

Dharma Blogs 2015 Summer



by Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. My thanks to Patti Singleton Williams for helping me to gather this all together. These blogs were from the Summer of 2015, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRACTICE: INTENT

August 5, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Somewhere I read, years ago, that the extant written literature in Buddhism is several orders of magnitude greater than any other “religion,” which just means that Buddhists like to write things down, especially long and detailed lists of things we should observe or not observe, such as lists of the five paramitas and other key words. Intent is such a word.

“Intent” is something that is often mentioned in the more advanced Buddhists teachings, but not as much in the more preliminary texts. Perhaps it is a more subtle topic, one that’s a little hard to put your finger on. I can’t say. What is our intent?

Here in the West, “intent” pops up more in the criminal justice system, where the intent to commit a crime factors very much in the seriousness of the crime. While the word is used differently, in Buddhist training the “seriousness” of intent is quite similar to the Western legal variety. Buddhist teachers take intent very seriously indeed.

The concept of “purity” of intent is very important. The whole idea of purity runs all through the teachings, perhaps because so many practices are concerned with purification, remedies, as a way, obviously, to become pure. “Purification,” a concept that smacks of Medieval torture or the American Pilgrims, is also true in Buddhism, but instead of trying to get the Devil out

of us, in Buddhist practice we are working to remove mental obscurations so that we can see more clearly.

Above all, Vajrayana Buddhists are concerned with removing whatever stands between us and our recognizing the true nature of the mind. A sign of this is that along with whatever key practices, like the various forms of meditation, usually there is another whole accompanying series of remedial exercises designed to prepare our mind for the particular meditation practices. And the reason for this is clear.

We can spend years (or lifetimes) trying to learn meditation through the clouds of obscurations and conflicting emotions that are common to most of us. We can soldier-on against all the odds of getting much of anywhere. OR -- and this is what the lamas point out -- we can take a step back, do some remedial training to take the blinders off and remove some of what obscures us, and then return to learning meditation with a much clearer mental windshield and a greater chance of success. As a typical American, I resist remedial work and usually end up learning the hard way.

We each have to find out for ourselves how clouded our mind is, how much debris we have accumulated that has to be removed before much clarity is possible. And we can fool ourselves, easily, into thinking, "Well, you folks may need to clear out your mind, but my mind has always been clear." Yeah, that thought and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

Our mind, just as we know it now, is all we have ever known. We have no way of even knowing whether we have a crystal-clear windshield or what we have been

peering through up to now in life is really all that obscured. The fact is, as mentioned, that it's all we have ever known. The lamas would suggest that darn few of us have all that much clarity of mind just out of the chute. Mental obscurations at birth are the rule, rather than the exception. It is said that even some great reincarnate lamas still have to work hard to get their minds right, to remove the accumulation of obscurations.

And we can decide this for ourselves by just jumping in and learning to meditate. If we can easily calm the mind and advance to Insight Meditation, that is well and good. However, if we sit there on the cushion spinning our wheels while years roll by, we might have another thought coming. And that thought would be to take a break and remove some of our impediments and then return to learning to meditate.

Certainly this was true for me, only it took years for me to realize (and then admit) I was not really getting much of anywhere with basic meditation. I mean, how was I to know? I didn't have a lama nearby to talk to about it with. All my dharma brothers and sisters were mum about their personal practice. Way back then it was considered private. Somewhere along the line we had been told that we were never supposed to talk about these things, which was a big mistake on all our parts.

Basic meditation is more like a science than anything else. We can talk about it, question it, discuss it, etc. any which way we can. It was just that back in the early days we didn't. Anyway, somewhere along in there I was able to admit to myself that nothing much was happening with my sitting meditation. And here

was this specter of the Ngondro preliminaries (remedial practices) staring me in the face, something I had fastidiously avoided up to this time because it was just too horrible to contemplate doing it.

Yet, after a while, a long while, Ngondro started to look better than the alternative: pretending to meditate when I really wasn't able to. I mean, I didn't know exactly what I was doing. I had no idea what the results of meditation were supposed to be. I had read books, received teachings, talked with friends, but my expectations about what meditation was supposed to be like were useless. In truth I didn't know anything. And, just for the record, when I finally did learn some actual meditation, it was nothing like I had imagined it, so all of those expectations were wasted energy. Ironically, those made-up expectations became a major obstacle to actually meditating.

And so, at some point what I did was bite the bullet and launch into the Ngondro preliminaries. And true to what I had heard and imagined, Ngondro was indeed no walk in the park. It was difficult for me, but I guess it takes something that hard to take out those deep down stains. The first two parts of Ngondro are purification practices, for sure. In the army, it's "Drop and give me twenty," while in Ngondro it's "Drop and give me 100,000" full-length prostrations on the floor. Ouch!

I am not suggesting you run out and do Ngondro. When I first asked to do Ngondro, my teacher said no, so don't count on getting to do it just because you think you want to. For me, as mentioned, Ngondro was very helpful, but also very painful. Just finding the time was difficult. But the results were beneficial. It

was purifying and did remove not only some obscurations, but also helped to break down resistance in general. And the last two parts of Ngondro, Mandala Offering and Guru Yoga are way beyond just purification. Mandala Offering was a breeze for me, my favorite practice of the set, accumulating merit. And the final Guru Yoga practice is essential preparation for any later practices.

In summary, Ngondro was tough but good for me. And, as mentioned earlier, when I was all done with Ngondro, Rinpoche asked me to do it again, which was a shock, but also very good in the long run. Let's face it. I am kind of a tough case folks, with apparently lots of obscurations. The bottom-line here is that these remedial exercises worked. Eventually I was able to learn to meditate so that even I knew it was working for me, and my teacher could see this too. What price can I put on that? The answer is that it is priceless and worth all the effort.

As a caveat, it is clearer to me as I grow older that not only do I want a clear mind to live life, but also to have something to take with me, as this little poem I wrote points at:

VACATION

I know,
What I will leave behind,
But not what,
I will take with me.

We need to know that.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRACTICE: PRELIMINARIES

August 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Before we can lay out a plan for dharma practice, we need to know something about what the goal of such a plan would be. Why are we practicing? We could just say that we are going for enlightenment, but that for most of us is a long way off. What about some in-between goals, a landmark or two along the way. What would they be?

Learning basic meditation is obviously important, but not that easy to learn. In Tibet, learning basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) was not something beginners generally did. Simply put, it is too difficult. The fact is that most of us have too many intervening obscurations to just sit down and have success with basic meditation. In Tibet, this is understood, so before meditation is undertaken, a lengthy series of preliminary practices are first completed called "Ngondro." Ngondro is like a dharma boot-camp, the basic preparation for further mind training, including the standard sitting meditation.

I am told that when Tibetan Buddhist meditation came to America via Chögyam Trungpa in the 1970s, it was introduced straight away with no preliminary training BECAUSE Americans would not begin to accept something as indirect and difficult as Ngondro. Ngondro, which is also called the Extraordinary

Preliminaries, is a set of five extensive exercises, the first few of which are for purifying the mind of obscurations that make learning things like meditation so difficult. For most people, Ngondro takes at least several years to complete, so for fast-food Americans it was assumed that we were not about to put up with that kind of sidetrack on our way to beginning meditation. As it turned out, we did it backward, started with meditation and then we had to do Ngondro, and that made it even more painful.

In the 1970s, most of us interested in Tibetan dharma were directly introduced to basic Tranquility Meditation right from the get-go. When we, as expected, found it difficult to meditate, we were told about Ngondro in case we found the going just too rough. In other words, we were given basic meditation training and, when many of us hit a brick wall, we were then told that it perhaps would be easier if we first cleared away some of the obscurations that were standing in our way, and then learned to meditate. I trust you can see how we got it backward from the traditional approach in Tibet.

It's easy to forget that many of the Tibetans who came to America had no place to live. In the beginning there were no monasteries, not even any centers, at least in our lineage. Great rinpoches were at the mercy of essentially strangers. My good friend Ngodup Tsering Burkhar, who translated for my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for 12 years, tells stories of Rinpoche and himself sleeping on people's floors, on couches, in living rooms, and so on. It's not like there was any infrastructure of any kind. They started from scratch like many other immigrants coming to America.

Therefore, if people like myself were on our own when it came to information and guidance on dharma, or dependent on students who knew little more than we did or, even worse, had gotten things mixed up or just plain wrong, who knew the difference? I did not live close to Khenpo Rinpoche, and thus saw him very infrequently, often just once a year. On top of that, he spoke no English and had many other students just like myself who needed his guidance. So it was like that.

Personally, I spent many, many years (decades) trying to learn what is considered basic meditation. I was never told that basic meditation is difficult and not simple. And we were all in the same boat. All my dharma friends and I were giving each other high-fives and thumbs up as to how our sitting meditation was going, when in reality most of us didn't know what we were doing. "Practicing" at meditation, yes, but we certainly were not meditating, at least I wasn't. I didn't know how. Of course, we all sincerely believed we were meditating. And back then it was considered uncool to talk about your private meditation experience, which is just another unfortunate mistake that no one corrected. Later I found out that in Tibet everyone talks about these basic practices with one another – arguments, debates, share, discuss, etc. Buddhism is all about asking questions.

Yet, I have to agree that had I been told first to do a round of ngondro (something that typically takes years) before I began to learn meditation (which is all I thought Buddhism was about), I would have said thanks, but no thank you and moved on. Ngondro at first glance appears as purely Medieval, something right out of the dark ages, way too primitive-like for

Americans. So... what we had were incredible beings like Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche telling us to sit on our gomden cushions to meditate and for a very, very long time.

I had the good fortune to meet Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and spend time with him. Later that same year (1974), I met His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Both of these incredible beings and teachers left an indelible impression on me, but then there I was, with all of these blessings, but just living in Ann Arbor with my young family. There were no teachers there, just people like myself.

Although we struggled on as best we could, it was some years before Margaret and I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who was to become our main teacher. He came to us in a dream that both Margaret and I had the same night, but that is another story. Khenpo Rinpoche did not start us out with sitting meditation, but instead with what is called Tong-len, part of a mind-training system called Lojong. In my opinion, Tong-len could not be more perfectly designed for Americans than it is. I will get to that in a blog or two.

It is important to digest the fact, mentioned earlier, that in Tibet most students start right out with the Ngondro, with no apologies being given for its difficulty. Later they learn basic meditation. In the long run, indeed, Ngondro is a great kindness if our goal is to get the job done, i.e. prepare our mind for realization. But Americans back then were way too pampered for that. Meditation then was more like a fad, not an avocation. It was brand new to us.

What happened in many cases (in my case for sure) is that my mind was not prepared for basic meditation. Americans have this amazing assumption that our mind, just as it comes out of the box at birth, is like good-to-go. This probably comes from the idea that a baby comes into this world innocent and pure in all ways, you know, as Wordsworth wrote, "Trailing clouds of glory do we come." While that may be, apparently we bring with us a whole mass of obscurations that obscure and obstruct our seeing the actual nature of the mind -- nothing much to do about that. The problem is that here in the West we are not aware that this is the case and therefore we never think to check our mental glasses to see if they are clear. We (mistakenly) assume they are, by birth, naturally clear. It is obvious by observing the state of the world that they are not.

Well, when we first sit down to meditate, we find out real quickly that our mind is anything but calm. Quite the contrary, it is thick with debris. This is why experienced meditators have to smile when the newbie comes out of a daily sitting-session saying how peaceful it all was. Sure, peaceful like a hail storm. Most likely, folks who say that are not even trying to meditate, but just getting a little much-needed relaxation, maybe even a nap like grandpa does on the rocking chair out on the porch, probably with their eyes closed at that. In Tranquility Meditation, we never close the eyes.

So... when Americans begin meditating, it should be no surprise that the going gets rough almost right off the bat. As mentioned, Tibetans don't even attempt it. Certainly I was an archetypical example of someone who eventually found it impossible to meditate

because of low-flying obscurations that distracted me. For me, my meditation practice was like a stuck record, endlessly repeating the same mistakes, but expecting a different outcome. Wait a minute; that is the definition of insanity. Actually, it was a little crazy.

I wish someone had taken the time to explain to me the value of Ngondro early-on, but I probably would have ignored it anyway. Ngondro had none of the appeal of lighting a candle and just sitting quietly in a corner that meditation practice did. I sat in the corner alright, but what I did there was not meditation. At best, it was “practicing” meditation, but I would never have admitted that.

When my attempts at meditation finally ran aground and I realized that I was stuck up the creek without a paddle, gradually the wisdom of Ngondro dawned on me. I was persuaded. Of course, by that time I was way down the road of being a dharma practitioner and willing to at least listen a little. It would have helped had someone explained to me that in Tibet everyone did Ngondro first, before even attempting to learn meditation. I might have been more open to doing it.

Anyway, Mohammed finally came to the mountain of Ngondro and dug in. And it was just as difficult as I imagined, requiring (straight out of the chute) 100,000 full-length prostrations on the ground just to begin with. Who in the world does something like that? And, as mentioned, that’s just for starters. It goes on and on for years. Aside from two practices in Ngondro designed to purify and clear out obscurations, there is one for accumulating merit, and finally one for mixing our mind with that of the guru. Let me tell you: when

you finish Ngondro you know you have done something.

In my case, there is a funny little story. When I finally finished Ngondro, all 500,000+ iterations of the practices, I had my yearly interview with Rinpoche and asked what should I do next? He looked me right in the eye and said “Would you like to know what I would do, if I were you?” Of course I wanted to know. And he replied: “If I were you, I would do another Ngondro.” Well, that hit me like a sledge-hammer, but both my wife and I then did another Ngondro, so be careful what you ask a rinpoche. Of course I did another; he is my guru. He knows what I need to get where we both agree I should be.

So, with a couple rounds of Ngondro under my belt, I was finally ready to approach basic meditation with a clearer mental windshield. And by that time I had also done a number of more advanced deity practices, so when I really doubled-down on meditation, I was already knee-deep in the preliminaries for Mahamudra Meditation, in our lineage the tip of the top of practices. And in Mahamudra preliminaries one combines a special form of Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) with a special form of Insight Meditation (Vipassana). It reminds me of Epoxy glue, where we mix together two types of resin into one super bond. That is what happens with Shamata and Vipassana as part of Mahamudra Meditation training.

Now, of course I could go on with what happened in Mahamudra training, but I have written of this elsewhere and it is not going to help much with those of you who are just learning meditation, so let's back

up and go over the essentials. What can we do now that may bring progress?

Let's assume you are not about to go right out and start Ngondro. Of course, if you are, that is wise, but you would need first to get permission from a teacher to even do it. Then you need to have the reading-transmission (Lung), and finally the actual instructions taught to you. Only then can you do Ngondro.

For those not starting Ngondro, what can we do, short of struggling on learning meditation, to prepare the way for actually learning meditation? The answer is that there is a lot you can do, so let's go over that. And here I am trying to find things that do not require that we go off in the corner and sit on a cushion (which means scheduling practice times in our day), but rather what can we do that will actually help while we do the regular things we do each day? By all means, if you already have a daily practice on the cushion, keep it up, but in addition, try doing some of these off-the-cushion practices, in what is called post-meditation. I will get into these practices in the next blog.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRACTICE: TRUNGPA

August 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Some of you have asked for additional details, perhaps a little more story, so I will try to oblige.]

Chögyam Trungpa's "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism" was a seminal book in the early 1970s. We were in the middle of the flowering of the New-Age Movement, when almost anything spiritual took a turn toward the almighty dollar. The Sixties were over and all of the spiritual exotica from that period were trying to take root in mainstream America. Suddenly there were swamis, yogis, devotees, disciples, and the like all over the place. And in the middle of all that new-age circus here was Trungpa Rinpoche, who was calling out all that New-Age exploitation stuff with this incredible book. The title alone was enough to stop me in my tracks.

And he had all the right signs. The covers of those early Trungpa books published by Shambhala Press were to die for, incredibly brilliant designs, mostly graphics from Trungpa Rinpoche himself. As someone who appreciates design, I was knocked out by the simplicity and choice of colors on those early covers. Actually, the first book I remember reading by Trungpa was a little Penguin paperback called "Born in Tibet," his autobiography, that was published in 1966. I read it again and again.

So imagine how I felt when I saw a tiny notice on a campus bulletin board that Trungpa himself was coming to speak in Ann Arbor. And on that note there was a phone number, which of course I immediately called, hoping to find a whole group of folks who felt like I did. What I found was a tiny handful of people trying to make this happen and before I knew it I was one of them, volunteering to design the poster for his talk and also act as his chauffeur for the weekend. Wow! I would get to meet Trungpa Rinpoche!

At the time I was just a struggling astrologer trying to survive in wake of the 1960s. The Sixties had come and gone and people like me were trying to sort our lives out in the aftermath. Margaret and I had met and married in 1971. We immediately went into the green-plant business, starting ("Erlewine Plants") running a greenhouse for tropical plants in Northern Michigan. That business went bust because, even though I had better plants, the flower shops were afraid I might not last. And thanks to that view, I didn't. I was forced to take a job with my competitor, managing 19,000 square feet of their greenhouses down in Apopka, Florida. We moved there, driving down in my old Dodge van with all our belongings plus our two English Bull Terriers and a litter of puppies.

Florida was like heaven to me, being surrounded by all those incredible plants in a semi-tropical climate, heaven, that is, until I realized that all the immigrant workers under my direction were being exposed to the very lethal Parathion, a poison in powder form that is cumulative in its effect. It sneaks up on you and then kills you. The workers were getting it all over themselves and didn't realize the consequences. When I explained the problem to management back

up north, they just laughed. They would do nothing. So, I resigned, left that plant paradise, and moved back up to Ann Arbor in the spring of 1972 to start all over.

In the summer of 1972, when we found out we had a baby coming, I had a come-to-Jesus talk with myself about supporting a family. The day after the pregnancy news, I went out and took a job on a city garbage truck and came home pretty stinky. I was trying to prove to myself that I would do anything necessary to provide for my family. After that garbage day, I realized that I could probably be more useful doing something else, so I hung out my shingle and began to make a living full-time as an astrologer, offering readings, giving classes, and lecturing here and there around the state. It was a shoestring existence.

At that time of Trungpa's visit in early 1974, we were living in an old house suspended on a hillside overlooking North Main Street in Ann Arbor, just across the street from Lansky's Junkyard and the Huron River. There were wharf rats around the garbage cans outside our house the size of cats. We had about zero money, but were happy nevertheless. I have always been a pretty positive type.

I was to chauffeur Trungpa Rinpoche, but I didn't have a limousine. Instead I had an old beater of a Ford station wagon that, when you turned off the ignition and pulled out the key, kept on sputtering and coughing for something like a ten or twenty seconds afterward. I couldn't believe I would get to drive to Detroit Metropolitan Airport and pick up Trungpa Rinpoche.

And the day finally came. There I was at the airport (and early too) in my Sunday best (which since I never went to church Sundays was not much), but as enthusiastic as all get out. Let me tell you, I was pumped.

The plane was a little late and I peered into the jet way as the passengers filed out, but no Rinpoche. Then, finally, way at the back I saw this short Tibetan man in a suit; he was smiling and at me! And suddenly there we stood, eyeball-to-eyeball, even a little too close for my comfort. I am sure I mumbled something, but what I saw was this very tired pair of eyes staring into mine, and with a yellow tinge to them at that. Then Trungpa, still looking right at me, rolled his eyes up into his head until all I could see were the whites, and they stayed there for an uncomfortable amount of time. When at last they rolled back down, I found myself looking into perfectly clear eyes with no tiredness or yellow. Hello!

Suddenly here was this incredible being staring right into me, and friendly too! Traveling with Trungpa was Larry Mermelstein, who later became the head of the Nalanda Translation Committee in charge of translating so many valuable texts from Tibetan into English. I was already in some kind of contact high as we made our way out of the terminal, into my station wagon, and headed back to Ann Arbor where Trungpa would stay at the house of Donald S. Lopez, Jr., professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at the University of Michigan.

I carried Trungpa's bags into the professor's house, where a small welcoming committee was doing just that. My job as chauffeur was done for the moment,

but I hated to leave, so I kind of hung around at the back of the room taking this in. I was very intrigued by Trungpa Rinpoche.

Before I knew it everyone there had decided to go for a tour of the U-M campus and they were heading for the door, while I scrambled to get out of the way, hoping I would not be noticed. Suddenly Trungpa Rinpoche said that he was tired and that they should go ahead while he took a nap. I kept my head down and waited until the rest filed out and then began to follow suit, at which point Trungpa motioned to me. "Michael, you stay here with me."

This was like too good to be true, and he motioned me into a small room that turned out to be the professor's office and had me sit in a straight-backed chair that was there. Meanwhile, Trungpa Rinpoche proceeded to completely ignore me while he went over every inch of that office, picking up and examining all of the various statues and knickknacks that were there and, at the same time, drinking a bottle of saké. I sat there like a bump on a log and hoped I was not disturbing him. Like a turtle coming out of his shell, I gradually relaxed and realized that Trungpa was totally occupied in every moment, delighting in everything that was there. I had never in my life seen this kind of focus being exercised, and that was my first lesson right there.

My natural inclination in that kind of spot would be to do nothing but fidget, which is exactly what I was doing. After a while, Trungpa finally got around to examining me and suddenly there he was right in front of me and looking right at me again. He proceeded to give me a series of instructions, never

telling me what it was he was doing. But it had to do with watching my breath and breathing in and out, deeply, like we do when a doctor uses a stethoscope. And this next part is hard to describe, so you will just have to take my word for it.

I was breathing in and out, as directed, but Rinpoche was concerned with my outbreath, the way I was breathing out. He told me I was not letting the breath go out far enough, but somehow holding back. By now I was nervous for sure, and I sat there trying to exhale as hard as I could without actually fully exhaling. And I didn't want to breathe all over him. I was just too nervous and simply going through the motions. Then he said to me, "Michael, let it go all the way out. Don't worry, it will come back!" And with that I exhaled, and all of the way out too. And here is the unusual thing:

At the same moment that I really let my breath go, in the back of my mind (and at some higher level) all of my fears of death and dying that had haunted me all my life arose like a swarm of darkness and just evaporated. Gone. While today I am still not anxious to die, I no longer have the kind of dread and fear that I had before those instructions. Of course, later I was to find that Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching me basic Shamata Meditation, the cornerstone of all basic meditation practice.

I am trying to communicate here that doing ordinary things with Trungpa Rinpoche end up being extraordinary. I must have spent an hour and a half with Trungpa Rinpoche, after which he did go to take a nap, and I hit the road.

We had one more significant exchange on the way out of the professor's house. Trungpa pointed to a copy of the poster I had made for his talk that was on the wall. It was a woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds, while each of its four feet clutched a pearl. "Do you know what this represents?" he asked? I told him I did not, but that I just loved the image and thought it might be appropriate for his talk. He went on to explain that the dragon, which in the Tibetan and Chinese cultures is perhaps the most important and positive of creatures, could fly, but only as long as he held those four pearls, one in each hand. If he dropped even one of them, he would fall from the sky. Of course, I took this in. Later I understood that the four pearls that the dragon held were what are called in Tibetan Buddhism the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," sometimes called the "Four Reminders" or the Common Preliminaries. And those four thoughts have always been key in my understanding of the dharma.

Here Trungpa was pointing them out to me and making it clear that we must hold all four thoughts in mind at once to maintain our awareness. The Four Thoughts are something one encounters at the beginning of Buddhist study, but also just before learning the highest form of meditation, called Mahamudra. They are profound and so much already a part of each of us. Trungpa was pointing something important out to me. There are other stories of Trungpa's visit, perhaps for another time.

I will never forget the last thing that Trungpa said to me. I was trying to tell him that he was the first person I ever met for whom I had no personal resistance or criticism. It was true. He turned to me, took my hand,

and said: "Well, Michael, we are both married men and we are about the same age." And then he was gone.

There is that story. I will try to get back on track discussing the preliminaries to meditation training tomorrow."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRACTICE: WHAT TO DO

August 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michahel@Erlewine.net)

It is clear to me after some 40+ years of practicing dharma that, of course, there are things I would do differently today than I did back then. For one, I had no idea what I was doing and I had even less idea where I was heading or what was really important in dharma practice. I may not have gotten all that far, but I am finally oriented correctly, at least for me. So what is important?

Well, the answer is: a lot of things. I will attempt to prioritize them as best I can. Becoming enlightened would be nice, but realistically that is unrealistic for most of us in the short term, like that of this life. Yes, it apparently has been done, but as the beginners we are, that would be a really long shot. More realistic is to settle on what short-term goals can set us up properly for going toward enlightenment.

I am assuming you have read some books, perhaps even a lot of them on Buddhism. Dharma books, in my experience, are only useful if they eventually lead to action. As my first dharma teacher would often say to me, "Michael, some day you must become the book." So read, read, read, but reading just to read or to tread water, instead of actually practicing, is ultimately not that helpful. Many people would prefer to read another book than to actually get started

practicing. We have to act, and the act of reading is not what I mean.

Of course, I want to say to go out and find a qualified teacher that inspires you, but that is not an easy task. I used to be amused by those brilliant young folks who made a point of stating that they needed no one to instruct them and were on the watch for anyone who even tried to guide them, as if it was insulting that they might take something in from outside themselves. What they didn't know is that even if they tried with all their heart to find a teacher, it is not permitted for everyone. We have to deserve to have a teacher, to be worthy of one, before they will appear. So, if you don't even want one, that will probably make it less likely, unless you have a change of heart. Not everyone has the confidence to externalize themselves in the form of a teacher outside of themselves, who then assists them. That itself, affording a teacher, is a sign of real progress, a great blessing.

And we have to find a teacher that is just right for us, quirks and all. There are said to be 84,000 dharmas, so perhaps that means there are 84,000 different paths, and the same number of teachers and students. I would say run right out and see if you can meet my personal teacher, but he is 92 years old and might not suit your style anyway. There seem to be more and more Tibetan Buddhist teachers becoming available, but I have no idea how useful they might be for any particular one of you. Let's say, for now, that you don't have a teacher.

Even so, you should be able to get some authentic dharma teachings under your belt from somewhere,

even if the instructor is not someone who could become your personal teacher. The long and the short of it is that sooner or later, perhaps later, you will need a teacher, actually what we call a “guru,” to help you through certain practices. Those who say a teacher is not necessary either don’t know what they are talking about or should look elsewhere than in the Karma Kagyu Lineage for instructions. In Karma Kagyu Vajrayana Buddhism, for example, it is exhaustively written that we cannot recognize the actual nature of our mind without a guru who can point it out to us. Period. End of story. Anyone who does not accept this statement should, well, look elsewhere. Therefore, until you can find a personal teacher, a guru, how best to spend your time?

To begin with, there are the preliminaries to consider. Certainly, what are called the Common Preliminaries (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma) have to be thought through and taken to heart. And they couldn’t be easier. You can never contemplate these four thoughts enough. We encounter them at the beginning of dharma practice and we return to them much later when we learn Mahamudra Meditation. When I was learning Mahamudra, I spent something like three years just on those Four Thoughts. That should tell you something.

What is important about the Four Thoughts is that they are capable of getting our “mind right,” as they say, for useful dharma practice. Without them, we can’t get grounded enough, serious enough, to really practice or for that practice to amount to much. So, no amount of time spent on the Four Thoughts is ever

wasted. I will go over the Four Thoughts a couple blogs from now.

I have told, many times, the story of when the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa explained to me, while pointing at a Tibetan woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds with each of its four paws clutching a precious pearl or gem. His comment to me was that as long as the dragon can keep all four pearls in his paws, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he will fall to the earth. That was about as clear a statement as we will find that entertaining one or two of the thoughts will not be enough. We need to have all four thoughts in mind like: all the time, thus my suggestion that no time spent on them is ever too much or wasted.

So the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” is a good place to start. Read about them, read them, contemplate them, imprint them into your being, and live them. They should, even on first sight, already be quite familiar to you. They are as natural as nature is to the human condition, so there is nothing foreign there whatsoever.

Another really useful practice, something we can do anywhere and all day long is (as I mentioned in the previous blog) “Reaction Tong-len,” what I sometimes call Reaction Toning. I have written about this a lot. Here is a whole book about it called “Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction.”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

Reaction Toning is something we can practice all day and anywhere we are. It is very effective in helping to

remove our long-standing reactions to people and things. It can greatly increase our general awareness and clarify our mind. Of course, it is one of the main remedial or purification practices.
To be continued.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRACTICE: WHERE TO BEGIN

August 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

By far the easiest and least-invasive-of-your-time practice is what I call “Reaction Tong-len” or just “Reaction Toning.” It requires no extra time in your day and no special circumstances. You can do it while you work and play, anytime night or day. At the same time, it is very demanding in that it requires you to come face-to-face with your own behavior and to own it, a bit at a time. It is remedial and thereby healing, and it is a form of relative-Bodhicitta (Lojong) in that it feeds on dualisms that you support and either tones them back or eventually removes them. And perhaps best of all, it reduces your micro-karma load incrementally and steadily. And it is very easy to do.

Reaction Toning involves simply looking at your moment-by-moment reactions with awareness, awareness of when they occur, and awareness of how you react. Of course we react when someone flips us off, but more important we react endlessly throughout the day, not just with major confrontations, but in innumerable distractive ways that you can become aware of.

And it is important to discover for ourselves that every reaction we have is dutifully recorded in our mindstream, a bit of micro-karma that leaves a trace, underscores a groove that we have inscribed in our

stream of consciousness. Within minutes of hearing this, you should be able to identify many examples, just by using your awareness.

It could be the office worker who “hates” you that suddenly comes around the corner. What is it that happens? You react, visibly or internally, to their unexpected appearance. Regardless of whether you have a good reason (or not) to react, your reaction is completely your own and no one else’s. Others may give us good reason, but whether we react in knee-jerk style or respond reasonably is up to us alone. And I am distinguishing here between our involuntary reactions and whatever we could agree might be an appropriate response to whatever happens.

These endless negative reactions throughout the day are like a thousand tiny razor-cuts to the mind. They imprint, and if repeated, they imprint deeper, inscribing a groove in our mindstream that is a form of karma. And, as they say, karma always burns twice, once as it goes down and twice when eventually it has to ripen and finally be removed.

No, this type of karma is not like killing or stealing, but it is much, much more common, numerous beyond counting. This is an amount of karma that exponentially dwarfs whatever “10 Karma Commandments” that most of us try to maintain. And you can start right now if you want to do something more than just read about it.

Just observe your own reactions and I don’t mean only the major ones like the office-worker who does not like us that I mentioned above. It is equally true for reactions on a much smaller scale, like reacting to

someone's big nose or the color of the blouse they are wearing or what-have-you? The point is the regardless of what causes the reaction, large or small, the reaction is ours and ours alone. We may have little say in many of our life situations, but we have a total say in how we react to every one of them. However, mostly we never make use of that fact. We just continue to react and record every reaction in our mindstream as karma. Every reaction is like a little wince, so many of us can hardly keep our mental eyes open because of the constant wincing. We can't see straight.

What I am describing here is a very useful dharma practice, approved by my own Rinpoche, one that we can do while we live our day. I do it all the time, and for me it is pretty much automatic by this time. I have become more and more aware of my reactions, large and small. With each reaction that I am aware of I note it and make a point of owning it as purely my own reaction. When recognized, these reactions begin to disarm automatically and tone down. Pretty soon I can recognize a particular reaction as it arises and allow it to subside before it internalizes itself. After a while, these reactions get weaker and weaker, as I recognize and own each one, first recognize and then own it, over and over again.

If we are Vipassana students in the Kagyu Lineage, we can also learn to look at the very nature of each reaction and further help each one to quiet down in our mind.

What needs to be realized is that this smokescreen of our reactions is no minor hindrance. It's like the windshield of a car driving 80 miles per hour in a

hurricane of mosquitoes. All these reactions obscure our view and reduce the natural clarity of the mind. If we begin to tone them down and eventually eliminate them from affecting us, there is nothing else we have to do. Our mind will just become clearer all by itself, just by not being occupied with the continual “wincing” that reactions require. As mentioned, this wincing is not only debilitating, but it obscures the clarity of the mind itself.

Observing our moment-by-moment reactions can lead to observing our thoughts in general and eventually to becoming more aware of our conflicting-emotions (kleshas) as they too arise. This practice is totally easy for anyone to do, and it offers great ROI (return on investment) for the effort involved.

If this very easy practice proves too difficult for you to do, I can't be of much further help to you. I don't know of any off-the-cushion dharma practices that are easier than this.

Feeling around in the dark of the mind for light is, of course, no fun. Not knowing what we are doing is just that, not knowing. We have to fix that, each of us. There is a lot of talk about our mind being distracted all the time. Sure. And there is talk about our managing to ignore all kinds of stuff. Sure enough, ignorance. That is pretty much understood.

What is not so much understood is how subject we are to our own endless reactions throughout the day, each one a kind of little wince, as we react. In other words, we are wincing (consciously or unconsciously) all the time from our own involuntary reactions, the net effect of which is to dim down our awareness. Of

course, we wouldn't know the difference because it has probably always been this way for each of us, respectively.

This is why, if we start to monitor and tone down our reactions, our awareness will blossom and we will just kind of wake up. Really, it is an open and shut case, or should I say a "shut and open case."

We either have reactions or we don't. If we have them, we either are aware that we have them or not. If we are aware that we have them, then it is easy to establish that they are our own, our reactions, and no one else's. Even just monitoring and recognizing each reaction is itself usually enough to begin to tone it down. If, in addition to recognizing 'that' we are reacting, we acknowledge to ourselves perhaps why we are in fact reacting, that further helps to tone the reaction down.

In other words, once we become aware of a particular reaction each time it arises, we can gradually de-react it and allow it to begin to subside. Eventually, we no longer react, at least a much. Do this thousands of times a day (yes, we react that much) and the net effect is an increase in awareness, if only because we are not being debited every other second or so by our own reactions.

Reaction Toning works. Try it and see for yourself. And it's not rocket science. Anyone can do it. Sure, we are not aware enough to catch the smaller reactions at first, but we sure can become aware of the biggies, the low-hanging fruit, so to speak. Start from there and work down to ever more subtle occurrences. It's a zero/sum game. The more we tone

down our reactions, the more awareness we automatically have. It is that simple.

It's like we have this huge backlog of credit slips, our continual investment in reactions; all we have to do is cash them in, one by one, by deactivating or toning our reactions down. The guaranteed result is greater awareness and mindfulness.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRACTICE

July 31, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[It is brief and it is about my introduction to dharma practice, but that is what I know best. After that, I hope to point out a few ways we can accumulate practice at no additional cost in time. Let's start with what I remember.]

When I first started studying Buddhism, there was no such thing as dharma practice. We had never heard of it. Back then, in the late 1950s, it was read and talk, read and talk, usually late at night, with lousy instant coffee (powdered creamer), and plenty of cigarettes. No one had asked us to sit in meditation and somehow we never put that part of it together.

And it was mostly Zen we talked about, because it was mostly Zen that had made it to America and had set up shop. Well, there were also the Akira Kurosawa films, with their unique combinations of violence and humor. I saw damned-near all his movies and bought into the whole Japanese gestalt, with its rice-paper walls and manicured-sand gardens, which seemed so simple compared to what I was raised in, i.e. the Catholic Church. So it was with some irony that I found myself in Tibetan Buddhism, with not only the equivalent of church-Latin, but its "cacophony" of colors, etc. – almost like going back to church. But there in fact I was.

And it was mostly the fault of the great Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whose wake embraced more than a few of my closest friends. He gave all of us the confidence that there was, despite our deepest fears, life before death. Trungpa was undeniable, way better than any rock star.

What I am getting to here is how Trungpa pointed out to us that the dharma was not just a topic for talk; it was a path to walk, something to do. That had never occurred to us. Sure, we knew about Zen, sitting Zazen, sesshin, and all of that, but that was more like something out of a movie we were watching, a movie we were not featured in.

Sure, I managed to sit all day in sesshin with Roshi Philip Kapleau, where we were smacked on the back with the Kyosaku, the “awakening stick” as it is called. But that was more like going to Disneyworld for a day. The dreary end of practicing had not yet reared its ugly head, but it was coming. And it came, for me, via Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, if only somewhat indirectly. When I first met Trungpa in February of 1974, where I served as his chauffeur for his visit to Ann Arbor, about the first thing he did after arriving at the professor’s house (where he was to stay) is sit me down alone in a room with him and personally teach me Shamata, Tranquility Meditation. He never even told me what he was doing. He just did it. I had never met anyone like him, not ever.

That is a story in itself, but what I am getting at here is that although Trungpa came and went, I did not join his group for two (that might sound crazy) reasons. They all drank too much and, as a working musician, I had been there and done that. And secondly, they all

wore suits. Even back then, you had to die to see me in a suit. I came out of a wannabe-a-Beatnik past, which had morphed into being a hippie-leader, and I was all about NOT wearing suits. But....

And, as Simone says to Pee-Wee Herman in the movie "Pee-Wee's Big Adventure," "I know you're right Pee-Wee, but... And Pee-Wee says, "But what? Everyone I know has a big 'But'? C'mon, Simone, let's talk about YOUR big 'But.'" I digress.

What Trungpa did for many in my generation was to shatter the idea that Buddhism was something to just talk about, some kind of oriental philosophy. As mentioned, he made it clear that the dharma was a path, a way to go through life, and it could be hard work. And that "hard work" first took the form, in my experience, of sitting meditation. When Trungpa said "Sit," he meant for a long time. He not only had all-day sessions like the sesshin I had experienced, he had all-week sitting sessions called "Weekthuns," and was best known for his Dathuns, sitting for an entire month. For those of us who had never sat, that was like going from zero to sixty in one-second flat.

And to make it worse, Trungpa Rinpoche had some students who in 1975 formed a company called Samadhi Cushions. What they specialized in, and what was most often used by the Trungpa group, was a cushion called a "Gomden," which in Tibetan simply means "meditation cushion." And it was (and still is) recommended on their web site for "beginners." The Gomden is a fairly high rectangular cushion which is very firm, so firm that its edges seem to cut into your legs after even a short while. I am a little bit of an expert on cushions and I should write a blog about all

of the different kinds, but suffice it to say that in my opinion Gomdens were a big mistake for beginners. Just my two cents.

They are still all over the place, even in our own shrine room at our center, tons of them. Yet, if you bother to look at what the rinpoches sit on, it is not that rectangular firm gomden. That should tell you something right there. I'm wandering again....

The long and the short of it is that many of us were more or less bullied into sitting on gomdens by peer pressure and sitting for much, much longer than we felt like. The idea that was bandied about, both in all-day sesshin-sitting and by Trungpa students, was something like, "no pain, no gain." And folks like me just bit our lips and did our best to go along. In my case, this was not a good thing.

Of course, later I find that my own rinpoche and the great siddhas in the Mahamudra tradition recommend not to sit any longer than you feel like it, which would have been my choice. My teacher goes as far as to point out that in the texts it says that a session can be "as long as it takes to raise a teacup to the lips and take a sip." That, my friends, is not long.

The reasoning behind this approach is that forcing ourselves to sit runs the risk of staining our enthusiasm so that eventually we have an approach-avoidance response when the idea of sitting comes to mind. We don't like it and find ways to avoid sitting. And that can be a very serious problem. Certainly for me it was. I sat for over thirty years, well, mostly incorrectly, and the results showed it. When a series of events intervened in my sitting, basically a perfect

storm for “good” sitting, I finally managed to understand how meditation actually works. And part of what I saw, at least for me, was that forcing ourselves to practice is the exact opposite of what is actually required for progress.

So... what is a reasonable approach to dharma practice, one that won't turn around and bite us in the butt? I will attempt to answer this in another blog, if there is any interest.

A MOVABLE FEAST

July 3, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I am sharing here a new introduction to my book on Tong-Len, a mind-training technique, part of what is called in Tibetan “Lojong,” a key mind-training practice that is the theme of this 10-day teaching I am attending on Mahamudra and its preliminaries. Hopefully it will interest a few of you.]

This article is on what is called Relative Bodhicitta, the heart of the lion, so to speak, and it is where most of us are or will be for quite some time with our mind training. Relative Bodhicitta is all about working with our ego or Self in an attempt to diminish its strength.

This is not an easy task because the Self is exactly as clever as we are. After all, the Self is our own creation, the step-child of our attachments, a kind of zombie made up of our likes and dislikes.

The Self hangs on to what it has, to whatever it has drawn around itself, its coat of many attachments. Above all, it does not like to have anything taken away from it because it is used to always growing ever larger, not smaller.

The Self keeps what it likes and loves close, and what it does not like or hate at a distance. In that sense the Self is a living example of conservatism, dotting on the status quo and resisting all change from the outside.

The Self, like former president George W. Bush, thinks of itself as “The Decider,” and likes to be in complete control.

At the same time, as clever as it may be, it is as dumb as a stone. About the only approach that works with the Self are some forms of reverse-psychology. So there you have a brief sketch of the Self. Sound familiar?

“The Seven Points of Mind Training,” what is called Lojong, is a very deliberate method designed to deconstruct the Self and lessen its influence on us. This method takes time, but it actually works.

Regardless of whatever other Buddhist practices we do, every dharma path, like the Grand Central Station, seems to first pass through Lojong, “The Seven Points of Mind Training,” at least in our lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, the Karma Kagyu. And the key to all of this deconstruction of the Self is the practice of Tong-Len, which is also called “Taking and Sending” and “Exchanging Yourself for Others.” We could call it “Self-Exchange,” because, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, with Tong-Len we remove one bit of self-attachment after another and exchange it for what we thought of as ‘other’.

And we don’t have to feel sorry for our Self because we are weakening it because the Self has no permanent existence. It not an entity, but nothing more than the current collage or collection of our own interests, our likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears. As the description of this technique states, Tong-Len is simply a way of exchanging our Self for others and “Other” in general using reverse-psychology.

Actually, it is more like enlarging our Self by converting what we now label as “other” into our Self, making friends with that “other,” and finally including it as part of our Self, one item or other at a time. Scholars tell us that through this process we are removing duality and becoming non-dual in our outlook. Or they say that we are discovering the ‘interdependency’ of all things. I like to think that by doing Tong-Len practice we are adding what was once labeled as “other” onto our Self (making friends with that other) until the Self finally gets so large that it implodes for lack of any comparison, i.e. lack of any more other. It just bursts like an overblown balloon. Either way, it is deemphasized and gradually becomes less and less of an obscuration of our mind.

I like to say that the Self becomes increasingly transparent until we can see right through it to the true nature of the mind itself. However we spell it, the Self, which always will be part of us since it is (at the very least) our scheduler (and hopefully not our best friend or advisor) is eventually seen as the shadow of us that it actually is, rather than our boss. But I digress.

Tong-Len, as mentioned, is the systematic deconstruction of our Self, hopefully rendering it more transparent, at least enough for us to realize the true nature of the mind behind or obscured by it. The Self, once understood, need not be an obstacle. The goal of all mind training is to get us to the point where we can have a glimpse of recognition as to the true nature of the mind itself. As mentioned, Lojong is mostly concerned with what is called “relative truth,” the relation of our imagined subject (Self and everything that is not a subject, not our Self, i.e. ‘other’ than us.

Tong-Len is a form of a psychological differential-calculus that is concerned with the ever-changing perimeter or border between our Self and all that is outside of it or considered other than our Self. Through Tong-Len training, gradually the constant reification of the Self grows weaker and weaker, and a sense of transparency allows us to begin to see through our own Self to the actual nature of our mind, which is behind it.

This is a gradual, but sure, process and a necessary step or preliminary to achieve what is called “Recognition” in Tibetan Buddhism, an important gateway to the actual path to Enlightenment. “Recognition” refers to the recognition of the true nature of the mind, something that has to be pointed out to us by a guru or teacher who has realization enough to do this.

However, before this is possible, the thick layers of obscurations accumulated by the Self’s attachments, have to be gradually thinned out and removed. Although this can be done through many practices, there is general agreement that Tong-Len and the Lojong practice, “The Seven Points of Mind Training” are the most effective way to do this.

BENEFICENT OR MALEFICENT?

July 12, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BESIDE THE POINT

July 17, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

But there you are, someone who has perhaps actually experienced the subject, practicing your patience, while this person drones on about something they understand intellectually, but have never known -- experienced. Or worse, they think “knowing” from personal experience is the same as reciting knowledge from a teaching they once heard, etc. And it’s not easy (or perhaps polite) to interrupt them and get at the point that they are just regurgitating something they have read, like a cow chewing its cud.

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

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

get back there again. And it is in this last phrase that the damage is done, trying to repeat it.

If we fixate on that one (or most recent) spiritual experience and then endlessly compare that key experience to how we are doing today (and come up short), we have just short-circuited our dharma practice situation. This is a recipe for failure that has been endlessly detailed in the tradition of dharma teachings, i.e don't fixate, even on the good stuff!

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

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

IMAGINE WHAT I DON'T KNOW

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

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

BLOCKED CREATIVITY

August 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

Definition-ally "creativity" requires clarity of inspiration and utility, i.e. our creativity has to be of some use to the world. We can be creative in our own sphere, but the usual definition of creativity requires an audience, someone (the world, society, etc.) to receive and value our creation. Otherwise, every crazy person

spouting original gibberish would be valued for their creativity, which is not the case.

One important point is that creativity arises always in relation to the static status-quo. That too is definitional. Somehow, beneath the status-quo for each of us (and all of us) is a well of creativity waiting to arise. Creativity brings new things into existence and, when those things themselves grow old and become part of the status-quo, further change and creativity takes them out of fashion, because the status-quo, despite all its attempts to remain the same, is ever changing. Creativity is always the remedy for the current status-quo. Those of us who don't feel creative enough are tired of the same-old-same-old. There is something we can do about it.

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

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

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

Years ago I had a come-to-Jesus talk with myself about caffeine, i.e. coffee. I loved everything about it and still have at least two very fine espresso machines gathering dust around the house, but here is the story.

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

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

This was disappointing because, as mentioned, I like to write, and I know exactly when I am on-point with my writing, when I am on my contacts. The process of writing creatively is important in “creating” the finished result. I found that when I wrote with caffeine in my system, the results, when read the next day, were somewhat disappointing. They were less crisp and, yes, I hated to admit it, less creative. Perhaps readers

could not tell the difference but, alas, I could. What a bummer.

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

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

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

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

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

The same mind-training practices that the Tibetans recommend for removing obscurations to meditation also free up our creativity. They go hand in hand. Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, when we remove obscurations one by one, ultimately the clarity and creativity of the mind itself shines through. There is nothing stopping it. It is this lucidity and luminosity that is available to any one of us, despite what gifts Mother Nature has (or has not) given us. Anyone can have a clear open mind, and that is the avenue that all creative intuition travels.

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

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

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

CREATIVITY REVISITED

August 16, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

Something has changed internally overnight in the mindstream and I am not quite the same person

getting up as I was going to bed. In that case, and it happens quite often, I have to synch into the moment right then, check my contacts, get my bearings all over again, and write a brand-new blog. I have all kinds of blogs that never got posted because the change-factor in time moved too quickly and the material was no longer fresh. It was no longer me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I know first-hand what an obscured mind feels like and I also know what a mind is like once we begin to free it up from some of its obscurations. That is why I

am writing this. Removing obscurations allows us to actually “see.”

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

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

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

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

There IS a way to take advantage of Samsara (the vicious part of cyclic existence) and anyone of us can

learn the methods to achieve this. It is called dharma training.

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

My first dharma teacher often use to say this to me about Samsara: "This is hell, but we have to make our heaven in a little corner of it."

CULTURE COLLISION

July 28, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

And it is not that I have no experience with one-to-one counseling sessions. I have been doing astrological counseling for, well, something like fifty years, so I have a lot of experience. You may not care for astrology, but what goes on in these sessions is not so much about astrology, but rather using astrology to look at relationships, vocational issues, family problems, and “you-name-it, I’ve seen it.”

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

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

The great Indian Mahasiddha Tilopa (and later Patrul Rinpoche) clearly said “Don’t prolong the past.” The

past has traditionally been shadowy. The memories of our past change form as we do, every time our mind changes; they are even subject to our moods. Just how are we to rejigger our past in order to come to some kind of terms or peace with it? The answer of course has to be, from the present. The present is how we deal with anything we call our past. Like a puppet on strings, as we adjust our memories (and our attitude toward our past) in the present, our view of the past reflects these changes. It is like trying to hit an ever moving target. In other words, even in therapy, the past (or our view of it) can be changed only in the present; it all depends on how we have come to look at it.

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

The problem of course is fixation on the past, particularly past events that are troubling. The past is just that, past. We can't change the past no matter how much therapy we have; we can only change how we view it, which I agree can be helpful sometimes. Not only do we fixate on the past, but we often identify with it as being who we think we are. Rather than spend years in therapy somehow trying to come out

even, it can be much easier just to create a new past in the present and gradually identify with that, in which case eventually our troubled past no longer concerns us all that much.

Perhaps this is why most Tibetan Buddhist mind-training techniques are concerned with clearing our mental windshield by carefully removing obscurations, one by one. As the obscurations are removed, our mental clarity or awareness automatically increases. It is analogous to cleaning a pair of dirty glasses. Remove the dirt and we can naturally see better.

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

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

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

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

DISAPPOINTMENT

September 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

What is wonderful is that we have any control over our response whatsoever, something every prison

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TIME FOR NOTHING

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

DO TELL

September 25, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

And I itch to do this because I want to get my mind clear and then rest in that clarity. Juggling my thoughts in an intuitive manner is a convenient method of meditation to transform my ordinary distraction-oriented mind into something clear and luminous. It would be even better if my mind was

always clear and luminous, but at this stage in my practice, I still have to actually meditate. Life does not yet, in my case, meditate me.

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

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

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

It is like trying to thread a very small needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation calms the hands,

so that we can use Insight Meditation to thread the needle. The meditation that I refer to above is a combination of both Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation, using the focus of writing, photography, etc. to calm the mind (Tranquility Meditation), so that Insight Meditation (clarity, luminosity) can take place. This form of interactive meditation is called Mahamudra Meditation. I have been studying it and practicing it for going on 26 years.

“DON’T PROLONG THE PAST”

July 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[This post grows out of yesterday’s blog, where my comments on therapy in Western psychology caused a lot of reactions. What I suggest here is that we start again. I will limit my thoughts to the import of just one line.]

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

Don’t recall ----- Don't prolong the past
Don’t imagine ----- Don't invite the future
Don’t think ----- Don't dwell in the present
Don’t examine ----- Don't try to figure anything out
Don’t control ----- Don't try to make anything happen
Rest ----- Relax, right now, and rest in the self-liberating nature of ordinary mind

Later, Patrul Rinpoche further boiled it down to this:

Don't prolong the past,
Don't invite the future,

Don't alter your innate awareness,
There is nothing more than that!

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

Again and again I find that the dharma confirms and gives me confidence in what I already intuitively sense and know, but have had no support in. This first slogan, "Don't Prolong the Past," is the one that caught my attention and confirmed what I had discovered on my own, which went something like this:

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

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

a memory. Yet the past often overshadows our present mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So it seems to me that Tibetan mind-training, while fully aware of the conflicting-emotions (kleshas),

seems to prefer not to deal with the content of kleshas, but instead move forward and develop the techniques to look at the nature of kleshas successfully. They certainly do not, in my experience, dwell on or go over past experiences as we seem to do in therapy here in the West.

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

So the point here is not to throw out the therapy, but to examine its value in lieu of the import of this Tibetan approach I am describing. I am sure they can be combined, but they also appear to come at the same problem from a different angle. Isn't that what is called perspective?

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

September 9, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[It seems there are virtually no comments or questions anymore on these blogs, which I agree has to be my fault. All I can say is that I am doing the best I can to be clear, at least to myself.]

Sometimes things are just backward. The zeal and energy that we need to drive on toward enlightenment, we get that when we achieve “recognition” of the mind’s nature, which, while nowhere near enlightenment, itself is an authentic form of realization. Otherwise, most of us are kind of stuck where we are right now, with nothing but our own idea of enlightenment as a guide, and not realized enough to easily tap into the energy needed to get there. Indeed, at worst we are in a painful Catch-22 and at best a bottleneck.

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

“expectations” of practice. While apparently unavoidable for most of us, this is a flawed approach.

Sure, we are hearing and reading about the dharma, and some are practicing, but not yet tasting the results of realization, so there is definitely a quality of passivity here. In other words, we are still taking it all in, yet, like snow falling on a warm rock, there is little to no accumulation. In other words, nothing adds up to actual realization... yet. Of course, we are practicing, and initially, dharma practice for most of us is a slow and tedious process not unlike a camel crossing a very wide desert with no oasis in sight.

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

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

Many imagine that Realization of the Mind’s Nature is a big mountain to climb, but in reality, at least for starters, it is more like a big mountain of obscurations to remove. In fact, it struck me deeply when my dharma teacher explained that it was not necessary to

worry about attaining greater awareness or continue to maintain the other expectations that we have. Instead, so he explained, just begin to remove the obscurations, one by one, and realization (and greater awareness) will follow, automatically. It is like a natural law: remove obscurations and the result is realization. It's all quite doable, if we will patiently do the work and have the proper instructions.

So, any expectations and energy spent on future awareness or our future enlightenment on our part is perhaps misplaced. Instead, the smart advice is to put 100% of our effort into removing what obscures our mind right now and that is all that has to be done, at least on the technical level.

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

IMAGINE WHAT I DON'T KNOW

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

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

I can only imagine what I don't know

ETERNAL DAMNATION OR THEREABOUTS

September 26, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Warning: This blog is about some of my negative experiences with my spiritual upbringing, so please feel free to ignore it if you are sensitive to this kind of material. Thanks.

Seeing the Pope on the news yesterday was encouraging. Pope Francis actually seems like a nice guy, probably the best pope I have seen in my lifetime. Be that as it may, I also realized that I am still suffering from my upbringing, that monolithic entity known as the Catholic Church. It was no Mister-Nice-Guy back when I went to Catholic School, studied the catechism, learned Church Latin, served as an altar boy, and was generally subject to that religion from birth onward.

If I look around, monotheism in general, whether it is Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or whatever, can be a pretty grim affair, at least in the eyes of a child growing up under its influence. It's no wonder I have a hangover from it. The idea that at heart, in essence, I am a sinner was difficult for me as a child to grasp. I was just a kid. What an introduction to spirituality! And it was not just once over lightly.

There was the whole idea of mortal sin that, if not forgiven, warranted a one-way trip to hell and eternal damnation. And that meant forever! And committing a

mortal sin was so easy. For example, not showing up on Sunday for church was considered a mortal or grave sin. Also, eating meat on Friday, having doubts and a losing faith, and even the occasional falling into despair. All are grave sins against the church. And grave sins are mortal sins and mortal sins send you to hell, if not forgiven. What if I forgot to confess one? What if I just forgot? All of this boggled the mind of this young person. I couldn't figure it out, and when I finally did, it did not reflect well on the Catholic Church. As a child growing up, no one bothered to worry about the effects of all the fire and brimstone on a kid, not my parents, and certainly not the church.

I am not going to go on and on in this vein or even bother to mention the lesser venial sins, etc. Just the list of such sins would fill a small book. And, as I got older, the threats got even bolder. I can remember, as a seventh grader, the priest of our parish taking all of the boys into the church (no girls) and, in front of the altar, he went on and on about masturbation, and the fact that if we even touched ourselves sexually, it was a mortal sin. We would go to hell.

And there we boys would be, at church and in front of Christ on the altar, glancing sideways at one another, knowing full well we had (at that age) no one else to touch other than ourselves. Of course we touched ourselves, and here we were being told that each act was a mortal sin and warranted eternal life in hell. I don't ever remember being brought before the altar and being told that we all had Christ's nature within us. Quite the contrary.

I do remember that as a young adult, when I sought out the advice of the Jesuit priests, the "high" priests

of the Catholic Church, with the question whether the best of me was the same as, perhaps, the worst of Christ, and that we were connected, to be told that Christ was the son of God, not the son of Man, and that no part of me was equal to any part of Christ. Not even and not ever. Well, that was the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak. Here I was, being told that my essence was forever divorced from Christ, and this from the get-go. Etcetera and so on... You get the idea.

I know. In more recent history, the Catholic Church has walked some of this back, but not in time to be of any use to me. You can now eat meat on Fridays, go to church on Saturdays, and all kinds of other loopholes, which sounds more like the tax code, ways to get around mortal sins - food for lawyers. Thanks to all of the more ridiculous part of that religion, I was forced to realize that I have a mind of my own and I went with that. What a brave act for a young adult, to dare to use my own mind to say "Enough! Church, you've had your chance," and to just walk out on all of that religious stuff.

In fact, the Catholic Church could not have undermined itself more perfectly than it did in my particular religious education. They literally drove me away by sheer logic. I had no choice. And the fact that the nuns at our school physically hurt us, smacked our knuckles with rulers, and punished us in all kinds of mean and devious ways did not help. They even seemed to like doing it as they did it often enough.

So, I am happy about this new pope and any progress that is being made. At the same time, I want to emphasize what has been done in the past that I

found egregious, not to mention the ongoing pederasty that is still not being properly addressed. Thank god that I never saw any of that in our parish.

Is it any wonder that when I came upon Buddhism and was told that at heart we all have Buddha Nature, I was happy to hear this?

EXPERIENCING REALIZATION

July 5, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

NO HIDING PLACE DOWN THERE

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

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

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

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

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

From out of the middle of experience, realization can arise.

Anyway, I find it more than helpful to understand these differences.

EXTENSIBLE REALIZATION

August 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

For some, it may be the old rocker on the back porch and some time to sit there. For others it may be cooking, sewing, or some hobby. It can be helpful to locate and acknowledge what rituals work for us. Call it your favorite part of the day. It's what you like most

to do, because the ROI is so great. For me, sometimes it is just watching a movie, while the busyness of the day gets sorted out in the background of my mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

realizations are, as mentioned, extensible and expandable.

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

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

FOLKLORIST MARC SILBER

September 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I got a chance to spend about five days with my old friend Marc Silber. I had not seen him in fifty years, but I had heard about him here and there over that time. Back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Marc and I were a part of the folk revival, a group of us that included folks like Marc and I, but also a young Bob Dylan and my friend Jim Greenberg. What drew us together was the University of Michigan Folklore Society, founded by Al Young and Bill McAdoo. Al Young today is a Poet Laureate of California.

Back then, there was a stream of young folk players that circulated (mostly hitchhiking or in old jalopies) through a circuit that included not only Ann Arbor, but The University of Chicago, Cambridge, New York City, Madison, and Berkeley. It was like a bloodstream for the folk music of that time.

I had hitchhiked to New York City at least ten times, and in 1960 all the way to Venice Beach (Santa Monica) and North Beach (San Francisco) twice, and so forth. In the spring of 1961 I was traveling with guitar virtuoso-instrumentalist Perry Lederman and Bob Dylan. I can remember standing by the road with my thumb out, trying to get a ride, while next to me Bob Dylan (with a Martin Dreadnought guitar) was playing and singing "Baby, Let Me Follow You Down,"

a song by folksinger Eric Von Schmidt -- things like that.

Mark Silber left Ann Arbor and went out to California in 1960. He later had an important store in Greenwich Village called "Fretted Instruments," where he repaired, sold, bought, and built guitars. Today he has a shop in Berkeley and an incredible collection of hundreds of rare instruments that amount to a museum.

I reconnected with Marc earlier this year and was astonished to find that not only had he preserved the way songs and folk music were sung and played back in the early 1960s, but he had gently improved everything I remember from that time, and without inserting anything that was not authentic, a rare feat.

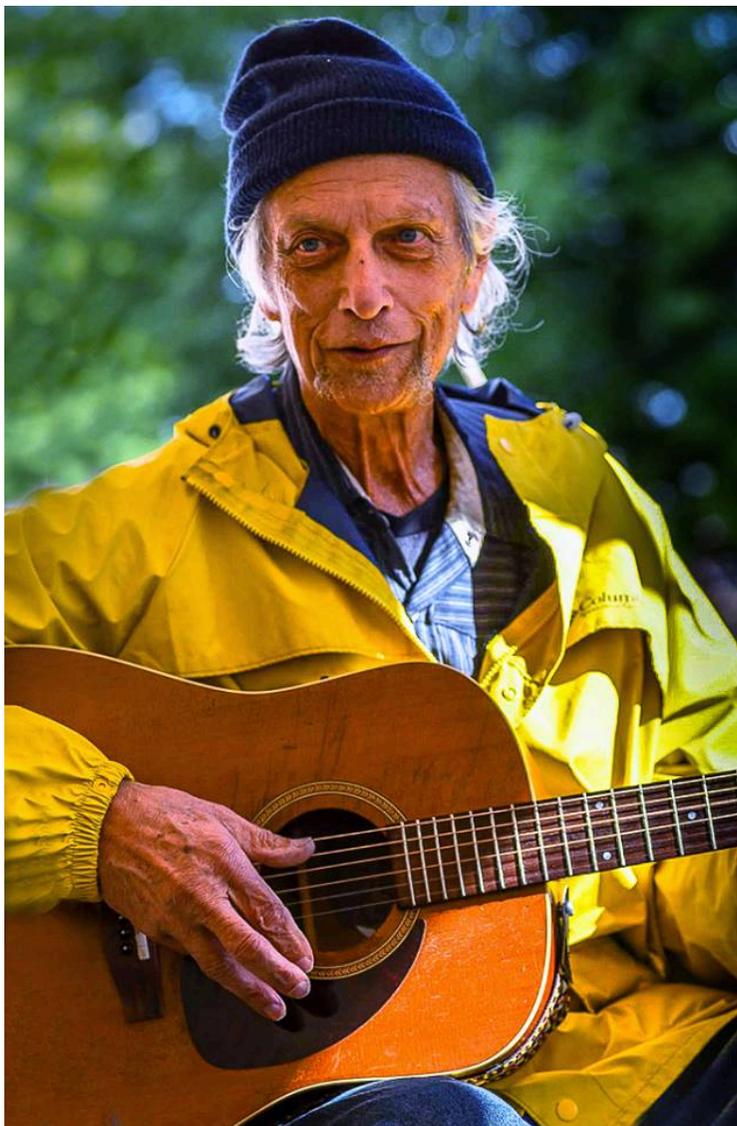
I was eager to bring Marc to the Harvest Gathering, so these fine young musicians could at least hear how it was when we were their age, or younger. I can't say what their impression was, but at least they had a chance to see where their beloved music came from, i.e. exactly what it sounded like back then. I know some of the older folks who were at the Gathering remembered or recognized this, because they told Marc and me so.

Anyway, I drove Marc into Grand Rapids today, where he is now on his way to Lansing, Ann Arbor, and Detroit for concerts. I thanked him for coming all this way and I also thank the Earthwork Music Collective for making him feel so welcome.

Here is a sample of how his guitar playing sounds like:

<http://www.marcsilbermusic.com/mus.../MississippiSlowBlues.mp3>

[Photo of Marc Silber by Zachary Ray]



GET A GRIP

July 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

As one of five boys (no sisters), I can remember one of us yelling “Jam Pile” and all of us piling on top of one another. We do that with our own moment-to-moment reactions, let them just pile up until we can't lift it. And it's just more karma that we don't need. As the occultist Aleister Crowley used to say, “Snatch at

a gnat and swallow a camel.” Here we are on the lookout for big “sins,” while being engulfed by a tidal wave of micro-karma, the kind of stuff we generate all day long through our reactivity. There has got to be some humor in that!

If you can’t manage to grab some time to sit on a cushion and learn to meditate (or are not even moved to), then work with your own reactions as you go through the day. That’s what I do and I have done it for years. And I was amazed to find that it works. How great is that!

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

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

Sure, if someone throws us a zinger of a comment, something will happen. Watch it happen and then, instead of reacting in kind, respond reasonably. You can tell them to take a hike gently instead of with anger. The person you are helping here is yourself, by

not stacking-on karma, and your reasonable or appropriate reaction may benefit the perpetrator of the comment as well. No harm done.

Let me remind you why we are doing this. Meditation involves stability and tranquility of mind. We all know that. But not everyone knows about the clarity that comes in time. If the clarity is not there, much of the motivation to practice is not there either. One method to get that clarity is to wait however many years needed until it somehow naturally arises.

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

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

I’m sorry, but I can’t make it simpler. This IS simple. if you can’t manage (or don’t want) to work with something as easy as reaction-toning, what can I

say? Perhaps now is not the time for this kind of dharma practice. For those to whom these dharma blogs speak, I am doing my best to point out some useful things that we can do all day long, a practice that adds up into something worthwhile. And it works!

HOLOGRAM AT DEATH'S DOOR: THE EVENT HORIZON

September 10, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Recently there has been a fair amount of hullabaloo in the realm of quantum physics, as Professor Stephen Hawking has laid out a new scenario for that exotic concept, the celestial Black Hole, an area of the cosmos that becomes so laden with heavy information that it collapses within itself and vanishes from view, pulling everything in its wake behind it. As we know, no information (not even light) is supposed to get out when a black hole sucks down. The point where everything disappears is called the “event horizon.”

Mathematics was always my worst subject, but nevertheless, when I am exposed to any viable new idea, I still find myself instinctively reacting, albeit, at the level of a lay person, i.e. very, very generally.

So, when the papers and magazines began to announce that Hawking had issued pronouncements such that information that was previously thought to be sucked into a black hole never actually enters the black hole, or to quote the professor: “I propose that the information is stored not in the interior of the black hole as one might expect, but on its boundary, the event horizon.”

As mentioned, the event horizon is the sphere around a black hole that, once crossed, nothing from inside can escape its clutches. Now, Hawking is suggesting that information never enters the black hole, much less is swallowed by the black hole (as previously supposed is either lost or stored in there). Rather, he says that information is stored right on the boundary, the edge near the event horizon, in something he calls the “apparent horizon.”

He says that information of any kind is translated into something like a hologram, a two-dimensional description of a three-dimensional object and is stored there. And here is the good part:

That information remains sitting on the surface of the apparent horizon... in his words “Thus they contain all the information that would otherwise be lost.”

That’s all the description I am going to try to parrot from what has been in the news. You can read, online, scores of articles on this, if you so desire. What I am going to share with you is my instant (and involuntary) reaction when I first heard about this and grasped the idea. Of course, I am making no claims if it has any meaning whatsoever, but it was a powerful response I had, which was:

It brought immediately to my mind this whole concept we all struggle with as to what happens to the personality of each of us at death. We know from the Buddhist teachings that what we call our Self or personality is left laying in a pile just at the life-side of death’s door, and whatever mind (or mind-training we have) goes on without it.

It reminds me of Bhagavad Gita “The Song Celestial” as translated by Sir. Edwin Arnold, and the part that says:

Nay, but as when one layeth
His worn-out robes away,
And taking new ones, sayeth,
“These will I wear to-day!”
So putteth by the spirit
Lightly its garb of flesh,
And passeth to inherit
A residence afresh.

My flash of insight was that of all of the information that we might call personal, whatever we have collaged/montaged together to make up our Self... all of that is discarded or written out this side of the edge of death, like a collapsed balloon or a pile of informational dust. Lest we get too excited about this, Hawking also goes on to say that the information left inscribed on the event horizon has been chaotically mixed together so as to be indecipherable. We might have to be a mind reader to decipher it.

Anyway, dear Facebook Friends, that was what swept through my mind like a dust devil. I hesitate to share this with you, but why not. So, sue me. LOL.

And it reminds me of a poem I wrote:

WANDERER

All of this,
Gone,
And none of it,
Going,
Not even,
My Self.

Awake,
From this dream,
I've been dreaming ...

Senseless,
But not,
Mindless.

IN RINZAI ZEN, IT'S CALLED "KENSHO"

July 19, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Fun birthday came and went, and here I am, once again sharing something about the dharma.]

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

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

Since "Recognition" is irreversible, it never goes away. Therefore it only can happen once to each of us, which is why in our lineage the "root guru" is declared to be the one (and only one) teacher that first points out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it, thus the term "Recognition." We recognize.

That is why he or she is called our root guru. We have either recognized the actual nature or the mind or we have not. It is nice (once in a while in life) to have something that has very little gray area, so that it can serve as an actual landmark, a beacon in the dark. Indeed, recognition is that!

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

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

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

If we have recognition, there is no need to defend it or attempt to qualify it in the eyes of others because recognition is enough in itself. We no longer look for or need anyone else's approval (other than our guru's) or seek it on this issue. Why? Because we have, at last, complete confidence (and no doubt) in the dharma. We finally know just what to do in our dharma practice and, best of all, we know that we can do it just as we are now.

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

Why do I drone on and on about this particular crossroads in each of our dharma paths called "Recognition?" I do because perhaps the saddest thing would be to assume you have it just because you intellectually understand it, but have not yet

realized it. You could stop being open to ever having it. This is why it is perhaps dangerous to talk about these topics.

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

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

INAUTHENTIC DHARMA

August 14, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

That's a scary thought, non-authentic dharma being mistaken for authentic dharma, and no one being able to tell the difference. Thankfully, this is not generally

the case in this country... not yet, but this is not to say it isn't already here, any more than we could say that there are no phony yoga teachers or what-have-you. Most important is any degradation to the lineage that might occur. It took me a great many years to get it through my head that the sine qua non of Vajrayana Buddhism was to keep the lineage intact and pass it on to the next generation without any loss of integrity. More important than money.

And the old maxim "As Above, So Below" applies here. In other words, what's true for each one of us can also be true for the lineage itself, such events as recognizing the true nature of the mind. Recognition in the Karma Kagyu lineage is not an option, but an absolute requirement for undertaking Mahamudra Meditation training. Without having recognized the actual nature of the mind, actual Mahamudra training cannot begin. While there is considerable wiggle-room or leeway in many areas of the dharma, in others there is none at all.

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

What am I getting at here, aside from pointing out the fact that having a strong Bodhicitta and achieving Recognition of the Mind's Nature are crucial for a successful dharma practice? As mentioned earlier,

these two qualities are critical, not only to our personal dharma practice, but also of great importance to the future of the lineage of the dharma. If you and I don't realize the dharma, who will?

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

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

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

When students of the dharma who have not achieved Recognition, just because they have done some

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

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

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

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

This is why, as I understand it, it is so important to find a teacher that has some realization, at least enough to keep us safe from the obvious pitfalls. In my training, I was clearly told that if I sincerely wanted to help others, I should first help myself by working

through my own obscurations before trying to help others. Your teacher will tell you when you are ready to share your dharma knowledge with others. Just ask them.

No Rinpoche that I have ever met charges for one-to-one training. Sure, we can make offerings or we can pay for attending teachings, etc., but working one-to-one with a teacher, which I have done a fair amount of over the last 32 years, has never involved money. And this may be very Hinayana of me, but mixing dharma with any kind of business involving money is something I have been very careful to avoid.

That's my two-cents. Your thoughts?

MAHAMUDRA – A STORY

August 18, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I am going to post sections of my “Mahamudra: A Story” book for those interested. Those not interested can at least look at the nature photo.]

Now, we know that the granddaddy of all realizations is called Enlightenment, something that as far as I can tell is somewhere in our future, probably not in the near present, and not too likely in this lifetime. But there is a kind of realization that, while way short of enlightenment, we can work for in this life and that is called “Recognition,” as in recognizing the actual nature of the mind and how it works.

Again, Recognition is not Enlightenment, but it is considered “The” major threshold or gateway on the journey toward enlightenment. Recognition is a form of realization that we can have definite hope of reaching in this lifetime if we have a good teacher and practice correctly.

One key thing to understand about recognition is that, like all realizations is that there are no gray areas. It is a switch that is on or off. Either you have had recognition or you have not. There is not a lot of middle ground or wiggle room. For example: Perhaps there is something in a dark room and a light flashes on and then off. Maybe you saw that something or maybe you did not. It is one or the other. There is the

old example used in the teachings of seeing what appears to be a snake in a dimly-lit room, that is, until you turn on the light and “realize” it is a piece of rope. Anyone can imagine what the nature of the mind is like (and we all do), but as Chögyam Trungpa used to say, “Your guess is as good as mind.” Realization is definitive, not guesswork.

There are all kinds of stories and claims of “getting a glimpse” of recognition of the true nature of the mind. I am not saying it cannot happen; it is just that the whole idea of recognition is that you definitively recognize the nature of the mind or you do not. In my opinion (and experience), we don’t recognize that nature “just a little.” Either we do or we do not recognize the mind’s nature because, by definition, “Recognition” is a form of realization. Recognition, once had, it is there to stay and not some kind of glimmer or glimpse, so I tend to discount claims of having a glimpse of “Recognition.”

We can be given the pointing-out instructions as to recognizing the actual nature of the mind and still not get it. I have done that myself a number of times, but I didn’t get a glimpse of something and fail to recognize it. I just failed to recognize it. Period. It is true that once a student has recognition, it can take many years to stabilize that recognition, so please don’t confuse the need for stabilization after a realization with having a little glimpse.

And, as mentioned, realization differentiates itself from ordinary experience in that it is permanent, while experiences come and go. So, as far as I know recognition, like a switch, is either on or off. We have had it or we have not. I will leave it up to you whether

one can have just a glimmer of realization or not. I say no, based on the definition of what any realization requires.

Of course, everyone would like to believe that they have had recognition, but in my experience that is just wishful thinking and not at all helpful. The whole point of recognition (as mentioned, by definition) is that we actually recognize (and never forget) and not just “think” we recognize the actual nature of the mind. As my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche points out, “Recognition” or any realization is irreversible. One had, it never goes away. In other words, it is not just a passing experience.

What I can say with conviction is that if you have any doubt whatsoever if you have attained Recognition, you have not, because Recognition, of all things in life, is without-a-doubt. So, in this article I will look at how we might prepare for recognition so that we recognize the true nature of our mind, not just get a glimpse of something or other.

I should know. I have a predilection for making a mountain out a molehill when I can, and it would not help us to do that with Recognition. Recognition is a mountain, so forget about the molehill. If you have Recognition, your dharma life has changed forever, so, if that has not happened, let’s get on with learning something about how to actually get ready for Recognition.

Another, perhaps, unsettling fact is that all of the great Siddhas and Mahasiddhas agree that we will never just stumble on or happen into Recognition by ourselves. It has to be pointed out to us by someone

with realization, a guru or realized teacher that does this for us and we get it. This is called the “Pointing Out Instructions.” In Rinzai Zen Buddhism, Recognition is called Kensho.

Sorry for all this preamble, but there is no use wasting our time in speculation. There are many tales of Mahamudra. Starting with the next blog, will be my story.

MAHAMUDRA – A Story

August 18, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

My Experience with Mahamudra

This is the story of how I managed to have some actual recognition of the true nature of the mind. I write it not to boast or show off, but because having had this initial recognition, I immediately see how simple it is and how all those years I had managed to look every which way but loose in trying to see it. My wish is that this article may make it easier for others to have this same recognition. And, any small part of what I write here that is useful and has merit, I dedicate to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that they may further assist all sentient beings to develop heartfelt Bodhicitta, attain “Recognition,” and eventually become enlightened, sooner than later.

Buddhism as a Philosophy

Growing up in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, meant that I was exposed to a cosmopolitan atmosphere from an early age. As early as the late 1950s I had read a smattering of Buddhist literature, mostly Zen, although my take on the dharma was that it was intellectual, something that, like Existentialism, we would stay up late at night talking about while drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. In the 1950s, many young people I knew

wanted to be beatniks, but it was already getting late in the day for that. In the 1960s I toyed with some more advanced dharma concepts, and certainly played a bit at meditation (sat zazen, etc.), but it was not until the 1970s that I actually began to do any real practice to speak of, February 12, 1974 to be exact.

This was the date that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche came to Ann Arbor to speak. I had read some of his books with great interest and was eager to see him in person. As it turned out, since few people knew of him back then, I ended up as his chauffeur for the weekend and the designer of the poster for his public talk at Rackham Hall on the University of Michigan campus.

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

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

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

And of all the Buddhist teachings I have attended over the years since then, the yearly ten-day Mahamudra intensive with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at KTD has been the most striking and deeply influential.

The first ten-day Mahamudra teaching was in 1989 and this yearly event (I have not missed a one) is now going into its 28th year in 2016. In addition, sandwiched somewhere during that time, were two years of intensive Mahamudra teachings and practice with His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, one of the four regents of the Karma Kagyu lineage.

This article is not an introduction to Mahamudra meditation, which I don't consider myself qualified to offer (i.e. Pointing Out Instructions), but simply a recounting of my encounter with this profound technique and its effects on me personally. Mahamudra Meditation is considered the main form of meditation practice among the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. This is my personal story. Your mileage may differ.

As mentioned, I am not qualified to instruct readers in the more advanced techniques of Mahamudra meditation. Here it will have to be enough to simply say that to learn Mahamudra meditation, one has to

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

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

If you have it, you know it.

MAHAMUDRA, A STORY – PART 3

RECOGNITION

August 19, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Because it IS a threshold event, recognizing the nature of the mind has become a huge topic of speculation among those who read about and are learning to practice Mahamudra, replete with wild expectations and preconceptions based on the imaginations of those who have never had the actual realization. Recognition of the mind is one of those experiences that become a realization. As they say, if you have any doubt whatsoever about having recognition, then you have not had it. This is a real arrogance stopper for most of us. If we are being honest, we know we have not had that experience, no matter how much we wish we had. If we are not being honest, we are just making it that much more difficult to achieve realization. My dharma teacher had to tell me, when I initially asked him if I could place out of Meditation 101 based on my spiritual background, that it was best for me to begin right at the beginning. He said this very gently, but firmly.

In the Zen tradition, this recognition is called “Kensho,” and they make just as much fuss about it as the Tibetans. And most important, our expectations and hopes about what “Recognition” is like are perhaps the greatest barrier to having recognition itself.

You can't recognize the true nature of the mind many times, but only once. If you have to do it repeatedly, then you are just having 'experiences' of the mind, but have not yet recognized anything. This is because, as mentioned, "Recognition" is not some kind of temporary experience (that comes and goes), spiritual high, or lofty state of mind, like many imagine. Recognition is also not enlightenment!

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

Enlightenment and the path toward it is what we begin to more seriously work toward AFTER recognition of the mind's true nature takes place. Once we have it, we work to stabilize recognition into greater realization. Of course, there is no way for me to communicate this properly with words, because as the scriptures state: recognition is beyond elaboration. That being said, I wish I had understood this distinction early on. It would have been a huge help. As mentioned above, 'recognition' is like gazing at those figure-ground paintings; you can't fake it. You can give up looking, but either you see the embedded image or you do not.

You can memorize what you are told you should see, but finally you either recognize the mind's true nature or you do not. And recognition is just the beginning of real practice, not the end or any kind of final result.

And this is key: “Recognition” is just our ante-in, only the doorway to Mahamudra practice, and enlightenment. You literally cannot do Mahamudra practice without that initial recognition, so it is like the ring-pass-not or guardian-on-the-threshold that the western occultists often write about.

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

The Ten-Day Mahamudra Intensives

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

Then, at the ten-day Mahamudra teachings at KTD monastery in 2005 (some 16 years after I began studying Mahamudra), while examining a text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche called “The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen,” Khenpo Karthar

Rinpoche (my root lama) again gave the pith instructions, what are called the “pointing-out” instructions, the instructions by and through which a receptive student may be able to recognize the true nature of the mind. These instructions were part of an actual text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche, which my teacher was presenting and then commenting on.

Analytical Meditation of a Pandit

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

So, I had heard this kind of presentation for years (in many formats), and I always told myself privately that ‘this’ particular kind of teaching was probably not for me. Either I didn’t get it at all or it was too easy. I couldn’t tell, but I knew instinctively, for example, that the mind was not the color blue.

Perhaps some academic pundit or scholar delighted in answering such questions, but it was the best I could do to politely ignore the temptation to be condescending of this approach. Is the mind red? Of course it is not red. The mind is not red! I not-so-patiently waited until this section of the teaching was

over and we could hopefully get on to some of the juicier stuff, something that would actually grab me.

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

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

MAHAMUDRA, A STORY - EXPANDING REALIZATION

August 21, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am going to take time out from my story for a quick sidebar, one that hopefully will provide an overview of my situation.

It is clearly stated in the Vajrayana teachings that after we have learned Insight or Mahamudra Meditation, when we are not actively doing these meditations, our mind remains still quite ordinary (as in obscured), you know, like it has always been. In other words, if we are not actually meditating, but rather going about our daily business, even though we have finally learned to meditate, our mind reverts to being simply ordinarily obscured. The question here is how do we extend our realization into more areas of our life?

Obviously, one of the benefits of doing Mahamudra Meditation is the extreme clarity of mind it can provide, a clarity like no other that I have ever experienced. To put it mildly, actually meditating (as opposed to practicing and learning meditation) is addictive. This is true especially for Insight and Mahamudra Meditation.

Of course, for most of my life I never experienced Insight Meditation, so I had no idea what I was missing. Of course, I had ideas of what enlightenment

might be like that I literally made up out of whole cloth. These are called “expectations” or “hope,” and these are discouraged by the lamas. As they say, hope and fear are not our friends.

And I practiced learning meditation for many years, like decades, and I didn’t get very far because I did not know what I was doing and was afraid to ask for help. Of course, back then all my peers (and I) never discussed our personal meditation, which was another really stupid move. In Tibet, topics like Tranquility Meditation are an open book, discussed and debated by all.

When, by the force of circumstances (and perhaps sheer chance), I lucked into a method of learning meditation that actually worked, I was amazed... AMAZED... at how incredible it was! Please note that it had no relation to my expectations about realization, which, as mentioned, turned out to be just another pie-in-the-sky construct, not unlike my idea of Heaven from my Catholic upbringing. I had no idea that what we call “Realization” was, well, “Real,” like here and now, rather than somewhere and then.

All this time, “Realization” was as close to me as my next breath, but I did not know how to get there. That’s why I write all this stuff, to perhaps help some of you get there. Like the Tom Waits song “Come on Up to the House” and the lyrics:

“This world is not my home,
I’m just passin’ through.
Come on up to the house.”

If you can hear me, do what you have to do to learn how to actually meditate, not just “practice” meditation as I did for too long and for no good reason. I could have just friggen done it, instead of dilly-dallying around for half my life. It is no wonder the Tibetan Buddhists call the mind the “wish-fulfilling gem.” That’s what it is. I have to remind myself that every last invention and idea in this god-almighty world came from the mind and from nowhere else. That should be a clue.

We practice techniques like Insight Meditation until we have the ability to do that meditation, to actually meditate. However, once we can do the practice (i.e. Insight Meditation), we then perform Insight Meditation not to learn it; we learned it! We do it for the sheer clarity of the insight, the clarity of mind that it provides. We just naturally want to do it as much as possible, like: all the time, if we can manage it. It is so superior and clear compared to what we have known up until them.

However, at least in my case, when I finally was able to sit in Mahamudra Meditation a bit, the ability to do so hinged on the particular way or ritual I had of meditating. I should interject here the fact that my introduction to Mahamudra Meditation was, to say the least, anything but ordinary. I happened onto it during a very difficult section of my life and I discovered it while doing intense close-up photography. Did I mention that I watched the Sun come up each day for something like six-months, unless it was raining? That is how far I had to get out of normal to finally get into meditation. I have a whole free e-book on my personal experience called “Mahamudra, A Story” at this link:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Mahamudra – A Story Version 3.pdf>

The book is also available in printed form on Amazon.com.

Anyway, once I was doing Mahamudra meditation, I could not simply take the technique that worked for me with Mahamudra (and photography) and transfer it to other work I had to do throughout my day, like washing the dishes, etc. I'm not saying that no one could do this, but only that I could not do this, at least at first.

I imagine that this is why it is written that any realization, like the realization that comes with Insight or Mahamudra Meditation, has to be extended to other things. We have to extend it, to work it, so to speak. Often the term used is "stabilization," as in to stabilize our realization, but just what is that? For me, perhaps a better term for what happens, as far as I know, might be "extensibility." We work to extend our realization from our original method (whatever works for us) unto other things that we do in a day.

As for me, it seems that, for better or for worse, I had a rather unusual introduction to Insight/Mahamudra Meditation, in that I (by accident) mixed my mind with close-up photography and had some unexpected realization, while the most normal method (I guess) would be to do all of this while sitting on the cushion. That didn't happen for me because, unfortunately, I had stained my cushion-practice by trying too hard, by forcing myself to practice at times when I really didn't feel like it, and so came to not like the cushion.

Be that as it may, I consider myself fortunate that my meditation finally worked at all, regardless of the circumstances. However, and this is kind of humorous, once I had settled into using photography as part of my meditation technique, I could not meditate without using a camera. If I wanted to have clarity and a clear mind, I had to pick up my camera, go out in the fields and meadows, and do nature photography. LOL.

My cushion sat their gathering dust, while I was out there meditating photographically in Mother Nature to get my mind right. This was fine by me, especially since at first I did not know that I was a prisoner of my own meditation technique. This only became clearer to me when Summer turned to Fall and Fall to Winter. I couldn't go outside any longer for my camera's sake as well as my own.

Of course, I worked inside during the cold winter, built a tiny studio, and continued on as best I could to keep my mind right. Gradually, I figured out what had happened to me (with the help of a lama) and realized that I had to somehow extract the meditation technique from the photography, the baby from the bathwater. This, however, took time.

And it also took getting my mind straight on just what, as mentioned, was the baby and what the bathwater, since the two were so completely intertwined or fused. Keep in mind that through this meditation/photography technique, any dualism that was there had become one – non-dual. It was for me one interdependent technique that worked effortlessly, brilliantly. I just happened into it.

Nevertheless, I gradually realized that I must extract the basic meditation technique (how it works) from my special way of meditating and extend it to other parts of my life, thus the word: extensible. This was not exactly easy, because I tended to just slip back into doing Insight-Meditation-Photography rather than figure out how the intrinsic technique could be extracted and applied elsewhere.

In fact, it took me more than six months to make any progress. It was not until the following spring that I realized I could now go out in nature without my camera and still manage to clarify my mind. That was just a first step, but an important one. It took a much longer time to transfer the meditation technique into or onto writing blogs like these, but I managed to do it.

Today, I can practice Insight Meditation by just writing articles like this and I am beginning to see that the clarity of the technique is starting to overflow into whatever I do, whatever I turn my mind to and focus on. This is a good sign.

The takeaway here is that once we have a realization, it is up to us to carefully expand or extend it. We have to, because, long-term, this is inevitable anyway. However, from my point of view it has taken a lot of work to get as far as I have to date. Having given you a bit of an overview, I will return to my story.

MAHAMUDRA, A STORY

The Pointing-Out Instructions

August 31, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It is said in the Mahamudra teachings that the main and perhaps only function of the guru is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind. After that, it is up to the student. “The Nature of the Mind,” this phrase immediately raises expectations reminiscent of the realm of Zen koan dramas. What is it? One thing I never had managed to understand is that recognizing the nature of the mind is not the same as enlightenment (whatever that is), so let’s start there, and this turns out to be important:

What is meant by the phrase “recognizing the nature of the mind,” as I understand it, is more like being able to finally see the actual problem I was having with meditation all along, like: I had no clear idea what meditation was, much less real experience, and that was embarrassing. And, having recognition, I then saw that the nature of the mind is not something beyond my current reach (as I had always implicitly assumed), not something anywhere “out there,” but rather more like very simply seeing how the mind actually is and works, seeing that the mind (my mind) was in fact quite ‘workable,’ as in: “Hey, I can do this!” It was not out there somewhere, but entirely “in here.” I finally could see a little into how I, Michael, might work it. And being a somewhat clever guy, this was a very practical revelation. This is what seeing the true

nature of the mind is all about, a new take on practice, not some euphoric rush of bliss. Recognition is not enlightenment, but it is a realization.

Perhaps the most important result of recognition is that the responsibility for getting enlightened immediately switched from books, texts, and my teacher onto to me. Instantly! What I saw or recognized made “me” immediately responsible for it all, and only me. That had never happened before. I was always looking for someone or something on the outside strong enough to affect me, teach me, and somehow enlighten me. You know, help me out. Instantly I saw that it doesn’t come from outside! As obvious as it sounds now, I could finally see that was not ever about to happen, and I could also see why.

Of course, I could only enlighten myself. It was my job, not someone else’s. In pointing out the nature of the mind to me, and my getting the gist of it, Rinpoche had completed his responsibility to me and succeeded in making me fully responsible for the very first time. I responded! I was awake or aware in a new way. I was realizing! And with that responsibility also came the insight on how this mind training business could be done.

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

Expectations are seldom ever our friend and almost always obscure the actual path and the reality. It might be better to say the teacher points out the nature of 'how' the mind works rather than simply say the teacher points out "the nature of the mind." The term 'nature of the mind' seems so mysterious, and the actuality is anything but that. In fact, it is just seeing the obvious. In my case, the less that is left to the imagination, the better. My imagination has filled me with preconceptions and impossible expectations all my life.

In other words, at least in my recognition, the "Aha!" experience was not "Aha!, this is finally some enlightenment," but rather a simple: "Aha! I get it now. So this is how the mind works; even a beginner like me can do that! This is workable, as in: something I could actually do."

It is remarkable how in an instant my years of expectations vanished and were replaced by something simply practical that finally made real sense to me. How absolutely encouraging! The "pointing out" instructions didn't in any way mark the end of my practice and thus my graduation to some higher "bodhisattva-like" level (like I had always wondered or imagined), but rather it marked the end of my imitating what it is I thought practice was supposed to be like, and the very beginning of actual useful practice. Finally I got the general idea of how to work with my mind, and understood in a flash that I had been mistaken about this all of my dharma life, like perhaps 30 years!!!

For the first time I saw simply how the mind works and that there was no reason that I (just as I am,

warts and all) could not just damn well do it. And that WAS a new experience, to somehow be at the same level with reality – to see it clearly. It was up to me to figure out just how to work with this new information and to put the time in. Perhaps most important of all, I suddenly had the enthusiasm and energy to make it work that I had been missing all those years. No more boredom and laziness when it came to practice. I wasn't practicing anymore; I was meditating or working on it all the time.

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

That quite ordinary insight was a form of recognition, and it was permanent. In reality, for me this was a huge result after about 31 years of meditation of the "sounds-like-this" variety, years during which I sincerely went through the motions, but with little result that I could see. I had been rubbing the sticks and getting some heat but no fire. Suddenly, there was some heat and also fire. While not what I had expected, this was what I had always dreamed about having happen: visible progress. To be continued...

MAHAMUDRA, A STORY - The Workable Mind

September 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Continuing with the story of recognizing the nature of our mind.]

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

I left that year’s ten-day teaching with a very different idea as to what my practice was going to be about from then on. For one, it was now crystal clear to me that the amount of daily practice I was able to squeeze out up to that time would never be enough to get me to any kind of enlightened state. It was like going to church only on Sunday. Being the devious, lazy, bad boy that I am, I would never get to heaven

at that rate. I had never been that much of an angel anyway, more like the black sheep of my family, and that too was a problem.

I could now see that mind practice required way more effort than the small amount of practice I had been doing each day, which practice itself I had nicked and dimmed to death as it was. It seemed that everything else in my life managed to come first and distract from my dharma practice and, on top of that, my whole approach to practice was cloaked in expectations, disappointment, and frugality of effort. At that point in my life, I was doing as little actual practice as I could get away with and still look at myself in the mirror. After 30+ years of pushing that stone uphill, I was worn out.

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

Quitting practice was just too scary to even consider. The dharma was too much a part of my ego, my identity to just stop my practice. If I wasn't a dharma practitioner, what the heck was I doing with my life? But what I now realized was that, like it or not, my daily practice (even in the best of times) had been simply way too small an effort to ever get very far along my personal dharma path. At the best of times, the most practice I had ever done was around two hours a day, and even that much practice would probably not be enough to clear the various obscurations I had managed to collect. I needed

some full-time dharma practice and I was a part-time player.

One thing I did realize from the pointing out instructions was that all of my years chained to the computer as a programmer had given me a real ability to concentrate and for long hours at a time. And Rinpoche had made a remark to a number of us that those who work on a computer in a concentrated manner may have a leg-up on others because at least they are learning concentrated focus.

That was not all bad. I often would work 12 or even 14 hours a day (seven days a week) glued to the tube, as they say. And, although the computer work might not be particularly dharmic in nature, the concentration I had acquired was quite real, lacking perhaps only a more pure motive than making money, although that is not fair to me. In my life, I have always turned my hobbies into ways of making money, so mostly I loved what I did for a living and did it with a pure heart. If only I could tackle dharma with the same concentration and enthusiasm that I put into my various computer and entrepreneurial projects. I had been thinking and dreaming about this for years.

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

Putting the Technique to Work

Inspired by what I realized at the yearly 10-day Mahamudra intensive, the way I practiced changed dramatically.

I slowly began to apply the techniques of mind training I was learning to what I was doing on the computer all day long. During my computer work, whenever I would catch myself in a distraction, when I popped out of whatever I was deeply involved in and found myself once again outside my concentration groove and looking around, I would attempt to practice Mahamudra meditation. It could be as simple as a dog bark, a phone call, the doorbell, an unwelcome thought, etc., whatever it took to startle me out of what I was concentrating on.

The result was that I was suddenly popped out of whatever I had been focused on and just instantly there – awake in the intervening gap. Those gaps in my concentration were the only moments I had to insert dharma into my work, but there were a lot of them. They happened all day long.

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

I had seen the nature of my own mind, how it works, which as I mentioned does not mean I was enlightened in any way, only that I had seen something about how the mind actually worked or is, and even that opening look was enough to begin unraveling some of the obscurations I had labored under all my life. The fact is that it changed things forever. And I liked the clarity in what I saw and was beginning to learn to rest in the nature of the mind, however brief that might be.

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

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

If there was one thing I was ashamed of and feared all those years, it was that I could not find much joy in rote practicing. I knew that this was not the way it

should be, but I was powerless to bring joy to something I could not seem to find the joy in. And it took the shock of an outside event to really push me into yet totally new territory. I will continue with my story.

MAHAMUDRA, A STORY - Forced into Freefall

September 3, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[This is a long one, but this is also pure story.]

I had been working for the preceding four years or so as a senior consultant to NBC, an area of theirs specializing in astrology, something I know quite a lot about – 50 years of experience. I was putting in long hours for them (and for myself), because I was building content, something I am well-known for in my career as an archivist of popular culture, creator of the All-Music Guides (allmusic.com), the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com) and other entertainment sites. It is not unusual for me to put in 12 or 14 hours, seven days a week. I was getting up at 2 or 3 in the morning most days (still do), concentrating on programming, on creating thousands of tarot-like cards for astrology in Adobe Illustrator, writing courses, and other text-related projects. And I took plenty of joy in that. All of these tasks were perfect to test out my Mahamudra practice, which was coming along really well. All it lacked was the motivation that comes with a worthy object, but my motivation was pretty good as it was.

In other words, I was practicing Mahamudra while working on essentially mundane tasks, instead of focusing on the 'dharma' itself (whatever in the world that is), although my intent and motivation for astrology were very pure and heartfelt.

Freefall

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

No doubt, I was in shock. As it turned out, I had to leave the astrology conference a few days earlier than I had planned when I found out that His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, was suddenly making his first visit to the United States and to his main seat in this country, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. This was our monastery, where my teacher lived! I could not miss that event and, as it turned out, I was being asked to be part of a four-man video team to film the event, and additionally, I was asked to film some events by myself (with Margaret) where they didn't really want much of anyone present. I had been around KTD so long that I was pretty much some kind of fixture there anyway.

I would love to tell readers about the visit of His Holiness, but that would be a whole other story, but the gist of it was that seeing His Holiness was a big shot in the arm for me, especially in the shocked state I was in from being laid off. I had instantly been thrust, not only beyond any comfort zone, but into a kind of Limbo state that only those who have lost their livelihood can understand.

I also took hundreds of still photos of the event and within a few weeks of getting home, I had made a 200-page coffee-table sized book of the visit of His Holiness which I made available for the close sangha. The book was inspired, not so much by me as a photographer, as by the fact that all of the people I was photographing had just been with His Holiness and were shining with happiness and a light that was clearly obvious in the photographs. Here is that free book for those interested:

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/KarmapaKTD_2008.pdf

As it turns out, the time with His Holiness certainly helped to put the fact that I no longer had a job somewhat into perspective, but to suddenly be without a paycheck was, as mentioned, a shock, and it sure went through my system like a lightning. Where before I was working long hours at my job, suddenly I had all kinds of time on my hands – a really big gap of free time in my life, like: all of it. However, with it came the rush of responsibility to do something about it.

Talk about popping out of what you were focused in (the so-called “gap” in Mahamudra practice), well, this was a really terrific gap, vast in scope, and I popped

out big-time. And here is how I was able to actually look at that gap. Looking back from today, this makes me seriously wonder whether it takes some profound shock to the system to make us receptive to the deeper teachings. And, keep in mind that seeing His Holiness up close and the blessings that interaction brought may have been key in precipitating what follows. I will continue with my story:

The Photographer

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

I had been deemed a photographer by my father (a really good photographer himself) ever since he had given me a little Kodak Retina 2a camera back in 1954, when I was something like 13 and sent me on about a 3,000 mile trip across the U.S. and Canada (with a dip into Mexico) on a bus with a bunch of kids my age. He had explained to me before I left how to take good pictures, and I listened.

Apparently I had taken some great pictures because my dad couldn't say enough about them when I returned, perhaps the only time he ever felt that way about anything I have done. The long and the short of

it is that I came away from that time of my dad's approval with the sense that (perhaps only in my mind) I had a really good eye for photography.

And I had been toying with photography for a number of years anyway. Like many of us, I had of course taken the requisite shots of my family, our dogs, and what not. And, as part of a large archival database that I created for documenting rock and roll posters, I had purchased a Nikon D1x system and carefully photographed some 33,000+ posters. For this, I had built my own vacuum table, had an exact light setup, and so on. So, I knew at least something about photography.

But in the late spring of 2008, after suddenly falling out of a job, I found myself embracing photography more deeply, perhaps just as a way to find stability from my chaotic life at the time. And then there was my interest in nature, and this also is key. Even though this happened only a few years or so ago, to this day I have trouble pinpointing just how I happened to start going out into nature again.

I am a trained naturalist and had intensely studied nature from the time I was about 6 years old until my late teens, and I mean intensely. In my early teens I was even given a tiny office back in the stacks at the University of Michigan Museums building, where all the reptiles and amphibians were stored in bottles of alcohol just because I was somewhat precocious. I was really into it, but that is another story. My wife loves nature too and for the last many years had done all she could to get me out in the woods, streams, and fields again, but I had pretty much declined the invitation. I didn't know why exactly. Perhaps it was

because I felt that nature had been early-on my first real teacher and I had learned my lessons. Certainly, school had taught me almost nothing. Whatever life lessons I carried came from observing how nature behaved, and once learned, I was unwilling to open up that avenue again. Why?

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

The Naturalist

I studied natural history for so many years and with such diligence that there was not much I missed as to what goes on out there in the woods and meadows. I know every frog, salamander, and snake, not to mention insects, and you-name-it. I not only know them, I know all about their lives and deaths. Nature is so absolutely candid and direct that she leaves almost nothing to the imagination. And nature does not know mercy. It is all laid out for anyone to see, and it is not a story without emotional affects. I did not need to become a Buddhist to love the life in every living creature. I always felt that way. When I was confirmed in my early teens as part of Catholic ritual, my chosen confirmation name was Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi, the saint who loved and protected animals. That was me. I have often joked that I like animals better than people, and I wasn't being all that

funny. It is kind of true. The Buddhists tell us that animals are bewildered. I feel great compassion for their bewildered state. I am working on feeling that same way toward human beings.

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

The countless tiny tadpoles that don't mature before the spring pond dries out, the mass of worms and slugs that get caught crossing the tarmac as the fierce sun comes over the horizon and fries them to a crisp, the huge Luna Moth that is so heavy it can hardly fly, flutters in the still morning light, trying to find a tree to hide in for the day, and is snapped up by the bird just as it tries to land, etc. You get the idea. It is endless and merciless.

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

animal world are simply bewildered, too stunned by their lack of real intelligence to protect themselves.

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

Back to Nature

But in that year of 2008, I was not in an ordinary frame of mind. I had just been shaken out of every sense of safe I knew, at least financially. I had been put out, turned loose, and set free from any path or trajectory I thought I was on. So, it is no surprise that I easily crossed or slipped over that threshold that I had avoided for so many years and immersed myself once again in the way things actually are - nature. I already was completely vulnerable, reminded personally how things can be when we have no control. I was, as they say, "in the mood." And the camera was probably my ticket to ride, my excuse to get lost in nature once again. It was like finding my roots, like going home. Most of all, it was consoling. If nothing else, it was authentic. Nature always is that.

So there I was, out in the fields and meadows looking at nature and seeing her full-on, familiar friend that she was. I soon was photographing nature and became absolutely fascinated with close-up camera work, what is called macro photography. And for me, this meant close-up photography of nature and all the living things surrounding us. And, in what was

perhaps also a symbolic gesture, I got out of my office. For years, I had been afraid to leave my office lest I miss an important phone call or whatever next thing I was waiting for. As mentioned, my wife had tried just about everything to get me, stick-in-the mud that I was, out of my office, but to no avail. But now I just walked out into the fields. It was dramatic.

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

TIME FOR NOTHING

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

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

As I look back on it now, it was of course a very remarkable time. Here I am remarking on it! But what was most remarkable about this time was not at first apparent to me, and this is what I want to present here.

To be continued...

PERFECT MAKES PRACTICE

July 25, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have had a chance to revisit the realm of music practice these last couple of days, learning an instrument I have never before touched. And I find new instruments hard, not easy to learn. I have been at war with brute “practice” all my life, so this has been a chance to experience the journey of practice with fresh eyes.

I have long had a personal theory that practice amounts to nothing more than waiting for the life energy to have a gap, an opening spurt, and then ride that. To be a little clearer, our life energy (like the energy of the sun) is not a continuous line fed to us at the same speed, but rather an endlessly varying stream of leads and lags. Think of it as the future opening and then closing again, much like the birth process, where a baby’s head crowns and then pulls back, and then comes on again.

If we like what is coming (the future), we want the spurts to outrun the lags, and they eventually do, of course. The future, for better or for worse, won’t be denied. Practice time is time when we are going through the motions of the technique and waiting for a surge, an opening. And by “surge,” I don’t just mean full-speed ahead, linearly, but more like waiting for time to expand, for there to be space in which

whatever we are practicing can freely happen, as in: outrunning our effort.

Effort in almost any kind of practice is unavoidable. Unfortunately, that is what practice is generally thought to be about, trying to acquire muscle memory by effort that one day will become automatic, no longer taking effort, and requiring little management. We put in our time, pay our dues. Too often we tend to just go on just the time we put in. We practice and wait out the hour or whatever it takes to pass. Then we are done.

This does not work because practice does not succeed by effort alone, and that is where I believe there is some confusion. Muscle memory is not only gained by sheer rote repetition, although it may seem so, and repetition is perhaps only the most obvious part of it all. There is something more required, and that's what I am pointing out here.

Instead of just blind repetition, look for the real progress in practice in the micro-flow of life energy. The cause may not be clear; it could be just variations in the sunlight and solar flux as far as I am concerned. We apply effort to practice so that what we are practicing becomes like second-nature to us. We all know this. Certainly the force of will to practice (effort), that kind of energy, will only get us half the way there, like into the ballpark, but little more. The effort to concentrate on the practice, as mentioned, keeps us in the ballpark, but it alone will get us no home runs. And this is the point.

For that, we require the gaps that are natural to any energy flow, the openings and expansions that

overrun our effort and allow us to glide free like a bird in the air. If only ever so briefly, they happen and, when they do, we leave off with effort and have a moment of true freedom and that is when we move forward in our practice. We slip beyond the clock-ticking seconds of time into a breath of eternity.

The best analogy I know is that with certain sheets of plastic, polymers, when we pull to stretch them, they only stretch so far, but with a little more pulling they suddenly almost double their length in an instant, effortlessly. Physicists call it “necking.”

Anyway, in the midst of effortful practice, when we reach a point of “necking,” time just opens up, expands, and the future is present, if only for a moment. If we are practicing music, in that moment we are playing music, not just practicing. And just as quickly the gap closes and we find ourselves wrapped in effort once again, and probably wishing we could repeat the experience. However, in that instant of free-flight we have tasted the future, not to be forgotten, and such experience is very helpful in urging us on in our practice.

So... what's the lesson here? Of course I can't help but relate it to everything else I have ever practiced, especially dharma practice. It suggests that simply forcing ourselves to practice, rubbing our nose in it, so to speak, is obviously not going to help. As mentioned earlier, effort will get us in the ballpark, but that is all effort is good for. By itself, effort can never lead to a breakthrough, because the result of practice that we want is always, in that way, effortless. That's the whole point.

So, just holding our feet to the fire will only get us burnt toes. The reality is more subtle than that. Too much effort will only, as they say, stain our practice and make us want to avoid it. The image that the Tibetans seem to use is that of holding a raw egg in our hand. If we squeeze too hard, the egg will break, and if we hold it too loose, it will fall and break. So the technique that we practice must be very gentle, not too tight and not too loose. This is something that most meditation practitioners need to take to heart. Brute force is a waste of effort. The process is much more delicate than that.

Anyway, that is my take away from undertaking a totally new instrument these last days, one unlike any I have ever played. I find that reinforcing my effort does nothing but clog up the works. On the other hand, relaxing, and gently working on the technique, but looking to the music part of it, however distant it may seem, allows me to come alive when those spurts of spirit happen and I am freeborn. Look for the gaps of sheer spirit which, like pure oxygen, allow us to breathe within the technique. As my dharma teacher says, the length of a practice may be only as long as it takes to raise a teacup to our lips and take a sip.

If we look to lengthen the gaps of spirit (and rest in them) rather than worry about the length of practice, we can step through the door of technique and realize it. I don't feel this approach is very difficult to understand, but without it we are just sitting there spinning our wheels and burning out our tires.

PLAYING THE VICTIM

July 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PRAYER BEADS: PARKING THE MIND

July 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

If that is not enough, some malas have a movable marker that records 10,000 rounds of mantras, which can be moved around the entire 108-bead mala to record over a million mantras. This makes for a fairly

efficient system for keeping count. And that is about it for most malas, except some lamas add extra markers just to commemorate this or that event, to remind them of something. These event beads are not used for counting.

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

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

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

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

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

Usually Rinpoche does not make off-hand remarks, but during an interview some time ago, when nearing the end of an interview, Rinpoche made the remark to me that I might want to use a mala to say some mantras. The idea that was communicated was similar to those lamas that use a prayer wheel, i.e. for some kind of background repetition practice.

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

This soon became completely automatic, and I mean soon, so much so that the whole process fell into the background and became almost invisible to me. It was not long before I found myself reaching for the beads whenever I was at loose ends. From then on it

was a place to park my mind whenever it was not engaged or when it was getting distracted – a hedge against distraction.

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

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

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

[Photo of a mala given to me by my teacher, the Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, many years ago. At the time, this was his personal mala, one that he had used before coming to this country and for many years after arriving here. As you can see it is a Bodhi seed mala, but one that has been used for almost countless mantras. This mala is so precious

that I seldom use it, which I am sure he would not approve of. If you look, you can see all the various marker beads I mentioned above. The large red-coral “guru” bead was given to Rinpoche by the Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche, and the green bead attached to it came from the previous Thrangu Rinpoche, and so on. It is very precious.]



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PRESS TITLE ABOVE FOR ARTICLE

July 8, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I want to share the beginning of a new series of books titled “The Illustrated Guide to Dharma Stuff.”] Dharma stuff is bound to happen to anyone who starts to practice the dharma. It just happens. If you are working with Tibetan Buddhism it happens floridly and vividly, at least it did in my case.

I had nothing in the way of “dharma stuff” when Rinpoche gave me a small statue of Shakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha) and I was off and running. One thing led to another and before I knew it I was running a mail-order dharma store for KTD Monastery, since at that time they were unable to manage that themselves. I believe we did it for five years or more. In the course of importing all kinds of stuff from Kathmandu, we produced scores of transcribed teachings and printed a great many dharma sadhanas in the traditional Tibetan pecha format.

WHAT IS THE DHARMA?

One of my Facebook friends asked, “What is ‘The Dharma?’” You would think that would be an easy question to answer, as in “The Dharma is the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, the path for

awakening he laid down, his method,” and that would be true, but that is not the whole extent of it. The historical Buddha did not invent the dharma, but rather reflected what was already naturally there. Remember that the Buddha started out as an ordinary human being just like us.

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

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

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

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

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

The Tibetan Buddhist define the Two Accumulations as "Merit" and "Awareness," and the two work together as hand and glove, as we shall see. As mentioned, by "Merit" they mean meritorious actions,

more commonly called “Skillful Means,” which is just what it says, learning to act skillfully as opposed to making a mess of things. Of course, it is nice to be skillful, but there is much more to being skillful than just making a neat job of things.

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

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

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

And here is the recursion, the main point of this explanation. By acting ever more skillfully, we create ever more awareness. And... with more awareness we can better see to act still more skillfully yet, which generates even more awareness, and thus the

recursion. We have a dharma machine which is called, as pointed out, the Two Accumulations. This dharma engine, so to speak, using skillful means generates by iteration ever more awareness, which is then used to be even more skillful, ad infinitum. This is one of our tickets to ride, an example of what is called relative-truth that will propel us on our journey to awakening.

Now, I had to think this through very, very carefully and, for me, it took a long time. Perhaps you can just get it instantly, yet putting it into practice takes, well, “practice.” This is, however, a brilliant way to accumulate merit, a method that is self-propelling and, pretty much, unstoppable. When enough merit has been accumulated, we wake up quite naturally. My dharma teacher, the Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gives this analogy:

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

However, if we will keep rubbing those sticks (gathering the two accumulations), we will eventually reach a point when fire suddenly appears. That is the point of performing the Two Accumulations. When this

fire happens, this is called “Recognition,” and it refers to our recognizing the True Nature of the Mind. Once that takes place, once we get a real glimpse of the nature of our own mind, we spontaneously generate what is called “Bodhicitta.” Bodhicitta, like fusion, gives us an endless supply of devoted energy to further enlighten ourselves so as to be of use to others. It is the ‘sine qua non’ of Buddhist practice, the fire in the belly, that is unstoppable.

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

Vajradhara:

The Primordial Buddha

The Sanskrit word is Vajradhara, in Tibetan it is Dorje Chang, and translated into English it means something like "Holder of the Thunderbolt" or "Possessor of Indestructibility," also referred to as the primordial or "Adi-Buddha." Vajradhara most often appears in a dark-blue color, wearing heavenly ornaments and garments to symbolize the capacity to benefit all sentient beings via various emanations.

Vajradhara contains the essence of the historical Buddha's enlightenment in non-physical form and is synonymous with the Dharmakaya. The Mahasiddha Tilopa is said to have received the Vajrayana teachings directly from Vajradhara, the Dharmakaya. In other words, the Karma Kagyu Lineage originated from the very essence of Buddhahood, the Dharmakaya itself.

The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, appearing in physical form is called the Nirmanakaya, his realization in subtle or psychological form is called the Sambhogakaya, and the essence of the Buddha's teachings is called the Dharmakaya. Vajradhara represents the Dharmakaya. It is said that Tilopa did not learn from a human teacher, but was enlightened directly from Vajradhara, the Dharmakaya itself. Tilopa's lineage marks one of the direct lineages of Mahamudra in the Karma Kagyu Lineage.



Vajradhara:

Vajradhara appears with crossed arms, his right hand holding the dorje (Skillful Means) and his left hand the bell (Wisdom). The combination of the two symbols represents the non-dual wisdom of Mahamudra or Dzogchen (The Great Perfection), the result of either practice being the same realization.



The Illustrated Guide to
Dharma Stuff

by Michael Erlewine



Rupas

RELATIONSHIP COLLISIONS

July 23, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

And up there at the tip of the top is the fact that (as you might imagine) I am not the easiest person to live with. I’m difficult and I forget that with any partner I am

talking to my own reflection and fall into arguing, when intellectually I know that is purely a waste of time.

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

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

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

same technique also works when two partners in a relationship collide.

I am not saying that there is no value in sitting down after a mental collision with your partner and digging through the debris, searching for who is to blame or how it happened. Seriously folks, we know how it happens, because it happens all the time. And either, neither, or both of us are always to blame. We know where to find the culprits. As mentioned, post-mortems to fights are not all that helpful and forensic science is something few of us know much about.

In fact, initially I was amazed at the fact that in Buddhist mind training, as a rule, they do not dig in the past. In fact, one of their great slogans is “Don’t Prolong the Past.” This is never more true (IMO) than with arguments or fights between couples. Diagramming how a fight went down seldom is helpful in my experience because, as mentioned earlier, we already know who the victim and victimizer are. They are us, either one of us more than the other or, more often, both of us involved in the relationship. And just as every dualism has a subject and an object, in truth, even if we can prove the dualism that you are wrong and I am right (or vice versa), the fact of the interdependency of things ultimately sheds light on the shadow world of subject and object, victim and victimizer, etc. Dualism is no solution. It’s like a game of hot-potato.

In other words, unless we want out of the relationship entirely, painting you black and me white (or the reverse) is not ever going to be a solution. That should be obvious. It’s a push me, pull you situation. If we intend to move forward with the relationship, we

are just going to have to eventually walk all of that kind of finger-pointing back anyway, so why bother extenuating it. Picking over the carcass of an argument is mostly a waste of time. It is just another bad habit we have picked up.

What I find more useful is to just take a page from meditation 101. As soon as I can get hold of myself, I just stop arguing and start over. There is no point in spending more time evaluating how I got distracted, any more than when we are distracted meditating, we spend even more time on what the distraction was all about. That is throwing good money after bad, adding insult to injury. As I tell my dog when he brings home something dead and rotten “Just drop it.”

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

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

This technique works best if both partners have the trust in the other (despite the current disagreement)

and both can drop it and move on, with trust that the other is not just getting away with something, but like ourselves, is serious about getting beyond this kind of behavior.

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

SOLAR STORMS: WE WILL WITHSTAND SHOCKS OUTBREAKING

September 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have not been notifying my Facebook friends of every solar flare that takes place, as I used to. But I should point out that in the last week or so we have had several strong solar flares, CMEs, and various solar storms that caused auroras to be seen as far down as where we live in Michigan. In fact, some of my family saw them. I, of course, was sleeping, being one of those rare early-to-bed folks.

I have any number of free e-books, videos, and many articles on solar flares and their effects and “affects” on our mental and emotional states. Also, two paperbacks are now available on Amazon.com, “Sun Storms: The Astrology of Solar Activity” and “Solar Flares: Monitoring Inner Change.”

Solar Flares and all solar energy are about “change,” in particular the rate of change. The Sun is basically responsible for life here on Earth and the steady beat of daily sunlight is the rate of change and inner-exchange we are used to. When the sun has storms, sudden outbursts of intense solar energy, the rate of change that drives life comes in fierce bursts instead of the steady trickle.

Like it or not, we each are subject to these quantum bursts of solar energy. While we all experience the

same Sun, and the same solar flares, etc., how we take, absorb, and assimilate these changes differs greatly. Some of us are aerodynamically aligned and can sail in the solar wind like a bird in the sky, while others of us (unfortunately, most of us) have an attitude to solar outbursts that takes these changes head-on and we are very much disrupted, if not torn apart by them.

As mentioned, I have written exhaustively on this topic and, provided you don't want to read about it in printed form, everything is available as free e-books here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx>

I don't want to drone on about these inner solar changes and I mention it only to indicate that these days and during the last week or so we have all (each of us) absorbed some heavy bursts of change. At times, such strong solar energy buffets us around like a windstorm does an autumn leaf.

This is nothing new, of course. It has always been like this, and we have learned to ignore these inner solar changes and, sadly, take them internally rather than share them publically. This is why the Buddhists say that ignorance (what we ignore) is the root poison that obscures our mind. When a burst of solar changes hits us, we all turn inward at the same moment, like a flower (or sea anemone) closing, and when we have absorbed the change (or tried to), we all gradually open back outward again. It seems that we agree to forget what we find so hard to remember, the struggle to cope with and assimilate quantum bursts of change that break out within us.

I know: drone, drone, drone, but “I am just saying,” as the phrase goes, the obvious, which we have obviously forgotten for the most part. The Buddhists call this endless process of change “Samsara,” the vicious cycle of our ups and downs. We struggle onward like Sisyphus rolling the boulder uphill.

It was the Buddha who was kind enough to point out to me through his teachings how we can wake-up and become aware of how to handle change.

THE ALCHEMY OF REACTIONS

July 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[This is a long article, so not for everyone on the run, of course. The technique presented here I came up with after being prompted by the dharma teacher Daniel P. Brown, a psychologist (and Buddhist scholar) on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School, who suggested that in the Four Noble Truths, the word “suffering” might better be translated as “reactivity.” Thus the First Noble Truth, which is “The Truth of Suffering” might better be translated as the “The Truth of Reactivity.” After that I spent some years practicing with my own reactions. I ran this technique past Rinpoche in the Q&A part of our teaching schedule yesterday for his comments and he said that it was a sound idea. I was glad to hear it, so I will be a little more forward about sharing it. Some have expressed wanting to know how this technique works, so here it is for those who are interested.]

Introduction

Tong-len was the first Tibetan Buddhist mind-training practice that I instinctively understood and warmed to. It was easy to do and I could do it anytime and anywhere; it was portable.

Somehow Tong-len seems intuitively American. We just get it. Perhaps everyone does. If there is a vaccine that is the antidote for an inflated ego, this is

it. And like the perfect diet, you can eat all you want and still lose the weight of your attachments.

Instead of denying the self as so many techniques tend to do, Tong-len's genius is just the opposite. It gradually identifies more and more territory as your friend (part of yourself) until the Self implodes by inclusion instead of denial. It's like blowing up a balloon until it bursts of its own accord.

In other words, Tong-len uses the self's natural tendency to become attached to defeat itself. It is a miracle cure for the egocentric.

Reaction Tong-len: The Alchemy of Reactions

Here is an introduction to what in my opinion is the easiest to learn meditation method, called "Reaction Tong-len" or "Reaction Toning."

The Kinds of Meditation

The kind of meditation practiced by Zen and Tibetan Buddhists is what is called "awareness" meditation, learning to allow the mind to come to rest in awareness -- becoming more aware. But here in America, we basically have the one word "meditation" to cover hundreds of existing mind-training techniques, and most of them are not awareness-oriented.

Meditation methods can be divided into what we might call uppers and downers. Downers relax us and uppers make us more aware. The Buddha's teachings actually combine the two such that we learn to relax or rest in awareness. Buddhist methods are all about

awareness, being mindful and becoming more aware -- waking up.

As examples of other kinds of meditation, there are "absorption" meditations, where we go inside or are guided in one way or another – eyes closed. Awareness meditation is typically done with eyes open. And there are literally hundreds of meditation types that are basically relaxation therapies of one form or another.

In fact, meditation for many people simply means learning to relax. There is a somewhat subtle difference between this and the methods Buddha taught, which was to learn to relax "as it is," so to speak. However, the Buddha taught to allow the mind to relax and rest in awareness, not in relaxation itself. In other words, rest "as it is" means to rest in the awareness that always is, as in the awareness it takes to read this. Rest in this awareness that it takes right now to read this sentence, rather than the content (what it means) of this sentence. Think about that. If you don't know how or if you are currently meditating but not getting the results you hoped for, you can easily learn this technique. That is the idea.

Meditation Hurdles

One of the potential problems with learning meditation is that it takes time and practice. Few people have enough time and fewer yet like to practice. A chief hurdle for many folks is finding enough time in a day to practice. Meditation, like any technique, has to be practiced until it becomes almost second nature. For most this involves setting aside some time each day

(or every day or so) to practice and learn meditation, which is not the same as actually meditating.

For those of us with busy schedules, often the first thing to get scratched from our daily "to do" list is our meditation practice. Practice of any kind takes effort and spiritual practice has the additional problem that we really have no idea (yet) of what the results or outcome of the training is or will be. We are doing this on spec, and this can be discouraging.

These and other obstacles often lead to would-be meditation practitioners giving up and abandoning their efforts to learn to meditate. This is a generalization, but occasional practicing of meditation every day or so for a short time is a difficult way to reach the critical mass necessary for meditation to become a spontaneous habit.

I am not suggesting practicing for a long time each day unless that is joyful to you. Instead, the great mahasiddhas suggest that we practice many short times. What is even more needed is some way to apply the meditation technique, not just for one-half hour every a day or so, but all the time in whatever we have to do. IMO, that is the ticket.

Practice Places

Typically, learning meditation technique, what is called "practicing," takes place in a quiet place, often a little cushion off in a corner of a secluded room, and so on. That is where the technique is learned until we are fluent and we can stop "practicing" meditation and instead actually begin to just meditate. It is like those little training wheels we had on our bike as a kid.

Practicing in a special room, on a cushion, when we can get to it for some bit of time each day (or every day or so) is like going to church on Sunday for an hour and expecting to get into heaven. Of course, every little bit helps, but given all the variables that can intervene, the amount of practice that accumulates may not amount to enough to reach the critical mass needed to become passionate about meditating.

Daily practice is fine, but too often there are several variables that can intervene and short-circuit our efforts.

These include not keeping to our schedule. Often what happens on a busy day is that the first thing that gets cut from my schedule is my meditation practice. Runner-up is that we just don't feel like it that day and are sure that "tomorrow" will be a better time to practice, or we don't feel like we know what we are doing or we are not getting any results, etc. The list goes on. In other words, other methods are needed.

Enter "Reaction Toning," a simple technique that can be done all day long during whatever our normal schedule requires and one that accumulates serious amounts of dharma practice at no extra expense in time or concentration. And, it is easy to do.

Karma

The whole idea of "karma" very much relates to meditation practice. I will explain why, and karma is simple to understand. Our every action has a result. This is simple physics. And we have all heard about "good" and "bad" karma, at least from our point of

view. The good karma produces results that we like, while the bad karma makes life more difficult for us.

And there is a popular misconception about karma to the effect that karma mainly relates to the kinds of "sins" listed out in the Ten Commandments, like "Do not kill," "Do not steal," and so on. Of course that is "bad" karma, but there is a much greater source of difficult karma, in particular since most of us are not killing and stealing anyway. I call it micro-karma.

Micro-Karma

As mentioned, it is not just the big karma-forming actions (killing, stealing, etc.) that we should watch out for, but rather the myriad of small actions that we habitually do that create the bulk of our "bad" karma, which most folks have no idea they are accumulating. As mentioned, I call this our micro-karma.

The Tibetan Buddhists differentiate between skillful actions (which they call Skillful-Means) and un-skillful actions, those whose result impair or obscure our minds. When we think of skillful means, we think of intentional actions, but the vast bulk of the "bad" karma we accumulate is "unintentional" only in that we are not aware of it, but it too has intent. Ignorance of natural law is no excuse for bad intentions.

Chief among our "unintentional" karma are the reactions we have to almost everything all day long. And by "reactions" I mean our knee-jerk reactions, those we apparently cannot control, mostly because we are not even consciously aware of them. Keep in

mind that the name "Buddha" means awakened, the one who is aware. Buddhism is the method (and its practice) of becoming more aware, of waking up.

We react all day long, but are not aware that we are doing so. When we become aware of our reactions, we can learn to respond appropriately to them instead of just reacting involuntarily. Thus I am distinguishing here between our uncontrollable "reactions" and appropriate responses. And by "reactions" I am not talking about the kind of reaction we have when we place our hand on a hot stove. Instead, I am speaking here of the myriad of reactions we have based on our personal likes and dislikes, our prejudice, bias, antipathy, aversion, repugnance, enmity, etc. that we have built up over the years, mostly thanks to our Self.

The Self

I am not going to go deeply into the concept of the Self. I have a whole book on it for those who are interested. Instead, here I just want to sketch out how our self can affect the accumulation of karma by its many attachments, particularly what it does not like. In brief, the Self is a montage of our likes and dislikes that we draw around us like a coat of many colors, only here it is a persona of many attachments, positive and negative.

The Self does its best to pull everything it likes closer and to keep away (at arm's length) everything it does not like or does not identify with. We all know this. Anyway, the Self reacts to all that it does not like and those reactions are recorded like any other event in our mindstream. The problem is that these reactions

are so constant and often so intense that they amount to an almost constant accumulation of karma all day long and even in our dreams at night. And the amazing thing is that we are not even aware that this is taking place, so successfully do we ignore it.

The controversial poet and New-Age harbinger Aleister Crowley penned the phrase, "To snatch at a gnat, and swallow a camel." This is effectively what we do with the torrent of reactions we record as karma each day. We are unaware of it all and yet it probably is the single greatest cause of "bad" karma that we have.

As they say, "Karma burns twice," first when it occurs and adds to our obscurations and second when somewhere down the line its imprint has to be removed, expunged.

Luckily there is an easy way for us to address this problem and greatly reduce the amount of micro-karma we record and this is "Reaction Toning," also called "Reaction Tong- Len."

Reaction Toning

Reaction Toning is a complete dharma practice, one that can be done (and is best done) off-the-cushion. Best of all, it does not interfere or add extra time to our busy schedule and day. Personally, I do this all day long. And it amounts to a lot of practice getting done, something very few people achieve since they do not have the time. It's Dharma-on- the-Go, so to speak.

And Reaction Toning is easy to learn, something we can do "on the hoof" so to speak. All that is needed is to begin to be aware of our reactions, and there is no lack of opportunity since we react, literally, all day long. What reactions are we referring to? Literally all of them. For example:

The not-so-friendly office worker who suddenly comes round the corner and confronts us, face-to-face. We may try to control our reaction, but just note it. Note the wince and the avoidance we can feel. What is that?

"That" is nothing more than our reaction, regardless of the cause. The cause may be our instinctual dislike for someone who has offended us. But whether they did something to us on purpose or not is not important. We can't control the outer world, but we can recognize our reaction to it and begin to tone that down. As one of my favorite songwriters Seth Bernard penned, "Make friends with the weather." This does not mean we are unmoved by it, but it is very possible to transform knee-jerk reactions into appropriate responses that do not record karma.

To do this requires that we first note the reaction when it occurs and then recognize the reaction as purely our own. Someone else may be causing it, but how we react is totally up to us. So, after recognizing we have reacted, we then own it as ours and acknowledge to ourselves that we alone are reacting. This is our reaction. We own it and because of that we can change and modify it. Once we have owned the reaction, that by itself may be enough for it to begin toning down. Eventually we learn to spot it every time it arises until it no longer arises. Instead

we begin to respond to whatever input we receive in an appropriate way. Or we may even do a little traditional Tong-Len with it, taking in the worst from outside (from that other person) and sending back out the best in us we can offer.

I find that merely recognizing and owning my reactions is usually enough right there to begin toning them down and de-emphasizing a particular reaction. The more often we do it, the less emphatic (or traumatic) it becomes. We make friends with it.

Imprint or Groove

Our every negative reaction, let's say to a person we don't like, deepens the groove or trace in our mindstream connected to them. In other words, repeatedly reacting to someone (or something) negatively etches an ever deeper groove in the mind that not only further obscures our mind, but also that someday will have to be removed if we want a clear mind. Think how long and how often these reactions occur. It is scary.

Multiply this by the thousands of reactions we have each day and you get the picture, a torrent of micro-karma that steadily accumulates to our disadvantage. And this micro- karma is not reserved just for people we react negatively to. Our reactions descend to even finer reactions. For example, we don't like that person's nose, scar, scarf, color, or hat. Those too are faithfully recorded in our mindstream. "No reaction is too small" might be the motto here.

In other words, our daily reactions amount to thousands of tiny razor cuts, moments when we

automatically wince, that record themselves as karma in our mindstream.

And the amazing thing is that with just a little work we can tone down and eventually remove those reactions and stop recording so much karma. And the byproduct of that is that our mind gradually clears up and we become increasingly more aware. In other words, this is a method to remove the effects of our "bad" karma and to stop recording it. And that is something to consider.

Another plus is that this technique is not rocket science. Anyone can do it and getting started is as easy as your next negative reaction, which probably will be coming along any second. And unlike many forms of meditation training, we can see and experience our progress with Reaction Tong-Len right away, on the spot. It is a get-paid-as-you-go practice. As we come to terms with each reaction, we can allow the mind to just rest in the space or gap that appears as we own our reactions and they lessen in strength. We embrace them as opportunities.

And since the process is pretty much instantaneous, we are not losing any time. In fact, we gain time because we are not embroiled in all the wincing, bobbing & weaving, and dodging that we usually do when we react negatively to something. We accumulate time and awareness as we go along.

As to how this method differs from its big brother Tong-Len, Reaction Tong-Len is all about the Self and does not involve others as so many dharma practices do. The Buddhists are very clear that until we enlighten ourselves, we cannot enlighten others.

Reaction Toning is like that old kid's game of Pick-Up-Sticks, gradually removing our own obscurations, one-by-one. And what is being removed through Reaction Toning is just that which separates us from others, all of the harsh criticism, bias, prejudice, etc., which is mostly directed at other people. So, Reaction Toning is about removing the "other" in our own self, which translates to an ever more inclusive embrace of everything "else" -- the end of dualism.

Tong-Len

The Alchemy of Reaction



by Michael Erlewine

THE COMMON PRELIMINARIES: THE FOUR REVERSALS

August 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the next few blogs let's look at the Common Preliminaries, which are also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma," "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind," or just "The Four Thoughts." They are sometimes called "The Four Reminders" and "The Four Reversals." However you want to spell it, the import is that these four thoughts or concepts are capable of turning us away from our everyday distractions toward discovering the actual nature of our mind. And that is the whole point of dharma practice.

They are termed the Common Preliminaries because they are common to all forms of Tibetan Buddhism and they go before any other practices. By "go before" it is meant that before you begin any dharma practice, one should review the Four Thoughts. And by "review," it is not meant to simply read through them, but rather to bring their import to mind, as in: get serious about them. In other words, we usually have to turn our mind away from our everyday preoccupations in order to get anything done dharmawise. So we have to actually contemplate these four thoughts as they pertain to us.

I was raised Roman Catholic, so I was used to things such as the Ten Commandments and the like. But the

Four Thoughts are not written in stone somewhere; rather they are inherently inscribed into our mind, already an intrinsic part of who we are. All we have to do is to become aware of them.

In fact, a large part of why I originally became serious about Buddhism was because when I encountered the Four Thoughts, I was already instinctively familiar with them and had been thinking the same things myself. They were as natural as anything I knew and I already was thinking about them much of the time. So, for me these four thoughts were a sign that Buddhism is something that I could easily understand, and that proved to be true.

And unlike the Ten Commandments, which are imperatives, the Four Thoughts are meant to serve as just reminders of something we intuitively already know, at least the first three of them. These four thoughts were how Buddhism first caught my attention and what flagged me down in the first place. It was like finding my own form of religion, although I consider Buddhism more of a psychology than a religion, but you get what I mean.

As I have written in previous blogs, the Four Thoughts were not only my introduction to Buddhism as a newbie. When, after a great many years of practice, I finally was ready to start learning Mahamudra Meditation, said to be the tip of the top of meditation practices in our lineage, the first thing I was told is to spend some time once again on the Four Thoughts. I then spent something like three years working just with those four thoughts. They are that important.

So, as they say, without further ado, let's look at the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma. We will do this in the next few blogs, but as we go in, here are the Four Thoughts as I originally encountered them. This is how they appear in the Tibetan practice sadhanas:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS

(1) This Precious Human Birth

First,
This precious human birth,
So favorable for the practice of the dharma,
Is hard to obtain and easily lost.
At this time,
I must make this meaningful.

(2) Impermanence and Death

Second,
The world and all its inhabitants are impermanent.
In particular,
The life of each being is like a water bubble.
It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.
As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time,
I must practice now with diligence.

(3) Karma and its Consequences

Third,
At death there is no freedom,
And karma takes its course.
As I create my own karma,
I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action,
And always devote my time to wholesome action.

With this in mind,
I must observe my mind-stream each day.

(4) The Shortcomings of Samsara

Fourth,
Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to
my death,
The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of
samsara,
Cause me continual torment by means of the three
sufferings.
I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain
enlightenment.

As mentioned, it was the Four Thoughts that got my attention when I first encountered Buddhism. They indeed turn my mind. I had looked into many spiritual directions, had read about the trinity of this and the sacredness of that religion, all of which seemed so abstract to me, so distant and other-worldly – a world I did not know. When I came across the Four Thoughts, they seemed so down to earth, so very natural. In fact they made clear to me what I had pretty much come up with on my own. They spoke right to the heart. They were better than any religion I knew and I had some experience with organized religion.

Having been raised Catholic, I went to Catholic school for a while, was an altar boy, learned church Latin – the works. But I left that. I never had a quarrel with Christ (still don't!), but organized religion and the behavior of its authorities appeared arbitrary and cruel to me. It lacked the intimacy laced with the taste of

blood or reality that Mother Nature showed me – something real. Enough said.

That First Thought, that “life is precious,” did not need to be explained to me. I had always thought that my life was precious and hoped that I might be put to some good use and not just wasted. And here was an acknowledged spiritual direction telling me straight out that my life was precious. I just inhaled it. And that was just the First Thought.

It was the Second Thought that struck me to the core, impermanence. Death and impermanence had always hovered just out of eyesight in the peripheral vision of my life. I had never looked it straight in the eye and here was an instruction to do just that. There was nothing churchy or ‘clergy’ about this. It was what was always in the back of my mind anyway, part of what I sensed to be true. Mother Nature had always confirmed this.

And the idea of rebirth (that not only had we lived before and would again, but had done this innumerable times) was more than I could hope for. After all, I was raised with the deep impression that (as the beer commercial says) “we only go around once” and that without warning we are tossed into this world and have to figure it out (heaven or hell) on our own in one shot.

It took years for me to realize that the great majority of people in the world believe in rebirth and still more years before I dared believe it myself, and that only those of us here in the West are stuck in the view that at our core, beneath everything, we are sinners.

The Buddhists teach just the opposite: that our obscurations, our so-called “sins” are just on the surface and that beneath that we all have Buddha Nature. All we have to do is to become aware of this by removing our obscurations. After all, the word “Buddha” simply means “awareness” or “the one who is aware.”

It seemed too good to be true. But when I began meeting these high Tibetan lamas and rinpoches, arguably the most authentic authorities I have even known, they spoke of rebirth as a fact, as a personal experience and not as an abstract idea. Here were authorities who actually were authorities. Imagine that!

And it was those Four Thoughts that first got my attention, that turned my mind or that I recognized without a doubt to be the truth as I already dimly knew it. All I had to do was to work on removing my own obscurations, which is what mind training or ‘meditation’ is all about.

Tomorrow, and in succeeding blogs, I will describe each of the four thoughts in more detail.

THE FIRST THOUGHT: PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH

August 8, 2015

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First,
This precious human birth,
So favorable for the practice of the dharma,
Is hard to obtain and easily lost.
At this time,
I must make this meaningful.

The First Reversal or first “Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma” is the precious human birth. I have been to Tibet, China, India, Nepal, etc. and I have watched the lamas carefully brushing mosquitoes off their arms, so I know that Buddhists value all sentient beings, even gnats and mosquitoes. In Nepal I was told you get life in prison if you hit and kill a cow with your car, and there are cows wandering everywhere in the streets over there - that kind of thing. How “foreign” to those of us over here in America.

The Buddhists are even more concerned with human life. And while all human life is to be treasured, Tibetan Buddhists reserve the words “precious human life” to refer to those of us fortunate enough to be born physically able to learn the dharma (have the necessary senses) and in a country or place where the dharma is available. The fact that you are reading this here and now means that you are such person.

It might sound trite, but the Tibetan Rinpoche I have worked with for almost thirty-three years has reduced me to rapt attention (and tear-filled eyes) a number of times when he has gently and clearly pointed out to me that if we are here right now learning the dharma, we are one of the very, very few -- the 99th percentile. He states that to have the good fortune to be born in a place where (and time when) the dharma is actually taught means that we have accumulated an enormous amount of merit in our past lives to (no pun intended) 'merit' this.

He goes on to point out that many of us might be alive now, but born not in a country where the dharma is taught. Or we may glance over these words and never take them in or actually even be repelled by them entirely. Or we could have severe mental or physical problems that make learning the dharma impossible. Or we may be so obscured by anger and desire or just busy with nonessentials that there is no way we can overcome our condition enough to actually hear and practice the dharma. We don't get it.

His point seemed to be that if we are open to these concepts, we already have come a very long way and that in our past lives we have somehow accumulated enough merit to deserve such a precious human birth as we have now rather than some other birth, like an animal, in which bewilderment and desire may cloud any other possibilities. In other words: in our own way we already have great merit. That's the idea.

And in Tibetan Buddhism, as I mentioned in a blog not too long ago, they put great value on the concept of motherhood. In fact they say that all beings (not just human beings) have been our mother in past

lives and have given birth to us, wiped our bottoms, and cared for us like no one else ever would. Every being has been our mother and we have been the mother of every being. I grant you that this concept is foreign to those of us here in the west and takes real time to sink in, that we are all that close. Every Tibetan is raised with this thought. Anyway, you get the point.

Buddhists feel that all life is sacred and that this precious human life in particular is a rare opportunity to be able to hear and practice the dharma, the path to greater awareness of our own mind. In this short blog it is difficult to present in enough detail the First Thought That Turns the Mind, how very precious our life is and how each of us wants to make it count for something and for it not to be wasted.

In summary, the first of the four thoughts is that this human life we have is precious and rare, hard to come by. It should not be wasted. Buddhists believe that all life is precious, not only that of every last human being, but all the way down the tree of life to the very tiniest sentient beings, perhaps some kind of microbe. All sentient beings are precious. Life itself is precious, human life in particular, because as humans we can have the opportunity to encounter and learn the dharma. Animals can't do that.

This first of the four thoughts instantly rang a bell with me the moment I heard it because internally I had always felt the same way. I worried about wasting my life, having it amount to nothing. I wanted to be used up in some meaningful way, for this life I live to count toward something.

My point here is that I became a Buddhist, not because of rules and thoughts laid on me from on high, but rather I discovered that I already was (and always had been) a Buddhist. I just didn't know it.

The Four Thoughts made perfect sense because they had already always been on my mind anyway, ideas like not wasting my life, coming to terms with my eventual death, watching the results of my actions, and hoping to find ways to wake up from the rat race I often found myself in.

None of this was news. This was my life.

THE SECOND THOUGHT: IMPERMANENCE

August 9, 2015

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Second,
This world and all its inhabitants are impermanent, In particular,
The life of each being is like a water bubble,
It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.
As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time,
I must practice now with diligence.

Impermanence is a fact worth our consideration. Of the four reversals (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma) the best known of course is the second one, "Impermanence," but it is also the most ignored -- our great ignorance. Ignorance can also be willful, as in "to ignore." We agree to ignore what we find too hard to remember.

It is a cliché that most of us act like we are going to live forever and it takes some life-shattering experience (the death of a loved one?) to remind us that death is perhaps the one thing we do know for certain. However, our eventual impermanence is something that we tend to acknowledge only when put on the spot. Otherwise, it is unspoken.

I call impermanence the "smelling salts of the dharma," because even a little whiff of it wakes us up to the actual reality. The great Tibetan Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa once opened an evening talk with

these words: “Some of us will die soon, the rest a little later.”

Steve Jobs, who was a practicing Buddhist, was very aware of the Four Thoughts, in particular of the thought of impermanence since he was dying of cancer. It is said that his awareness of his mortality (the Second Reversal) kept him focused almost mono-maniacally on perfecting the iPhone and the iPad. At least that’s what I understand. In a eulogy read by his sister at his funeral she said that Jobs had “achieved death” and that his last words were “Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.”

This is why these are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” because only they are strong enough medicine, or remedy enough, to tear our attention away from our often mindless day-to-day business. Only these four thoughts are capable of turning the mind from its freight-train rush at nowhere to an awareness of what is important.

Now, let's look at the thought of impermanence, so appropriately listed as the second thought, because we all have second (and further) thoughts about death and impermanence. The Buddhists state that this universe and everything in it is impermanent, and moreover that the lives of beings are fragile like bubbles on the surface of water.

Nothing lasts forever. Even the hardest diamond-like substances eventually wear themselves out of time and into essence. Any of us over thirty have at least begun to realize impermanence and those of us over sixty have probably begun to be humbled by it. And I

expect to become increasingly more aware of impermanence to the very end.

The goal of considering our impermanence is not to have us huddle in a corner afraid of our impending death. Rather it is to realize that all that we have, including our entire self, is ephemeral. It will not last.

Instead of being paralyzed in fear and fruitless worry, our time is better spent working on those things we do take with us when we die, like our karma, any merit we may have accumulated, and our potential awareness of the true nature of the mind. These are treasures that survive the death of the body and the inevitable abandonment of the Self.

In my opinion there is no better teacher and constant reminder of our own impermanence than Mother Nature. She treats every sentient being absolutely equally and never blinks when showing us exactly where things are at. For me, even a morning walk can suffice.

It can be as simple as a country road filled with night-crawlers struggling to get across the tarmac before the rising sun fries them to a crisp... or the huge Luna Moth fluttering to seek refuge in a tree after a long night, when a passing bird swoops down to make a meal of it. The list of these events is endless.

Most living beings struggle to avoid being eaten, while at the same time struggling to find some other critter to eat. I mean, the writing is on the wall my friends, if we will just read it. Nature is a harsh mistress indeed. And we are subject to Mother Nature (the laws of physics) from the moment we are born.

Impermanence informs us that our fear of death is only adding insult to the perceived injury of death itself. I am reminded of that great film by director Arthur Penn, "Mickey One," a Kafkaesque study of paranoia, where the protagonist (played by Warren Beatty) has to choose between, as he puts it, the "crush out" or the "fade out." I put it this way: we can masochistically wait until the forces of time drag us to our eventual fate or we can stand up and look fate in the eye. We can choose to go to meet our maker.

I favor the second option over being dragged kicking and screaming to the end of life. I would rather learn to become increasingly aware of the nature of the mind (and thus of the nature of death itself).

A whiff of impermanence, as I like to say, is the smelling-salts of the dharma. It is one of those four reminders or thoughts capable of waking us from our tendency to snooze our lives. A close brush with death sobers up even the most jaded of us rather quickly.

THE THIRD THOUGHT: KARMA

August 10, 2015

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Third,
At death there is no freedom,
Karma takes its course,
As I create my own karma,
I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action.
With this in mind,
I must observe my mindstream each day.

Karma has been a buzz word in the West for decades, gradually working its way into the popular idiom. What is meant by karma I am sure varies widely, but the basic idea is that for every action there is a reaction, for every statement, a response.

And, yes, there is good and bad karma, although what we worry about as bad karma may not be what really takes a toll. The Ten Commandments in the Bible are definitely karma producing, when they are violated, but habitual micro-karma appears to be even more overwhelming for us in the long run.

Of course actions like killing and stealing create what we could agree is bad karma, but what really adds up is the gradual accumulation of low-level karma due to our own thought processes. Let me give an example.

You might say something accidentally (or purposefully) that hurts my feelings. I walk away from

our conversation thinking about what you said, going over and over it in my mind, all the time recording this in my mindstream. This might go on for hours, all day, or even persist for weeks on end. Every time I review it in my mind, I am inscribing this event deeper and deeper in my mind, digging a groove until it becomes a trench. This too is karma, big time.

And this particular kind of micro-karma really adds up. It not only obscures our mind as it goes down, but like all karma, it has an afterlife. It grows and eventually ripens in our mind, creating even more obscuration. And unfortunately, most of us do this all the time, day in and day out. And it is mindless, meaning we are not even aware of it. Or we may be dimly aware of it, but think nothing of it.

One concept to take to heart is that karma, large or small, is infallible. What goes up, comes down, and what goes down in our mindstream will eventually come up as ripened karma. You can count on it. As they say, "You can take it to the bank."

What was harder for me to understand, at least in the beginning, is that karma is infinitesimally fine, as exact as exact can be. And it is not just limited to what we might have a conscience about. Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to karma. You don't have to be aware that you are creating "bad" karma to accumulate it. This should be obvious to any reasonable person. Just consider what various societies (in particular our own) are accumulating. Look around you. Global warming and ozone holes are probably examples of collective karma that the entire earth is accumulating, whether or not we are aware of it, whether we believe in it or not. Like the

proverbial ostrich, we can stick our heads in the sand, but the clock of karma ticks on nevertheless.

My point here is that karma does not only depend on our ability to distinguish right from wrong, although "intent" is important. It is way finer (and more insidious) than that. Karma goes beyond ourselves (the Self), so great care is required when considering actions, like each and every one of them.

Not to upset you, but in evaluating actions, we can't just assume we have good sense when it comes to our actions and the karma they accumulate. After all, we are not examining the world outside ourselves, but in mind training we are examining the mind itself (our attitude) that projects this world around us. Even a tiny change in attitude (a slip of the mind) can produce a big change in how we see things, and influence our actions one way or the other.

My point here is that we may want to err on the safe side of karma, and not just assume that our mind (just as it came out of the box) is good-to-go, and that we actually know what is best for us and can tell the good from the bad. Can we? We may be walking a high-wire karmic tightrope hundreds of feet in the air and not even know it. That's how vulnerable we are in this area.

The older I get, the more I realize that my approach to karma has been way too general and that, while avoiding the "big-bad actions," I have consistently engaged in a myriad of smaller karmic actions (of which I am only somewhat aware) that I never take very seriously. And karma sneaks up on you.

And while I don't want to become a mind-Nazi to my own life by second-guessing every last decision, I need to clean up my actions and stop laying waste to my own potential clarity through micro-karmic accumulation.

To use a phrase from Aleister Crowley: "To snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel." In this analogy, I have to reverse Crowley's phrase to something like: While watching to avoid the big karmic mistakes, I habitually (and often consciously) accumulate and record an avalanche of micro-karma, my every passing reaction, like and dislike.

It is possible to stop recording all this micro-karma, but it takes some serious mind training, which I have detailed elsewhere, i.e. Reaction Tong-len. Suffice it to say that it involves relaxing the mind and learning to recognize and drop the obsessive thoughts or see through them. If you don't record them, the karma does not accumulate. Less karma accumulation means less obscuration. Less obscuration means greater clarity. It is that simple, but easier said than done.

In this short blog I have only scratched the surface of this topic. The bottom line is that it would help if we can become more aware of what we are doing in each and every action. As we better understand the laws of karma, we stop acting like the bull in a china shop and suddenly find ourselves walking on tiptoe.

I am reminded of the cliché often used to explain chaos theory, that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil sets off a tornado in Texas. Karma is sensitive like that.

THE FOURTH THOUGHT: SAMBARA

August 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

(1) The Shortcomings of Samsara

“Fourth,
Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to
my death,
The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of
samsara cause me continual torment by means of the
three sufferings.
I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain
enlightenment.”

The language is a little strong, especially that fourth thought. I also spent a few years on these same four thoughts when I seriously begin to study and practice Mahamudra meditation. They were all I needed to get my mind right, with one exception, which is what I want to discuss here, and that was the fourth thought, the one about the shortcomings of Samsara, you know, the problems with this world we live in.

Sure, I understood it somewhat, but I also found that I wanted to edit it a bit, give my own interpretation. I insisted on having a little more wiggle-room, which is not a good sign with dharma teachings. For some reason I could not as deeply embrace it as I had the first three thoughts.

"The Shortcomings of Samsara," Samsara being this cyclic world of existence we all find ourselves embedded in – our ups and downs. Sometimes the fourth thought is translated as "Revulsion at Samsara," suggesting that we reach a state of being repelled by this world. Well, I didn't like that translation at all, the idea of being revolted by this world, because in so many ways I love this world. So I kind of translated it for myself as "I will never get my ducks all in a row." In other words, we can't game the system. Not only does death claim each one of us (second thought) but, like a casino, the odds are in the house's favor (fourth thought). We will never game life. It games us, if only because we lose everything mortal at death.

Now that was hard for me to accept, because I am reasonably clever and somehow thought that at least I could game the system. I could probably get all my ducks in a row, at least enough to be content, if not happy. But I failed to understand one basic principle, and that was compassion.

Compassion is like what happens when a drop of water hits the surface of a still pond; a ring of concentric circles gradually spreads out embracing more and more of the pond. Compassion grows and is ever more embracing, the more realized we become. It is a simple law of nature, but one I failed to understand coming in.

Way back then, it was just me. I was on my own and could take care of myself, and everyone else was in the same boat, taking care of themselves. This was before I had a wife, before I had kids, before I had grandkids, and before I was that much interested in

the welfare of my fellow travelers in this world we live in. That was a simple mistake (miss-take).

Like the ever-widening embrace of those concentric circles in the pond when a drop of water falls, my care for just me, myself, and I gradually broadened to include a wife, kids, grandkids, friends, co-workers, and more. It was no longer just me I cared about.

I knew little to nothing about compassion early on. Sure I felt compassion for the animals that suffered in the harsh Michigan winters, and beings like that, but people? I didn't dare start caring about people. That was just too much responsibility for essentially a kid, a kid that, as concerns compassion, refused to grow up.

My point is that as compassion grows, and as it does with age and experience, our mandala or the envelope of what we can embrace and care for widens. It becomes ever more inclusive. It is no longer just myself that I care for, whether I am personally content or not, but all of those I have come to know and love. How is it with them?

Sure, I can try to maintain a cheery attitude when all is well with me, while others I love around me are suffering and in trouble. My previous attitude was something like "Of course I wish everyone well, but not at the expense of my feeling content" – that sort of thing. But I find that this kind of attitude does not extend to my family, to my wife, kids, and grandkids. When they are hurting, I am hurting. And where does the line stop? The simple truth is that it does not stop unless we stop growing inside.

This simple principle is what leads to what is called the Bodhisattva Vow, the vow (as Buddhists point out) to not find peace until every last being is enlightened and finds peace. I don't see there is a choice here. The moment we care or feel compassion for at least one other person (or being) in the world, our choice is made for us. There is no turning back. We are ultimately all bodhisattvas in the making, like it or not...

So at my age I finally begin to understand that "Revulsion at Samsara" is a natural correlate to having compassion. How can I be happy if one of my family or friends is deeply suffering? The bottom line is that I can't, not if I care, and I do.

When I witness the sufferings of those around me, I get world-weary, just tired of ignoring all the suffering in the world, and I feel less game, not willing to just go along with my normal attachments, not feeding them so much.

I guess what I am saying is that, at long last, I am beginning to understand that "Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind," the "Revulsion of Samsara," this world and its shortcomings.

As John Donne said: "No Man (or Woman) is an island."

In summary, it was that fourth thought that gave me pause. What was that all about?

To repeat, this fourth thought was hard for me to grasp, not because it actually is that difficult to understand, but because like years ago when I first

tried to give up smoking or coffee, inside of me I did not yet really want to give them up, so my non-understanding was driven by my secret joy in still pursuing them. That secret joy had to be plumbed to the very bottom and found to be what was causing me real physical suffering before I could tear myself away from it. And it took me a long time. I was sure that there was a backdoor to life, a way out. This is not uncommon.

With that fourth thought that turns the mind, the idea is that life is inherently undependable and the fact that this cyclic existence we are attached to (life as we know it) will eventually wear us down and out of memory before we figure it all out, before we actually get all our ducks in a row. But we keep trying anyway. Only we know if we are successful.

And with the end of life, with death, there is no such thing as success, except learning to fail successfully. That is as close as we come.

Anyway, I was certain that I could somehow game the system and, in fact, get all my ducks in a row. I could master life so that it behaved as I wanted it. All around me, if I looked, other people were suffering, struggling, dying, etc., but somehow I knew I was the exception and that I (perhaps only me) could beat the system. I could make it all come out right. If I was only good enough, worked hard enough, and was careful enough to think of everything, that then, for me at least, life could be mastered. It all could be good. I could have only the high parts of the cycle and escape from the low sides of life's cycles that I repeatedly found myself mired in and unhappy about.

We each have to find out for ourselves if life is cyclic. Does your life go up and then down, and around again? If it does, we go with it, like it or not. And so on, which brings me to my point here:

Life can't be rigged, no matter how smart we are. "Smart" is not the same as intelligent. A wound smarts. Life can't be taken by force, by cleverness, by scheming, planning, or any other approach than that taken by the historical Buddha, which is why he took it. And that approach or path is "awareness." In fact the word "Buddha," in ancient Sanskrit, simply means "aware one" or "awakened one." It is all a question of awareness. We are all aware, but to what degree?

The Buddha's entire path or method, which is called the "dharma" is about one thing only, waking up, becoming more aware so that we can respond appropriately to the ups and downs of the life we now live, so that we can learn to fail successfully as life ends, which it, of course, eventually will.

Without that awareness, we are subject to being torn apart by the tides and cycles of life, a piece at a time, and can't seem to control it, can't get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak.

So the point is that in my priority list, at the top of that list, before everything else, is the need to develop increased awareness, so that I can respond to the exigencies of life that confront me daily in a useful and successful manner.

It came as a real shock to me to learn from the highest Tibetan lamas that we have about zero chance of figuring out how to become aware of the

true nature of our mind and existence WITHOUT guidance and help. In fact, they use this analogy, which was a show-stopper for me:

Imagine the entire earth covered by water. Into this we toss an inner tube with a single hole in it. Winds from the four quarters would push this tube every which way, constantly. In that ocean of water is one blind turtle that comes to the surface only once in a hundred years and pokes his head out. How long will it take for that turtle, as it surfaces, to coincidentally stick his head through the center of the inner tube?

That is how long it will take us, life after life, to discover the true nature of the mind and be able to respond to life in a workable and enlightened way...WITHOUT a guide from someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind.

That is something to think about. We need help to learn how to become more aware. We need someone to point out to us how the mind works.

One last comment that points out how we may not yet be sensitive enough to grasp the traditional concept of the “revulsion of Samsara.” This excerpt is from a teaching by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, translated by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso:

“It says in the commentary on The Abhidharmakosha, If a hair were to be placed in the palm of our hand, we would not notice it particularly and certainly would not experience it as painful. But if the same hair were to be stuck in our eye, we would not only notice it, we would experience it as uncomfortable and even painful. The childish are like those with the hair in the

palms of their hands. They do not realize or recognize pervasive suffering. Aryas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats are like those with the hair in our eyes. They see pervasive suffering as suffering.”

So, the idea here is that we, you and I, are not sensitive enough to what is called the all-pervasive suffering around us. We are the “childish,” with the hair in the palm of our hands, not aware enough to experience it as a hair in our eye. That is why we feel so little “revulsion.” If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon.

THE HARVEST GATHERING 2015

September 15, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It's once a year and there is nothing else like it. I have been coming to the Gathering for over ten years, at least. It is the most like the 1960s I have ever experienced, aside from the Sixties themselves. If you can't stand to meet new people and hug and be hugged, it is best not to come. I'm not the great hugger myself, but I am learning.

Here is a photo of me (very early in the morning) a couple of years ago offering meditation instruction at the Harvest Gathering. I will be doing that this year too. The gathering is always the third weekend in September, this year the 18th, 19th, and 20th (this coming weekend), three days (and nights) of music on four concert stages and other small venues and workshops. Last year there were something like 104 bands and this year I believe it is 136 groups; music of all kinds. And part of what makes it special is that most of these musicians were featured performers all summer at the major festivals. That is why the Harvest is called a gathering and not just another festival. This even is way beyond any festival; trust me. And it's like family.

The Harvest Gathering is mostly attended by hundreds and hundreds of musicians, who come to play for and with each other. That's how it started out, a place to let your hair down after a busy festival

season. It used to be by invite only, but in recent years anyone can now come to watch, look, and listen to this incredible music. It's the most music all of the time. The gathering takes place on a spacious 180 acres of beautiful land, with a working sawmill, honey house, and maple sugar shack. It is held on land owned by Bob Bernard, the father of my son-in-law Seth Bernard. And, although a large staff of volunteers make this happen, the Harvest Gathering is produced by Seth Bernard and my daughter May.

You can see acts like Josh Davis (of The Voice), plus my daughter May Erlewine and the Moonlighters, and literally many hundreds of other musicians. I will be there the whole time, because I am bringing and taking care of Marc Silber, the incredible guitarist from the West Coast. I will be commandeering a golf cart just for Marc and myself, although I may drive my grand-kids around in it. I know Emma loves to ride around with me. Most of my family and grandkids also will be there.

I will also be giving two meditation workshops at 9 AM on Saturday and Sunday morning at a place in the woods called Mattie's Circle. At other times, I will just be there, so come and hang out with me, because I will have the time to kick back.

All kinds of great organic and natural foods are served, and many workshops, circles, etc. on all kinds of topics are available. There is even a farm market right on site, with vendors from all over Michigan, plus vendors of alternative clothing and all kinds of other stuff. And food? All lots of it and most organic or natural. As of a couple days ago, I believe there are still tickets, and I know you will never, not ever, forget

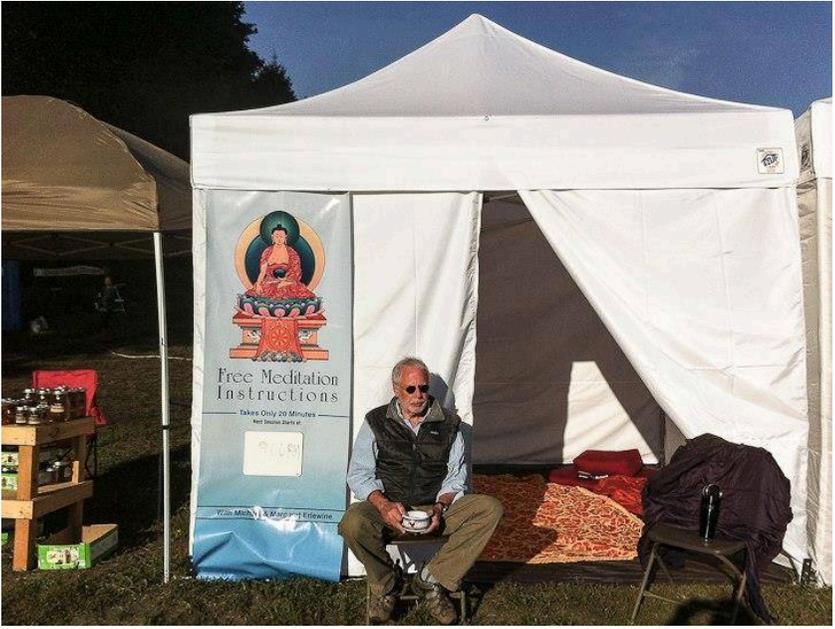
the experience. There are usually a couple thousand people there, but it is spread out, with lots of room. It runs all day and deep into the night. Most people camp out, but there are motels all around for those who are not campers.

As mentioned, I will be there with Marc Silber. I have known him more than fifty years and he came out of the folk scene I did back in the late 1950s, where we all hung out with players like Dylan and all that.

Marc is, bar none, the finest finger-picking folk guitarist living today. His music is so pure. He plays it like we all did back then, only better than we ever could. Really, my Facebook Friends, at least SOME of you could say, screw it, take a couple days off (time out) and live some of this communal music-life here with us. It's an unforgettable experience, which is why I keep going back every year. They also need volunteers!

Here is more information:

<http://www.earthworkharvestgathering.com/>



THE ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO DHARMA STUFF: RUPAS (STATUES)

July 15, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I want to share the beginning of a new series of books titled “The Illustrated Guide to Dharma Stuff.” Dharma stuff is bound to happen to anyone who starts to practice the dharma. It just happens. If you are working with Tibetan Buddhism it happens floridly and vividly, at least it did in my case. This book is about rupas, the statues that Tibetans use to represent different great saints and certain qualities.

What are these statues or rupas representative of? They are not “strange gods” any more than a statue of Jesus is a strange god. Foreign? Yes indeed, but not idol worship or anything heathen unless we want to admit that Christian statues are the same when viewed through the eyes of foreigners.

There are two types of Tibetan figurines, ones (like the historical Buddha) that are representative of people who actually lived and walked the earth, and others that represent qualities like kindness or loving compassion, health and healing, wealth, and so on. Then, of course, there are the fierce wrathful dharma-protector statues that westerners might confuse with some kind of demon worship.

The wrathful protector deities do just that, protect humanity from those forces that would weaken or

destroy the dharma. It would be like if here in the west we had representations (statues) for natural laws like gravity, which if we were to go against, would destroy us. We don't break gravity's laws. Dharmapalas protect the dharma laws.

Rupas

Although some rupas were actually made in Tibet, they tend to be crude compared to the ones crafted in Nepal, especially in the area of Patan in the Kathmandu Valley. It is in Nepal that the craft of rupa making reached its greatest height and it was customary for Nepalese statues to then make their way into Tibet. It is not true that all of these fine statues originated in Tibet.

In fact, it was not until the first century AD that representations of the Buddha became common in India. Although Buddhist representations were first made of stone and wood, they increasingly began to be made of metal, in particular copper. The main method of creating rupas was what is called the "Lost Wax" process, where the statues are first made from beeswax. The wax figurines are then covered with clay and dried in the sun for many weeks, at which time the wax is removed by melting and the resulting hollow space is filled with molten metal. The resulting rupa was then removed by carefully breaking away the clay mold. That is how the basic Nepalese rupa is obtained.

Next, a wide variety of fine details are hand-chiseled into the hardened metal, which can take many days, after which various layers of polish to finish the statue. And finally, some rupas are painted with enamel and

decorated with semi-precious stones. If the rupa is copper, it may be gilded with gold plate or gilded with gold. Gold-plated images produce the best effect, with their soft burnished look, while the more recent “gilding” with gold, applied with a mercury-process, produces a harsh overly-bright look that smacks of cheapness.

Unfortunately, the entire rupa industry in Nepal is undergoing vast change, moving more to making cheaper imitations of a once very detailed process. Additionally, the choice of what deities are available has shrunk until the lesser known deities must be special-ordered, if they can be obtained at all.

Generally, only copper statues are gilded or plated with gold, and many collectors prefer a rupa with no plating whatsoever, and these un-plated rupas are generally known by the name of “fine.”

The rupas shown here are all from our meditation center, the Heart Center KKSG (Karma Kagyu Study Group), where they appear as part of a number of shrines we have. Some of these rupas are middling expensive, and some are not. The idea here is to show readers a general overview of what decent rupas look like up close. These are hi-res photos. It is taught that, of course, even the worst-looking image deserves our respect. And so it does.

However, I have yet to see any Tibetan Buddhists, either here or in Tibet, not choose the finest they can afford. Here is the link to this 104 page free ebook:

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/illustrated-guide-to-dharma-stuff-rupas>

The Illustrated Guide to
Dharma Stuff

by Michael Erlewine



Rupas

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

July 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I just ran this piece the other day, but I buried it under a bunch of photos that were not related and as a sub-theme. Not a good idea. So, I apologize for running it again (I have never done this before), but it is so crucial to dharma practice, that I worry that you may not have read it or fully taken it to heart. The dharma in my experience is built on repetition, do please take another look.]

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

The Tibetan Buddhists define the Two Accumulations as "Merit" and "Awareness," and the two work together as hand and glove, as we shall see. By "Merit" they mean meritorious actions, more commonly called "Skillful Means," which is just what it says, learning to act skillfully as opposed to making a

mess of things. Of course, it is nice to be skillful, but there is much more to being skillful than just making a neat job of it.

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

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

And here comes the “recursion,” the main point of this explanation. By acting ever more skillfully, we add fewer and fewer obscurations, thus becoming more increasingly more aware. And... with more awareness we can better see clearer to act still more skillfully yet, which generates even more awareness, and thus the recursion. In essence we have a “dharma machine” which is traditionally called, as pointed out, the “Two Accumulations”. This dharma engine, so to speak, by using skillful means generates (by iteration) ever more awareness, which is then used to be even more skillful yet, and so on, ad infinitum. This is one of our

tickets to ride in dharma practice, an example of what is called relative-truth that will propel us on our journey to awakening. This is why the Zen Buddhists not only practice on the cushion with care, but make a point of skillfully executing any action throughout the day if they can be mindful enough.

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

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

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

However, if we will concentrate and keep rubbing those sticks (gathering the two accumulations), we will eventually reach a point when fire suddenly appears. That is the point of performing the Two Accumulations to begin with. When this fire happens, it is called “Recognition,” and it refers to our recognizing the “True Nature of the Mind.” Once that

takes place, once we get a real glimpse of the nature of our own mind, we spontaneously generate compassion and achieve what is called “Bodhicitta,” which, like fusion, gives us an endless supply of devoted energy to further enlighten ourselves so that we can be of use to others. It is the ‘sine qua non’ of Buddhist practice, the fire in the belly, that is unstoppable -- Bodhicitta.

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

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



THE MINIMISATION OF THE DHARMA

July 30, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

It took me a longer time to realize (and it came as a shock) that there could also be times we are born in where there are dharma teachings, but as lip-service only. No one had bothered to realize the teachings. For me, I first heard about this possibility from the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when he

called such a possibility “Spiritual Materialism,” as in his seminal book “Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism.” Meeting him in person only emphasized this for me, because his every action cut through the intellectualized view of Buddhism that I had acquired from late-night coffee (and cigarette) chats on the subject in the late 1950s. Buddhism and Ingmar Bergman films were popular topics back then.

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

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

Those very raw early days of the 1960s (and especially the 1970s), when the dharma was like a blowtorch igniting part of a generation, have since given way to the more cultured dharma scene that is now becoming quite popular. It is exactly what happens to politicians that make it into Washington’s

inner circle. They too often become part of the problem, rather than the solution they intended. It is no different with the dharma. It is simple call and response, which very much reminds me of what Wilhelm Reich pointed out in his radical book “The Murder of Christ.” Now there’s a book that pushes the limits of the Western mind.

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

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

With the Tibetan lineages, so much concern and effort go into what we could call authentic realization. And this explains why threshold events like Rinzai Zen’s

Kensho experience, what in Tibetan Buddhism is called “recognition” of the true nature of the mind, are so crucially important. Without those very clear thresholds, all these initially pure impulses are quickly incorporated into just what Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out, spiritual materialism of one kind or another, the intellectualization of the dharma -- understanding, but no accompanying realization. If indeed we are entering a dark age for the Dharma, I would take a page from Dylan Thomas and his words “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

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

THE ONSLAUGHT OF DEPRESSION

September 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I imagine that most all of us have some means of relaxing our mind. I can't imagine life without it. However, it would seem that very few of us have found a way to actually generate clarity, much less maintain it on a daily basis on our own. This, of course, is the province of meditation, and why it is so precious. It helps us keep a light on in the night of time.

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

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

Even Tranquility Meditation is difficult to learn properly, yet it is the basis for Insight Meditation, which is really where freedom begins.

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

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

THE PHYSICS OF AWARENESS

July 10, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

awareness diminishes in a one-to-one relationship. And there is a caveat.

Increased awareness, more than we now have, is a closed book for us. We have no idea what increased awareness is like because we have never experienced it. However, the whole idea of obscuration is more familiar. I have offered the following analogy (perhaps once too often), but it is a good way to understand this idea.

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

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

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

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

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

THE THREE SUFFERINGS

August 16, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

The Suffering of Suffering (dukkha-dukkha)

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

The Suffering of Change (viparinama-dukkha)

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

and go, they are an example of the suffering of change. Change as the only constant typifies this kind of suffering.

All-Pervasive Suffering (sankhara-dukkha)

The kind of suffering, “all-pervasive” suffering, is almost unknown to us and seldom understood. It refers to a kind of suffering that is characteristic of Samsara (cyclic existence) in general, and is often likened to a vast ocean of suffering we all float in. In my opinion, this is somewhat characteristic of the Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind, which is often called “Revulsion of Samsara.” This fourth thought always gave me trouble, like for about 40 years! Secretly, I love this world and did not cotton to the thought of being revulsed by it, to use an older version of the word revulsion. I seldom get to the point of revulsion of this world. Sure, maybe if someone close to me is suffering or dies, I tire of this world, but otherwise I am all ears.

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

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

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

“Pervasive suffering is something that we do not normally recognize. Pervasive suffering here refers to our unripened karmic imprints, of which we are not normally aware. We do not experience it as suffering because we are unaware of the karma that we have accumulated and we are therefore unaware of what we are headed toward. Aryas, arhats, bodhisattvas, and so forth do experience this as suffering because they can see the presence of ordinary beings’ karmic imprints and are therefore aware of where they are headed.”

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

So, the idea here is that we, you and I, are not sensitive enough to be aware of what is called the all-pervasive suffering in life. Everything looks pretty good to us. “What suffering?” is our response. We are

the “childish,” with the hair in the palm of our hands, not aware enough to experience it as a hair in our eye. That is why we feel so little “revulsion.” If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon. We have to trust those with realization who tell us that as we become more aware, we go behind the curtain of the Self and begin to see our normal state as suffering. We will then see that there is a low-level kind of suffering that we are all twisting and turning in, but which we are oblivious to. It occasionally manifests as ennui or, the way the dharma texts put it, “revulsion” of this world.

UH OH, IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR AGAIN

July 17, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As they say, it is better than the alternative. Here is an article on the birthday boy that came out in the local paper today, so I will run that instead of a blog. I don't like interviews for the reason that they always seem to misquote me. Now, this time I made the very nice young reporter promise me he would send the copy of my interview to me for review, which he kindly did. However, then either he or some higher up proceeded to rewrite parts of it, changing the meaning. I hate when that happens, so.... here is the interview, but I changed the parts that were misleading back to where I thought I had them or where they make more sense. And I can't say much for this photo of me in front of the Stupa in the back of our property; it sits right next to our shrine room. This photo is not going on my Timeline photos. But the good news is that my granddaughter Iris (and her mom May) are coming for my birthday party. And if there is one thing Iris loves it is to sing "Happy Birthday." She can sing me "Happy Birthday" and help me blow out the candles. That will be birthday present enough. Here is the interview:

BIG RAPIDS — Michael Erlewine can attest to the value of education, and not only the kind of education you get in a classroom. From hitchhiking with Bob

Dylan to publishing books about Buddhism and astrology, Erlewine's classroom is the world.

"I've always been pretty good at teaching myself stuff," the Big Rapids resident said. "I didn't like school. I went through 11 years of school thinking every day of what I would do when I got out. I finally just walked out and never finished school."

It's hard to connect the dots when observing the range of Erlewine's work over the years. He said he's driven by his passions, what he most loves, like music, dharma, astrology, photography, and popular culture.

"I just have a lot of interests and follow them all in a very determined way," he said.

Erlewine was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and raised mainly in Ann Arbor. He began the first of his numerous careers as a teenager in a herpetology lab at the University of Michigan. Herpetologists there took a liking to Erlewine, who figured out new ways for them to estimate the age of salamanders by measuring the concentric rings of growth in thin-bones of the skull (like in tree rings), rather than with a ruler .

In 1960, Erlewine left high school and began traveling. First to California with the hopes of becoming a Beatnik, at that time painting oils, then

back to Ann Arbor, where he met Bob Dylan. In 1961, Erlewine and Dylan, along with guitarist Perry Lederman, hitchhiked to places like New York City and Boston.

This was before Dylan had released an album, but Erlewine said he can remember standing on the side of the road listening to Dylan play “Baby Let Me Follow You Down.” Later on, Erlewine helped organize a concert for Dylan at the Michigan Union.

“I learned he was very bright and ambitious,” Erlewine said. “Dylan definitely knew who he was, even if others did not.

From 1965 to 1970 Erlewine was the lead-singer and played harmonica alongside his guitar-playing brother Dan in the blues band “The Prime Movers.” In 1966, James Osterberg (who would soon after become Iggy Pop) joined the band on drums.

“We called him Iguana for a while, but it was eventually shortened to Iggy and that stuck,” said Erlewine.

The Prime Movers started getting attention from record labels and opened for Cream at the Fillmore in San Francisco during the “Summer of Love” in 1967, but the band ultimately disbanded in the early 1970s to pursue other interests.

In 1969, Erlewine lent his skills on the harmonica to Bob Seger's debut album and hit, "Ramblin' Gamblin' Man."

In other aspects of his life, Erlewine is most notably an astrologer. In 1977, he developed Matrix Software, the first astrological computer software. His company is the second oldest software company still on the internet, the oldest being Microsoft. Erlewine has also published dozens books about astrology, film, dharma, and music, in particular blues. In 2011 his book "Blues in Black & White" was published by the University of Michigan Press and was one of the top 20 Michigan books of that year.

Erlewine's next pursuit was archiving. In 1991, he founded the All Music Guide, which would later become AllMusic.com, a database of music reviews and biographies, the largest collection of its kind even today.

"I felt popular culture should be treated as an important part of our lives," Erlewine said. "It deserved some kind of special venue."

AllMusic remains the largest collections of media content on the internet. In 1992 Erlewine launched AllMovie.com, a similar database of film history, one of the two largest databases of its kind. He went on to document rock n' roll concert posters and created the largest database of that material, which was accepted

as part of the permanent collection of the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan. Erlewine's astrology library was donated to the University of Illinois, the 4th largest library in the world as part of their permanent collection. And his collection of music CDs (over 600,000) is stored in a warehouse in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is recognized as an Internet pioneer, an archivist of popular culture, and had email in 1979.

Throughout his life's journey, Erlewine became increasingly interested in Tibetan Buddhism. In 1972, he and his wife, Margaret, founded the Heart Center in Ann Arbor and later moved to Big Rapids in 1980, where he has run a meditation center since the mid-1980s. Erlewine has published a vast number of articles, books and videos about astrology, photography, Buddhist teachings, meditation and Tibetan translations. He studied Buddhism in Tibet and China and has brought many high Tibetan rinpoches to his meditation center in Big Rapids, including Lama Karma Drodhul, who has been part of the Harvest Gathering each year in Lake City, Michigan.

"A lot of what I do these days is try to help people who are trying to learn meditation get past the obstacles in the transition from just practicing at meditation to actually meditating," Erlewine said. "Aside from Tranquility meditation, Insight meditation (for me) is better than music, better than astrology and better

than film -- anything. It puts me in touch with the nature of the mind beyond myself and teaches me to have mental clarity.” Erlewine meditates frequently and says he no longer needs to only sit on a cushion to practice. Like Zen meditation, meditation in daily action is part of his practice.

“People meditate to learn to let their mind rest naturally,” Erlewine said. “Once that happens, they learn through Insight meditation to be able to take any subject and go right to the heart or true nature of it.” Getting to the heart of a subject is what Erlewine seems to have done with not only meditation, but with all of his life’s endeavors.

Erlewine has penned many books (and videos) about macro photography and has a massive collection of classic rock concert posters. He also owns a recording studio near his home in Big Rapids, which he has made available to younger musicians at no cost. Erlewine is currently putting the finishing touches on a new book about Buddhist statues, which will soon be available with his other work on his website, dharmagrooves.com. He blogs on Facebook every day.

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LOCAL ALMANAC

Getting to the heart of everything

■ **Michael Erlewine lives a life of Buddhism, music and astrology**

By DEVIN ANDERSON
PIONEER STAFF WRITER

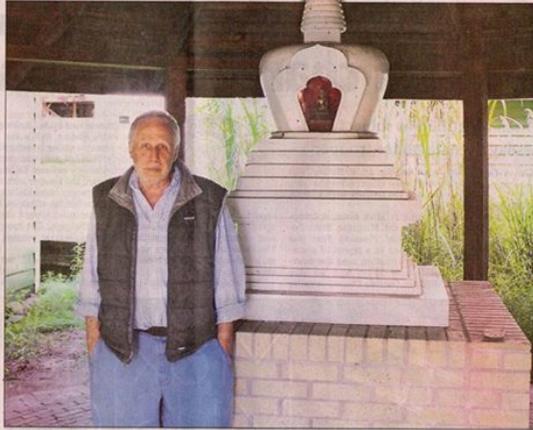
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STUPA: Michael Erlewine poses next to his Stupa, a Buddhist religious monument. (Pioneer photo/Devin Anderson)

UNUTTERABLE

September 8, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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

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

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

own minds, even though it is with us all the time. We don't recognize it!

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

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

The short answer is "not much" and the longer answer is where the classic "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma" come in, you know: how precious this human life is, the specter of impermanence, the inevitability of karma, and the utter undependability of this cyclic world existence. Those are all sticks, folks, not carrots. Apparently, something has to bring us down to earth before we can get serious enough to actually undertake dharma practice. And the bottom line here does not look so good.

It is this that makes religious or spiritual teachings so difficult to convey. We have no common reference point like: any real idea of what enlightenment would be like. Certainly the Christians work hard to paint a picture of what Heaven is like. If there is no immediate grasp and understanding on our part, then teachings can appear like preaching and the dharma becomes just one more thing for us to ignore. So how does the dharma propagate?

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

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

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

WHY WE CAN'T DO IT BY OURSELVES

September 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I hate to pause in the story I have been presenting, just when it is getting to the juicier parts, but when the impulse comes, I write, so we take a sidebar.]

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

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

most virile and destructive. How do we remedy ignorance and reach realization of some kind?

The teachings point out that it takes two things to solve this problem, first, a teacher or instructor who has actually realized the nature of the mind and can handle the Self much like one would handle a deadly poisonous snake (or an old cow). And second, a bond of sincere devotion and complete trust in our teacher, what is called by the Tibetans “Samaya.” The very idea that we can (or think we should) handle this by our self is flawed because, that very same Self that would do the handling is literally itself the problem personified. In addition, our Self-fixation is recursive and unable to point beyond, of course, itself -- our very Self. We have no other point of reference, thus the traditional “Pointing Out Instructions.”

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

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

I bother because there is a chance that, while words cannot correctly point at the nature of realization of the mind's nature, these same words may be able to at least discourage us from our current expectations, from assuming we know (or can ever know) anything about what we by definition do not know and are trying to achieve by our practice. We have to abandon expectations.

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

Imagining that you and I are going to just stumble on realization (like the recognition of the mind's true nature) in the dark night of time one fine day...will

never just “happen,” if we are to trust the teachings of the great Mahasiddhas. We each need to take that to heart, once and for all, with no “And, If, But, Or, or Nor, etc.” about it.

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

