

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND DENIAL

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I have heard for many years from Asians, astrologers from India in particular, who do not understand the western concern of the self. Why? Because they are somehow inoculated at an early age against what we call self-ishness. How can this possibly be so? Are not all humans just plain selfish?

Well, the answer appears to be, yes, Asians are also selfish, but no, they are not selfish in the same way we are here in the west. Tibetans regard the "self" differently than we do. The Tibetan Buddhists learn at least two concepts early on in life that those of us here in the west apparently never know, and I will present them here so that we can all be on the same page.

The Buddhists emphatically teach that the self is a pure composite, a personality that we pull around ourselves like a cloak made entirely of our likes and dislikes, our habits and experience. The self is our servant, not our master. After all, we created what it is composed of. How this master/servant order reverses itself in our mind would take a lot of looking at, so let's just agree for now that somehow it does. Like the old Marxist axiom, the master becomes dependent on the work of the servant and thus servants become masters in their own way.

Of course, that is what self-control or self-mastery is all about, but not many of us achieve it. It is more common for the self and our selfishness to master us, at least much of the time. We allow our self to master us and end up serving it, rather than it us. It would be kind of humorous, if it were not so obstructive.

The Buddhists actually teach that although we all have a self (and always will), what makes up our particular self has no true or permanent existence. We have no such teaching here in the west, and no one pointing out to us that the self is an ever-changing fabrication that we ourselves create, made up entirely of whatever currently most has our interest.

Worse, we easily fall into the habit of taking the personal self as the main vantage point from (or lens through) which we view our entire life. And we foolishly assume that this collage of a self will survive our death and travel with us (whoever we are) and will somehow be reborn in our next life. This is problematical, because the personal self, for all practical purposes, dissolves and is left behind when we die. It is all dressed up with nowhere to go.

This very simple mistaking the self for who we, in essence, are leads to (obviously) a fierce fear of dying and death on our part. If we painstakingly search through our entire self, bit by bit, we will not be able to find a center or kernel on which the self rests. There is none because, like an onion, it consists only of layer on layer of the various things we are attached to, positively or negatively.

In other words, the self is not our awareness, and this should be patently clear by just noting that we are (or can be) self-conscious, as in: very much aware of our self. If the self was our spirit, it would be aware of us, but it is the other way round. Our awareness is aware of the self. We are sometimes conscious of the self, self-conscious. We are the awareness, not the self, the baby and not the bathwater.

I believe that this very simple misunderstanding is the cause of an incredible amount of personal suffering, struggling to prop up and believe in a self that is by definition not what we are, and moreover not something that will outlive our current life. It is like carrying water in our hands. That is point number one.

The second point has more to do with what remains to be done with this self that has no true existence, but yet which we earnestly continue to believe in. The self is very much real to most of us and perceived as solid as solid can be. And most of us have put all of our eggs in that basket, so to speak, assuming that our self is the permanent "us." This is what is called a big mistake, a bad takeaway.

Somehow we got it wrong, and have yet to get it right. To do this we must somehow transfer our consciousness (our vantage point) from identifying with (and looking through) the lens of the self, to identifying with the awareness that is aware of that self, the same awareness that allows us to be self-conscious, as I mentioned earlier.

However, before we can do that, we have to recognize the self for what it is, our own personal dummy and acknowledge that we are the ventriloquist. Yet it is too easy to fall into listening to our own dummy-self talk and then follow its demands. Obviously, this is a problem, falling in love with our own creation.

This is why tonglen is so powerful. Without violence or trauma, tonglen can gradually help us thin out the opaque membrane of the self so that it becomes transparent enough for us to finally see through it to the awareness that we naturally are and have been all along.

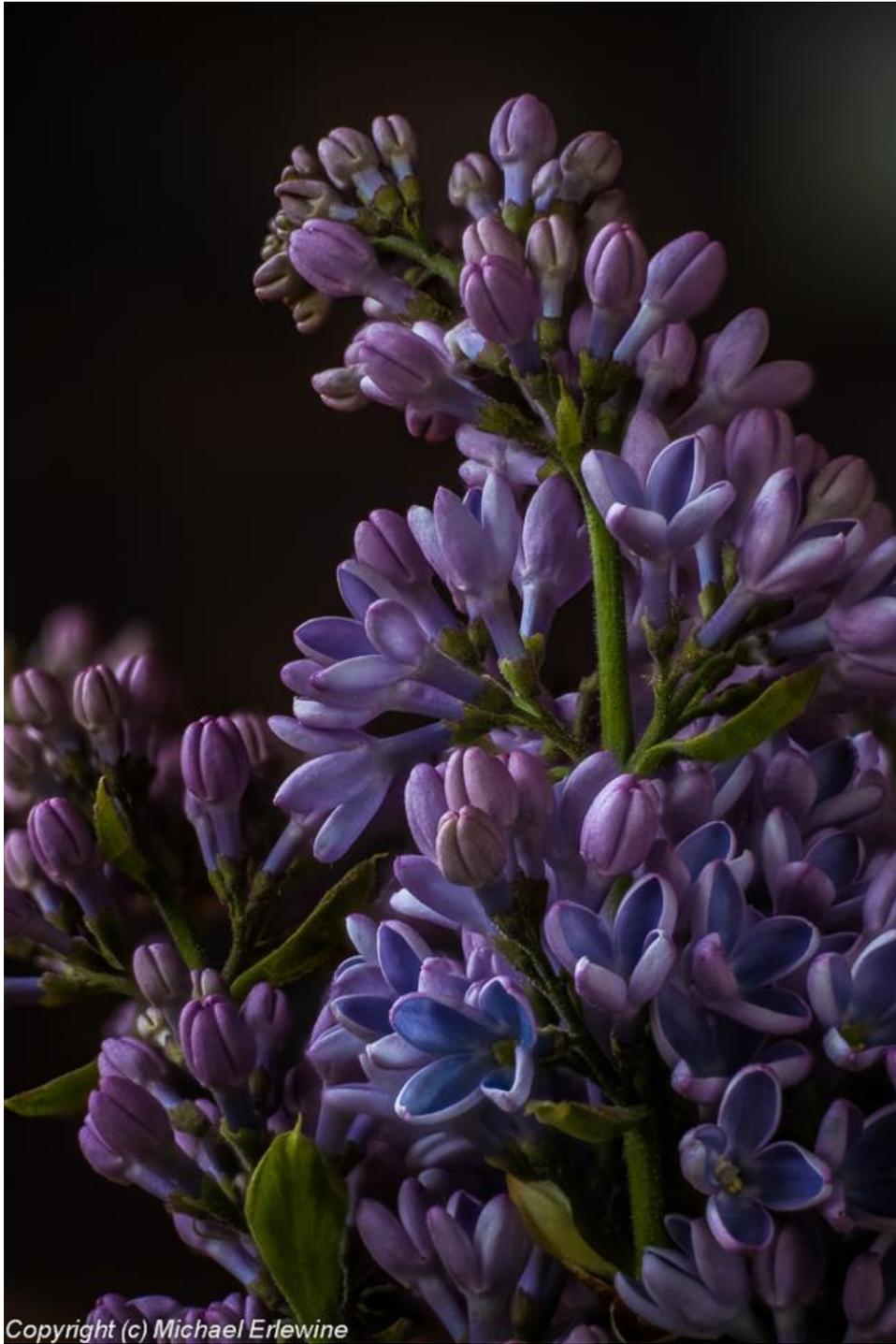
This is not easy to do through any other way than with tonglen; at least that has been my experience. By learning to monitor our reactions, one by one, we can quite easily see that they all can be traced back to our self-image, our likes and dislikes. It is not about punishing our self (it is not an entity!) for being so narrow minded, but rather (like my mom used to do when she cut open the stitches on a hemline), incrementally releasing our prejudices and setting them free.

First we have to become aware of our reactions, and then learn to monitor those reactions, and tonglen has proved (for me) to be the easiest way to do this. My self is pretty picky, opinionated, and biased -- reactive.

The amount of time in a day that I can find to sit on the cushion and meditate is like going to church once a week on Sunday. It will never get me to heaven. I have to supplement my on-the-cushion practice with post-meditation practices like tonglen, and I do and have for years.

Confronting my own reactions is almost a full time job, but it is one dharma practice that I can do as I walk around on my busy day. Removing these many small obstacles by becoming conscious of them takes time, but with this in mind I can log many hours each day, and that is just what is needed. Dharma finally must become our full time job, even while we work our regular job.

I have done my best to point out some of the benefits of this remarkable Tibetan Buddhist practice, tonglen. And questions or comments?



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[Photo taken yesterday of the budding lilacs in our yard.]