like fully opening our eyes and seeing. And even that is not enlightenment, but rather just the first step on our subsequent journey toward enlightenment. Recognition is, however, a very important step, a realization that never goes away. As Rinpoche says, it is irreversible.

Unfortunately, I have seen folks in conversation on this topic twist in the wind in attempts to water-down this definition far enough so that they can say with a straight face that they have "recognition." Usually that is just intellectual understanding talking and such an attempt flies in the face of the definition of recognition that I understand.

If we have recognition, there is no need to defend it or attempt to qualify it in the eyes of others because recognition is enough in itself. We no longer look for

or need anyone else's approval (other than our guru's) or seek it on this issue. Why? Because we have, at last, complete confidence (and no doubt) in the dharma. We finally know just what to do in our dharma practice and, best of all, we know that we can do it just as we are now.

It is said in the teachings that once the root guru has pointed out the true nature of the mind to us (and we get it), his or her job is done. That's a powerful statement, one that needs to be thought through with care. From that point forward, it is all up to us. Sure, perhaps we might want to get an external blessing on that event from our guru, although the recognition itself is already the proof of the blessing having been given. Recognition is something after which there is no doubt whether you have had it. Questioning yourself as to whether you have had recognition is an oxymoron, a sure sign that you have not.

Why do I drone on and on about this particular crossroads in each of our dharma paths called "Recognition?" I do because perhaps the saddest thing would be to assume you have it just because you intellectually understand it, but have not yet realized it. You could stop being open to ever having it. This is why it is perhaps dangerous to talk about these topics.

If we accumulate enough talk, but no actual recognition, we become saturated with the material and run the danger of it losing any freshness -- the surprise factor. However, this danger has to be contrasted against the need on a student's part for a clear description of the nature of the path, at least in outline, although, as the tradition amply points out, no words can describe recognition or eventual realization. As the texts say, it is "beyond elaboration."

This is not to say that the great siddhas of the past have not tried their best. There are hundreds of descriptions, poems, pith instructions, etc. on the results of the pointing-out instructions and the subsequent recognition of the actual nature of the mind. While we can't say it, we can point at it.

INAUTHENTIC DHARMA

A sign that the dharma in America is taking root is that the days of wide-eyed wonder are no longer the only game in town. Way back when, in the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s, when none of us knew much of anything, we were ignorant, of course, but also innocent. Today we are still mostly ignorant, but not so innocent. I don't plan on dwelling on this topic, but in fairness and as an alert, I feel we should look at it.

And to make it clear that I am not just making this up, here is an excerpt from a teaching by the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, as translated by the inimitable translator Lama Yeshe Gyamtso:

Thrangu Rinpoche says, "...[I]t made the dharma so comparatively rare that it was hard to tell good dharma from funky, corrupt, polluted dharma. Because there wasn't a widespread presence of it anymore, people couldn't judge... they couldn't tell the difference, so corrupt practices... (Khenpo Rinpoche comments)... people misinterpreting the teachings because they lacked recognition of their mind's nature and so on, and all sorts of problems became troubling."

That's a scary thought, non-authentic dharma being mistaken for authentic dharma, and no one being able to tell the difference. Thankfully, this is not generally the case in this country... not yet, but this is not to say it isn't already here, any more than we could say that there are no phony yoga teachers or what-have-you. Most important is any degradation to the lineage that might occur. It took me a great many years to get it

through my head that the sine qua non of Vajrayana Buddhism was to keep the lineage intact and pass it on to the next generation without any loss of integrity. More important than money.

And the old maxim “As Above, So Below” applies here. In other words, what’s true for each one of us can also be true for the lineage itself, such events as recognizing the true nature of the mind. Recognition in the Karma Kagyu lineage is not an option, but an absolute requirement for undertaking Mahamudra Meditation training. Without having recognized the actual nature of the mind, actual Mahamudra training cannot begin.

While there is considerable wiggle-room or leeway in many areas of the dharma, in others there is none at all.

And just as Recognition is required for Mahamudra meditation, so Bodhicitta is required to achieve Recognition. Bodhicitta is often called the “Mind of Enlightenment” or “Heart of Enlightenment,” and if you ask a Tibetan where their mind is they don’t point at their skull, but rather at their heart, actually the middle of the chest. In other words, the mind and the heart are the same to Tibetans. Bodhicitta is also called “Awakened Heart,” as in “heartfelt.”

What am I getting at here, aside from pointing out the fact that having a strong Bodhicitta and achieving Recognition of the Mind’s Nature are crucial for a successful dharma practice? As mentioned earlier, these two qualities are critical, not only to our personal dharma practice, but also of great importance to the future of the lineage of the dharma. If you and I don’t realize the dharma, who will?

In the history of the dharma, the teachings clearly

point out that there have been (and will be) times when the teachings deteriorate and are no longer as effective as they once were. All of the Rinpoches I have known all agree that we are now in a time when the dharma is growing steadily weaker.

One of these teachings I attended clearly pointed out that there have been times where individuals involved with the dharma have not achieved recognition, have not recognized the nature of their minds, but somehow assume that they have. The result is that they lead the dharma from authenticity off-track in inauthentic directions, just the opposite of their avowed intention. Worse, often these folks don't know they don't know.

I have been around the dharma for some fifty years in one way or another. Because the dharma was so new to this country, very few of us knew what we were doing, and it was all, as mentioned earlier, so very innocent. However, as time progresses, we have become more socially comfortable with the dharma, comfortable in some cases to the dharma even being fashionable to the point of arrogance and not feeling responsible to others, and not wishing to be questioned. In Buddhism we are asked to question everything and everyone.

When students of the dharma who have not achieved Recognition, just because they have done some practice, begin to feel entitled to our respect and even feel confrontational with those who question them and/or their methods, this is not a good sign. A sense of entitlement is always a problem. Bodhicitta is the sincere heartfelt concern for others, and not just as a doctor to a patient. When Bodhicitta is lacking or is just receiving lip service, that too is a problem.

What to do? We can't just point this out to them, because they are especially on guard to being questioned, as well they should be if they want to maintain their imagined status-quo. It is hard to just ignore them because, as I like to say, the way they tell it asks a lot. Theirs is just another form of suffering, but one that looks a bit like a closed loop.

The texts for the First Thought That Turns the Mind, "The Precious Human Body" has what are called the "Eight Freedoms," situations where we cannot learn dharma, the seventh freedom is termed something like "because of incorrect views," a condition where our own arrogance and stubbornness prevent us from realizing the dharma.

Understanding the dharma is not the same as realizing it.

We would like to think that incorrect views only come from outside the dharma, but the fact is, as the opening quote pointed out, these incorrect views can just as easily come from within the dharma community itself.

This is why, as I understand it, it is so important to find a teacher that has some realization, at least enough to keep us safe from the obvious pitfalls. In my training, I was clearly told that if I sincerely wanted to help others, I should first help myself by working through my own obscurations before trying to help others. Your teacher will tell you when you are ready to share your dharma knowledge with others. Just ask them.

No Rinpoche that I have ever met charges for one-to-one training. Sure, we can make offerings or we can pay for attending teachings, etc., but working one-to-one with a teacher, which I have done a fair amount

of over the last 32 years, has never involved money. And this may be very Hinayana of me, but mixing dharma with any kind of business involving money is something I have been very careful to avoid.

PLAYING THE VICTIM

I realized some years ago that the psychological terms “masochist” and “sadist” just refer to our position on some kind of bell-curve that time imposes, with masochists being dragged along behind the wake of time like some rag-doll, while sadists tend to push things before their time, before they are ripe. Shakespeare said “Ripeness is all.” Well, I agree. We may not be out-and-out masochists or sadists, but we tend to fit into one or another of these categories. We let time force us or we tend to force things.

Certainly we do one or another of these in any particular situation.

Anyway, that observation is the not my main theme here. What I want to get at is this idea of victimization, of conceiving ourselves as a victim. I actually am surprised at how many folks habitually do this, like: all the time, and the concept is easy to grasp.

Now, this may be peculiar to Americans; I can't say, but it is prevalent in this country, the tendency to blame our particular personal situation on something outside us. Not only is this approach masochistic, but it makes us a victim of our circumstances every time. And it is this assuming the role of victim that I am pointing out here. Often we don't even realize we are doing it. That I find rather amazing.

It is like the old “The devil made me do it” phrase; whatever we are suffering from comes from outside ourselves. However you spell it, we are not to blame. Above all, we are not at fault. Our problems come at us from outside. I see this particularly when, as an astrologer, I do readings for folks, and listen to them

describe their personal situation.

If it's not untoward circumstances, then it's their boss, their kids, even their dog, but mostly, and above all, if they are in a relationship, it is their partner. The partner is the main cause of all of their suffering and pain. This might be believable, if it was true, but it is obviously not. These folks are simply taking on the role of victim, big time, and the saddest thing is that they are not even aware of it; they don't know it.

It's blame, blame, blame, and always anything or anyone other than themselves. One thing they are clear about is that they are not to blame. They don't say it (or realize it), but they are saying over and over again "I am a victim. I am not to blame. I can do nothing about this. The world or other people must change." Well, to use the vernacular, "As if!"

Being a victim is almost always a choice, at least as it relates to our response to what life subjects us to. The alternative to painting ourselves as a victim and blaming everyone else for our fate is to take responsibility for where we find ourselves. Even if it is not our fault, each of us has to be responsible, meaning only we can respond to our own situation. Others can perhaps point out or suggest how we might deal with things, but ultimately we must make a response.

Yet it seems that many people do not have the ability to respond, simple responsibility. Maybe they hope that someone from outside will save them, but they don't seem able or willing to save themselves. They keep saying, over and over again, that they are not responsible for their own situation. Someone or something else always is to blame. Do they realize what they are saying?

I can't help but think of the newborn baby that won't respond and breathe. The doctor spansks them on the behind to somehow shock the system into responding. I am afraid this is what is happening to those who choose to be a victim. Now, before I get a million comments about the victim of crimes or abuse, I am not talking here about something that simple.

Instead, I am speaking here of those of us who always (or at times) blame anyone or anything but ourselves for the particular situation we have gotten ourselves into. We play the victim in life as opposed to, regardless of what has happened to us, taking responsibility (i.e. simply responding) to our own situation and doing something about it other than complain and blame someone else.

When we choose to be a victim instead of to be responsible (respond), and blame anyone but ourselves, this is a recipe for failure. "Responsibility" is not a liability, but rather an opportunity to breathe and manage our own life. As they say these days, "I'm just sayin'..."

PRAYER BEADS: PARKING THE MIND

Tibetan Buddhists use prayer beads, those 108-bead rosary-like string of beads they call “malas.” On these they count (or don’t count) mantras. Every monk or nun has a mala, and much of the time they are using them, if only in the background.

A rinpoche can be teaching or sitting there talking with you, while at the same time they are parsing beads on a mala in their hand. And practitioners also use them. I have accumulated all kinds of malas over the years, and have sometimes used them diligently to keep tracking of the number of mantras for various kinds of practices.

Most malas have 108 beads, but many also have extra beads that serve as marker beads, usually three marker beads that divide the mala into four sections of 28 beads each. Then, on top of that, there are often two strands of ten beads each that serve as meta-counters, one strand to keep track of how many rounds of 108 beads we have done, and a second strand of ten beads to keep track of when you have done 10,000 mantras.

If that is not enough, some malas have a movable marker that records 10,000 rounds of mantras, which can be moved around the entire 108-bead mala to record over a million mantras. This makes for a fairly efficient system for keeping count. And that is about it for most malas, except some lamas add extra markers just to commemorate this or that event, to remind them of something. These event beads are not used for counting.

The 108 beads can be made of almost anything, most often seeds, like Bodhi seeds, lotus seeds, and so on. But there are also malas of precious stones, pearls, amber, and on and on. And different Buddhist practices lend themselves to this or that kind of mala, like Chenresik, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, usually has a mala of white beads, Medicine Buddha of blue (Lapis Lazuli), and so forth.

All of these malas are most often used for reciting mantras. I have mentioned that malas are used to keep track of recitations with the idea being to accumulate a certain number of mantras. The standard accumulation is 100,000 mantras for each syllable of the mantra.

However, that is not the only thing malas are used for. They also are used as place holders, which I will now describe. And by place holder, here I mean a place to park your mind or attention when it is not in use. These days that is my principle use for malas. And in this use, the mantras are not counted. My approach is one of “Who’s counting?”

And although I have many regular 108-bead malas, I tend to carry around just a small wrist mala of 20 or so beads. I don’t even remember how many beads are on it because I don’t use it that way.

I use my wrist mala much like the popular “Worry Beads,” not to count anything, but as a place to park my mind when it is not otherwise in use. And I did not come up with this use by accident or on my own, but by way of a remark from Rinpoche, my teacher, during an interview.

Usually Rinpoche does not make off-hand remarks, but during an interview some time ago, when nearing the end of an interview, Rinpoche made the remark to

me that I might want to use a mala to say some mantras. The idea that was communicated was similar to those lamas that use a prayer wheel, i.e. for some kind of background repetition practice.

I took this in and rather than haul around a large heavy mala, I instead used a small wrist mala of Bodhi seeds, which are like the common Worry Beads we often see used in many religions. I began using it in the traditional manner, to say some mantras or prayers now and again. However, after a while, I began to instead do what I believe Rinpoche actually intended. I found myself reaching into my pocket whenever I was a little tense or under pressure, such as in conversation or whatever. My hand would reach into my pocket, find the wrist mala (I don't wear it on my wrist), and start moving beads around, one after another, while silently reciting a mantra with each bead, frequently "Om Mani Padme Hum," the mantra of compassion.

This soon became completely automatic, and I mean soon, so much so that the whole process fell into the background and became almost invisible to me. It was not long before I found myself reaching for the beads whenever I was at loose ends. From then on it was a place to park my mind whenever it was not engaged or when it was getting distracted – a hedge against distraction.

It was like a free parking place for my mind or attention. And that is where I am today, using these anti-distraction beads as a way to place or park my mind. As mentioned, when I am not engaged in doing something specific, I find myself reaching for the beads and parking or resting my mind there.

The fingers keep on moving, silently reciting mantras.

And while the whole process is pretty much automatic, it does not really take my attention away from things I have to do. Yet it does take enough of my attention to keep me from being distracted by anything else. My mind and mental attention rests on the silent mantra recitation.

The beads keep on moving, the mantra is silently repeated, and the mind gently rests on this as I remain undistracted. In summary, this mantra repetition on the beads of a wrist mala is a way of distracting me from being distracted, holding my attention just enough to allow my mind to rest in the mantra until called forth by circumstances to action. So, it is a place to park my attention so that my mind can rest, rather than be distracted all the time.

WHAT IS THE DHARMA?

One of my Facebook friends asked, “What is ‘The Dharma?’” You would think that would be an easy question to answer, as in “The Dharma is the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, the path for awakening he laid down, his method,” and that would be true, but that is not the whole extent of it. The historical Buddha did not invent the dharma, but rather reflected what was already naturally there. Remember that the Buddha started out as an ordinary human being just like us.

In other words, the concept of the dharma did not start with the historical Buddha of this age, but goes back thousands of years. It is part of the Vedas, the Upanishads, as well as Jainism, Sikhism, and all kinds of other spiritual disciplines. Originally the Sanskrit word “dharma” meant “to hold” or “to maintain and keep.” And what is held or kept is the law, the natural system of phenomena that support and is the basis of the life system we all live in.

So, the dharma has kinship with modern science and certainly with the laws of Mother Nature, but unlike science, it is much broader, and includes ethics, psychology, spiritual and religious matters, the “right” way of living, everything that is the basis of anything. Above all it is sensitive to our “intent” in every action.

Yet, as mentioned, the more common definition of dharma, the one that is most popular, is that the dharma is one of the Three-Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) of Buddhism, with Dharma referring to the teachings and the path to awakening as left by the

latest historical Buddha, Shakyamuni.

I am afraid I can't get all academic about the term "dharma," and don't even want to. Personally the dharma in my life has to do with a path or method of living that generally results in my becoming increasingly more aware rather than increasingly more unaware. Instead of endless trial and error on my part, the dharma as laid down by the Buddha saves me time by pointing out as best it can what actions and methods, if learned and practiced, have proven to be useful over the centuries in waking up and moving toward enlightenment, i.e. greater awareness.

I could go on and on, I imagine, but it all adds up to waking up into more awareness. Let me give just one simple example of a Buddhist method and practice that demonstrates, at least to me, the efficiency and genius of the Buddhist methods. And I am referring here to Vajrayana Buddhism, because it is the only form I have practiced. I know there are other forms out there, but let's stick to this one for discussion please. The Tibetan Buddhists are very, very concerned about meritorious actions, what they call the "Two Accumulations," so let's briefly look at that as an example of Tibetan Buddhist mind-training methods.

The Tibetan Buddhist define the Two Accumulations as "Merit" and "Awareness," and the two work together as hand and glove, as we shall see. As mentioned, by "Merit" they mean meritorious actions, more commonly called "Skillful Means," which is just what it says, learning to act skillfully as opposed to making a mess of things. Of course, it is nice to be skillful, but there is much more to being skillful than just making a neat job of things.

As I understand it, action done skillfully (skillful execution), like all great skills, is aerodynamically or karmically efficient. Skillful actions produce the least fallout by way of adding fewer obscurations to our already burgeoning pile of karma. And please note that accumulating less obscurations automatically means greater awareness, etc.

The Zen Buddhists (close kin to Tibetan Buddhism) excel at perfecting actions (Skillful Means) in everything they do, as in “Zen and the Art of Archery” and so on.

The thing to grasp here is that skillful actions not only “cut the air” beautifully or skillfully, but that skill amounts to creating less karma, which translates for us in being less obscured and having more space or awareness. Be sure to understand that last line please.

And here is the recursion, the main point of this explanation. By acting ever more skillfully, we create ever more awareness. And... with more awareness we can better see to act still more skillfully yet, which generates even more awareness, and thus the recursion. We have a dharma machine which is called, as pointed out, the Two Accumulations. This dharma engine, so to speak, using skillful means generates by iteration ever more awareness, which is then used to be even more skillful, ad infinitum. This is one of our tickets to ride, an example of what is called relative-truth that will propel us on our journey to awakening.

Now, I had to think this through very, very carefully and, for me, it took a long time. Perhaps you can just get it instantly, yet putting it into practice takes, well, “practice.” This is, however, a brilliant way to

accumulate merit, a method that is self-propelling and, pretty much, unstoppable. When enough merit has been accumulated, we wake up quite naturally. My dharma teacher, the Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gives this analogy:

When I was a kid, in Boy Scouts, I learned to rub two sticks together to start a fire. Rubbing the two sticks is like gathering the Two Accumulations described above. We first get some heat, but no fire. If we stop there, we will never reach what I call “critical mass” and develop what the Buddhists call “Bodhicitta,” the heart of awakening, the ability to keep at it.

However, if we will keep rubbing those sticks (gathering the two accumulations), we will eventually reach a point when fire suddenly appears. That is the point of performing the Two Accumulations. When this fire happens, this is called “Recognition,” and it refers to our recognizing the True Nature of the Mind. Once that takes place, once we get a real glimpse of the nature of our own mind, we spontaneously generate what is called “Bodhicitta.” Bodhicitta, like fusion, gives us an endless supply of devoted energy to further enlighten ourselves so as to be of use to others. It is the ‘sine qua non’ of Buddhist practice, the fire in the belly, that is unstoppable.

I know, this must sound all dramatic, and it is. Bodhicitta, once aroused, lights up our life with fire and compassion for all those who have yet to develop Bodhicitta. I could go on, but my wish here was to point out one method of Buddhist mind-training as an example of how useful and profound these practices are. I have no idea if I am being clear here. Do you get it? Do see how this is a recursive practice that once aroused, like fusion, can bring an endless supply of dharma interest?

RELATIONSHIP COLLISIONS

After a certain point in our dharma practice, everything becomes grist for the dharma mill. “Take it to the path,” is the refrain that’s always singing in the back of my mind, you know, use whatever comes up. And this is nowhere more true than in the very heart of my relationships, the thick of the thicket so to speak. The closer the relationship, the less room for error, and the easier it is to screw up at least for the short-term. Aside from the difficulty in initially doing it, there is a definite joy to throwing our arms open, bending over backward, and taking a leap of trust with those closest to us, although it is probably scarier than bungee-jumping.

There is no one is closer to us than our partner, married or otherwise, whoever is closest and thus presents a direct reflection of our behavior – our shadow mirror. As I often mention here, I have been doing in-depth astrological counseling for some fifty years or so and, without-a-doubt, the main topic or questions I get are about relationships, marriage in particular. And if that were not enough, I have my own marriage of 44 years going on now and still standing. And no one ever said it would be easy.

And up there at the tip of the top is the fact that (as you might imagine) I am not the easiest person to live with. I’m difficult and I forget that with any partner I am talking to my own reflection and fall into arguing, when intellectually I know that is purely a waste of time.

And arguments with someone close to us are not only tricky, they’re like Brer Rabbit and the tar baby in the

Uncle Remus Tales; the more punches we throw, the deeper we're stuck in the mess we've made. And post-mortems to arguments can only go so far before they become part of the problem, rather than the solution. Endless analyzing of the "He Said, She Said" variety, like peeling layers of an onion, in the end seldom results in anyone being left to blame, certainly not ourselves. Each points at the other. However, here is what does help when I find myself going head-to-head with someone, and it is a page right out of dharma-101.

The most basic meditation technique is called Shamata or Tranquility Meditation, learning to let the mind just rest as it is. And, as part of that practice we pick some object to focus on, be it a stone, stick, a spot on the wall, or whatever. We try to remain mindful of that object (without analyzing it), you know, just allow our mind to rest on it. However, when we find that we get distracted (our mind wanders from the object), and we eventually become aware or realize we are day-dreaming, what we do at that point is to very gently bring our mind back to the object (the stick or stone, etc.) and begin again.

In fact, Shamata Meditation, IMO, is little else than a series of endless beginnings, bringing our mind back to the subject at hand and starting over fresh. That's the basic meditation technique that has been used for thousands of years. And, oddly enough, I find that this same technique also works when two partners in a relationship collide.

I am not saying that there is no value in sitting down after a mental collision with your partner and digging through the debris, searching for who is to blame or how it happened. Seriously folks, we know how it happens, because it happens all the time. And either,

neither, or both of us are always to blame. We know where to find the culprits. As mentioned, post-mortems to fights are not all that helpful and forensic science is something few of us know much about.

In fact, initially I was amazed at the fact that in Buddhist mind training, as a rule, they do not dig in the past. In fact, one of their great slogans is “Don’t Prolong the Past.” This is never more true (IMO) than with arguments or fights between couples.

Diagramming how a fight went down seldom is helpful in my experience because, as mentioned earlier, we already know who the victim and victimizer are. They are us, either one of us more than the other or, more often, both of us involved in the relationship. And just as every dualism has a subject and an object, in truth, even if we can prove the dualism that you are wrong and I am right (or vice versa), the fact of the interdependency of things ultimately sheds light on the shadow world of subject and object, victim and victimizer, etc. Dualism is no solution. It’s like a game of hot-potato.

In other words, unless we want out of the relationship entirely, painting you black and me white (or the reverse) is not ever going to be a solution. That should be obvious. It’s a push me, pull you situation. If we intend to move forward with the relationship, we are just going to have to eventually walk all of that kind of finger-pointing back anyway, so why bother extenuating it. Picking over the carcass of an argument is mostly a waste of time. It is just another bad habit we have picked up.

What I find more useful is to just take a page from meditation 101. As soon as I can get hold of myself, I just stop arguing and start over. There is no point in spending more time evaluating how I got distracted,

any more than when we are distracted meditating, we spend even more time on what the distraction was all about. That is throwing good money after bad, adding insult to injury. As I tell my dog when he brings home something dead and rotten “Just drop it.”

So, the smart money is on dropping it and starting over; let it go. In meditation, we bring the mind back and start fresh endlessly, until we get it right. It is no different with a relationship argument. As soon as you can realize you are distracted from a peaceful interaction (i.e. that you are fighting), just drop it, bring the mind back to your partner, trust that they will do the same, and begin again.

The trust part is that our partner will do the same, yet, even if they don't, we are better off doing this unilaterally, if need be. However, starting fresh is not to be confused with simply ignoring what happened and going on our merry way. That confusion would be a huge mistake. We are not ignoring it, pushing it under the carpet. We are noting it and then starting over fresh. And again and again and again.

This technique works best if both partners have the trust in the other (despite the current disagreement) and both can drop it and move on, with trust that the other is not just getting away with something, but like ourselves, is serious about getting beyond this kind of behavior.

Part of the beauty of the dharma approach is that instead of digging in the past, trying to understand it, we recognize that we have been there, done that, and we just drop all of that post-mortem, start over, and move on. In other words, we build a habit in the present that eventually creates a new past, one good enough that we don't feel the need to dig through the

ruins of our old arguments. We move on together.

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

Let me give just one simple example of a Buddhist method and practice that demonstrates, at least to me, the efficiency and genius of the Buddhist methods. And I am referring here to Vajrayana Buddhism, because it is the only form I have practiced. I know there are other types of Buddhism out there, but let's stick to this one for discussion here please. The Tibetan Buddhists are very, very concerned about meritorious actions, part of what they call the "Two Accumulations," so let's briefly look at that concept as an example of a Tibetan Buddhist mind-training method.

The Tibetan Buddhists define the Two Accumulations as "Merit" and "Awareness," and the two work together as hand and glove, as we shall see. By "Merit" they mean meritorious actions, more commonly called "Skillful Means," which is just what it says, learning to act skillfully as opposed to making a mess of things. Of course, it is nice to be skillful, but there is much more to being skillful than just making a neat job of it.

As I understand it, action done skillfully (skillful execution), like all great skills, is aerodynamically or karmically efficient. Skillful actions (proper execution) produce the least fallout by way of adding fewer obscurations to our already burgeoning pile of karma. And please note that accumulating less obscurations automatically means greater awareness, etc. As our obscurations lessen, our awareness goes up. The Zen Buddhists (close kin to Tibetan Buddhism) excel at perfecting actions (Skillful Means) in everything they do, as in "Zen and the Art of Archery" and so on.

The thing to grasp here is that skillful actions on our part not only “cut the air” beautifully or skillfully, but that skill amounts to creating less karma, which translates for us in being less obscured and having more space or awareness. Be sure to understand that last line please. Using “Skillful Means” creates less karma, less obscurations.

And here comes the “recursion,” the main point of this explanation. By acting ever more skillfully, we add fewer and fewer obscurations, thus becoming more increasingly more aware. And... with more awareness we can better see clearer to act still more skillfully yet, which generates even more awareness, and thus the recursion. In essence we have a “dharma machine” which is traditionally called, as pointed out, the “Two Accumulations”. This dharma engine, so to speak, by using skillful means generates (by iteration) ever more awareness, which is then used to be even more skillful yet, and so on, ad infinitum. This is one of our tickets to ride in dharma practice, an example of what is called relative-truth that will propel us on our journey to awakening. This is why the Zen Buddhists not only practice on the cushion with care, but make a point of skillfully executing any action throughout the day if they can be mindful enough.

Now, I had to think this concept through very, very carefully and, for me, it took a long time to digest it. Perhaps readers can just get it instantly, yet putting it into practice takes, well, “practice.” This is, however, a brilliant way to accumulate merit (and thus awareness), a method that is self-propelling and, pretty much, unstoppable, once fully initiated.

When enough merit has been accumulated, we wake up quite naturally. My dharma teacher, the Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gives this analogy:

When I was a kid in Boy Scouts, I learned to rub two sticks together to start a fire. Rubbing the two sticks (according to my Rinpoche) is like gathering the Two Accumulations described above, by iteration and recursion. In that process, we first get some heat but no fire. If we stop there, we will never reach what we could call “critical mass” and develop what the Buddhists call “Bodhicitta,” the heart of awakening, the ability to keep at it rain or shine.

However, if we will concentrate and keep rubbing those sticks (gathering the two accumulations), we will eventually reach a point when fire suddenly appears. That is the point of performing the Two Accumulations to begin with. When this fire happens, it is called “Recognition,” and it refers to our recognizing the “True Nature of the Mind.” Once that takes place, once we get a real glimpse of the nature of our own mind, we spontaneously generate compassion and achieve what is called “Bodhicitta,” which, like fusion, gives us an endless supply of devoted energy to further enlighten ourselves so that we can be of use to others. It is the ‘sine qua non’ of Buddhist practice, the fire in the belly, that is unstoppable -- Bodhicitta.

I know, this must sound all dramatic, and it is. Bodhicitta, once aroused, lights up our life with fire and compassion for all those who have yet to develop Bodhicitta. I could go on, but my wish here was to point out one method of Buddhist mind-training as an example of how useful and profound these practices are. I have no idea if I am being clear here. Do you get it? Do see how this is a recursive practice that once aroused, like fusion, promises an endless supply of dharma interest? And this kind of enthusiasm is what is needed to walk the dharma path toward

enlightenment.

[Shown here are the Bell and Dorje (thunderbolt) used by dharma practitioners in many of the deity practices. The dorje represents skillful means (merit) and the bell awareness (wisdom). These are my own implements and they sit on what is called (in Tibetan) a “Tilden,” made of pieces of brocade. This particular Tilden was made for His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, should he ever visit here. The Tilden then sits on a small wooden table called a “Chok-tse.”]

THE MINIMISATION OF THE DHARMA

When I was first learning about the dharma and encountered the incredible “Common Preliminaries” (also known as the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma”), there were considerations about that “First Thought” (the precious human birth) that intrigued me. Within that First Thought was a list of the eight different kinds of existences that would not offer us what is called the “precious human birth.” And one of those existences is that we might be born into a time when no Buddha appears or when there is no dharma available to us. What a sad thought, the world without the dharma.

I rejoiced that we are fortunate to be born in times when there are teachers like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa, and many others. At the same time, great lamas, in particular the one I have worked with, have continued to point out that we are now in times when the dharma is diminishing, growing weaker, and have been in those times for centuries and longer. How is that?

It took me a longer time to realize (and it came as a shock) that there could also be times we are born in where there are dharma teachings, but as lip-service only. No one had bothered to realize the teachings. For me, I first heard about this possibility from the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when he called such a possibility “Spiritual Materialism,” as in his seminal book “Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism.” Meeting him in person only emphasized this for me, because his every action cut through the intellectualized view of Buddhism that I had acquired from late-night coffee (and cigarette) chats on the

subject in the late 1950s. Buddhism and Ingmar Bergman films were popular topics back then.

While Trungpa Rinpoche instantly cut through the veil of intellectualization of the dharma (which was not our fault because it was all we knew at the time), it was only later that the implications of what he called “spiritual materialism” came home to us, fueled perhaps by the appearance of teachers like himself. It seems that any introduction of authentic dharma, to use an analogy, was like space injected into time, resulting in expanded time, which somehow instantly draws around itself its opposite.

And so it is with the brilliance of someone like Trungpa Rinpoche. It is the same idea as when great teachers are often surrounded by crazy folks, who seem to flock to them like moths to a flame. Or perhaps this is why so many great enlightened masters left the monasteries in which they grew up. There was no room in the intellectual climate for actual realization to appear, so they just walked out. The whole point of dharma is realization.

Those very raw early days of the 1960s (and especially the 1970s), when the dharma was like a blowtorch igniting part of a generation, have since given way to the more cultured dharma scene that is now becoming quite popular. It is exactly what happens to politicians that make it into Washington’s inner circle. They too often become part of the problem, rather than the solution they intended. It is no different with the dharma. It is simple call and response, which very much reminds me of what Wilhelm Reich pointed out in his radical book “The Murder of Christ.” Now there’s a book that pushes the limits of the Western mind.

Everything that is incendiary (and of pith essence) causes an intense reaction, part of which apparently is to draw around itself cover to prevent it from burning the status quo with too much sudden change. The ripples of Trungpa Rinpoche continue to spread and be incorporated into the fabric of a conservative society, mere echoes of what it meant to stand face to face with Trungpa and look him in the eye. He subdued whippersnappers like me on contact, instantly, not with power, but with his openness.

This is perhaps why Tibetan Buddhists work so diligently to secure their lineage, to make sure that no more than the same is certain in each generation. What is known as empowerment is simply the Samaya between student and teacher, a mixing of the minds, extension by recognition, and transmission through identification. And every pure fresh impulse is gradually embodied with almost infinite layers of response, everything from a direct reflection to that impulse watered down until it is almost unrecognizable.

Imitation is said to be the most sincere form of flattery, but an imitation is still just that, imitation.

With the Tibetan lineages, so much concern and effort go into what we could call authentic realization. And this explains why threshold events like Rinzai Zen's Kensho experience, what in Tibetan Buddhism is called "recognition" of the true nature of the mind, are so crucially important. Without those very clear thresholds, all these initially pure impulses are quickly incorporated into just what Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out, spiritual materialism of one kind or another, the intellectualization of the dharma -- understanding, but no accompanying realization. If indeed we are entering a dark age for the Dharma, I would take a

page from Dylan Thomas and his words “Rage, rage
against the dying of the light.”

My first dharma teacher would often say to me:
“Michael, if you spend all of your time in the sideshow,
the main tent will be gone.”

THE ONSLAUGHT OF DEPRESSION

There are legitimate reasons for depression, the universal one probably being the very nature of this cyclic world of ups and downs we all live in, which the Buddhists call Samsara. In a way, Samsara is like pinching ourselves, in that only we can do something about it. And Samsara is absolutely endless.

In recent years I have become clearly aware that the forces of Samsara, the ups and downs of my life, will never weaken, but always continue to operate at full strength. To my chagrin, it is I who will gradually weaken and eventually fail, hopefully more or less successfully. We literally wear ourselves out of existence. That fact, my friends, can be a little depressing. The key or operative words above are “pinching ourselves,” suggesting that there is something that we can do to alleviate our own condition and avoid depression. What is that?

In my own case, I have found that I have to become increasingly immediate in examining the state of my mind and the moment. I became somewhat expert in reading the signs and signals around me many decades ago. And certainly there is no end to them. Like everything meaningful, all signs point somewhere, usually to some kind of action. How to choose?

In the whirlwind of pointers and signs surrounding every moment, how are we to know which signs lead on to the future for us and which will wind up planting us more firmly in the past? It reminds me of the old song by John Sebastian of “Lovin’ Spoonful:”

“Did you ever have to make up your mind?”

You pick up on one and leave the other one behind,
It's not often easy and not often kind,
Did you ever have to make up your mind?"

How do we make up our mind? Either we do it or our mind will be made up for us simply by our inaction. However, as mentioned, how do we know our true direction in the maelstrom of indicators surrounding us? After all, they all point somewhere.

For one, like the old adage about letting the mud settle out from the water, we can learn to allow our mind to settle out and just rest. Relaxation therapy can be helpful in facilitating this, regardless of how each of us relaxes. As for me, I often relax by watching a movie. Sure, I follow the plot (although less all the time), but what I am really doing is allowing the swirl of daily events to settle out somewhat. So, that is the first step, relaxation.

But let's not confuse relaxation with meditation. They are two different things entirely. Relaxing is allowing the mind to settle. Meditation is a technique or method to facilitate clarity. I know that they sound similar, and they are to a limited degree, but one is relatively passive (relaxation), while the other (meditation) is an active process that we personally undertake. The results are different too.

The result of relaxation is a somewhat settling of the mind, but other than that, relaxation readies us more for sleep than action, although it does allow what may be important for us to keep in mind to rise to the top. On the other hand, meditation is an active technique that is capable of both generating and maintaining clarity. We can take it with us and it is forward looking.

I imagine that most all of us have some means of relaxing our mind. I can't imagine life without it.

However, it would seem that very few of us have found a way to actually generate clarity, much less maintain it on a daily basis on our own. This, of course, is the province of meditation, and why it is so precious. It helps us keep a light on in the night of time.

To repeat, relaxation allows the mind to relax and settle out to some degree. Tranquility Meditation involves allowing the mind to come to rest in one-pointed gentle concentration. We might say that instead of allowing the mind to just relax all over the place, as in relaxation therapy, Tranquility Meditation allows the mind to come to rest calmly, yet remain in mindful focus. Somebody is home. There is a very real difference between the two. One is just relaxation, and the other (Tranquility Meditation) sets the stage or serves as a base for Insight Meditation. And Insight Meditation is something special!

Insight Meditation is an incendiary technique for producing brilliant clarity of mind and it is recursive, i.e. it feeds on itself. Like an acetylene torch, it bursts into clarity and actually begins to feed on thoughts and reactions as fuel. Most people these days are mistaking relaxation therapy for meditation. It's not. Even Tranquility Meditation is difficult to learn properly, yet it is the basis for Insight Meditation, which is really where freedom begins.

If you don't know what Insight Meditation is like, of course you don't know what you are missing because you don't know -- tautology and all. If you did know, you would understand why it is worthwhile to wade through the rather difficult process of learning basic Tranquility Meditation, and so on. I am not the only advocate of Insight Meditation. It has received unanimous acclaim by meditators for millennia.

My message here is that relaxation, while greatly needed by most of us, alone is not ultimately effective against Samsara, the whirlwind of this world. Relaxation is, in the long run, just too passive. We have to take action or, as I used to say, we have to actually go to meet our maker. There are many worthwhile acts and activities that will benefit this world, but in my experience the single most useful form of action I have found (and I have been very active!) is to first discover the nature of our mind and how it works. And then go and do the world. For that, some form of meditation, using the mind to look at itself, is required.

THE PHYSICS OF AWARENESS

What follows is a very simple explanation of a dharma principle that can otherwise be confusing. It has to do with “awareness” and our various obscurations, how they are reciprocal or relate with one another. Once you understand this relationship, you may find your approach to mind-training changing, and this concept is very easy to understand.

Most of the traditional beginning dharma practice texts are directly concerned with removing obscurations rather than concentrating on increasing awareness, and there is a reason why. For example, the extraordinary-preliminaries, what is called “Ngondro,” are concerned with removing and thinning out obscurations, what is called purification. The practice of Vajrasattva is all about that. Lojong (The Seven Points of Mind Training) is similar in that Tonglen is a purification practice, etc.

There is a simple relationship between obscurations and the degree of our awareness. Like a teeter-totter, if we decrease our obscurations, our awareness automatically increases. After all, this world of Samsara we live in obscures the true nature of the mind itself, so if we work on removing our obscurations, by definition the mind clears up and we naturally become more aware. The converse is also true; accumulate more obscurations and our awareness diminishes in a one-to-one relationship. And there is a caveat.

Increased awareness, more than we now have, is a closed book for us. We have no idea what increased awareness is like because we have never

experienced it. However, the whole idea of obscurity is more familiar. I have offered the following analogy (perhaps once too often), but it is a good way to understand this idea.

If we want to learn to play a musical instrument, of course we have to practice. We have to learn tuning, chords, scales, and what-not. Practicing the guitar is not the same as playing music with it. That takes time and, as mentioned, practice. To keep up our will to practice, we can always put on a CD and listen to our favorite guitar player, be inspired, and so on. We can hear what we hope to achieve.

However, in learning mind-training, we also have to practice, but unlike learning a musical instrument, there is no CD or DVD that we can put on to experience what having greater awareness will be like. Increased awareness, much less enlightenment, is a virtual unknown to us. As the venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche would say “Your guess is as good as mine.”

My point here is that most dharma practices (at least beginning mind-training) don't attempt to directly approach our enlightenment. Instead they tend to work on purifying our obscurities. And, as mentioned earlier, a decrease in obscurities automatically means an increase in awareness, the actual clarity of our mind.

While we can't successfully imagine what an increase in awareness will bring without perhaps falling back on what we have heard, read, or been taught (conceptual understanding), we can just stop with the expectations. 99% of the time they are wrong anyway, so we can just clear our minds of speculating because dharma-expectations are just another form of

obscurations, and a serious one at that..

Instead, we can concentrate on purification practices, like removing obscurations of one kind of another and leave the awareness appear as it will. We can trust and know that, if we remove our obscurations, that an increase in awareness will result, and in direct proportion to our efforts. This simple truth can be very important and it is easy to grasp.

THE THREE SUFFERINGS

As if one suffering is not enough, the Buddhists traditionally number three of them, and they are worth understanding.

The Suffering of Suffering (dukkha-dukkha)

This is pretty much the common idea of suffering we all know, what Shakespeare called the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, things like birth, sickness, old age, and death, plus the standard round of physical, emotional, and mental pain. We all are aware of this kind of suffering. The Tibetans refer to this as fully-revealed or “obvious” suffering.

The Suffering of Change (viparinama-dukkha)

In the Tibetan texts, this type of suffering is considered characteristic of the realms of the gods and humans, the so-called “higher realms,” being mainly the suffering of change, the idea that whatever goes up, comes down, and vice versa. We may be up today, but we may be down tomorrow. This is the idea that our states of mind and sense of well-being are temporary, unstable, and do not last. They cycle or circle. When we have spiritual experiences that come and go, they are an example of the suffering of change. Change as the only constant typifies this kind of suffering.

All-Pervasive Suffering (sankhara-dukkha)

The kind of suffering, “all-pervasive” suffering, is almost unknown to us and seldom understood. It refers to a kind of suffering that is characteristic of Samsara (cyclic existence) in general, and is often likened to a vast ocean of suffering we all float in. In

my opinion, this is somewhat characteristic of the Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind, which is often called “Revulsion of Samsara.” This fourth thought always gave me trouble, like for about 40 years! Secretly, I love this world and did not cotton to the thought of being revulsed by it, to use an older version of the word revulsion. I seldom get to the point of revulsion of this world. Sure, maybe if someone close to me is suffering or dies, I tire of this world, but otherwise I am all ears.

Of course, this whole conundrum finally came up in a teaching and my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, explained it to us so that I actually understood it. And, as usual, it was not what I was thinking or expected! Expectations really suck.

Basically, he explained that we are not generally even aware of this third form of suffering. It is beneath our radar screen unless our awareness is highly developed. But rather than paraphrase him, here is an excerpt of a teaching he gave in 2002, translated by the incredible Lama Yeshe Gyamtso:

“Once we have, through ignorance, adopted the five aggregates [physical form, feelings and sensations, perception, mental formations, and consciousness], we are constantly experiencing a type of suffering that is called “pervasive suffering” or sometimes “the pervasive suffering of the transitory composite.” “

“Pervasive suffering is something that we do not normally recognize. Pervasive suffering here refers to our unripened karmic imprints, of which we are not normally aware. We do not experience it as suffering because we are unaware of the karma that we have accumulated and we are therefore unaware of what we are headed toward.

Aryas, arhats, bodhisattvas, and so forth do experience this as suffering because they can see the presence of ordinary beings' karmic imprints and are therefore aware of where they are headed."

"It says in the commentary on the Abhidharmakosha, if a hair were to be placed in the palm of our hand, we would not notice it particularly and certainly would not experience it as painful. But if the same hair were to be stuck in our eye, we would not only notice it, we would experience it as uncomfortable and even painful. The childish [beginners in dharma] are like those with the hair in the palms of our hands. They do not realize or recognize pervasive suffering. Aryas, Arhats, and Bodhisattvas are like those with the hair in our eyes. They see pervasive suffering as suffering."

So, the idea here is that we, you and I, are not sensitive enough to be aware of what is called the all-pervasive suffering in life. Everything looks pretty good to us. "What suffering?" is our response. We are the "childish," with the hair in the palm of our hands, not aware enough to experience it as a hair in our eye. That is why we feel so little "revulsion." If you lack the faculty, you can't see the phenomenon. We have to trust those with realization who tell us that as we become more aware, we go behind the curtain of the Self and begin to see our normal state as suffering. We will then see that there is a low-level kind of suffering that we are all twisting and turning in, but which we are oblivious to. It occasionally manifests as ennui or, the way the dharma texts put it, "revulsion" of this world.

UNUTTERABLE

Ineffable means unutterable, i.e. we can't speak it, try as we might, no matter how clever we are with words. The Tibetans say that "realization" is unutterable, beyond elaboration or words, so there is no shame in not being able to express the ineffable. It's natural.

If we have some bit of dharma realization, the best we can do is to point at it in hopes that others can go, experience, and finally realize it too. An example that my dharma teacher often uses is trying to explain to someone what sugar tastes like. In the end, we each have to taste it for ourselves, which is the whole point of the dharma. It is a do-it-yourself project.

We can describe sugar to someone who has never tasted it until we are blue in the face, but they literally don't 'know' what we are talking about. And when it comes to questions of dharma "realization," words can barely scratch the surface. So, if words don't work, what works?

The fact is nothing works all that well or we would all have been enlightened long ago. If we knew now what we will know when we are enlightened, then perhaps we would have the energy and initiative to push on through, but we don't. Not only do we not-know, we don't have a clue and, as the great lamas say, we continue to ignore the obvious nature of our own minds, even though it is with us all the time. We don't recognize it!

If words can't even do it, how on earth will we flag-down our attention long enough to stop being so distracted? Unfortunately, there is not an easy answer to that question, meaning it is not easy to break the

deer-in-the-headlight hold our distractions have on us.

Apparently we can't just say "Hey Guys! Over here is what you have been looking for," etc. Words can't describe it and obviously we don't know what we "don't know;" there are two strikes against us right out of the gate. So what does get our attention?

The short answer is "not much" and the longer answer is where the classic "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma" come in, you know: how precious this human life is, the specter of impermanence, the inevitability of karma, and the utter undependability of this cyclic world existence. Those are all sticks, folks, not carrots.

Apparently, something has to bring us down to earth before we can get serious enough to actually undertake dharma practice. And the bottom line here does not look so good.

It is this that makes religious or spiritual teachings so difficult to convey. We have no common reference point like: any real idea of what enlightenment would be like.

Certainly the Christians work hard to paint a picture of what Heaven is like. If there is no immediate grasp and understanding on our part, then teachings can appear like preaching and the dharma becomes just one more thing for us to ignore. So how does the dharma propagate?

As far as I can tell, it depends on the student, much like the old saying, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." Eventually, when we have enough merit, we finally see it. But, at least in my experience, getting ready for realization is not something as simple as just being told to "listen up."

What little realization I know came from extreme circumstances, ones that I had never before experienced, ones that plunged me into what was, for me, a world of hurt. These circumstances sobered me up enough so that I could take some dharma teachings seriously enough to actually respond to them with action on my part. And that response was not done out of obligation or pressure, but spontaneously like just letting go and becoming free!

I find it a little scary that it took so much to simply get my attention, which does not bode well for a “business as usual” approach. In other words, it may take a real life disruption for us to shake loose from our fixations long enough to realize anything. This underlines why the ‘Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind’ loom more and more important for each of us. If invoked, they can actually bring us down to earth long enough to where we can actually do something about our situation.

WHY WE CAN'T DO IT BY OURSELVES

The very words in the above phrase explain it. According to the greatest Mahasiddhas from India and the enlightened masters of Tibet, there is a limit to what we can do by ourselves and this in no way a fault of our mind, talents, or intent but, as usual, it has to do with the nature of the same-old “Self” that we each have created and remain fixated on. That “fixation” is not just a minor distraction, like a passing glance, but rather a lifelong habit that is so profoundly part of us (the Buddhist say for endless lifetimes!) that we alone cannot one-day just figure the Self out. Why is that?

The answer is that, because of the constant ongoing re-enforcement of our self-fixation, it would take someone (or something) other than our Self to do that and we have (at this point) no other reference than our self-reference. In short, unfortunately, we don't know our own mind, because we can't manage to see beyond our Self to the mind's actual nature. We are fixated on the Self and continue to ignore the actual nature of the mind. That's what ignorance is all about. That's why, of the three poisons (anger, desire, and ignorance), Buddhists point out that ignorance is the most virile and destructive. How do we remedy ignorance and reach realization of some kind?

The teachings point out that it takes two things to solve this problem, first, a teacher or instructor who has actually realized the nature of the mind and can handle the Self much like one would handle a deadly poisonous snake (or an old cow). And second, a bond of sincere devotion and complete trust in our teacher, what is called by the Tibetans “Samaya.” The very

idea that we can (or think we should) handle this by our self is flawed because, that very same Self that would do the handling is literally itself the problem personified. In addition, our Self-fixation is recursive and unable to point beyond, of course, itself -- our very Self. We have no other point of reference, thus the traditional "Pointing Out Instructions."

A realized teacher with whom we have samaya can distract us from our rapt distraction on the Self and point out what it is that is beyond our fixations, something that up to now we have seldom to never even glimpsed, much less experienced, and certainly not realized. The greatest Mahasiddhas in the history of Tibetan Buddhism all agree that we, you and I, are logically incapable of pointing out the nature of our mind to ourselves (the Self) for the reasons pointed out above, that we are already in a closed loop – a Catch-22 with it. Or, the teachings say that if it IS possible to do it ourselves, it would take incalculable eons to manage this by indirect reasoning. I like the line I came up with: "Even we, as bright as we are, cannot sneak up on a mirror." We always see only our own reflection, etc.

The Self is, by nature, dualistic, and "Realization," by nature, is non-dualistic -- interdependent. These are all words I am writing here that themselves are not what they are pointing at. Language, by nature, is dualistic. Realization and eventual enlightenment is (as the Tibetans say) beyond elaboration, beyond words or description. As I write this, I am aware that it is impossible to express the reality in words. I can only point at the meaning. So, why even bother?

I bother because there is a chance that, while words cannot correctly point at the nature of realization of the mind's nature, these same words may be able to

at least discourage us from our current expectations, from assuming we know (or can ever know) anything about what we by definition do not know and are trying to achieve by our practice. We have to abandon expectations.

If we can let go of our expectations and assumptions about enlightenment, which by definition have to be wrong (otherwise we would already be enlightened), and simply rest in the gap that remains when we let them go, we at least have the opportunity for something else to occur to us. However, this “letting go” of our expectations is not something simple that is easy to do. This is why most all of us enter into actively training the mind through various dharma practices. Much of dharma practice is about removing obscurations, not inserting realization. When we remove obscurations, the true nature of the mind is automatically revealed.

Imagining that you and I are going to just stumble on realization (like the recognition of the mind’s true nature) in the dark night of time one fine day...will never just “happen,” if we are to trust the teachings of the great Mahasiddhas. We each need to take that to heart, once and for all, with no “And, If, But, Or, or Nor, etc.” about it.

Deconstruction of fixation on the Self is the first step toward realization.