

Training the Mind

Book Two



by Michael Erlewine

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, and probably some typos (not-so-good). I am doing my best to make this available and still work a full-time job. At least, it should be readable.

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Mixing the Mind

By Michael Erlewine

Learning meditation is hard because it can be boring. Like trying to thread a needle, there is no easy way to do it except to do it. For starters, you have to learn to focus and concentrate. Often the breath is what we concentrate on, but here is the problem.

Going off and sitting on a cushion in the corner and focusing on your breath is foreign to most of us, perhaps a bridge too far. Of course it eventually works, but in the meantime there is a great chance we will give up and abandon trying. Instead, try mixing your mind practice with something you are already doing that requires concentration and focus.

It came as a revelation to me when the Tibetan dharma teacher I have worked with for some 30 years pointed out to a group of us that sitting in front of a computer was a good way to learn some of the basics of meditation. It got my attention because as a system programmer I sit in front of the computer a lot, probably more than is healthy for me. I was all ears.

Chances are that most of us already have learned to concentrate in some area of our life. Figure out what that area is and you are halfway there. Plus, with any luck, you like the area in which you do concentrate or at least have learned to be patient with it. You already are somewhat of an expert.

For me it was programming a computer. It takes attention, concentration, and discipline. And rather than the few minutes, half hour, or hour I managed to squeeze out for my daily meditation practice, with computer programming I was often gladly doing it

eight hours (or more) a day. That, my friends, is real practice time, the kind of time needed to develop a solid meditation practice. As I used to tell myself: Michael, you will never get to heaven by going to church once a week, on Sunday. It will take a lot more than that to save you. Well, here it is.

I was already an expert at holding my body still, focusing the mind on programming, and keeping it focused. How is that different from focusing on the breath? It isn't. Focus is focus; concentration is concentration.

Yet programming isn't "spiritual," right? What is? That idea of spirituality and a bus ticket will get you a ride. You have all heard of books like "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," right? There is no subject that is not spiritual, no subject that you can't mix your mind with and practice meditation, although some are easier than others.

Am I telling you to give up formal meditation and throw away your cushion? Not at all. Keep it up, but also begin supplementing formal meditation with some area of your life where you already have learned to focus and concentrate. When you find that area, how do you turn that into "meditation?"

It is easy. Since you already have mastered the hard part, which is learning to focus and concentrate. Once you have found an area in your life where you already can focus your attention, then just 'practice' letting the mind rest in that. As you tense up with focus, be aware of that and allow the mind to just relax into rest. "Relax as it is," as the saying goes. Just be aware of it.

You want to hold your attention fixed on whatever you are concentrating, but also let the mind rest. This too

is just 'practice', but you are establishing a habit of allowing the mind to rest in the awareness of what you are doing. This is all part of meditation. And the best part is that if you have been concentrating with focus in some area of your life for a long time, you have already built a habit identical to practicing meditation. All you have to do is realize this, be aware of it, and make it a conscious practice.

Meditation 'practice,' is just that, practice, learning the habit or discipline of focusing our mind. Practice is never meditation, even practicing meditation. Only meditation is meditation. Meditation practice is the scaffolding we use to learn the habit of meditation. Once we learn how to meditate, we stop practicing and just meditate. We still sit or whatever, but we are meditating rather than practicing meditating. No more trying.

Chances are you may already be doing something like meditation and are just not aware of it. So become aware of it, do it consciously, and mix your mind training with whatever you already know how to concentrate on. And what types of activities are right for this?

There is no activity that is wrong for mixing your mind training with. It could be as simple as running the laundry, putting out the garbage, doing the bills, taking a shower. You name it. It is best if we can find some area of activity where we really have to focus and have been doing so for a long time. And it is easier if it is an activity that takes some real time, so you can settle into it. Look around you in your life and see what requires you to really be present and focused, and start with that. It could be whatever you

are really good at or love to do. I totally mix my mind with photography, for instance.

Are there more advanced ways to mix the mind? Of course. There are all kinds of advanced forms of meditation. Ultimately one mixes the mind with the mind of one's teacher, but for starters find something that you already are already familiar with and go from there. If you have interest in hearing more on this subject, there is something I could add in another blog about how we can 'spiritualize' whatever activity we do. Interested?

In the meantime, here are a couple of poems that are meant to be fun, the first of which is about trying too hard to meditate.

TESTING THE REST

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

And the second poem is about letting the mind rest:

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,
But you can let the mind rest.
Just let go,
And don't mind the rest.

Mixing the Mind: How to Do It

In the previous blog I pointed out that one shortcut to practicing meditation is to piggyback on areas of your life where you already have achieved focus and concentration. I found it in photography, computer programming, and video editing, but it could be

anything: playing chess, tying flies, doing crossword puzzles, and so on -- wherever you find yourself spending real time concentrating and focusing the mind. You already have some discipline.

Some of you have messaged me asking how to convert these disciplines you already have into meditation practice. The best part is that you don't have to add anything more to your schedule, but just approach where you are already concentrating a little differently. Aside from photography, I did this mostly with computer programming, so I will use that as my example.

I slowly began to apply the basic techniques of the mind training I was learning to what I was doing on the computer all day long. During my computer work, whenever I would catch myself in a distraction, when I popped out of whatever I was deeply involved in and found myself once again outside my concentration zone and looking around, I would attempt the following mediation technique.

Distraction could be as simple as a dog bark, a phone call, the doorbell, an unwelcome thought, a daydream, etc. Whenever my mind wandered or whatever it took to startle me out of what I was busy concentrating on, the result was that I was suddenly distracted from what I had been focused on and instantly was just there – awake in the moment. Those distractions in my concentration were the only moments I had to insert dharma into my work, but there were a lot of them.

In those distractions, those gaps or moments when I broke concentration, I would be aware that I had been distracted from my work and gently bring my mind back to what I was doing and let my mind rest in that.

I would pick up where I had left off, but with a little more awareness.

After all, I had virtually nothing better to do with my time at those moments anyway; I was already at a complete stop. So whenever I found myself startled or popping out of whatever I was engrossed in, I took that opportunity to at least be aware that I had been distracted, bring my mind back to the task at hand, and just let my mind rest in that awareness. Gradually I became more mindful of what I was concentrating on, and slowly built a habit of being more aware.

Those moments of letting the mind rest after a distraction were short, perhaps more like nanoseconds than something more enduring, but the total amount of actual practice time I was doing off the cushion from these distractions added up. Pretty soon I was logging more total time in off-the-cushion meditation than I had been able to practice at any other times in my day, including time spent on the cushion. By then my meditation time on the cushion had become almost a kind of a joke. Every time I headed for the cushion it seemed like I put on airs, robes of expectation, arrogance, embarrassment over past failures, hopes, and irritation. The cushion was getting a much-needed supplement.

This new process of post-meditation practice was not something I could measure in days or even months. It took about two years of this kind of exploration before I really had it down to any useful degree, but it WAS useful and it actually worked, which translates to:

Perhaps for the first time in my many years of mind practice, I started to really like practice, something I had always devoutly wished for. If there was one thing I was ashamed of and feared all those years, it was

that I could not find much joy in rote meditation practice. I knew that this was not the way it should be, but I was powerless to bring joy to something I had not been able to find the joy in.

So there you have the general idea. If meditation won't come easily to you on the cushion, then take meditation to where you live, where you already can focus and concentrate and try that. It takes almost no extra time and you are utilizing moments otherwise ignored. Let me briefly go over the basic concept once again.

When you are doing something that naturally lends itself to focus and concentration, begin to be aware when you break that concentration. As mentioned, it could be any interruption, like the phone rings or you've got email, etc. Whatever the cause, the result is that you popped out of your concentration groove and are just there in the moment.

Instead of being frustrated by the interruption, take advantage of it to be aware of your distraction and with that awareness bring your mind back to what you were doing and rest in that awareness. And start again. Each time you break concentration, go through the same actions of being aware of being distracted, and gently bring your mind back to what you are concentrating on and let it rest there. Do this all day, every day, when you can.

If you can remember to do this, you are logging meditation practice in real time. It adds up. And there is only one thing more to point out here and that is how to make whatever post-meditation practice you have into a real dharma practice.

Mixing the Mind - Conclusion

Let me remind us how we got to part three of this blog. It is for those of you who are having trouble keeping any kind of meditation practice going or for those who are looking for a way into meditation that is less painful than starting at square one. It has only a single requirement, that in your life you have acquired one or more disciplines where you actually have to focus and concentrate your mind. And of course you have to do it often enough for my suggestions to be effective. I will review the steps so far.

(1) SKILL: Find an area in your life that you have mastered, requiring real concentration and focus. It could be anything, but it must involve keeping your mind on it and have developed some skill in this. For me it was photography, computer programming, and video-editing, but it could be almost anything. The point is that whatever you have mastered, you have already paid your dues and have acquired the habitual skills necessary to do it.

In traditional meditation there is always an object to focus on, be it the breath, a pebble, a spot on the floor, or nothing at all. In the method I am describing, it is some skill that involves focus and concentration that you have already acquired. This skill will be the object of your meditation. It helps if you do it all day long or often, otherwise you will never get in enough time to amount to anything.

(2) TECHNIQUE: Next, when we are performing this skill, we have to take advantage (and be aware) of when we are distracted from concentrating (can I say meditating?) on the task at hand, when we pop out of our concentration. Anything could pull us out of our

focus, the doorbell, a phone call, and so on. This has been covered in the earlier two blogs.

When we are distracted from our task, we just remain aware of that fact and gently bring our mind back to the task and let the mind rest there as we pick up where we left off. We do this again and again, every time we are knocked out of our focus. I did it for a couple of years. This essentially is what goes on in basic meditation, whether we are sitting on the cushion or performing any other task that we have taken as the object of meditation. The only step missing now is to somehow accrue some spiritual credit for our investment of time and energy, and this is also important. And it is easy to do.

(3) DEDICATION. It remains for us to dedicate the merit of our every practice session, and this is simple. First, what is merit? Merit is whatever that is positive we manage to accrue from the task we set our mind to. When we sit on the cushion and meditate, it is whatever value or goodness we manage to generate by our meditation session.

And I have never read that any action, any object of meditation, if done with the right intention and spirit, will not produce some merit. The Zen Buddhists with their “Zen in the Art of Archery” or “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” have shown us this. It may be that the merit I produce from my practice is very, very small, but even that tiny amount can be dedicated.

My point is that if we do any task with the right intent, merit will accrue. Merit is non-denominational, meaning whether you are Buddhist, Christian, Muslim (or whatever), your merit can be dedicated. So how to dedicate the merit? I will show here how the

Buddhists dedicate merit and you can take it from there. We might (with pure intent) say to ourselves something like this:

“I dedicate the merit of this practice, however small it may be, to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that they may benefit all sentient beings and bring each of them to greater awareness.”

You can vary the words, infinitely, but the intent should be to benefit all beings and help them to become more aware. Of course, you can use your own religion, dedicate it to the saints, etc. You are taking what otherwise could be an ordinary activity and, by dedication, putting it to a better use. In closing, let me share a little personal story with you.

When I first started meditating I didn't even have a cushion to sit on. Then my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gave us a small statue of the Buddha that he had blessed. I placed it in front of where I sat and that became a little shrine. It meant so much to me.

As the years rolled by, my meditation area got fancier and fancier. Today I have a big cushion with a little cushion on top, plus all my favorite Buddhist statues. I even have some hand-painted thankas hanging on my wall and on and on. Folks, I know how to set the stage and even add a little ambiance. I have a candle, a lotus light, and even a miniature spotlight that shines just on my dharma text. In other words, I have all the trappings of a successful meditator.

But over time my meditation area has collected more than just copper and brass. It is also infested with my expectations, hopes, as well as all my fears and you-name-it connected to meditation. Sometimes it gets so bad that I can feel myself taking on airs the moment I approach the cushion. “Michael, the

meditator, has entered the building. “ This does not help meditation.

My point is that while formal meditation on the cushion is important, if there are ways to muck it up, I tend to find them. Sometimes, in addition to your practice on a cushion (using the same techniques), try some off-cushion (post-meditation) practice. You may find that off-cushion meditation has less baggage connected to it because you have already learned how to focus and concentrate on whatever object (or task) you have in mind. And it is all important that you don't forget to dedicate the merit.

The above described method is one I have used. I was surprised at how many tasks in my life I could incorporate as some form of dharma practice. Like a pebble dropped in a still pond, the circles of dharma practice grows. And the amount of practice time I am able to do this way is way beyond what my on-the-cushion practice schedule will allow. Any questions?

If you would like to read more on the subject check out this collection of blogs in e-book format called “Training the Mind,” found here.

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig=Michael@Erlewine.net>

Off the Cushion – Post Meditation

By Michael Erlewine

When I speak of post-meditation, meditating off the cushion, this bothers some folks, so let me be clear. I am not suggesting you give up meditating on the cushion, but I am suggesting that you might consider augmenting your cushion sitting by meditating on any other focused work you do, if you can. The cushion is a good place to build the habit (the mental muscle memory) of sitting. Sure, the cushion is home base or most familiar, but once you learn to meditate, you will find that you can meditate elsewhere, including almost anywhere. I wrote about this in the previous 3-part blog on “Mixing the Mind,” so scroll up if you want to revisit that.

I originally got into meditating off the cushion almost by accident through close-up photography, something I found joy in. “Joy” or happiness was an ingredient that too often came up missing with my on-the-cushion meditation time. After many, many years, my cushion sitting had (unfortunately, but understandably) gradually gathered around itself a lot of expectations, wishes, arrogance, hopes, fears, and boredom – a whole nest of obscurations which did not help.

I also found that I simply was not logging enough time in. I had an approach-avoidance thing going on with the cushion, which was not good. I had forced myself to do it too much over the years, and that had left a mark. At the rate I was going (or so I thought), it would take me lifetimes to accumulate any real results. By supplementing cushion practice with various other meditation practice, ones I had not

stained through my learning curve, my progress greatly improved.

I don't recommend forcing yourself to sit for long periods. I do many short sessions, most of them off-the-cushion. This does not mean that I time them. If you are doing that, you are already in trouble. A session is measured by how long I enjoy the meditating process. When my mind gets tired or when meditation gets tiresome I try to be aware enough to recognize that and just stop for a while. Pushing practice beyond enjoyment may be an interesting exploration, but I have seldom found that my meditation benefits from it. Most of the great mahasiddhas recommend many short sessions and not pushing a session beyond your enjoyment threshold. I have had to protect my meditation from my efforts to force it this way or that.

Meditation opportunities are everywhere, including whatever we do or could be doing. I don't limit myself to the cushion, but am learning to add other activities where I have to exercise focus and concentration, like making this blog. I have gradually added writing to the list of activities that I am able to use as an object of meditation, like this article here.

For years I tried to force myself to meditate when I did not feel like it and there was little to no joy involved. Looking back, this kind of forced-practice only stained my meditation and did little good. At this point I try to bring meditation to whatever activities I am joyfully involved in that lend themselves to the technique. The activity I am involved in does not have to be joyful, only my attitude and approach to it.

And I don't limit an activity by trying to get through it or be done with it in a hurry. There are no good or bad

activities, only good or bad attitudes on my part. If I am cleaning the toilet, I try to do it attentively and joyfully. Why “joyfully?” If I have to do it anyway, why not? What good does bitching and moaning about what I have to do bring me? This is where the Zen Buddhists have so much to contribute. There are few (if any) objects or subjects that do not lend themselves to meditation.

Looking forward to a “joyful” activity, one I like, while wishing the one I am now in would get over quick is pointless. If I can relax and find joy in or be content with whatever I do, then I would not have favorites.

The first off-the-cushion object of meditation for me was photography, and even today I look forward to it. However some days it rains or is too hot or cold, or I just don’t have the energy for it. I became attached to photography as the prime medium for meditation.

I have gradually learned to stop thinking it is the photography that is important, when in fact it is the clarity of successful meditation I yearn for, but for a time could only attain through photography. I just happened to get that clarity through the process of photographing nature up close.

On rainy days, instead of photographing I will sometimes work on organizing or finishing photos that I have previously taken. This too involves concentrated and careful work, and so is a good subject for meditation, with the result that when I do it, pretty soon my mind is clear, and so on.

In other words, it is that baby and the bathwater thing again. I used to think the baby was the photography, when in fact the baby was always the extreme clarity of meditation achieved through the process of photography. This is an important point.

It is the clarity insight-meditation brings that is precious and portable, and I am learning to invoke that activity in more things that I do during the day.

Do We Need a Teacher?

By Michael Erlewine

An analogy of what finding a good spiritual teacher is like is an experience I have had that is common in 3rd-world countries. Let's take Kathmandu for an example. I well remember getting off the small plane, walking across the wet tarmac (it had been raining), and into the customs office. Blooming plants were all around and the warm humid night air was filled with fragrance. Once inside, it took a long time, passing customs, exchanging money, and so on. After that we were directed toward a double-door and almost pushed from the station.

Emerging outside into the warm, wet night again we were faced with a solid wall of cabbies and touts on the other side of the street. They all were waving and gesturing for our attention. It was scary. Between the touts and ourselves was a policeman or two. It seemed we stood there for some time, not knowing when to cross beyond the police line, and what might happen when we did.

When we finally ventured beyond where the policemen stood, clutching all our many bags, the line of cabbies and touts all rushed forward, completely surrounded us, and literally began grabbing and taking away our luggage, which we were hanging on to for dear life.

That experience with the touts, IMO, is what trying to find a spiritual teacher these days can be like, the would-be teachers being the touts. If this is insulting to spiritual teachers, I apologize.

And let me be clear: I am not jockeying to be a teacher, nor do I think I am your teacher or should be.

If I were a teacher, I would have students, and I can honestly say that I have no students that I recognize, at least in the world of astrology. A student would be someone that I feel has fully understood my particular astrological lineage and is empowered (in my eyes) to pass that lineage on, you know: carry on the tradition. Nada. So what am I?

I am an older family person who has been around a bit, and who has taught himself much of what he knows. As a child of the 1960s, I like to share what I am interested in with others. If I can be of use in that way, I am grateful.

That being said, in my own life, teachers have been very, very important. I don't consider myself lucky, like winning the lottery, but I have been lucky in finding life or spiritual teachers. Since I have perhaps learned something about having teachers and what they are about, I'd like to share just a few thoughts with you. I imagine some of you must wonder about having a teacher. I did.

First, as often is the case with me, the Tibetan Buddhists seem to have the best understanding as to what a teacher's true job is, so let's start with that, which is like starting at the top. And please think about this carefully. I had to.

A dharma teacher's job is over when he or she has pointed out to the student the true nature of his or her mind, AND the student has recognized that nature. Period, end of story. Another way to say this is that a teacher is someone who is capable of actually pointing out to us personally the true nature of our mind, and we get it. Anything else is gravy, like if they are a nice person, have good manners, are clean,

dress well, or whatever we might imagine is desirable in our idea of a teacher.

Although teachers can be our “friend,” that is not part of their job description, nor is hanging out with our teacher very likely. I mean, anything is possible (and almost all things eventually happen), but don’t look for it. Life teachers are not folks we get too personal with in a social sense, at least this has been my experience.

And teacher’s personalities are none of our business. When I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and we were in a one-to-one situation, the first thing he did was to drink a bottle of sake AND teach me to meditate. The learning to meditate was the teaching; the drinking sake was none of my business.

The same goes with trying to judge the effectiveness of a teacher by seeing if they measure up to some internal standard we have. If we knew what a teacher has to know to teach us, we wouldn’t need a teacher. Right? My first life-teacher used to say: “Don’t ever say ‘nobody knows’; just say: ‘I don’t know.’”

In other words, we are in no position to grade teachers, except as to whether they can actually teach us and whether we can in-fact learn what we most need to learn from contact with them. There are said to be 84,000 dharma teachings, so there must be at least 84,000 kinds of students. We each only need one teacher, the one who can teach us, and even that seems to be hard enough to find.

Your teacher might be a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker, etc. They may be fat, thin, tall short, kind, nasty, attractive, repulsive, and so on. The only relevant question is whether they can point out to

you the true nature of your mind (and how it works) so that you recognize it.

Of course, if they just happen to be kind, compassionate, gentle, soft-spoken, and appear wise, etc., so much the better, but where the rubber meets the road is whether they can introduce you to your own mind so that you recognize it. And please note:

Being introduced to our own mind is NOT the same as enlightenment or even close. Recognizing the true nature of the mind and how it works is the first (and single) step that ends for us the confusion of endlessly searching for the 'way', and instantly puts the responsibility for our own eventual enlightenment squarely in our hands, rather than our looking for something outside ourselves, like (you guessed it), for a teacher. Got it?

The takeaway here is that the teacher's main job is to redirect our search for something we have been looking outside ourselves for (like to find a teacher) back upon itself, i.e. pointing out to us that it is only inside that we will find the true nature of the mind, and then our finding it. The teacher is the one person who can do that for us. In other words, the teacher is kind enough to bother to redirect us to where we should have been looking all along, and skillful (and patient) enough to help us get it. We all already know we are supposed to look within, but who has shown us how to do that and where to look?

And for those of us who think you are going to just get a do-it-yourself 'nature-of-the-mind' kit, please think again. The Tibetan Buddhists are very clear that each of us has been wandering in cyclic existence forever and we have yet to recognize the true nature of our own mind, even though it has been right here in front

of us all this time. The chances of our lucking upon it or finding it without direction are infinitesimal. It won't happen, which is why dharma teachers exist: to point this out to us. So, we do need a teacher, and just have to find one teacher, not a dozen, the one for us.

We can all locate yoga teachers, math teachers, Pilates teachers, astrology teachers, and all kinds of other teachers of what the Buddhists call the 'relative truths'. A relative truth is one that can help us get moving and making progress, moving perhaps from here to there. Astrology is one of these truths. It is relatively helpful, but not absolutely helpful.

Only an authentic (authentic-for-us) dharma teacher can reveal the 'absolute' truth, the most important truth, by being able to successfully point out to us the true nature of our own mind so that we can at last see it. This is called in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition the "pointing out" instructions and in the Zen Buddhist tradition "Kensho."

How important is it to find an authentic teacher IMO? The answer is VERY important. Is it easy? No, it is difficult, because there are so many would-be teachers out there that can't help us. Even otherwise authentic teachers may just not be our teacher, are not capable of grasping just what it is that we personally need to wake up, and then giving it to us.

This blog is already long. There is more, and we can discuss this, if there is an interest on your part.

Teachers - More

I can see from your comments that we are most familiar with teachers of what are called the 'relative' truths, which simply put are studies of anything and everything in the world, the content of anything.

All 'relative' truths, such as astrology, psychology, gardening, etc. offer us a way to progress, a way to get around in this cyclic world we are living in and have always lived in. If we are 'here', a relative truth (like astrology) can help us get to 'there', to some place we want to go or progress to. It is like traveling on the surface of a sphere. We can go anywhere, all 360 degrees, but no matter where we go across the surface, it will never be toward the center. Relative truths share the quality of being concerned with this world of peripheral external things.

With relative truths we are using our minds to look at or study some subject or another. And while there is nothing wrong with relative truths (and relative-truth teachers), in a very real way they can only scratch the surface. With relative truths, we are examining the 'content' of the mind, but not the mind itself.

It is when we use our mind to look at itself that we get into the realm of absolute or 'true' truth. When we learn to look at who is doing the looking, we immediately touch on a whole other kind of truth, one that does not have a looker and an object of study, but the two are somehow one. We learn to look at the looker, so to speak. This is what we are here calling "absolute" truth.

An absolute truth like the dharma is not concerned with the surface or outside of the sphere of life, but takes us inward toward the center and heart of the mind itself. Our mind is the projector of the movie of life we are all watching.

The practice of sitting meditation is the traditional doorway to this kind of inner truth, and once the mind is calm, another form of mind practice called "insight" meditation allows us to go further, and to look not at

the content of the mind (astrology, mathematics, etc.), but at the very nature of the mind itself.

Another way to consider this life is as a dream. We all have this dream we call life that we are living, with its cycles, ups and downs, and what-not. This is the domain of the relative truths like astrology, philosophy, economics, and the like. Our life dream is an endless dream or projection, but one it is possible to wake up from.

The best means to awaken from this dream of life is some kind of mind or dharma practice. The Buddhists teach that awakening from the dream of life is similar to waking up from our nighttime dreams. We gradually wake up and realize we have been dreaming (distracted) all this time. We have missed the point.

This so-called 'absolute' truth of the dharma teachings cuts through the relative truths like a knife through warm butter and reveals them to us as we might think of a nighttime dream we just had. We just wake up.

And while relative truths and their teachers are many, those who can point out the nature of the mind itself are few. Even harder to find is a dharma teacher that can successfully point out to each of us personally the true nature of the mind.

In other words, most teachers (relative truth) can show us how to get around and make "progress" within the dream of life. This too is helpful. However, dharma teachers can point out how to wake up from that dream altogether into a much greater awareness.

I write about this, not from the experience of waking up, but by understanding from my teachers how this

apparently works. I find it fascinating. What about you?

The Baby and the Bathwater

By Michael Erlewine

I am reminded of a line in one of Franz Kafka's journals, in which he writes: "Everything I write, it already has perfection." This was many years ago and it took me a while to puzzle that one out, but as I understand it, what Kafka was saying is that rather than perfect his writing, instead he perfected his mind, with the result that anything he subsequently wrote reflected the perfection of his mind. He chose to improve his mind over just his writing technique. Of course, the two work hand in hand, meaning obviously writing was a form of meditation for Kafka.

There is a similar story of the great Tibetan yogi Marpa and his root teacher, the Mahasiddha Naropa. When Marpa met Naropa, Naropa created before him a vast and wondrous shrine, telling Marpa the shrine was the very embodiment of sacred wisdom. Then Naropa asked Marpa which one he should bow down to first, Naropa or this incredible shrine. Marpa bowed to the shrine, and Naropa then pointed out that he had made the wrong choice, for without him there would be no shrine. It is all about priorities.

I went through the same kind of experience when I first mixed my meditation practice with nature photography. Since photography was the focus and object of my life back then, as my photos improved, I attributed it to my photographic technique, but was not at first aware that I at last was successfully mixing my mind with an appropriate (for me) meditation object, in this case photography. It was improvements in my mind that made all of this possible. Of course this is the baby and the bathwater syndrome all over again.

In my case I thought my photography was getting better, but what was really happening is that my mind training was getting better. Of course, my photos were also getting better, but it was only thanks to my mind practice improving.

The take-away from the whole experience is that my mind became better through using photography as an object of meditation; therefore my photography also benefited, but that is secondary. The proof of this is that not only has my photography improved, but so has everything else I do, like writing these blogs. It is the mind that makes all of this possible, not the photography or the writing. This is the difference between the mind itself and one of its objects of meditation, like photography.

It is a simple question of priorities, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks; you have to know which stick to pick up first that will open up all the rest. I was focused on the photography, but had not yet realized that I was actually successfully mixing my dharma practice with an object, in this case photography. I had my eye on the photography, but had not yet realized that my mind had finally found an object of meditation that did not invoke in me all kinds of obscurations. It just worked. I could focus through the camera lens on an object with little to no distraction. There was no effort involved, or any effort was absorbed by my love of nature. And it is the mind training that resulted from that experience that today affects every other aspect of my life.

I write this here for those of you who might see how important training the mind through meditation can be. In my opinion, it is the first thing to accomplish. All else follows. Any questions?

Mastering the Fourth Thought

By Michael Erlewine

I have written here many times about what are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” which were in fact my introduction to Buddhism many years ago. These are the four thoughts that when kept in mind can turn our mind away from our everyday mad rush to exist, and out into some little eddy or cove of a more peaceful existence. Here I just want to talk a bit about that gnarly fourth thought. For reference sake, the four thoughts are:

- (1) Human life is precious. Be of good use.
- (2) Impermanence. Life is very fragile and time is short.
- (3) Karma. Every tiny thing you do is a seed that has an exact effect and a corresponding reaction and growth.
- (4) This world is inherently undependable. You will never get your ducks all in a row.

It was always that fourth thought that I had trouble with, the idea that no matter how hard I try, I will never game the system, never manage to get all of my ducks in a row. Somewhere in the back of my mind there is part of me that thinks I am smart enough to somehow game the system, and I will manage to get my ducks in a row.

Well, if you have ever tried to herd ducks, you will know in an instant that it can't be done. I tell you folks, when it comes to this stuff I am a slow learner.

Like building a house of cards or setting up rows of cascading dominoes, soon or later something or someone will slip up and it all comes tumbling down.

And there is no use crying over spilt milk as they say. I know that and make a point of not adding insult to injury. It is one thing if something unwanted or unexpected happens to me in life and quite another if I follow that by feeling sorry for myself, getting angry, or railing at life for subjecting me to the ignominy of it all. This is what they call “pissing into the wind.”

All of my mind training practice has taught me to just drop the hurt feelings, the sense of injury, and any response to whatever it is that happened to me that I did not invite, and start over again.

I learned this as a programmer so many years ago. I would lose a day's (or week's) work by pressing the wrong button on the keyboard. I used to go through all kinds of antics over my loss, but in time I realized no one was watching or cared but me, and to just leave off with the theatrics and start over. Just bring the mind back to the beginning and start coding again, as opposed to staining my mind with all kinds of anger and what-not. You get the idea.

Of course it is easier to talk to you about this than to do it. Actually, I am pretty good about not throwing good money after bad, not following insult by injuring myself with anger and regret. This is not to say that there is not a sigh, every now and again, that escapes me despite my mental firewall. Just a little sigh that tells me I still have not learned all I need to know about that fourth thought. Ring any bells?

Mixing: The Story of My Photography

By Michael Erlewine

Some of you like my photography and I often am asked how I got into it. How I began mixing my mind with photography was not intentional. It just happened, and here is the story:

At that particular time in my life I had just lost my job as a consultant in which I had been involved in for some years, due to layoffs and downsizing. I literally had nothing I had to do. Suddenly here I was with no job and only time on my hands. Of course, I was in shock. Through all of this something inside me somehow broke and I was just out on my own as I had not been since I was very young. I had no schedule of any kind.

I soon found myself walking alone at dawn in the meadows and forests, just soaking it in. I believe I was out at sunrise (unless there was serious rain) every day for something like six months straight. And I took along my camera, more as an excuse to go out in nature than anything real. And I started using it again.

It was a chaotic time in my life, a time when much of my outside world was failing me in some important ways. Without a thought, I found myself looking inward through a lens at a world I could not (or seldom bothered) to see on my own. My outside world was shutting down and the camera lens became a keyhole into another, and for me, better world. As mentioned, I looked without thinking. And I looked a lot.

I have always loved nature and know a lot about critters of all sizes, so pretty soon I was doing close-

up and macro work, and that took time and patience. Without meaning to, I was out there crawling in the wet grass at dawn, soaking wet, focusing and concentrating with extreme precision for long periods of time, waiting for the light or for the wind to die down. I was soon spending hours each day like this.

Only, unlike my meditation practice, I had no mental baggage. I had no hopes or fears, no arrogance or expectations, and no spiritual agenda. And I had no ties at work to distract me. I had no work. My family was perhaps worried about me, but aside from giving me some odd looks, they more-or-less left me alone. They knew I was suffering. I was totally there in the moment, because I had nothing else to do and nowhere else to be – no attachments. Perhaps best of all, I had no agenda whatsoever. I could feel I was changing, but for a long time I did not know what those changes were.

All of the meditation texts and legendary dharma sources talk about seeking out a place of solitude to practice. Since I live in a city, there was not much solitude around, no mountain peaks or caves. But I soon learned that solitude is not measured only by distance from people and cities. It can be measured whenever we lose our attachments to this world. I had not voluntarily done this, but when my job vanished, I was plunged into a kind of solitude I had never known.

I might as well have been on a mountain peak because there was no consolation from friends and family that I would allow. I could have been in a hidden cave, so cut off did I feel. Yet I did not think of this as being 'in solitude' and certainly did not welcome it, but it happened anyway and suddenly

there I was, all by myself. Of course, in hindsight this was a good thing, but at the time I just felt totally on my own and it was uncomfortable, to say the least.

Now the photography thing is going to be a little difficult to explain because what happened is subtle. I soon found that I was not concerned with the results (the photos) I was taking, but rather with the process of focus and concentration I had to go through to take them. This is key.

I even joined some lens and photo-gear sites on the web and found out that my not-being-concerned with the resulting photos, but rather with the process, made me very different from other photographers, and they did not grasp what I was doing IMO. What was I doing?

What I was doing was learning meditation very easily, rather than with great difficulty as I had been doing for thirty years or so. And I didn't even know this was what I was doing. I was that engrossed in the whole process of macro photography.

I was not that interested in the resulting photos because it was the process of taking those photos that was the meditation and it was in that process that I found peace of mind and clarity. It was the many hours of setting up the camera and tripod, photographing the subject, waiting for the light, for the wind to die down, etc.

I had somewhere (way-back-then) bought into the idea that meditation was somehow supposed to be "spiritual," whatever that meant, and my spiritual fears and expectations (or whatever) had managed to cloud up the very practical nature of learning meditation. There is nothing "spiritual" about meditation, if by spiritual we mean otherworldly or somehow on

another plane. There is only one plane for all of us, but different levels of awareness. After all, the word “Buddha” simply means awareness or the ‘one who is aware’. Awareness is not spiritual in any ‘other-worldly’ sense, but just what it says, “aware.”

I was finding liberation by looking through a lens, peering into tiny worlds of perfection that cannot be seen with the naked eye. With sitting meditation, we can focus on a pebble and let the mind rest there. The object of meditation practice can be anything or nothing. There is also formless meditation.

Anyway, the many, many hours of extreme concentration focusing through a lens brought increased clarity to my mind. Before I knew it I was depending on my daily photographic sessions just to keep my mind clear. I was hooked. I did not understand what was happening enough to explain it to myself, much less to other people, even to my own family.

Lucky for me I have as a close friend, Lama Karma Drodhul, a Tibetan monk who we consider like a son, a member of our family. When I explained to Lama Karma what was happening to me, he knew just what had happened. He said I had found the ‘Lama of Appearances’. It seems that nature herself, the world of appearances, can also be a perfect teacher, and I had been learning meditation from nature herself. This made good sense, and I instantly flashed on what had happened. I had finally learned to meditate properly. It is a little more complex than this, but this will have to do for now. I have two books for those who want a blow-by-blow description of each step here:

<http://macrostop.com/>

Their titles are “The Lama of Appearances” and “Experiences with Mahamudra.”

I can see that this story is too long for one post, so I will finish it up tomorrow. Thanks for listening. Questions are welcome.

More on Photography

Continuing with how I got involved with photography, to be clear, I was not just taking single photos. I became somewhat expert in a technique called Focus Stacking, and ended up writing a few books and scores of articles/posts on the topic. Focus stacking is a very tedious technique where multiple photos are taken of a subject, from the front to the rear, each in sharp focus, and then combined into a single photo where the subject appears to be perfectly in focus, or as much in focus as the artist/photographer wishes. There are often 100 or more photos taken of, say, a flower, and these are then combined into a single result. This is a time consuming and painfully slow process, but it can give beautiful results.

Speaking of results, although I concentrated on the process of photography and not the results, my resulting photos did gradually get better. Eventually I was even invited to be the mentor for the close-up/macro forum for Nikongear.com, a site consisting mostly of professional photographers, and what I consider the most useful lens site on the Internet.

The long and the short of this story is that perhaps serendipitously I had created the right conditions to learn meditation properly. My mind was clear of any expectations or hope. I was not “trying” to meditate as I had for many years, with all the mental baggage that brings. Instead, I was simply concentrating my focus on an object whole-heartedly, and when distracted, I

sincerely brought my mind back to the task at hand. And I loved it and was doing this whole process for hours each day.

I have given you the basic idea. What is harder to convey is my realization that meditation as I was now learning it was nothing like the ‘spiritual’ idea of meditation I got out of books, etc. All of my so-called previous spiritual expectations were not real. I made them up somehow or bought into other’s descriptions. My whole take on enlightenment, elevated consciousness, and ‘spirituality’ was skewed, and just unreal.

The actual experience of meditation was nothing but real common sense, practical, and being immediately present. All of the other stuff that I had been imagining (all those years) should be taking place with a successful meditation practice was just my imagination, expectations based on no actual experience – guesses, and bad ones at that. It was these phony expectations that had stood between me and really meditating all those years. Even though I did not know meditation, I had already set up some kind of criteria to gauge it by, all of which were simply not true. What a surprise!

Meditation is the most basic reality life offers, the most crystal-clear, down-to-earth, practical awareness possible. There is nothing ‘special’ or spiritual about meditation other than the clarity it brings to the mind. If clarity and awareness is spiritual, then meditation is spiritual.

After some thirty years of meditation practice, I finally had learned something about what meditation really was about. As embarrassing as this is to relate, I am so grateful for the opportunity to have experienced it

firsthand. And, for me, this happened not on the cushion, where I had been not-so-patiently sitting for years, but out in the wilds of the early morning dawn. Who would have guessed it?

So my meditation process continues and the resulting photos that I post here are what remain from that process. Do my photos reflect the meditation process? You will have to be the judge of that. For me they are the result of that process and it continues today.

I write this that it may be of benefit for those of you looking for a way into meditation other than the standard route. For me it was through close-up photography. What about you?

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Mindfulness

By Michael Erlewine

Mindfulness meditation can have any activity or subject as its object, the breath, a pebble, twig, and so on. Many would-be meditators find learning mindfulness to be boring or difficult. In that case, it can be helpful to find some repetitive activity in life that you already enjoy and which you have achieved some kind of mastery in. That activity becomes the object of the meditation, and keeping one's mind on that activity is easier if you already love it or know it.

When I started meditating, I found it hard to love something I did not know, like: meditation. If you already know a practice that involves concentration, one that you love or like to do, it can make the learning curve flatter. One of the main hurdles to learning meditation is to develop the habit of being mindful.

What is Mindfulness?

It helps to discriminate awareness from mindfulness. I can be aware that I am not mindful, but that awareness is not mindfulness. I can have awareness that I am being forgetful, but still not be mindful enough so that I won't forget. Mindfulness involves, obviously, being mindful.

When we meditate we learn to let our attention rest on the meditation object, like the breath, a pebble, or in my case close-up photography. Mindfulness involves maintaining our attention on the object of meditation and catching it early if it starts to slip away and be distracted.

Mindfulness involves moment-to-moment awareness of what is around you, but also remembering to be

aware of the object of meditation, keeping the mind focused. It is not telling ourselves “I should be mindful” or “I am not being mindful,” but drop that and just be mindful.

Mindfulness Continued

On the cushion we focus on the object of meditation, which could be the breath, a pebble, a spot on the wall, or even nothing at all. The process is to allow our focus to rest on the object just as on a computer we place the cursor on the screen with the mouse, take our hand away, and the cursor just stays where we left it. Meditation is like that, letting the cursor (mental focus) rest on the object, and having it stay where it is put. It is a two-way street.

In beginning meditation, the harder we try to focus on the object, the more difficult it becomes to do so. You can't forcibly rest the mind, but you can learn to let the mind rest naturally. If you cage a bird, it wants out, but if you leave the door open, it likes the protection of the cage, considers it home, and comes back on its own. Focusing on the object of meditation is like that.

If my mind wanders and my focus drifts from the object, hopefully sooner or later I will become aware that I am no longer concentrating on the object. Mindfulness is about not letting it get that far, but catching the drift at the first sign of wavering and restoring the focus.

Yes, there is something purposeful, mechanical, and effortful in learning to remain mindful. It helps to understand that in the beginning mindfulness itself is nothing more than ‘mindfulness-practice’, useful in building a habit of being mindful. Once the habit is established, the effort to become ‘mindful’ no longer needs to be made. Mindfulness has become

automatic. But in the beginning, mindfulness takes effort and can be tiring.

If you want to avoid some of the effort in learning to be mindful, pick an object of meditation that you are totally interested in, and learning mindfulness will be no problem or at least a lot easier.

When the mind wanders or forgets the object of meditation and we become aware of that fact, we simply note it and gently bring the mind back to rest in focus on the object. We don't think about, mentally-comment, castigate ourselves, or anything else about the fact that we were distracted. That would just be a waste of time, adding insult to injury. We just let ourselves be aware of it. Building this habit of mindfulness is an important part of meditation.

If we are absolutely mindful and relaxing in it, we are in the present moment, the proverbial "being here now." Learning to stabilize our concentration through mindfulness is the basis for meditation, but not the goal. Awareness is the goal. And awareness is not only static like turning on a light bulb. As we progress in meditation, we find that awareness is also recursive, incendiary, and brilliant. It is perhaps the only pure addiction.

When we are not meditating, our mind wanders, and before we know it we find our way back into the fog of our habitual patterns. A period of real meditation purifies that and we are clear once again.

Meditation is the only natural high I know of, and after a while it is the only thing I crave that will satisfy. Awareness is the cure for samsara, the sufferings of this world. Buddha proved that.

My message here is that learning to meditate properly is the first step to the future, perhaps the most important activity you can undertake. In this world there are few sure things. Learning to meditate properly is the single most valuable key to this life I have found. If this were not true, I would not go on and on about it as I do.

Meditation took me a very, very long time to learn. It didn't have to be that way. I could have learned to meditate a lot earlier in life, with just a little help.

For Those of You Who Can't Sleep

By Michael Erlewine

It is really hot here. Although thunderstorms are threatening outside, it is still almost ninety degrees here in my little office at 1 AM. I can't sleep from the heat, from the thunder, and so on. And I am still very sad about the passing of the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche, whose death brings home to me once again the thought of impermanence, something I would do well to contemplate more often.

I guess I was looking for Buddhism early on, way back in the 1950s. We would stay up late, smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, and talk about Buddhism and topics like existentialism. It was all just intellectual talk, and I was so serious back then.

I can remember when Coltrane's album "My Favorite Things" came out, with the incredible piano of McCoy Tyner. I was up all night at Harvey Armstrong's 2nd-floor apartment on Packard Street in Ann Arbor listening to it over and over again. The title track is still one of my favorite tunes of all time... and I mean of all time. Of course I love Coltrane on that tune, but it is the trancelike piano of Tyner that sealed the deal.

And there was that all-day sesshin sitting zazen with Roshi Phillip Kapleau. That was when I wanted to be a Zen practitioner. Or the Chinese Buddhist monk that Margaret and I met in Woodstock, New York while visiting a fellow astrologer. We invited him to live at our center, flew him there, but it did not work out. I wish I could tell you that story, but it is a little too crazy for here.

In other words, I was looking, early on, for something like Buddhism, something that was more psychology

and a method to live life than it was a formal religion. I am not by nature religious or, if I am, Mother Nature is my religion.

And like so many of us back then who yearned to find a teacher, someone older and wiser than we, someone we could trust, I tried about every guru or spiritual teacher that blew into town. Yet I was very, very fussy about who I would let teach me. It sure wasn't school teachers. I had left school early, never even finishing high school, because I was bored out of my mind and uninterested in the teachers I came across.

I ended up spending years studying black music and sitting at the feet of some of the great blues musicians, players like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Big Mama Thornton, Arthur Crudup, Big Walter Horton, Little Walter, and many others. I was lucky enough to interview and spend time with them all and, more than just the music they shared, it was the light in their eyes, the practical wisdom of life that I saw in them that I liked. I was thirsty for that.

Eventually I found the Tibetan Buddhists, who were as knowledgeable as the great blues players about life, but taught a spiritual path I could accept and follow. The life choices or situations of many of the blues greats were not something I wanted to imitate, but their spirit and common sense was.

With the Tibetan Buddhists, I found everything I needed in one package. Today there are hundreds, if not thousands, of Tibetan monks here in this country who teach. I would have trouble knowing which ones were for me. Back then there were about none.

Although I met the Dalai Lama early on, up close and personal, it was not until I met the Ven. Chögyam

Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, that I was satisfied that here was the real deal for me. Trungpa was certainly that.

Although I loved Trungpa, his followers were too much into parties and drinking. As a musician, I was already way past that and yearned for something simple and without a lot of baggage. I found that when I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who (believe it or not) came to me in a dream. I will tell that story once again, and then try to go to bed.

It was in 1983 and I was a businessman living where I live now, in Big Rapids, Michigan, managing Matrix Software, the astrology company I founded and still run today. My close friend James Coats phoned me to say that he had met a Tibetan teacher in Ann Arbor and did I want to come to Ann Arbor to meet him? James always had a new guru.

Not really, I said. I am running a business, married, with kids, and way past my guru-hopping days. Well, I didn't put it that way, but that was how I looked at it. I wished him well and let it go at that. Been there, done that.

It was a day or so later, just before dawn that I had the dream. It was one of those rare dreams that are more real than the dream of daily life we wake up to. In the dream I was driving to Ann Arbor to meet this radiant golden oriental man and I was as happy as I could imagine. And then I woke up.

In the early morning light of October, as I sat up in bed, I was struck with sadness that my life had become such that realizing in the flesh a dream like I just had was seemingly no longer possible. My sense of self just went void and life suddenly felt so empty.

In that moment I decided I wanted to go to Ann Arbor. I wanted to meet the man my friend James told me of, and I dialed him up right then, even though I knew he was a late sleeper, always. Sleepy-eyed James told me that it was too late and that the Rinpoche he had told me about was leaving that morning at 10 AM. It was already 7 AM where I was and the drive to Ann Arbor is three hours, so that was that.

Well, I was not having any of it that morning. I told James I was coming, no matter what and that I was not working that day and would be there as soon as possible. If I missed the Rinpoche, so be it. I was taking the day off. Period.

Then my wife, who had also had a similar dream, and I grabbed our kids, including our eighteen-month old daughter May and, with toothbrushes in hand, we were on the road. I drove as fast as I dared.

James knew we were coming and even was waiting to flag us down at the end of the long driveway and guide us into where the Rinpoche was. The lama was still there. As I came up the driveway I saw a handsome but young Tibetan man sitting outside on the front steps. This was not the Tibetan of my dreams, so I was taken aback. Then James pointed out that this was not Rinpoche, but his translator Ngodup Tsering Burkhar, who today is one of my dearest friends.

We went inside and were received by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche who was everything my dream spoke of, and more. He was radiant and we were radiant in his presence. The meeting was short because Rinpoche was soon on the road and driving to Columbus to another one of his centers. However, that meeting has never ended and we were left in a transported

state, and wandered around for days with some kind of spontaneous compassion that gradually faded as our bad habits regained control of us. If we wanted to live in that state, we would have to do some practice.

I am still working with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (who is in his high eighties) to this day. His teachings and guidance have made it possible for me to be somewhat stable and be able to share thoughts like these with you.

Meditation in Action

By Michael Erlewine

It would be much better if I could have learned to meditate in action, doing at least some of whatever I have to do on a normal day. You know, take a page from the Zen practitioners and use whatever we have to do as meditation. Easier said than done.

Before you can have 'meditation in action', you have to have meditation. It is a hard case of Catch-22, finding the time and a quiet place to just sit. In my experience, meditation is one of the first things to cross off the schedule on a busy day. I had a million reasons why waiting until tomorrow to meditate makes a lot of sense.

I learned to meditate in the traditional way, sitting on the cushion. It was not intuitive for me and I had great difficulty applying myself. I would tend to just sit and wait out the time, but not actually do or learn anything.

It is not that I cannot concentrate, because I am a fierce concentrator. It is probably that I have some kind of weird (and stubborn) learning disorder when it comes to applying myself abstractly. I am hard to teach and learn best from just doing, using real-life examples. Meditation is a case in point.

If I had been able to learn meditation by concentrating on a real-world task that I already knew something about, things might have progressed more rapidly. I am amazed at how many folks are sitting but perhaps not able to progress in meditation. I was a case in point. Meditation is a way to hone your mind to a brilliant point, but it needs a stable mind as a starting point.

I seem to have a problem learning anything by rote. Tell me the steps I should take and I will manage to screw them up, ignore them, or ignore enough of them to make sure I don't get it. Give me a hands-on example in the real world, and I will ace it. Does it help to tell you that I got all A's in geometry, but had to take algebra-one three times. They finally just passed me with a "D" to get me out of the class. I had been there three semesters. Meditation was also something I just could not get the hang of.

The goal of all meditation is greater awareness, but the path to that awareness is necessarily a two-step process, learning first to concentrate and be mindful, and only when that is perfected developing insight into the nature of the mind itself. Many of us don't make it through that first step, becoming mindful.

Mindfulness and concentration in itself are valuable, but most would agree that the rewards of insight (the second step) are so great that they become self-propelling. Once awakened to insight, there is no going back, but until then it is very easy to go back or not to progress, which is the same thing.

Meditation Two-Step

By Michael Erlewine

There are two basic meditation techniques that are taught, Shamata (calming the mind) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation). The second step in the meditation two-step is insight meditation, learning to look directly at the mind itself, not something many westerners have done. Even a brief glance at the web shows me there are dozens of kinds of insight meditation described out there, some of which I don't even recognize as what I have been taught. I can only describe to you what I have been instructed by my teachers, a form that has been handed down for thousands of years. And, I don't teach it.

Insight Meditation is usually taught after one has established a stable sitting practice (Shamata), but sometimes they are taught together. Without a stable mind, insight meditation is difficult to impossible. It would be like trying to thread a needle with shaky hands. First we have to stabilize the hands with sitting meditation, then perhaps we can thread the needle.

While basic sitting meditation is a gradual slope that anyone can climb, insight meditation (as I have been taught) has a clear threshold that must be attained before going further. In other words, you can't fake it.

Although I practice insight meditation (as part of Mahamudra meditation), in my tradition, before we can undertake insight meditation we have to have what is called by the Tibetans "recognition." In a word, we have to recognize the basic nature of the mind, which, since it is our 'basic' nature, you would think would be easy for us. Not true. As my teacher explains, through all of our many lives up to now, we have never managed to recognize the nature of our

own mind. Yet recognition of the true nature of the mind is the ground we need to build a solid dharma practice, something clearer than the phantasmagoria of our normal too-busy mind.

And I have been taught that we don't just stumble on recognition by accident or even by trial and error. It has to (according to the Mahamudra tradition) be pointed out to us by an authentic master of the tradition, which I am not. I am a sincere practitioner of Mahamudra, but I don't pretend to offer the Pointing-Out Instructions of our lineage. I defer to those rinpoches who can do that.

There are other forms of Insight meditation, but the one I have learned requires a personal bond with an authentic teacher who has mastered this technique and is able to point it out to you. And please let's not confuse recognition with enlightenment, because they are very different. Enlightenment is the awareness that Buddha attained, the final goal of meditation; recognition, on the other hand, is just finally seeing how your own mind works for the first time.

Recognition is a realization each of us has to have before we can practice insight meditation as taught by Vajrayana Buddhism, after which our training is something more than just practice. As mentioned, I can only tell you something about insight meditation, not teach it.

Once we have learned to meditate in the common use of that word, and are able to concentrate, focus, and stabilize our mind (let the mind rest naturally), then we can begin insight meditation. Up to that point meditation involves focusing on some object like the breath or a pebble, being mindful, etc.

With insight meditation, we begin to use the mind to look at itself, to “look at the looker,” as they say. It can be a very delicate operation, teaching the mind to see itself. We are used to using the eye to look at the outside world. Here we are using the eye of the mind to look at itself, so to speak, a seeming impossibility.

As mentioned, before Insight meditation can begin, one has to have received the pointing-out instructions. Not everyone is ready to receive the pointing out instructions and there are few who even teach it. Being ready to receive the pointing-out instructions and finding someone who can actually point out to you personally the true nature of the mind (so that you get it!) are two different tasks. Bringing the two together is even rarer.

Both Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism see ‘recognition’ (the Zen term is “kensho”) as a key and necessary step, kind of the gateway to a more authentic practice. “Recognition” is not an endpoint, but rather an entranceway. It is not enlightenment, but our first real step on the path toward enlightenment.

Previous to recognition we depend on outside guides like a dharma teacher, texts, and whomever we can learn from. After recognition, we begin to internalize the teacher and practice because we finally see why and how we should. After recognition, enlightenment becomes our responsibility. We are doing it for ourselves, rather than for a multitude of other reasons, including impressing other people.

And unlike most forms of dharma practice, which we can kind of embellish to our satisfaction and pretend we are accomplished, with ‘recognition’ that is not possible. You either have it or you don’t. Without it, one literally cannot take the next step because we

would lack any idea of what we are doing. It is a true ring-pass-not. You would have to pretend to have had it, and what's the point in that?

“Recognition” is pure self-empowerment, not an experience that fluctuates, but a realization that once attained never fades. That is how you tell the difference between a realization and an experience. Experiences go up and down. Realizations are more matter-of-fact than that. You recognize them once and for all and never lose that recognition. There is no going back with realization. Realizations are not experiences. An analogy: recognizing an old friend is not an experience that goes up and down, but a simple recognition. It is something like that.

‘Recognition’ is empowerment in the true sense of the word, after which we are on our own (practice-wise) perhaps for the first time ever. With recognition, we become responsible for our own practice because we finally see what needs to be done, and our outside guidance (teachers, texts, etc.) is instantly internalized within. Instead of looking outside ourselves to our teachers, we now see how to look in at the mind itself. This is why it is called “insight meditation.” We are learning to look within.

Life offers very few mysteries like ‘recognition’. I don’t know of any other event that offers no gradual path, no gradation. Recognition is like a switch that is either on or off. And the reason, as mentioned, is that recognition is not an experience, but a realization.

It is an experience when we have a spiritual experience, get uplifted in the mind, see and talk to the gods (so to speak), and then come back to Earth. All experiences eventually change or come down. They pass. Realizations are not experiences. They

are simply seeing something as true. Recognition is a realization.

Realizations happen in time, but not over time. They don't have a bell curve of before, peak, and afterward. Instead, they are instantaneous, because they are simply finally getting it right, getting the right view. Recognition may be partial and not be total, but it does not go up and down. You just see.

Recognition is like those figure/ground paintings that you look and look at and see nothing. Then suddenly you see the picture within the painting. Once seen, you can see it every time. That is a recognition. That is a realization. What is so great about 'recognition' is that it does not engage our emotions or put us through an experience. It is a simple recognition of the true nature of the mind. We get it.

I know ahead of time that trying to put this concept into words is impossible. It is beyond words. And pointing out to someone the true nature of their mind is very delicate work, something that takes just the slightest touch to break the bubble of concepts we are wrapped in and allow the mind to rest on its true nature, and see that!. But I also know it is possible for each of us to have this recognition.

I hesitate to even talk about this because it could be dispiriting. Basic sitting meditation (Shamata) is linear, with progress assured over time. We can all get on board that train. However, insight meditation is an exponential curve, a sudden seeing of what has always been there to be seen. We finally see it. That is why it is called a 'recognition', it happens in a flash. We recognize.

In the dim light of dusk we may see what we think is a snake on our path. That is an experience that may

include fear, etc.. But when we recognize that it is just an old piece of rope, that is a realization.

My question has been (to myself) whether to just get you started in sitting meditation, with no mention of insight meditation for a while, or to burden you from the start with what this is all about. And then perhaps I can't even explain it well enough. I don't want to discourage anyone from learning meditation.

At the same time, having gone through all of this myself over too-many years, it would have been compassionate and a kindness if someone had explained to me something about how all this works, so I will try.

In my life, there is nothing even close to being as important to grasp as what I am trying to present here. I wasted (in a way) decades with an incorrect idea of what meditation is and how it can be approached.

As presented here, meditation is a two-step process of learning to stabilize the mind and then learning to look directly at the true nature of that mind. The first is called Shamata meditation, the second Insight Meditation (Vipassana). Shamata meditation is a somewhat slow process of learning some habits, like mindfulness and concentration.

Insight meditation rides on the stability of Shamata meditation and is as exciting as Shamata can be gradual. We are so used to being rewarded instantly for what we do, but Shamata meditation takes time and dedication. We can sit forever, but if we don't practice correctly, nothing will happen, not ever.

So we need to bite the bullet, learn Shamata mindfulness, and reach a point of mental stability

where we can respond to the pointing-out instructions and recognize the true nature of the mind. Once that happens, I am not worried about any of us. Insight meditation is self-starting once recognition has taken place. There you have a brief description of more advanced meditation.

Meditation Imprinting

By Michael Erlewine

Although I spent 30 years sitting on a cushion, I ended up imprinting on meditation (getting it) through photography, not from the cushion. Go figure. I wish I had found it on the cushion, but the truth is I did not. It just did not work out that way for me. I had to step away from all the baggage I had accumulated on the cushion in order for my practice to take hold. There were too many years of expectations, fears, disappointment, etc. waiting for me on the cushion. I am not the Lone Ranger in this. Actual meditation was instantly recognizable

You know you are into meditation when nothing else feels right. I frequently look around for something that will scratch that itch I am feeling and end up photographing or writing, my main meditation practices. And here is the point. I don't need any more photographs or articles. I have plenty. It is the meditative process of doing the photography or writing that I yearn for. I want to get my mind right and feel uncomfortable until I do.

Because I learned to meditate properly off the cushion, through photography, writing, and other subjects, I don't seek out the cushion. It is probably time that I took my meditation back to the cushion and integrated it there. But I would have to get there and somehow burn through all the baggage I accumulated from my years on the cushion that may still be waiting for me there. I cushion-sit a little now, but not like I used to.

I am learning from my daily search to see what it is that I want to do on a given day that it is the meditation embedded in the activities I yearn for,

more than the activities themselves. It is the photographing process, not the resulting photos, the writing process, not the articles I write that satisfies. In meditation, the process is the result or the process produces the result, which is mental clarity and wellbeing. Along the way I have also produced large numbers of photos and writings. I have to laugh.

Adding Insult to Injury

By Michael Erlewine

I made my living doing sit-down astrology readings with clients for many years. I still do readings, but mostly for friends and acquaintances these days. I am just too busy running a company to have the time anymore, but I still like to do them.

One thing that comes up in many readings is what do we do when something really devastating happens to us in our lives, like losing our job, our life savings, our partner, or what-have-you? These kind of events happen all too often, and to almost everyone at some time in our lives – a real setback. It has happened to me, for sure – big time.

Or perhaps we do something just awful that we really didn't mean to do, something we can't just undo. It just happened and before we knew it the toothpaste was out of the tube and we could not put it back. This kind of event also leaves a big imprint. What to do when we make mistakes?

People that I have counseled seem to spend an inordinate amount of time feeling depressed and bad about what has happened to them. For some, it becomes the main theme for the rest of their lives, with much regret, bitterness, anger, and the like. It takes on a life of its own and it takes their life, what they have left of it.

It is the same thing with big gaffs or mistakes. Folks dwell on them and often for a long, long time. They are preoccupied with their mistake, humiliation, or loss. I hear this again and again in astrology readings.

Before I comment on any of this, I want to link my suggestions to a topic I have been trying to get across

to readers for years with not much success and that is “mind training.” I hesitate to use the word “meditation” because either it is misunderstood or people quickly replace what I mean by that word with their own explanation. I guess what I am saying here is please hear me out on this with an open mind, a fresh take.

Ultimately I want to point out to you how practicing meditation affects how we take these big road bumps that life sometimes puts in our way, and it is not as simple as meditation practice makes us more peaceful or accepting. Of course it does, but that is not my point here.

In basic meditation we practice focusing on our breath, or a pebble, a spot on the floor, etc. It does not matter what the object is. The point of meditation practice is to let our mind rest and focus on whatever object we have chosen and not let it stray from that. This is easier said than done, of course, and here is the view:

In meditation practice, when instead of focusing on the object (stone, breath, etc.), we find ourselves thinking instead about what we are going to have for lunch, when we become aware that we have strayed from the object, we just stop straying and gently bring our mind back to the object and begin again, start over.

There is no blame, no regret, no admonishing ourselves for straying, no thought at all or energy spent on our lapse. That is just a waste of time. Instead, we just bring the mind back to focusing on the object we have chosen for meditation and begin again.

And this is why they call it “meditation practice,” because we are ‘practicing’ and learning a habit, in

this case to keep our mind on what we are doing and not to stray from it. AND.... if we do stray, we spend zero time worrying about our lapse or mistake, and just bring the mind back and start over.

My point then is that this habit of starting over with no remorse or without dwelling on the past that we learn in meditation practice, not dwelling on what happened, what should have happened, might have happened, on what we are sorry that happened, etc. carries over into life events that happen to us, as well.

It is not that we should feel no remorse or regret when we make a big mistake. Of course we do. Or that the loss of something or someone important to us should not affect us. Of course it does.

The idea here is that we don't need to add insult to injury. It is unfortunate that something awful has happened in our lives that impacts us. If on top of that we then spend untold hours, days, months, or years of our life regretting it, then we really do continue that loss. We add insult to the injury that we already have sustained.

In meditation practice we learn the habit of just dropping it, much like when my dog picks up some smelly dead thing, I say to him, "Leave it!" We can do the same when these catastrophic or humiliating events happen to us: just leave it. We can let it go and start over without wasting our precious life energy on what we can do nothing about anyway. We don't need to add insult to injury.

We may not be able to control what happens to us in lives, what life brings, but we can learn to control our attitude, how 'we' react to what happens. Learning to just drop our regret, remorse, sorrow, anger, and so on, and get back to living our life is an important

lesson we can all stand to learn. And here is how I first learned this:

As a computer programmer, every once in a while I would accidentally delete an entire day's (or week's) work at the touch of a button. It is the dreaded "operator error," for which we can blame no one but ourselves. In the beginning, I would rant and rave, yell and even quit working for a while. I would sulk and curse my fate. However, sooner or later I would just get back to work and start over. I had no choice.

In time I learned to spend not even an instant on regret, but just calmly to begin again. I would immediately start over. Later, when I began to practice meditation, this habit was further reinforced until when something terrible happens, I just "leave it" and continue with the life that I still have.

First Cushion

By Michael Erlewine

Of course there was a time when I had no cushion, no shrine, not even a tiny corner in my home set aside for letting the mind rest. So I am grateful that I knew enough to find a cushion and a little spot in my office where I could sit. I knew next to nothing about what it was that I was doing or even why. For a shrine I used the small card that was given to me when I took the ceremony of Refuge, a traditional way to signal an interest in Buddhism. It had my Tibetan refuge name on it. Later, our teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gave us a small statue of the Buddha.

That cushion and the quiet spot in the house itself was a place of refuge, a sign and signal that I was seeking to find somewhere out of the storm of everyday life to get to know my mind.

At that point I was simply following instructions. I loved my little place of meditation although I did not really understand what mediation was. It would be fair to say that I liked the idea of meditation better than the actuality of practicing it. And I liked knowing there was a little peaceful place of refuge in my home, in my heart. And perhaps most of all I loved the idea and the reality of Khenpo Rinpoche, my dharma teacher.

He made all of this possible by presenting in reality something greater than I had ever dared to even imagine in a human being, someone who accepted me just as I was. It was who he was that made all the difference.

That little cushion in a corner changed over time. It became a little homemade round zafu, and then we I bought a zabuton (square cushion) for the zafu to sit

on, etc. The shrine got larger until it was a separate building outside our home, a building eventually filled with many cushions. That tiny piece of paper with my refuge name on it that was my shrine became a large multi-tiered shrine made of wild cherry. The one small Buddha figure became many statues, large and small. The walls of our shrine room were hung with brightly-painted thankas. There were Tibetan rugs, incense burners, and a large Tibetan drum.

And there were special tables made of black walnut for holding practice texts, and others hand painted with bright colors. There was a throne covered with the most exquisite brocades and even a very high throne should the head of our lineage, the 17th Karmapa, ever visit us.

All of this ornamentation was done with only the best intent, to pay homage to the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. There is nothing wrong with it.

But I can say that my inside development was not keeping up with the exterior décor. My intent was pure, and I made good effort, but as for progress, there was very little. I understand that with this kind of thing, progress can be very slow. Most of it is one form of purification or another. I don't question that or the time it took.

What I did (and do) have trouble with is the mental obscurations that accompany all of the dharma stuff I had surrounded myself with.

I had little to no idea what meditation was or what its intended results were supposed to be. Of course I had read too many books, absorbed too many tales of enlightenment and spiritual breakthrough. And this was early on, the late 1950s and 1960s. This was before meditation as relaxation therapy. Back then the

reason we meditated was to become enlightened, whatever that was, and not to reduce stress. One thing I knew for sure was that I was not enlightened and probably needed to be. At least I wanted to be.

I soon learned that aside from my pride in being a dharma student that meditating was pretty boring. I didn't really know if I was doing it right, and if I was, then it didn't do much for me. I mostly just sat there.

Did it calm me? Not really. I found out how hard it was for me, an active person, to remain still for even a minute, much less for a long time. And back then I had no real guidance. The Zen tradition I was touching into as well as the Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa I met all recommended sitting for a long time. I guess the idea was that you have to break yourself down to get to any breakthrough point. I could do neither.

I did not really break down and I certainly did not get to any breakthrough point, so what did I get? Frustrated and bored would be a good summary. This was before I understood that what I was feeling was all part of the process of learning meditation, but back then I assumed that I just did not get it. And I did not get it.

My outer trappings of dharma far outstripped my inner progress, which was like: none. It was just me sitting there on the cushion until I could find a good excuse to end the session and get back to whatever else I was doing that day. I certainly did not enjoy it, at least after the novelty wore off.

My point here is that meditation is something we practice to build a habit of mindfulness, not some blissful experience we have every day. It can be blissful, but likely as not it a practice, not different than

playing scales on a musical instrument. Practicing scales is not playing music. Practicing meditation is not meditation, at least not at first.

The Bardo Realms

After death, the after death.

By Michael Erlewine

Death is something we tend not to talk about. Even if we are deathly sick, that word may not even come up, although it can't be far from the truth and certainly will be true for all of us at some point in our lives. What happens after death really is a mystery for most of us and there are all kinds of theories kicking around and not much confirmation. Here is what I understand happens after death, so let's talk about it some.

I personally don't know what happens, and if it has happened to me before, I don't remember. This is a tough spot to be in, but I am not alone in this. Here is what I do know. In my search for the truth through the people and ideas in my life, the clearest and most direct information I have found both about life and death has come from the Tibetan Buddhists.

For one, they don't blink at the subject of death, quite the reverse. They have studied it for centuries. All I can say is that so far everything else I have learned from the Tibetan Buddhists has turned out to be true and they are the most brilliant teachers (as a group) that I have ever found. I have no reason not to have confidence in what they have to say about dying, death, and what happens afterward. This brings up the question of the bardo, the intermediated states between death and the next rebirth. Just what are they?

As for my background, I have been interested in the bardos and the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" since the late 1950s; In the beginning I read whatever I could lay my hands on about this subject, but all those

books pointed to knowledge I must attain through dharma practice. For the last 38 or so years, I have been involved in various Tibetan mind-training practices, and working with the same dharma teacher (a high Tibetan Buddhist lama) for almost 30 years. These practices include a couple of sets of what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (ngondro), and various additional yidam practices, not to mention rounds of mantras dedicated to Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of the Padma Family, which traditionally has to do with death, dying, and rebirth in the Buddha Realm called, in Tibetan, "Dewachen." And of course, meditation.

I have also been instructed and empowered to practice what is called Phowa, one of the traditional Six Yogas of Naropa. Phowa is a very detailed technique for ejecting the consciousness from the body at the time of death, and this can also be used to help others in the period immediately following death. While I have also learned to read Tibetan, my knowledge of written Tibetan is still very inadequate.

An in-depth article on the bardo would be the size of a short book and I am in no way an expert. What I can do here is to go over, very generally, some of the main points about the bardo states, with the hope that this will give enough of an overview for you to decide if you want to pursue this topic elsewhere on your own.

The Bardo

The Tibetan word "Bar-Do" means "gap," literally the space between two bodies or houses, the intermediate time between two places to live or lifetimes. Perhaps the most famous text on the bardo is the "Tibetan Book of the Dead." The Wylie

transliteration of this title is "bar do thos grol ," which transliterates in phonetics to "BAR-DO TÖ-DRÖL," and in English to something like "liberation by hearing on the after-death plane." At the very least, this is an interesting topic.

Although the popular misconception is that the bardo realms only take place after death, in fact the Tibetans make it clear that there are a number of different bardos, and we are in one of the bardo realms at all times. Here is a brief description of the six major bardos:

The first bardo, the "SHI-NAY BAR-DO," or "Bardo Between Birth and Death," is just that, a bardo that extends from the moment we are conceived until the moment of our death, our last dying breath. If you are reading this, you are in that bardo now.

The second bardo is the "MI-LAM BAR-DO," or "Dream Bardo," and this refers to the dream state we all have when we sleep. This is usually considered part of the first bardo. It is a separate kind of experience from waking life as we all know.

The third bardo, the "SAM-TEN BAR-DO," or "Meditation Stability Bardo," is also considered part of the first bardo, and refers to meditative states that can be experienced by the accomplished dharma practitioner. Some of these practices are what I keep suggesting are very, very useful in life.... and at death.

The fourth bardo is the "CHIK-KHAI BAR-DO," or the bardo of the moment of death, and is said to begin along with the signs of approaching death, and extends until a very short time after the last breath is taken. This is generally a fairly short-lived bardo.

The fifth, the "CHÖ-NYI BAR-DO" or "Bardo of the Experiencing of Reality," begins a short time after death, and usually lasts for a period of several days, a time during which most fall into a deep sleep or unconsciousness, and then gradually begin to awaken. It helps to know something about this bardo.

And the sixth and last bardo is the "SI-PA BAR-DO," or "Bardo of Becoming," which lasts from the moment of reawakening after the death swoon until the next birth is taken, which is an indeterminate period of time, usually put at 49 days, but it can be much longer.

This last bardo, the "Bardo of Becoming" is what most people mean when they use the word "bardo."

The Bardo State: Part 2

Before we continue with the discussion of the bardo, a KEY concept to understand is our own ignorance of enlightenment, whatever that is. According to the Buddhist teachings, we are now and have always been (since the beginning of time) in a state of profound 'ignorance'. We have all heard that term before, and many religions say the same thing, that ignorance is the cause of this or that. Ignorance, therefore, is an important term to understand.

Buddhists do not subscribe to the idea that we once were enlightened, but have somehow fallen (Plato), that we originally knew but have now forgotten a pristine state. The Buddhist view is that we have forever been ignorant. And ignorance, here, means (literally) to-be-ignoring-the-truth, ignoring what is true. Ignorance is not simply some state of unconsciousness or stupidity, but an active ignoring of the true nature of the mind and that true nature is right in front of us all the time.

It takes effort to ignore the truth, and this ignoring is a deeply ingrained habit extending back endless years and lifetimes. We do it habitually. We have always done it. We will always continue to do it, unless and until we learn otherwise. It is responsible for most of our pain and suffering. The sad thing is that we seem to prefer to remain ignorant.

Mind Training

If we understand the nature of ignorance, then we can better grasp what all the to-do about meditation and mind practice technique is all about. Meditation is not, as many people like to think (various relaxation techniques or therapies), but rather (to the Tibetans) active techniques to examine the mind and its nature, to get to know it. How are ignorance and meditation connected to the bardo?

I have used this illustration before, the old kids game of Pick-Up-Sticks. There are all of these colored wooden sticks about the size of darning needles. We would scatter the sticks in a pile, and the game was to pick the pile apart, stick by stick, without disturbing the rest of the pile, until all the sticks were gone. We could also use the old analogy of the layers in an onion.

Mind training techniques are somewhat similar, in that the mind, and particularly our concept of the Self and its attachments, is examined and carefully picked apart until there is nothing left - nada. When you take all the layers of an onion apart, there is nothing in the center. So it is (the Buddhists teach) with our personal sense of the Self. The Self (our self) is said to be a composite of our positive and negative attachments, and can be picked apart until nothing remains at its

core. And this is the "why" meditation techniques are so useful.

My point here is that these meditation techniques are about the only way to pick through our ingrained habit of attachments and ignorance, and to reach the point where we actually begin to cease-to-ignore what we have been ignoring since time immemorial, and start to pay more attention and just wake up. Using meditation techniques, we gradually reach the end of our own ignorance; we manage to stop ignoring, and begin to have awareness and awaken.

Remember that the Sanskrit word "Buddha" means 'to awaken' - to become aware. Buddhahood is simply the end of ignorance and the advent of full awakening. So, what's my point, and what does all of this have to do with the bardo states?

Meditation and the Bardo States

By Michael Erlewine

Tibetan Buddhists are VERY concerned with the state of our mind at the moment and time of death, and a considerable amount of Buddhist meditation practice is little more than working to prepare the mind for that moment when we each will die. Why?

Because it is at that moment, when we are suddenly freed of all of our senses, personal habits, and body that we come face-to-face with the unvarnished reality, just what we have been ignoring all of this time - the true nature of the mind. The Tibetans say that after we die we are suddenly nine times as aware as we were in life, many times more aware or sensitive to just everything in our mind AND in the world around us. It is also said that we are very, very sensitive, like the skin of a newborn baby. It is like a veil has been lifted. We have a unique opportunity for realization.

In that much-more aware state, it is far easier for us to get past our habitual patterns of ignorance (of ignoring) and to see the true nature of our mind, which at that point begins to appear to us. We each will have that opportunity sooner than we think. I love the anecdote of the Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche speaking to a group, when his opening words were: "Some of use here will die soon, the rest a little later."

Yet seeing the "true nature" of the mind, due to our endless ignoring of it, is not a walk in the park. Most are confronted with it with no training or preparation.

The Tibetans use the analogy that this "true nature" appears to us in the form of various brilliant colored lights – stark to stunning in their effect. Depending upon our particular habit of ignorance, these lights

can appear to us as very, very bright, blinding us with their brilliance, and sending us fleeing to the shadow of rebirth, or these lights can be seen and recognized as what they actually are, the true nature of our mind - something that has always been there with us.

The Mind's True Nature

In summary: right after death we have a chance to see the actual nature of our mind, but the shock of the difference between what we habitually are used to seeing while living and our mind's true nature may be more than we can stand, frightening us, so that we turn away.

Using a metaphor: it is said that the brilliance of this sudden illumination is so very great, so stark, that we cannot easily recognize it as the truth that it is, and instead turn away from it, seeking out some place that is darker and more familiar to us, like our age-old ignorance once again. We agree to forget what we find too hard to look right at. We have never become familiar with the true nature of the mind during life.

In that brief moment, we can, instead of recognizing that brightness as our own true nature, turn downward and choose yet another lifetime of continued ignorance, and thus: rebirth and the many forms of suffering. And there is a kicker. There is no guarantee that we will merit another lifetime in human form; we can easily fall into a lower birth such as an animal or whatever, thus further complicating things. And that is an understatement. The state of our own mind and karma determines this.

I am very much generalizing here, so please don't forget that this is just a metaphor. The point here is that instead of awakening from our ignorance, after all

this time, we can fall right back into it. In fact, we run to it and choose it rather than wake up to the truth.

However, if we can stand the shock of looking at the truth, the utter brilliance of it, then instead of falling back into ignorance, another birth and lifetime, we have the opportunity to hold that realization and become enlightened enough to not seek a rebirth at all, but remain in a realized state. Each of us has this chance of realization soon after the moment of death. This fact and opportunity is very important to Tibetan Buddhists.

Preparing the Mind

By Michael Erlewine

I apologize that this particular blog is so didactic and explanatory. It is my hope that understanding a little about how the Tibetans approach the bardo state will be useful for some of you.

Many Buddhists have a dilemma that is worth understanding. On the one hand, we follow the dharma path to awareness and enlightenment as taught to us by the historical Buddha. However, we are not yet enlightened; we are not there yet, which suggests that our practice is to-be-continued in another life.

In order to continue our practice, we actually have to merit another human rebirth, and the Buddhists suggest that the human realm is the best realm to practice dharma. However, just because we are human now does not guarantee that we will achieve a human birth in our next life. That depends on what we do in this life. We could very easily blow this lifetime's opportunity and, due to our karma, be reborn as an animal or even something lower (or higher). Neither the lower realms nor the higher realms are conducive to dharma practice and enlightenment. Do you see the problem? Let me explain.

In a perfect world, the teachings of the Buddha, if we follow them and practice them should theoretically insure that if we cannot reach enlightenment in this life, we can continue on the dharma path in our next life, provided we merit and achieve another human rebirth. But the Buddha's teachings include being reborn in many realms, some of which could last a very, very long time. Naturally, we assume that should we not achieve enlightenment in this life (very likely

for most), we will surely make real progress in our next... human life. The rub is that there is no guarantee we will have another opportunity like this human life any time soon. Hmmmm.

So, although we are practicing dharma, it is understandable that a certain amount of our attention may be paid as how to insure a human rebirth next lifetime. In other words, we don't have undivided attention in our dharma practice, but rather divided attention. We will get to this issue later on. With this concern in mind, let's continue looking at the bardo experience.

A significant amount of all Buddhist meditation practices are done to better prepare the mind of each of us for that singular moment of death and the coming face-to-face with the true nature of our own mind. And here is a crucial point: we don't have to wait until we die to begin recognizing the true nature of our mind. We can do it right here in this lifetime, now. Of course, that is just what the Buddha did.

As I like to say, "we can go to meet our maker." We can train for this coming after-death experience. And that is what many forms of meditation are all about or lead to - recognizing the true nature of the mind. All that remains is for us to take steps to learn how to do this, which is what meditation practice is all about.

In fact, the closer we can come to recognizing the true nature of our mind in this, our waking life, the greater chance we have of recognizing that same nature in the after-death state, thus achieving a more enlightened state, one in which we see clearly ourselves and can begin to benefit others, as well.

With true mind recognition, we won't turn away into a darker place (a womb, for example), but will walk

directly on and embrace the light and realize our mind's true nature from that point forward. As for what happens then, this would require a whole book and I am not aware enough to even write it. I am no expert and still have lots of questions myself and am trying to explain some of this to readers so we discuss it.

And I should point out that this kind of after-death experience does not seem restricted just to the Tibetan Buddhists. The Buddhist are very quick to say that these after-death experiences, just as they are described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, will appear to all of us, regardless of religious upbringing - Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and so on. It is not just a "Buddhist" thing.

Pure Land Buddhism

Earlier I mentioned how the attention of a dharma practitioner can be divided between the historical dharma of the Buddha, and awakening at the time of death, as well as a concern for being reborn in our next life as a human. It is a little more complicated than that, so here goes.

In many Asian countries, there is what amounts to a cult of devotees who are practicing the meditation techniques that we have been mentioning here, and who want to achieve liberation at the moment they enter the bardo, and by that realization to thereby skip the bardo states (described above) and go straight on to being a realized being at one level or another. This is the principal concern of what is called the Pure Land School of Buddhism, and I need to at least introduce you to this concept of the pure lands or Buddha fields. It will help to explain this whole movement.

In brief, a Buddha field or "pure land" is a realm spontaneously produced by the sheer merit of a Buddha achieving enlightenment, a place where enlightened beings can go and congregate. There are a great many Buddha fields, and it is considered very advantageous for each of us to ultimately get there, a place where we can most benefit ourselves and also other sentient beings. Sounds a lot like heaven, doesn't it?

That being said, there is one Buddha field that is traditionally the easiest to gain entry into. Why it is easy is a long story, but in brief, one particular Buddha (Amitabha) aspired deeply that his Buddha field be accessible to almost anyone who aspired to reach it. And so it is.

Amitabha's Buddha Field

Even ordinary people who aspire to this realm can obtain it. This particular Buddha field is called in Sanskrit "Sukavati" and in Tibetan "Dewa-chen." It is (for the reasons mentioned above) the most popular Buddha field, because any of us can aspire to go there and actually have a chance of achieving that goal, even if we are not fully realized or enlightened right now. Otherwise, it can take many lifetimes, perhaps even entire kalpas (an endlessly long time) to become enlightened and reach one of the Buddha fields.

By going to a Buddha field, we cease to take births, and instead are enlightened and can be of great help to all other beings. This form of Buddhism that wants to reach Dewachen (Sukavati) is called "Pure Land Buddhism," and it is (in one form or another) immensely popular in China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and of course Tibet.

By understanding the idea of Dewachen, perhaps you can begin to see the great concern with the bardo states, in particular why the 'Bardo of Becoming', the one we encounter soon after dying, is so important to Buddhists. It is at this point of death that, if we are mentally and spiritually prepared, we can recognize the true nature of our mind and pass directly into the Buddha field of Dewachen, bypassing the various bardos, and ceasing to be reborn. Nice work if you can get it.

I mentioned earlier that there can be two separate, but related, kinds of dharma practice going on here. On the one hand there is the traditional path to enlightenment that the Buddha pointed out, and on the other the more immediate need to do enough dharma practice this lifetime to either become enlightened in the bardo or at the very least to once again merit having a human rebirth, and not be reborn in still lower realms. As you can see both paths are related, but also the worry to be liberated in the bardo right after death can take up a lot of the energy we might have used to attain total enlightenment just as Buddha did, gradually but as soon as possible. It is a kind of Catch-22.

As my teacher has often pointed out, we are (those of us living today) all of the souls who have never up to now, through all millennia, managed to stop ignoring the way things actually are long enough to become enlightened. We are, as he says, the stragglers, the hard cases, the dregs.

So, that is a brief account of the urgency to get to Dewachen, the nearest and most easily accessible Buddha field. And, since the main entrance to Dewachen is at the beginning of the bardo (shortly

after death), this explains some of the concern with and study of the bardo. But what happens to those of us who can't get on board that train to Dewachen, and that is probably most of us?

Well, Dewachen aside, that is what all of the rest of the tradition of the bardo states is all about. If you do not make it to Dewachen, that is, if you turn away from the bright lights (if you do not recognize the true nature of the mind) and back into ignorance, then you enter the Bardo of Becoming, and eventually take another life, and not necessarily as a human being, as I mentioned earlier. This fact induces a certain urgency to practice.

This is not the place, and I am not the expert you need to properly describe in great detail the various bardo realms. I am only sharing what I understand of all this. I wish I were an expert and that all of us were enlightened, including me. Perhaps this is enough for now. I hope this has been understandable. Please feel free to ask questions.

The Bardo State

After death, the after death

Summary: Astro-Shamanism and the Bardos

In many respects, the bardo traditions and the Astro-Shamanic traditions are in parallel. The person who completes their Saturn return also finds themselves gradually detaching from the physical (Saturn) and floating off beyond time, wandering in and through a progression of chakras. They too most often do not know they are 'dead' in one sense and cannot understand why they cannot communicate with those around them, those who are among and living now in an area of life now dead to us.

The idea that we die and yet don't know we are dead is common to both approaches, as well as the gradual realization that death has occurred, and all that goes with it, such as being unable to connect or reach the "living," not being able to get back into our old habits or body, hypersensitivity, some kind of remote viewing or out-of-the-body experiences, and so forth. This is very esoteric stuff, I agree.

In other words, if you read the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" or writings on the bardo, you will find a lot of similarities to the journey through the chakras described in my book "Astrology of the Heart: Astro-Shamanism", the dying to one level or chakra and the process of being born or incarnating on another. These two traditions don't fully dovetail, but it is clear that they are talking, if not about the same kind of experience, then, at least in a similar manner.

Astro-Shamanism and Meditation

When I am asked what are the most important resources for the astrologer or spiritual person interested in shamanic techniques, some are surprised and disappointed to hear that learning the proper kind of meditation is at the top of the list. It is almost as if it is somehow unfair or not part of astrology to make such a recommendation, as if it were somehow politically incorrect. We need to examine this.

Whereas in the East, in countries like Tibet, China, Japan, Nepal, Korea, and so on, there are hundreds of types of meditation and words for it, here in the West, we pretty much have just the one word "Meditation" to cover anything to do with the mind and its training. To make matters more confusing, the most popular concept of meditation in American

(perhaps because of the success of TM - Transcendental Meditation) is that it is some form of relaxation or stress-release therapy, a way for us to cool out and go deep within ourselves. Meditation is often also associated in people's minds with cults, trance-like states, hippies, and alternative religions, in general.

And it is anyone's guess what those relative few who do "meditate" on a regular basis actually do, everything from practicing the authentic Eastern methods of mind training to mood therapy, psychedelic music, incense, and lava lamps. It is a fact that there is no general agreement as to what meditation is all about in this country, so it is no wonder that the vast majority of individuals steer clear of meditation entirely, and this is unfortunate. Let me explain why.

Our Western Tradition

We have a long and distinguished philosophical tradition here in the West, but it has one major flaw, which is that, in general, that tradition seldom focuses on the mind itself. In other words, we don't use the mind to look at the mind, but rather we use the mind to look at the various contents of the mind, subject matter, like existentialism, mathematics, linguistic analysis, and so forth. For example, you are now reading the 'content' of this page. Instead of that, please look at who is reading this page this very moment? Direct your mind to look at itself, to look at the 'looker'. Difficult, is it not? This is what meditation and mind training is about, looking at the mind itself.

Although Western mathematics and philosophy is paying increasing attention to the concept of the observer being part of what is observed and vice

versa, these attempts are still maturing. I find it much easier just to go to the real experts in using the mind to look at itself, the Tibetans and other Asians.

This is part of what the Eastern methods of meditation and mind training are all about. By and large, we don't do this form of mental practice here in the West. For centuries we have been lost in a simple dualism that conceives of a looker and a "looked at." We have bought into that dualism, although philosophy and science are gradually coming to accept the concept that the looker affects what is looked at, and that "how" we look makes a difference. Buddha did this 2500 years ago.

What little we know about looking at the mind itself, we have assimilated from the Eastern philosophical traditions, under the very broad term "meditation," even then it has a very 'foreign' feel to it for most people. Mind training of the type I am describing is our heritage, our mind. Meanwhile we tend to see it as not a natural part of our culture, but rather something that has come to us from cultures outside our own, in particular from Asian countries. Why do we need it at all?

What's In It For Us?

For starters, we need this type of meditation to overcome the dualistic way of thinking we just spoke of, and to prove to each one of us that the looker and what is looked at are interdependent, and not independent, of one another. Our most sophisticated scientists, psychologists, and philosophers now understand this, but it has not yet filtered down to the rest of us as a fact of life.

In studying the dharma, we need these meditation or mind practice techniques to help us get beyond the

time-oriented (read: Saturn) materialistic techniques we have inherited from this dualistic way of thinking, and into the timeless or more-eternal areas of our own mind. In this area, our religions have failed us. Western religions, by and large, offer the concept of faith to us, but precious little by way of a methodology of the mind, that is: step-by-step practical techniques to work with the mind to look at itself. And we need those techniques, for all the reasons given above. Asian religion and philosophy, which are themselves more unified than here in the West, abound with techniques and methods of mind training. We happen to need them at this point in history.

ANGER: Insult to Injury

By Michael Erlewine

Anger is a huge problem. It has been coming up a lot lately in my life. Anger is the one emotion that seems to dominate almost everyone.

Anger is what the Buddhists call a “Klesha” or obscuration. When we have it, our mind is obscured or darkened by its presence. It dims our light and we can no longer see clearly. We stumble around.

And anger always has an object, something we are angry about or at. Where there is an object of our anger, there is always a subject, which would be us. It is always “our” anger, not the object’s anger. We are angry.

And people and events do at times injure us and anger often arises from the injury. As the old saying goes, don’t add insult to injury. In this case, becoming angry is the insult to our being injured. It never helps things.

Anger is like pointing a flashlight in the dark. Wherever we point it we see something, but it is only because ‘we’ are shining the light, and not vice versa. Anger is always our problem and only we can do something about it.

And thank goodness anger is only temporary. Otherwise we would never know we even have it. It comes and goes. Unfortunately when anger comes it often creates karma and the karma lasts a lot longer than the anger.

When I get angry, I often think it is for a good reason. I have a good reason to be angry at my partner, friend, or whomever, while the truth is that there is

never a good reason for anger. Anger by its very nature is unreasonable – beyond reason. I am always anger's first victim along with anyone unfortunate enough to be the object of my anger. I harm both myself and whomever I am angry at. I burn my own mindstream. It is like one of those trick guns that shoots yourself when you fire it at others. We are always the main victim of our own anger.

Perhaps the greatest problem with anger is that it is not easy to get rid of. It is too close to us, too fast to arise. We seldom see it coming.

The only antidote I am aware of for anger (and the Buddhists agree) is awareness. If I can learn to be more aware, in general, then I can sometimes catch it before it takes hold. My dharma teacher, Khenpo Rinpoche, always tells this story:

The time to stop the pig from entering the garden is when he sticks his nose through the picket fence. Whacking him on the snout then will keep him out. Once the pig gets in the garden, it is almost impossible to get rid of him. He just keeps running around destroying everything while we chase him trampling as we go.

Developing awareness allows us catch the anger as it arises and before it is fully aroused. That is my plan, and part of why I study meditation.

ANGER: Management

There is no quick cure or silver bullet for ending anger. Of course there are dozens of books, classes, groups, etc. about how to deal with anger. However, not all of us like to read self-help books, attend classes, or work with groups. There is a more traditional method for working with anger.

The Buddhists point out that removing the root of anger is very difficult, but it can be done. However, it takes time and effort. For many of us, it is worth making that effort, as anger probably will not just go away spontaneously.

Anger management is all about awareness. Like most obscurations (kleshas), anger can take hold in a nanosecond. There is a moment when we give in and go with it, a split-second. In that instant, if we are aware enough we can look directly at the anger, recognize it, and not follow it, not give in to it. We do have a choice, albeit for most of us without training, not really much choice at all. It happens too quickly. So how can this awareness we need be developed?

There are, of course, many answers to this question, but the general answer is through meditation or mind practice. It is very unfortunate that the word “meditation” in our society has so many meanings, and most of them today probably negative. The New Age movement of the 1970s kind of ruined the word and it needs to be salvaged and restored. Let me tell you what I mean by the word “meditation.” Perhaps that will help.

Meditation refers to the various methods to help develop awareness of this present moment and of the true nature of our mind. I don't care whether you learn it as the Buddhists present it or from some other religion and source. That is not important. I only know it from the Buddhist perspective, because that is who taught it to me. You can substitute your own method, of course.

To gain the awareness needed to manage our anger requires practice. That is why all the Buddhists are always telling me they have to do their “practice.” It is

practice they are doing, not meditation itself. They are practicing meditation in order to build a habit of awareness that will just spontaneously function in the real world, by habit, when something like anger arises.

I am sure I have to be one of the slowest people in the world in learning meditation. It was so absolutely boring for the longest time that I used any excuse to get out of it and even when I did it, I chose every distraction that came my way instead of just doing it. So, meditation for me was VERY hard to learn.

It helped for me to remember that what I was doing was just practicing, practicing to form a habit that will someday take over automatically. It is no different from learning fingering and scales on a guitar or piano. It takes practice before you can just play music. In meditation, it takes practice before you can actually meditate life. Most of us are doing more practice in meditating than we are actually meditating. I hope that is clear.

Looking back on my learning to meditate, it seems a lot like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks I played as a child. After you ever-so-carefully picked through all the sticks, at the end there was nothing left. In practicing meditation we learn to “ever so carefully” pick through our emotions and mental attachments until there is nothing left to obscure our awareness. And then we have just the awareness, and that awareness is sharp enough to spot anger when it occurs before we decide to give up and go with it. It is a split-second decision that we can make, if we are aware enough.

Learning to meditate is all about learning not to be distracted. Anger is just one really big distraction, but

lesser distractions take our attention all day long. You would be surprised at how little pure undistracted attention we have in a day. It is like trying to hold water in our hands. It mostly all runs out.

Some of you have been my friends here on Facebook for a long time. If there is any trust on your part in me, then trust me when I say: there is no single thing in my life that has brought me more returns than learning to meditate. This is not to say that learning meditation is easy. For me it was almost impossible. I came very close to giving up on it many times. If it were not for the suffering in my life and the crunch of circumstances all around me, I would never have learned any. Of course, I am very much still learning this.

If any of you want to learn to meditate, you can look through this short free booklet I put together "Training the Mind: Dharma Practice," which can be found here.

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig=>

If you can't learn from reading and want personal instruction, the following link is a list of centers where you can get free instruction. I am sure there are many more centers, but these centers I know will present it properly. What you want to learn is called "Shamata Meditation."

<http://www.kagyu.org/ktd/ktcs/usa.php>

Or you can ask questions here or write to me personally: Michael@Erlewine.net.

There is no other single step I would suggest that will give you control over your own life (including anger) than learning to meditate.

The Feng-Shui of Anger

By Michael Erlewine

We usually think of feng-shui in terms of sensitivity to the outer environment, rooms, homes, etc. I learned the essence of what I know about feng-shui from His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, one of the four main regents of the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Situ Rinpoche visited our center a number of times years ago and he freely shared his love and knowledge of feng-shui with us. For me it was like a transmission.

Among other things, Tai Situ Rinpoche took us on a tour of our own home, pointing out areas of our house that compromised the sense of the peaceful living space we were trying to achieve. And while feng-shui can be as complex as you want it to be, what I learned from Situ Rinpoche boils down to becoming aware of our own innate sensitivity to space. Instinctively we know, if we will relax and trust ourselves.

For example, if I walk through a doorway into an adjoining room and immediately inside the room there is a tall lamp that is so close to my head that some part of my mind cringes or is forced to notice and be aware of it, that is 'bad' feng-shui. I just move or remove the lamp until I no longer notice it. For me, that is the essence of feng-shui, arranging your environment (to your taste) until your mind is at peace within it. I know that this is probably an oversimplification, but sensitivity to space is something we all have and can rather easily become aware of. And like with so many things, awareness is key.

We like to think of feng-shui as having to do with the outside world and its effect on us, but feng-shui knows no such boundaries and is just as active and true within our mind as elsewhere. In fact, we have more in common with one another regarding inner space than we have similarities in how we arrange our living room furniture. Mental and inner feng-shui is at least as important as paying attention to the outside world.

The Three Poisons

I have been actively meditating (or trying to) since 1974 when Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche himself took me into a room and taught me how. I am a very slow learner in this and after so many years I have managed to learn perhaps a little. My mind is somewhat more stable than it was and I have been able to let my mind rest, to a degree. But this mental stability does not necessarily extend to what the Buddhists call the Kleshas, which are also called the disturbing emotions, emotional afflictions, or most commonly the Three Poisons, and they are:

Anger (Aggression)

Desire (Attachment, Passion)

Delusions (Ignorance)

Many Buddhists call them the Five Poisons by adding to these three, the kleshas of Jealousy and Pride.

These three (or five poisons) are not considered run-of-the-mill mental problems or routine obscurations, but rather deep-seated and powerful emotional afflictions that tend to control us more than we them, should we indulge. It is said that for each of us, one of these poisons is dominant, so: choose your poison.

These three poisons not only can be destructive, they are also powerful (huge!) sources of energy, for good

or ill. Just imagine what great vortices these are, energy-wise, if they can move us so easily to such extremes. And they are never very far from us in the mind, either, so inner feng-shui makes good sense. Just a split second or a moment's lapse on our part and the poisons are there, fully present. For example, anger can appear in a moment, in a nanosecond, so we kind of have to tiptoe through the pastures of life being careful where we step.

I guess my point is that, like the proverbial elephant in the room, these poisons are very much with us, very close at hand, and not just some distant possibility. In the inner landscape of our mind, these are major features to avoid and their constant presence is something we all are aware of, even if only to better ignore them. Talk about bad feng-shui, kleshas impinge on our consciousness at all times. They are never really 'not there', but are always prominent in our peripheral vision, just out of sight, but never out of mind. In other words, we must be mindful lest we fall victim to them, and so they admit to feng-shui analysis. Let me say more about mental feng-shui.

I am using anger here as an example, but all of the kleshas (poisons) are right here within our mind, but of course we ignore them as much as possible. They are like fountains of energy that have been painted over by the veneer of society, coat upon coat, painted into a corner where we don't have to see or react to them.

And the kleshas are hidden in all kinds of clever ways. Of course they are buried beneath social taboos and forbidden by the law. We are warned not to go there, and suffer penalties if we do. Take, for instance anger. We are admonished not to indulge in anger,

warned, and there are consequences if we do. Law after law is on the books,

So we cap our kleshas off, hide them away, and make them punishable. In 'polite' society we just don't go there, and keep the various extreme effects of kleshas at arm's length. Yet, our ignorance is only a cosmetic solution -- ignoring the obvious. In our current condition there is no way we can cope with, much less subdue, kleshas like anger and desire. It is like grabbing a tiger by the tail. We habitually turn our gaze away.

The most common solution is to keep qualities like anger and desire at arm's length, to get as far away from them as possible, and to avoid them at every opportunity. Although society finds this approach necessary, we should not conclude that keeping our distance from them in any way diminishes their power over us. In other words, shunning kleshas is a cosmetic and not a permanent solution, but it is considered better than indulging them.

Living in a world where we must permanently ignore such great energy centers is also not so good. Talk about bad feng-shui. Just think for a moment how these powerful sources impinge on our consciousness at all times. We must forever be careful not to give them any of our attention, lest they erupt, so they forever have the minimum attention it takes for us to ignore them, and they have us walking around with our eyes downcast so as not to see or invoke them unnecessarily.

And let's not minimize the dangers of kleshas, either. It is a no-win situation. We ignore kleshas at our peril, and if we go with them, give them our attention, we usually end up being controlled by them. They take us

over. Tell me this is not one definition (or kind) of suffering.

Like a world populated by land mines, kleshas are always present, and we have to watch our every step. Society has learned to carefully avoid the obvious kleshas around us, locking them away with legalities and laws, painting them over with taboos and coatings of social veneer. You would hardly know they are there in 'nice' society, but there they are nevertheless, just beneath the surface of 'polite'. And wishing them away won't make it so. Sooner or later, in this life or another, we will have to come to terms with our kleshas and their energy. They await us. Handling kleshas directly is for advanced meditators only.

In this very introductory article, I am pointing out only that our inner and mental space is as important to us as our outer living space, and in fact we spend all of our time in our mind. The mind is the lens (and projector) through which the outer world appears. And like outer conventional feng-shui, much of what we find in our inner mental space can also make us uncomfortable and amounts to 'bad' feng-shui. It is enough here to note that within the mind are some very large energy sources (the Three Poisons) that are very close by, but usually ignored or avoided. They are there nonetheless, and prominent at that.

According to the Buddhists, ultimately, the Five Poisons can and must be known and transmuted into the Five Wisdoms. Each of us will have to do it, someday. As for altering or removing these kleshas, these obstacles, I will leave that for another blog, should there be interest. Mental feng-shui, inner comfort, and peace is at least as important as

rearranging the deck-chairs on our personal outer equation, which ultimately will be abandoned anyway. Your thoughts please.

And the Road to Enlightenment?

By Michael Erlewine

Obviously I am not enlightened and know next to nothing of that state. Since I am Buddhist, if I did know 'nothing', I would be better off, but with knowing next to nothing, I am close, but no cigar. LOL.

However, I have learned something about what the steps toward enlightenment are all about, and I find them fascinating. Perhaps some of you will also. One of the most important teachings I have received from the Tibetan Buddhists over the last almost-40 years is the difference between understanding, experience, and realization. This has some similarity to what we here in the West call the progressive steps: "I think," "I believe," and "I know," but there are also strong differences. These are just some words on a page, so what do they mean?

Understanding

Understanding is just that, understanding intellectually what has been said, with the ability to recite it back to someone. "Let me tell you about what I don't know," might be a good definition of 'understanding', the abstract knowledge of a concept, but with no actual experience of it in the flesh of life. Understanding seems to be the coin of the realm.

Experience

Experience is a step more real and may or may not include understanding, but the thing about experience is that it is not permanent. It comes and it goes. In other words, when we have a strong spiritual experience, we like to think of it as permanent. We have finally arrived at some place and we "get it," only to find out two weeks later we no longer have it, no

matter how much we wish or pretend we do. It was just an experience. Trying to revive spiritual experiences (being attached to them) that have come and gone is traditionally (in the literature) one of the greatest blocks to spiritual progress.

So experience is something we may have had and perhaps remember well enough, but not something that is just with us all the time from that point forward. Perhaps it cycles and can reoccur (we get it again), but it usually marks an epiphany or high point, which like a missile, reaches a height, holds for a while, and then declines. It is an earmark of 'experiences' that they come and go. They are temporary and not permanent. We had a little 'enlightenment,' but we could not hold that view. It came and went, and now we are back, stuck in our old habits where we were before the experience, but with the memory of having had some kind of a spiritual event. How many times when I was young did I eagerly look forward to visiting my parent's home to show off my new-found 'self-control', only to find myself reduced to my old habits by them in a short while, with the admonition "See, you have not changed." Sound familiar?

Realization (Recognition)

Unfortunately, the word "Realization" has more than one dharma meaning in English, so let's start with that. Let's not confuse 'realization' as used here with full enlightenment. They are not the same thing, although sometimes the word "realization" is used instead of the word enlightenment to describe what the historical Buddha attained. This verbal mix-up does not help matters any.

Because of this confusion, I will not use the word realization any further in this blog. Instead, here we

will use the word 'recognition' to indicate the recognition of the mind's true nature, which is not the same as enlightenment. 'Recognition' is what we are discussing here and it is actually the first actual step toward enlightenment, and usually comes after years of understanding, experience, and meditation practice. In Tibetan Buddhism, recognition is somewhat of a big deal.

And recognition, like its big brother 'enlightenment' is permanent. Recognition is what most of the Buddhist teachings point to, a view that is permanent. Once you have recognition, it never leaves you. You may have to stabilize it and enhance it, but it does not go away, and, if I can explain it well enough, you will understand why. Of course finding the right words is hard to achieve, IMO mostly because (as mentioned) people misunderstand what recognition is, and confuse it with full enlightenment.

To my understanding, the real path to enlightenment only starts when recognition of the true nature of the mind is achieved, and this only comes after much understanding and experience. From the point of recognition onward we are then actually on the path toward enlightenment. So it remains for me to perhaps better define or explain what recognition is. I will try, but please know that this can be very subtle stuff to put into words.

To recap: understanding is basically getting a concept intellectually, and experience is just that, actually experiencing it in one form or another. Understanding is cerebral, while 'experience' is physical and emotional. Also, you know if it was just an experience if whatever spiritual view it engenders does not last, but comes and then goes, which leaves recognition to

be defined, the recognition of the true nature of the mind. What then is that?

Recognition is a lot like those figure-ground paintings which contain a hidden image within them that, by carefully looking, you can suddenly see. There is an “Aha!, there it is. I see it now” with recognition. Once you see the embedded image in a figure-ground painting, you can always see it again from that point onward. Your perception does not vary or change. With recognition, when you get it once, you have it forever. That is how recognition works, but in this case we are referring not to a painting, but to the recognition of the true nature of the mind, something that is traditionally beyond words. And I am foolish enough to attempt to put it into words.

Recognition is not ‘spiritual’ in the sense that it is any kind of final “enlightenment” or spiritual high. It is not some subtle bliss that we may have imagined enlightenment is, but rather very practical and down-to-earth, a simple recognition, “Oh, I get it now. I see how the mind works” And once you get it, you always have it, because, unlike an experience, it does not go up and down. It is not emotional, but rather is a simple (yet profound) observation. You just get it. And what is recognized?

What is recognized is the actual or true nature of the mind. You suddenly see how the mind works, which suggests that up to now you had the wrong idea. Obviously that is the case. With recognition, the concept of the mind as you had imagined it up to then is seen through as just that, what you imagined. That balloon is popped and your expectations then dropped, and the mind just as it has always been

(which in fact is already quite familiar to you) is clearly seen for what it is and grasped. You get it.

In the process, one stops looking outside oneself to a teacher or tradition and grasps what has always been right at hand and with you all the time. We already know our mind more than anything else we have. And yes, it is difficult to describe this in words.

Recognition sounds a lot like understanding, but there is a big difference in that it is beyond understanding and also beyond experience, yet still very, very simple and close. How is that for a pile of words? My apologies. The Tibetans call what we recognize “ordinary mind.”

Perhaps it is easier to describe recognition by what happens when you achieve it. From the instant of recognition, when you get it, one important result is that all of the expectations, guesses, imaginings, wonderings, etc. about spiritual practice vanish. There is no need to guess anymore, because you wake up and are finally able to respond to your own particular dharma practice. You immediately understand why up to that point all of your dharma practice has been just that, “practice,” going through the motions, building strong habits. With recognition, you clearly see what that practice has been all about and where you missed the point. With recognition, you finally get the point. And you see what has to be done, and ‘practice’ as you know it up to that point is over. You are no longer ‘practicing’ meditation. Rather, you are actually meditating, however clumsily at first.

You instantly know what to do and also that only you alone can do it. And you need no further help from outside because you also see that you have to do it yourself. Even the Buddha could not touch your

forehead and enlighten you. We each have to enlighten ourselves. At the point of recognition, your teacher's job is done. The simple practicality of mind recognition gives you everything you need to proceed onward toward enlightenment on your own. This is a huge step.

In the Zen tradition, what I am terming here "recognition" is called "Kensho." I can understand why this entire blog may appear somewhat pedantic. I apologize. But perhaps for some of you, knowing the distinction between understanding, experience, and recognition may be useful. After recognition, one actually begins the long journey toward enlightenment.

And I have not attempted to describe that journey or enlightenment itself because I don't even understand it myself. Any questions?

Mind Treasures

Astrological Tertons and Terma

By Michael Erlewine

I get asked all the time what books I am reading. I invariably answer “I don’t read books, per se, anymore; I read some Buddhist texts, but that is about all.” That is a bit of a smug answer. I am perhaps deflecting the question rather than trying to explain what it is that I am doing about my reading habits.

This is a topic I probably should take a pass on and not tackle. However, it fascinates me and has become an important part of my life, so here goes. Years ago my first teacher, a Rosicrucian initiator named Andrew Gunn McIver (who, born in Scotland, was in his eighties at the time I met him) often used to say to me when he saw me reading this or that book: “Michael, some day you must become the book.” Hmmm, thought I, now what does that mean?

Well, I am gradually finding out what he meant. Believe it or not, I am learning to read what is already embedded in my own mind and it is good reading! Of course modern Western society has no words for what I am talking about, but the Tibetan Buddhists do. They call it “mind terma,” which translates as something like “mind treasures.”

The Tibetans even have a wonderful story about how astrology entered our world system ages ago in a place in China called Mt. Wu-Tai-Shan, five mountains in the shape of a square with the tallest mount in the center, a die. I have been to Tai-Shan in China, climbed to the top of all five mountains, and did puja, but that is another story.

The take away from that ancient legend is that the 84,000 astrological dharmas that are said to have sprung from the head of the Bodhisattva Manjushri at Mt. Wu-Tai-Shan were hidden in our world long ago, many of them embedded in the mind itself. And there they are, waiting to be found by us or someone like us. Indeed, I ask, why not us?

The operative question then becomes: just how can we do this? How can we learn to find the hidden astrological treasures within our own mind? And the answer seems to be, gradually, by becoming more aware of the nature of the mind itself in which these astrological 'terma' or teachings are hidden. IMO, it is that simple or complex.

And it is written that hidden 'terma' of any kind will be found when they are needed by humanity, always at the right time, when we most need them. And I am not speaking of the pure dharma treasure-teachings, but here just of the astrological dharma treasures that are also embedded in our mind.

In the Tibetan teachings, a treasure finder who finds a mind treasure and grasps its nature, must first fully absorb not only its concept, but also practice the essence of that mind treasure (often for many years) before sharing them with the community. It would make sense that astrologers find them or that anyone who finds them perhaps becomes an astrologer. I can't say that I know exactly how that works.

What I do know is that it does work because I have gradually been learning to read from the treasure-book of my own mind, and astrology is on the top of my reading list. Of course this can't be done by brute force, but rather slowly, like the old kid's game of Pick-Up-Sticks, through removing one bit of our

mental obscurations after another. The tools to do this are those of mind practice, such as the various kinds of meditation, but I will not go into that here. I have written extensively on meditation and I can post a link if anyone needs it. Look for the free e-book “Training the Mind” here:

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig=>

The theme of this blog is just to point out to astrologers that there are reading materials other than the New York Times Best Seller List or what you find in your favorite metaphysical bookstore. The mind itself is vast and wondrous. After all, every idea of value has, at one time or another, been found somewhere in the mind. Astrological ideas (terma) are no different.

I admit that it takes time, perseverance, and practice to read in the mind, but its rewards are virtually unlimited. And in this practice you are not reading the mind of another person, but rather in the mind that we all have access to, the true nature of our own mind. These astrological treasures are hidden close to us in our own mind.

I don't want to get too personal here, but almost all of the astrology techniques that I use in my work have been found and taken from the mind itself, rather than from pre-existing books. I could list them, and they would include techniques like Local Space, Interface Planetary Nodes, Heliocentric StarTypes (archetypes), Full-Phase Aspects, Burn Rate Retrograde analysis, and on and on.

I have also added on to some existing astrological terma that have been already revealed, like Grant Lewis's Saturn work, and there are others. Think about this please. I could write more on this topic, but

for those of you reading this who resonate to this concept, I have this suggestion:

If you read from the mind, you are learning to focus not on the external outside world, but rather from the inside, the inner essence is what I am pointing out here. So don't get hung up on external and outer phenomena, like the personality of someone like me who is presenting this. Like yourself, my personality is just a collection of attachments I have gathered over the years.

Instead, read beyond my outer person to the oracle that speaks through the personality, through any person. Focusing on the outer personality of any one of us, that guardian-at-the-threshold of the mind, distracts us from reading what is beyond the personal, what is shining through.

What I write about here is not true because I say it; I say it because it is true. Read from the inside out, not from the outside in. I understand this is an esoteric topic, so you may have questions. Feel free to discuss.



About Michael Erlewine

Internationally known astrologer and author Noel Tyl (author of 34 books on astrology) has this to say about Michael Erlewine:

“Michael Erlewine is the giant influence whose creativity is forever imprinted on all astrologers’ work since the beginning of the Computer era! He is the man who single-handedly applied computer technology to astrological measurement, research, and interpretation, and has been the formative and leading light of astrology’s modern growth. Erlewine humanized it all, adding perception and incisive practical analyses to modern, computerized astrology. Now, for a second generation of astrologers and their public, Erlewine’s genius continues with StarTypes ... and it’s simply amazing!”

A Brief Bio of Michael Erlewine

Michael Erlewine has studied and practiced astrology for over 40 years, as an author, teacher, lecturer,

personal consultant, programmer, and conference producer.

Erlewine was the first astrologer to program astrology, on microcomputers and make those programs available to his fellow astrologers. This was in 1977. He founded Matrix Astrology in 1978, and his company, along with Microsoft, are the two oldest software companies still on the Internet.

Michael, soon joined by his astrologer-brother Stephen Erlewine, went on to revolutionize astrology by producing, for the new microcomputers, the first written astrological reports, first research system, first high resolution chart wheels, geographic and star maps, and on and on.

Along the way Matrix produced programs that spoke astrology (audio), personal astrological videos, infomercials, and many other pioneering feats.

Michael Erlewine has received major awards from UAC (United Astrological Conferences), AFA (American Federation of Astrologers), and the PIA (Professional Astrologers Incorporated), and scores of on online awards.

Michael and Stephen Erlewine have published a yearly calendar for almost 30 years, since 1969. Michael Erlewine has produced and put on more than 36 conferences in the areas of astrology and Buddhism.



Example Astro*Image Card

Aside from his current work as director of Matrix Software, Erlewine has personally designed over 13,000 tarot-like astrology cards, making authentic astrology available to people with little or no experience in the topic. These Astro*Image™ cards are available through a variety of small astrological programs and in eBooks. Some examples can be found at WWW.Astrologyland.com, where there is also a link to his astrological software.

Personal Astrology Readings

Michael Erlewine has been doing personal astrology readings for almost forty years and enjoys sharing his knowledge with others. However, his busy schedule makes it difficult to honor all requests. However, feel free to email (Michael@Erlewine.net) him if you wish a personal chart reading. He will let you know if his current schedule will allow him to work with you.

The sections that follow will give you more details about Michael Erlewine and his very active center.



The Heart Center House

In 1972, Michael and Margaret Erlewine established the Heart Center, a center for community studies. Today, the Heart Center continues to be a center for astrological and spiritual work. Over the years, hundreds of invited guests have stayed at the Heart Center, some for just a night, others for many years. Astrologers, authors, musicians, Sanskrit scholars, swamis - you name it, the Heart Center has been a

home for a wide group of individuals, all united by their interest in spiritual or cultural ideas.



Heart Center Library

Erlewine also founded and directs The Heart Center Astrological Library, the largest astrological library in the United States, and probably the world, that is open to researchers. Meticulously catalogued, the current library project is the scanning of the Table of Contents for all major books and periodicals on astrology.

The library does not have regular hours, so contact ahead of time if you wish to visit.

Michael@erlewine.net.



The All-Music Guide / All-Movie Guide

Michael Erlewine's devotion to studying and playing the music of Black Americans, in particular blues, led to his traveling to small blues clubs of Chicago and hearing live, blues greats like Little Walter, Magic Sam, Big Walter Horton, and many others. He went on to interview many dozens of performers. Much of this interviewing took place at the Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, in 1969 and 1970, the first electric blues festivals of any size ever held in North America, and than later at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals.

With their extensive knowledge of the blues music, Erlewine and his brother Daniel were asked to play host to the score or so of professional blues musicians and their bands. They were in charge of serving them food and (of course) drink. Michael went on to interview most of the performers in these early festivals, with an audio recorder, and later on with video.

The interviewing led to more study and ultimately resulted in Michael founding and developing AMG,

the All-Music Guide, today the largest single database of music reviews and documentation on the planet.

Erlewine started from a one-room office, and the reviewers and music aficionados of the time laughed at his attempt to cover all music. But he persisted, and the all-Music Guide appeared as a Gopher Site, before the World Wide Web even existed—a database of popular music for all music lovers.

Over the years AMG grew, and the All-Movie Guide and All Game Guide were born, and also flourished. Later, Erlewine would create ClassicPosters.com, devoted to the history and documentation of rock n' roll posters, some 35,000 of them.

These guides changed the way music was reviewed and rated. Previous to AMG, review guides like the "Rolling Stones Record Guide" were run by a few sophisticated reviewers, and the emphasis was on the expertise of the reviewer, and their point of view. Erlewine insisted on treating all artists equally, and not comparing artist to artist, what can be important, Michael points out, is to find the best music any artist has produced, not if the artist is better or worse than Jimmie Hendrix or Bob Dylan.

Erlewine sold AMG in 1996, at which time he had 150 fulltime employees, and 500 free-lance writers. He had edited and published any number of books and CD-ROMs on music and film. During the time he owned and ran AMG, there were no advertisements on the site and nothing for sale. As Erlewine writes, "All of us deserve to have access to our own popular culture. That is what AMG and ClassicPosters.com are all about." Today, AMG reviews can be found everywhere across the Internet. Erlewine's music

collection is housed in an AMG warehouse, numbering almost 500,000 CDs.



Heart Center Meditation Room

Michael Erlewine has been active in Buddhism since the 1950s. Here are his own words:

“Back in the late 1950s, and early 1960, Buddhism was one of many ideas we stayed up late, smoked cigarettes, drank lots of coffee, and talked about, along with existentialism, poetry, and the like.

“It was not until I met the Tibetan lama, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in 1974 that I understood Buddhism as not just Philosophy, but also as path, a way to get through life. Having been raised Catholic, serving as an altar boy, learning church Latin, and all that, I had not been given any kind of a path, other than the path of faith. I hung onto that faith as long as I could, but it told me very little about how to live and work in this world.,

“I had been trying to learn the basics of Tibetan Buddhism before I met Trungpa Rinpoche, but the spark that welded all of that together was missing. Trungpa provided that spark. I got to be his chauffeur for a weekend, and to design a poster for his public talk.

“More important: only about an hour after we met, Trungpa took me into a small room for a couple of hours and taught me to meditate. I didn’t even understand what I was learning. All that I know was that I was learning about myself.

“After that meeting, I begin to understand a lot more of what I had read, but it was almost ten years later that I met my teacher, Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monstery, in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. Meeting Rinpoche was life-changing.



Heart Center Symbol

“It was not long after that we started the Heart Center Meditation Center here in Big Rapids, which is still

going today. My wife and I became more and more involved with the monastery in New York, and we ended up serving on several boards, and even as fundraisers for the monastery. We helped to raise the funds to build a 3-year retreat in upstate New York, one for men and one for women.

“We also established KTD Dharma Goods, a mail-order dharma goods business that helped practitioners find the meditation materials they might need. We published many sadhanas, the traditional Buddhist practice texts, plus other teachings, in print and on audio tape.

Years have gone by, and I am still working with Khenpo, Rinpoche and the sangha at the Woodstock monastery. Some years ago, Rinpoche surprised my wife and I by telling us we should go to Tibet and meet His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, and that we should go right away, that summer, and I hate to leave the house!

That trip, and a second trip that followed some years later, turned out to be pilgrimages that were also life changing. Our center in Big Rapids has a separate building as a shrine room and even a small Stupa; pictures are shown below.

I can never repay the kindness that Khenpo Rinpoche and the other rinpoches that I have taken teachings from have shown me.

Music Career



Michael Erlewine's career in music started early on, when he dropped out of high school and hitchhiked to Venice West, in Santa Monica, California, in an attempt to catch a ride on the tail end of the Beatnik era. This was 1960, and he was a little late for that, but right on time for the folk music revival that was just beginning to bloom at that time. Like many other people his age, Erlewine traveled from college center to center across the nation: Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Cambridge, and Greenwich Village. There was a well-beaten track on which traveled the young folk musicians of the future.

Erlewine, who also played folk guitar, hitchhiked for a stint with a young Bob Dylan, and then more extensively with guitar virtuoso and instrumentalist Perry Lederman. Erlewine helped to put on Dylan's first concert in Ann Arbor. He hung out with people like Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Joan Baez, The New Lost City Ramblers, and the County Gentlemen.

In 1965, the same year that the Grateful Dead were forming, Michael Erlewine, his brother Daniel, and a

few others formed the first new-style band in the Midwest, the Prime Movers Blues Band. Iggy Pop was their drummer, and his stint in the band was how he got the name Iggy. This was the beginning of the hippie era. Michael was the band's lead singer, and played amplified Chicago-style blues harmonica. He still plays.

Erlewine was also the manager of the band, and personally designed and silkscreened the band's posters, one of which is shown below.

The Prime Movers became a seminal band throughout the Midwest, and even traveled as far as the West Coast, where the band spent 1967, the "summer of Love," playing at all of the famous clubs, for example, opening for Eric Clapton and Cream, at the Fillmore Auditorium.

As the 60s wound down, and bands began to break up, Erlewine was still studying the music of American Blacks, in particular blues. Because of their knowledge of blues and the players, Michael and his brother Dan were invited to help host the first major electric blues festival in the United States, the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival. They got to wine and dine the performers, and generally look after them.

Michael interviewed (audio and video) most of the players at the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, they included: Big Joe Turner, Luther Allison, Carey Bell, Bobby Bland, Clifton Chenier, James Cotton, Pee Wee Crayton, Arthur, Crudup, Jimmy Dawkins, Doctor Ross, Sleepy John Estes, Lowell Fulson, Buddy Guy, John Lee hooker, Howlin' wolf, J.B. Hutto, Albert King, B.B King, Freddie king, Sam Lay, Light-nin' Hopkins, Manse Lipscomb, Robert Lockwood, Magic Sam, Fred Mcdowell, Muddy Waters, Charlie Musslewhite,

Louis Myers , Junior Parker, Brewer Phillips, Otis
rush, Johnnie Shines, George Smith, Son House,
Victoria Spivey, Hubert Sumlin, Sunnyland Slim,
Roosevelt Sykes, Eddie Taylor, Hond Dog Taylor, Big
mama Thornton, Eddie Vinson, Sippie Wallace, Junior
Wells, Big Joe Williams, Robert Pete Williams,
Johnny Young, and Mighty Joe Young.

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