DHARMA

The Intangibles

by Michael Erlewine

Dharma:

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THE INTANGIBLES

Meditation training is still quite new in this country. We are just getting the word out, so most of the emphasis is on the actual physical meditation technique itself, the bare bones, but there is more. Aside from the basic physical technique, there are what I sometimes call the "intangibles' – everything else. There is so much emphasis on learning the basic techniques of meditation that these intangibles are usually ignored until later on down the line. The problem with this is that these so-called "intangibles" are not just supplementary add-ons -- afterthoughts. Quite the contrary, they are crucial to the success of actually learning to meditate properly. That's the rub.

We can chalk this up, as mentioned, to the newness of it all, but that does not change the facts. The actual physical meditation technique is clearly very tangible, cut and dried. There is a correct way to do it, the method, while the intangibles have more to do with intent, enthusiasm, and a few other concepts that are new to Americans.

However, if you read the Tibetan Buddhist sources, those texts are all about the intangibles, about our intent, aspirations, dedication, and the like. Somehow we have put the cart before the horse, perhaps because these other intangible factors are too similar (and might be mistaken) for what passes as "religious" considerations. I really can't say why they are not taught along with the basic techniques from the get-go.

After we have practiced the basic meditation technique of Shamata for a while, we begin to discover the value and accent on all of these more intangible considerations. So what follows are a series of short articles on some of the so-called intangibles.

THE INTANGIBLES: CLINGING

One of the "intangible" concepts that we need to grasp is that of attachment or clinging. Touching my hand to a hot stove gets a reaction out of me, for sure, but that is not the kind of reaction I am looking at here. Instead, it is our instantaneous mental reactions to things, people, and events that are being discussed, the fact that we form attachments (judgments positive or negative) to objects we perceive as outside ourselves and then cling to them.

We instinctively want to pull those things we like closer to us and push those things we don't like away. The rest we ignore. This is what is meant by attachment or "clinging," when we like or dislike something. Buddhist mind training seeks to reduce and remove clinging and its biases so that we can see more clearly.

Our distracted mind is a seething mass of constant identification, of which we are aware only by our reactions. We are endlessly turned on or off by whatever catches our attention. We like this; we don't like that, or ignore it completely. Our hopes and fears color everything. This is called clinging or attachment.

It is the clinging itself that obscures our internal vision. By always pushing our biases this way or that, we gradually build up obscurations that dim out the light of the mind. Like mental cataracts, clinging-attachments increasingly blind us from recognizing the actual nature of the mind itself. We become myopic.

A common fear and misconception is that when we remove our attachments, we will somehow lose our

love or joy of life, the idea that Buddhists are non-biased, neither for nor against this or that (non-attached), and therefore somehow neutral to life itself – a vanilla or gray take on life.

In other words, if we cease identifying things and events as positive or negative through our attachment to them, does this remove them from our life. How could it? Only our clinging to them is gone. They are all still there and we can enjoy them as we will.

If I 'really' love chocolate ice cream and somehow manage to reduce my life-long attachment to it, does that mean I can no longer love chocolate ice cream? In other words, by gradually removing my attachments, does that take the fun out of life?

The answer is no. I still love chocolate ice cream, but my attachment or clinging to it has been reduced. I don't have to have it. If it is there I can enjoy it, even love it, but if it is not available I am OK with that too. Perhaps I will have some vanilla. By weakening our attachments we learn to enjoy what IS rather than what we think should or could be.

In fact we can enjoy both pleasant and unpleasant experiences without clinging to them, without attachment. Attachment simply refers to the energy and focus spent clinging to what we like and shunning what we don't like. Attachment differs from simple awareness of how things are by attempting to put a spin or bias on things. Our attachment (clinging) has nothing to do with the objects themselves, i.e. what we are attached to, whether positively or negatively.

Remove or lessen our attachment and the objects of our attachment remain for us to enjoy or experience without the clinging. In other words, we can enjoy what life brings us at the good times, but not suffer by

clinging to these things when they are not present. We can bask in and enjoy the warmth of a sunny day, but also accept a gray or even a rainy day (now and again) without wincing. Things are just what they are. We don't have to embroider or embellish them with our biases. My first dharma teacher would often say:

"My god is no beggar and does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet."

In other words, our clinging is a huge energy suck, not to mention that it obscures our vision of the way things naturally are. If you want to see "clinging" at work, just watch the talking heads on TV (representing various factions) busy putting spin on things. That is how attachments work.

And the same holds true for our self. The sum total of our attachments (for and against) is what we call "clinging to the Self." Our clinging-attachment is the glue that holds our personal self together. We cling to our own self-image as if it were real, even though we made it up ourselves. Gradually remove that attachment and the self becomes increasingly transparent, and is seen as the simple tool that it is, our personal assistant. It is no longer an obscuration because we begin to see through it.

When we start to detach and not-cling to our attachments, we give up our attachment to the object, but not the object itself. We can enjoy what life offers without having to cling to it, and experience difficult or unpleasant situations without denying them existence. In fact removal of clinging results in a sense of vivid seeing of everything. Clinging is just like sticking our heads in the sand, wishful thinking. We are ignoring the reality.

As we gradually detach ourselves from our clinging through mind practices like tong-len, what we now call our self becomes increasingly transparent and is no longer an obstacle to our seeing clearly. We begin to see through the self as we gradually drop our attachments, one by one. The self is no longer a big problem. It becomes manageable.

Yes, it can be tricky. For example, giving up my attachment to overeating results in my eating less, so yes, I cease to overeat. In that sense, something changes or is lost, but nothing essential to my well-being. I am better off for it. I chose it.

The Tibetans love to say that the dharma removes what must be removed and adds what must be added. It is self-pruning. How wonderful is that.

As we begin to be more aware and identify our reactions (our biases), we shave off the excess or attachment and leave the objects just as they naturally are, without our clinging to them. And they are still there for us to enjoy.

Does our self disappear if we remove all our attachments to it? The answer is no. The self (or some semblance of it) is a necessary part of functioning as a person. It is the attachment (clinging) to the self that is removed, and the self remains as the sum total of how we personalize ourselves, our persona -- personality.

And we can see this very easily when tragedy strikes in our own life. It is not that the self disappears at the death of a loved one, for example, but rather that our appetite and attachment to things thins out or vanishes for a time. Our sense of self is shattered for a time. Everything else is still there. Most of us have experienced this phenomenon by now.

I notice this in a lesser way with just the stuff around the house. One of my kids or a visitor breaks a rare one-of-a-kind vase or whatever. I used to totally anguish over such an event, but I find that today I just accept it and shrug it off. Do I welcome such events? No, of course not. But am I all attached to these objects to some huge extent? No, not any longer. C'est la vie.

This has been a brief clarification (I hope) as to the difference between clinging attachment and the objects of that clinging. We remove the clinging, not the objects.

MERIT: A DHARMA MYSTERY

For years I have listened to students asking Rinpoche why are they not progressing faster in their dharma practice, and the answer almost always is: you need to accumulate more merit first. Merit, indeed, is cumulative, but we don't accumulate it like in a merit storehouse in the sky somewhere.

The word "accumulate" is misleading in that it suggests stockpiling merit. It would be more accurate to say that merit is cumulative. Its result adds up, but its effect is to reduce our obscurations. We could say that merit helps us to accumulate less obscurations, if that sentence makes sense. I warned you that the word "accumulation" was misleading.

"Merit" is part of a dynamic dharma-duo (which includes "awareness") that together singlehandedly define our path to enlightenment. All branches of Tibetan Buddhism teach that "Merit & Awareness," working together in tandem, are the ticket to Buddhahood.

Therefore this little piece of dharma knowledge is well worth unravelling until we fully take it in and understand it all the way down to the practical level. In fact, personally I found this to be crucial information in my training. When I finally understood how merit and awareness worked, my practice took a giant step forward, but it took a while. I will try to explain, but it may take time and some listening on your part.

Merit, in the dharma sense, has to do with the purity of our intention. A meritorious action is one that does not further obscure our mind, but actually helps to remove what obscurations we already have. Such an

action has merit. It is indeed an example of skillful-means.

In Buddhism, offerings are a common way of accumulating merit, acts of generosity, acts that are unselfish and as pure as possible. It is not so much what is offered as it is how it is offered. For example, all over the world Buddhists set out seven offering bowls with various substances in them each day, flowers, food, musical instruments, but especially water. Water is the most common substance offered by Buddhists on their shrines, yet water is one of the least commercially valuable substances in the world.

Perhaps water is now starting to become more valuable, but up to now water has not been considered a 'precious' substance, except maybe in the desert; in fact, just the opposite. My point is that in offering water, water itself is not considered meritorious because it is just water, so the merit of offering water must be in the offering, our intent. That is what can be meritorious, and it is said that water is offered because since it has no real value, we can offer it purely, without any wince of selfishness for giving it up. Since it is ubiquitous, it is not worth clinging to. There has to be some humor in there somewhere, since it (along with air) is the source of continued life.

If we offer precious gold and give it away to the church (or whomever), we might easily feel a twinge of regret about the money. Even offering our very best food may cause us to wish (however slightly) that it could instead be eaten. These twinges, etc. further obscure the mind and take away from the purity of our offering, thus affecting the amount of merit we accrue in return. Gaining merit is like threading a needle. So, purity of intent seems to be paramount in

accumulating merit; it is not what is offered, but rather we offer it.

Merit at some point becomes just a word if we don't keep in mind what merit is for. Accumulating merit simply means accumulating the necessary conditions for us to reach enlightenment. That is what merit is all about, not a thing in itself, but rather an attitude, an approach, becoming spiritually aerodynamically aligned.

As mentioned, it is common to speak of the accumulation of merit like we might accumulate gold and take it to the bank, but as pointed out this can be misleading. Merit rather is a process of purification that shapes us in a spiritually aerodynamic way until we are airborne toward enlightenment. If Samsara is a wind tunnel, then merit is what makes us aerodynamically fit to fly in the winds of change on our way toward enlightenment. Merit is a process that shapes us rather than something in itself, the process of continued purification until we can realize the true nature of the mind.

Typically, merit is part of a matched pair of functions, usually called "merit and awareness," each dovetailing into the other. Not only that, but each member of this pair allows the other to reach greater heights as a purifying agent or whatever we can call it. In other words, merit and awareness are infinitely recursive with one another – a dynamo.

Alternate words for merit and awareness, are skillful-means and wisdom -- same idea. In fact, in Buddhism there are a number of recursive pairs that serve to create purity and the necessary conditions for enlightenment.

And this is where (at least for me) Zen and Tibetan Buddhism overlap. The Zen Buddhists are expert in showing that ANY activity is perfect for the practice of mindfulness. Just Google "Zen and the Art of…" and you will get a lot of hits, with "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" being perhaps the best-known.

In other words, there is merit in doing anything (and everything) well. And here is one case where a vicious cycle, the recursive-ness of merit and awareness with one another, is beneficial. Perfecting one of them makes it easier to perfect the other, and vice versa -- ad infinitum. How does that work?

This Merit-Awareness dynamic is so important that I am going give you some very direct analogies. In Buddhist terminology "Merit" is often translated as "Skillful Means," and dharma skill is no different from any other skill. Let's take a great golfer like Tiger Woods. His skill is in handling golf clubs and putting the ball where he wants it. That is the merit or skillful means of his craft. The other half of that, what we call in meditation "Awareness," in golf is just the result that Tiger Woods gets from his swings. His skill is so great that he defies the odds against him and is successful where others are not. That hole-in-one (or whatever) skill is the equivalent of "awareness" in dharma training, using the merit-awareness pair and technique.

In every field, whether in the arts, crafts, or any discipline (including dharma), the masters, those with skillful-means, execute their actions so well that the result is remarkable. Often you can pick out the master craft from the others. It stands out, and has something about it, an aura (or whatever) that is unmistakable. Or it, as it sports, just out-and-out wins.

This is related to what (in essence) religion is all about, the things that are made well and last. The Latin root of religion is "religare," to bind. So religion relates to the things that bind, are bound, and that last longest. When everything else dissolves, the truths of religion still stand. That is the idea and dharma is no exception.

Everywhere we look in life there is skill and skillful execution. The Buddhists call this "skillful means," or more commonly just "merit." An action has merit, and is meritorious. A meritorious (perfectly executed) dharma action thins out our obscuration creating more awareness. We can see the nature of the mind better. More awareness allows us to see even more clearly yet to make an even more skillful action, and generate even greater awareness. And it goes on from there.

Let's take simple Shamata meditation practice (allowing the mind to rest on an object) for an example, but it holds true for anything we do with mindfulness. The more skillful we become in allowing the mind to rest (even more so for insight meditation), the more awareness results. The skill in resting the mind is "merit" or skillful means, and the resulting awareness is wisdom or "awareness." And they are recursive, meaning they feed on and catalyze one another. And here is how it functions:

Ever greater skill in resting the mind merits ever greater awareness and ever greater awareness gives us the ability to see how to use even greater skill yet, and so on, infinitely. Increased awareness allows us to see how to be even more skillful and more skillful action (merit) on our part generates even greater awareness, and on around it goes. It is a closed loop. Once this recursive process is started, it feeds on

itself, escalates, and after a while reaches some kind of incandescence. It is self-perpetuating.

This phenomenon is so incredibly important that it cannot be stressed enough. It is, IMO, one of the true miracles of the dharma. However, getting the process to kindle, spark, and take fire can take a long time and requires constant practice. We have to learn how to do it.

In summary, a rough definition of merit is that it is what has to be accumulated for us to traverse the path to enlightenment, adding what must be added and removing what must be removed. And as mentioned earlier, the very word "accumulation" can be misleading, suggesting that we are piling something up somewhere. In fact merit accumulation involves paring down and thinning out our obscurations – making them transparent.

We know that merit and awareness include honing our mindfulness to the point where it takes fire and true clarity (insight meditation) is born. After that, the going gets easier because it becomes increasingly self-perpetuating. However, getting to that point is not always easy, which is why I spend so much time attempting to explain how to accomplish it. Buddha laid out these instructions 2500 years ago and they are still true today.

ACCUMULATING MERIT AND KARMA

I know, I am like a dog on a bone with this stuff. The point of this series of blogs is to help make the "intangible" tangible, to become familiar with some of the more subtle Buddhist concepts. While intellectual distinctions of this kind may appear on the surface to be overly conceptual, these particular concepts translate rather quickly to the sphere of action, where mistakes on our part have real consequences. As an example, it can be important to understand the difference between accumulating good karma and accumulating merit. They are quite different.

Karma of any kind always has to do with Samsara (this world of cyclic existence) and never with enlightenment, while merit pertains to our eventual liberation from Samsara -- enlightenment. It is said that the accumulation of karma is certain, like a shadow following an object, and always leads to a higher or lower rebirth within cyclic existence. Our karma, even the best karma, will never liberate us, but only determines the kind of our next rebirth. Karma is inextricably bound to this world of cyclic existence.

And karma pertains only to our intentional action. Actions of ours that are involuntary, unintentional, or just unconscious are not karmic, since the volitional accent is absent. With karma, it is always the intent that is important.

On the other hand, merit is one of the two causes of our liberation from Samsara (and eventual enlightenment), the other being wisdom (awareness). And there are said to be three basic causes for the accumulation of merit: generosity (giving), moral

discipline (virtue), and meditation. Dharma practice is all about the accumulation of merit.

And this practice is most often repetitive. Repetition of meritorious actions is important, if only to get them right. This is one of the reasons that various Buddhist practices are sometimes repeated 100,000 or more times, to make them habitual and pure. The chief contamination of our actions is considered to be reification, the mistaking of an ever-changing process for a real and permanent thing. You know, like the old song "Row, Row, Row You Boat," and the line "Life is but a dream." Well, mostly we believe that dream is real. We reify it.

Reification is defined as the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, like taking for reality what is just something we imagine or wish to be so, like the imagined permanence of the Self. We do it all the time.

Reification is a conventional truth that we assume for convenience. For example, the idea that something such as an automobile is a permanent thing. We can replace every single part in a car, which proves to us that what we have is a process and not anything more permanent. But it is conventionally convenient to consider our car as permanent, even though we know it is not. We do the same thing with our self image, and so on, like acting as if we will live forever.

We believe that what is impermanent actually exists in a permanent way. In other words, we "reify" (assign permanence) for convenience, forget we have done so, and then remain attached to our own creations. In dharma terms, these are examples of the obscurations that cloud our mind. The two

accumulations (merit and awareness) are the cure for reification.

Merit requires a certain purity to be effective. My point here is that it is not always simple to perform a meritorious action without contaminating it with our own tendency toward habitual reification, without misplaced references to our self, and so on. In Chinese martial arts it is said that an action must be practiced 100,000 times for it to become automatic, and no longer require conceptuality. Dharma practice is similar. We repeat an action, like saying a mantra countless times, in order to purify that action and remove the contamination of reification.

It is clear that we need to discuss merit and awareness in more detail. For now, I will leave you with a description of the three kinds of bodhisattvas.

It is traditional to list three types of Bodhisattvas (who display three types of Bodhicitta), although many lamas point out that only the first type actually exists. The three types, from least to best are:

The KING, who works for the common good by aspiring first to perfect himself and achieve enlightenment, and then to help others.

The FERRYMAN, who ferries sentient beings across Samsara to enlightenment, including himself.

The SHEPARD, who puts others' enlightenment ahead of himself, refusing to go into enlightenment without everyone else.

As mentioned, only the first type of bodhisattva is said to actually exist because unless we are enlightened ourselves we can't lead others anywhere.

For me, the way I understand these three is as a progression. First we enlighten ourselves (The King),

then we accompany everyone else to enlightenment (The Ferryman), and finally we put everyone's enlightenment ahead of our own (The Shepherd).

Your thoughts on all of this please.

[In this image, the right hand is in the teaching mudra, while he left is in the protection mudra.]

THE TWO ACCUMULATIONS

I am sorry to say that it took me many years to get the following concepts through my thick skull. Not sure what I was thinking or even if I was thinking, but I kind of let it go in one ear and out the other. Somehow it seemed like too great an effort or I felt that it was just not necessary for me to actually do it as suggested. Perhaps I don't like following directions. Anyway, that was a very big mistake on my part. This has to do with how we begin and end our dharma practice for each session (any practice), whether sitting on the cushion or in post-meditation out walking around.

In previous blogs in this series I pointed out that the effects of merit accumulation are key to reducing the obscurations that prevent us from recognizing the true nature of the mind. We perform acts all day long, most of them probably unskillful, but certainly some skillful enough to generate merit of one kind or another. What becomes of this merit? Does it just pile up in some corner of our mind, or what? Where does merit go?

I still have a lot of questions myself in this area, so I'm no expert, but the Buddhist teachers I have listened to suggest that merit, unless somehow contained, is just free to go away. We benefit from the merit whenever it is generated, but one-time only. Then it evaporates or otherwise trickles away. It did its thing. Obviously the question then becomes how do we accumulate merit beyond its initial effect? The Buddhists have a method to preserve merit, benefit once from it, but then still have it keep on benefiting us. How is this possible?

Karma and merit are two different things, but they overlap. No matter how good our karma can get, it only affects our rebirth in Samsara. And yes, karma also can generate merit, but it is said that while karmic merit makes for more pleasant conditions for us on the Samsaric (day-to-day) level, eventually it is used up and we regress to a previous state. So the merit from karma is temporary. What about the other use of merit as present in the dharma pair "Merit & Awareness?"

In the traditional gathering or accumulation of merit as in the pair, "Merit & Awareness (or wisdom)," the awareness gained from merit can be put to use by us to better see how to thin out and eventually remove whatever is obscuring our ability to realize our own Buddha Nature, what is called the true nature of the mind. The magic of all of this is due to both merit and awareness working together and an interlocking unit. One affects the other and recursively.

The overall recursive result of merit and awareness each catalyzing the other in return can result in the actual lessening of our obscurations, and that result we can retain. That we can accumulate. In other words, if we can keep from recording more karma by continually purifying our actions, we can hold onto that result, be it realization or any improvement in our dharmic condition.

I found that I had to stop imagining "merit" as something that accumulates somewhere outside of me, even though the translation of the Tibetan often is the "accumulation of merit." It is awareness that accumulates from merit (skillful actions) on our part. Instead, it is more accurate to think of merit as effects that are cumulative from increasing awareness, with the result that there is a gradual thinning out of our

obscurations, rather than a pile of pixie dust stored up somewhere. In other words, merit accumulation (cumulative merit) is a process of skillful action that generates awareness that helps us remove our obscurations so that when all is said and done, we have become clearer. That clarity (the awareness) is the result of cumulative merit (accumulating merit) and it can stay with us because it is us.

Now the way that Buddhists suggest to preserve the merit and awareness that is accumulated is by aspiration and dedicating it. And here again, the terms can be misleading, so hold on to your hats, for here comes another pair of essential dharma terms: aspirations and the dedication of merit.

Rinpoches that I have studied with make a big deal of having aspirations both before you sit down to practice and then dedicating the merit accrued after each time you have practiced. Some dharma teachers go so far to say that this is equal to or more important than the practice itself. I can't speak to that myself, but the idea is simple enough.

Before we sit down to meditate and do our practice, we declare our intent through an aspiration. We aspire. For example, we aspire for our practice to benefit all sentient beings – sentiment like that. It is that simple.

And, in similar fashion, before we get up from the cushion (or whatever practice we do) we dedicate any merit we have earned (however small) to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that they may benefit all sentient beings and bring each to enlightenment. In a word, this is what comprises aspiration and dedication.

The Buddhist texts state that the results of any merit we accumulate (and fail to dedicate) only blesses us once and like a single drop of water falling on the ground, it evaporates, while merit that is dedicated to others is like adding that drop of water to the ocean. It lasts as long the ocean lasts. I am still thinking on that one, but that's what they say.

What I do know is that these four things, Merit & Awareness, Aspirations & Dedication, have one thing perfectly in common, that they exist as a method to somehow lessen our obscurations. It is almost as if these practices (as dedicated to others) are a form of misdirection, such as magicians use. I don't mean it quite like it sounds, so bear with me.

While we are focused on aspiring to help others and dedicating any merit to others, actually the purity of our intentions is streamlining our own view (and mindstream), gradually eliminating our particular obscurations. The problem with aspirations and dedications is that they can be (here using the Buddhist term) "poisonous," meaning they can be tainted by our own selfish attachments. By offering our aspirations and dedications to others, we sidestep our self and are one-step removed from our own selfish interests and that much more aerodynamically spiritually pure or "dharmic."

So, in summary, and this is the extent of my understanding, the emphasis on aspiring to help and dedicating merit to others perhaps does benefit "others" in this world in some way. I can't say. But I do know that removing self-reference (our own selfishness) from the equation gives us a better chance (makes it easier) to be pure in our own dedication gestures. And it is that kind of purity that gradually

removes the layers of obscuration we have accumulated.

I tell myself that dharma practice makes us more aerodynamically sound and able to rise above (and transform) the fierce winds of change that Samsaric life subjects us to. And here is another analogy I use with myself; perhaps it will help.

Dedicating merit to others is not unlike spinning a coin on a table top. We have to spin the coin and get our fingers out of the way or the fingers affect the spin. Here the fingers getting in the way represents the self-attachments clouding our merit.

Apparently when it comes to including ourselves in the offering, it is too easy for our habitual attachments to me, myself, and I to occlude or obscure the purity we need to attain in the way of merit and its resulting awareness, so we are encouraged instead to include others along with ourselves, and even before ourselves.

And I have not discussed "Awareness" (also called wisdom) here, but it should be fairly obvious. We intuitively know that awareness IS cumulative and not stockpiled at some spiritual Fort Knox. Awareness increases and it just "IS."

The entire point of this blog is that merit, skillful execution of whatever we are doing, generates awareness commensurate with its purity and skill. That increased awareness is what allows us to see better how we make our next move or act. More skillful actions generate even greater awareness, and on and on. This is a process of purification (as dedicated to something other than our own self), and the result of this purification is a more pure or aerodynamically hewn "us." We (in our awareness)

are the accumulation that merit brings. We are the awareness. It is our awareness.

ENLIGHTENED HEART

Buddhism brings with it some concepts new to most of us here in the west. We get it that Buddha was a human (like we are) who enlightened himself, and his method (how he did it) is called the dharma. And Bodhisattvas are those on their way to becoming Buddhas. But what about that other (and more mysterious) term Bodhicitta, pronounced "bōdhi-cheatah." What is that?

Bodhicitta is one of the more subtle of the Buddhist concepts, often difficult for beginners to grasp, and yet at the same time said to be the most important in practice. I don't claim to know that much about Bodhicitta, but I feel it is crucial for each of us to understand at least something about what it involves.

The Sanskrit word Bodhicitta translates to something like "Enlightenment Mind" or "Heart of Enlightenment," a dynamic rather than a static state, so perhaps a better translation is a "mind that strives for enlightenment for all beings." There is a compulsive element to the concept that is key here.

Strong Bodhicitta is a ceaseless and one-pointed striving to benefit others, a permanent attitude. "Enlightened Heart" is my favorite translation for the word Bodhicitta. We usually speak of the mind being enlightened, but the heart must be too. Bodhicitta is the heart center of enlightenment. It grasps us at the heart level and drives to help realize enlightenment for all beings, including ourselves. Bodhicitta is the deep urge to help others realize what they already are.

Bodhicitta is another of those concepts that (like recognition of the minds true nature) we can only guess at what it means. Initially we have no direct knowledge of what Bodhicitta is like until it dawns on us, so there is a bit of a vicious circle here. Of course we read about it, hear it spoken of in teachings, and do our best to get a "sounds-like" idea of it going in our mind, but beyond that, the simple truth is that we just don't know that much about Bodhicitta when we first start out.

One thing we can know is that all of the great dharma teachers place Bodhicitta at the tip of the top of what we each need for enlightenment, so we can't just ignore it. The great lama Bokar Rinpoche, in my opinion, said it best:

"Bodhicitta is the electricity of spiritual practice. If it is cut, nothing works anymore. Animated with bodhicitta, all ordinary activity, all works in the world become a path to awakening."

So Bodhicitta is more of a drive or compulsion for enlightenment, not just for ourselves, but, of course, primarily for everyone else as well. We can make a patchwork quilt of ideas as to what Bodhicitta is, but the truth of it is that those ideas don’t add up to experiencing it. In this case, indeed, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts we put together in our head. So how then do we get it?

In my understanding, Bodhicitta is a direct result of the gradual process of detachment and the ensuing rise of compassion. Bodhicitta is a fruition of practice, not something we have in the beginning. And it seems that the arising of Bodhicitta is also a natural result of what is called "Recognition," glimpsing the true nature of the mind, a quite advanced realization.

Rather than frustratingly attempt to generate Bodhicitta or pretend compassion, IMO our time is better spent taking what steps we can toward realizing the true nature of the mind. However, this typically involves finding a teacher to guide us, learning basic Shamata meditation, and then have our teacher instruct us in Vipassana (insight) and finally Mahamudra meditation, which eventually involves the pointing out (until we get it) of the true nature of the mind. After that, Bodhicitta will arise of its own accord. This at least is, to my understanding, the quickest and most effective way to achieve true Bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is the incandescence to full flame of the spark of compassion that naturally occurs when we realize that not only do we all have Buddha Nature, but all we have to do is remove our obscurations to actualize it. When we realize this, we can't help but be electrified (as Bokar Rinpoche puts it) and driven to share this good news. Indeed, it is the best possible news for all of us.

Bodhicitta, once arisen, gets us up in the morning, stays with us through the day, and makes us not want to waste time sleeping at night -- that idea.

[This graphic is a combination of the seed syllable of the heart chakra (Hung/Hum) along with its color, deep blue. In addition I include a symbol I came up with back in 1972 after a spontaneous Kriya-yoga experience. It has been the symbol for the Heart Center where we live since that time and represents the heart and the flame, the young and the old, the relative and the absolute, etc. in total symbiosis. As I grow older I realize it is an exact symbol for what I understand is Bodhicitta.]

ENTHUSIASM FOR PRACTICE

No matter how you dice it, practice is practice, and that goes for dharma practice too. Enthusiasm for what (in the beginning) amounts to rote practice is almost an oxymoron. If you aren't enthusiastic, where is it to be found?

Well, how do you find joy right now in anything in your life? What gives you joy? Start there. People typically use a pebble or a stick for an object to focus on in basic Shamata meditation, and most often the breath. In themselves, these are not holy objects. You get extra points for using an image of the Buddha, but that is beside the point that there is no "right" object of meditation. We are welcome to pick an object we love to work with and concentrate on, especially if it helps, so make it easy on yourself.

Of course, if we chose an object we are attached to and then focus on the attachment, that won't work. It is the familiarity with and the concentration involved in whatever technique we choose that is our focus, rather than out attachment to it, plus the fact that we are relaxed when we do it, even though it may be complex.

We are also free to choose something unrelated to cushions and typical ideas of meditating. For me it turned out to be photographing nature. I didn't plan it that way, but as it turned out, close-up and macro photography takes sufficient concentration practice to be similar to the techniques of basic sitting meditation. I stumbled on it, but you may have techniques that require concentration you have learned years ago that you are already skilled at. Try using basic meditation

technique on those. For me it was nature photography.

And for me the best part was that I felt at home with nature, even joyful, and that was very hard for me to come by in standard meditation practice while sitting on a cushion. Just consider: meditation practice was new to me. Not only that, but I had no true idea what was supposed to come out of my practice, only whatever ideas I had scrounged up from books, teachers, and other students. Mostly I was in the dark about it all, but of course I thought I knew what the results of meditation would be. Few beginning meditation students have any real idea of what the fruition of meditation could be like. It is not our fault that we don't know. We just don't know.

Is it any wonder that I wasn't naturally filled with joy about practicing something I knew nothing about? It is the same way with my practicing anything. By any definition, it is a trial…. trying. For me it was very trying.

Like anything else we must practice, a certain amount of enthusiasm is required to get results. If you don't naturally have that joy because you are on a learning curve, you may want to look at that fact and find another object of meditation, something you already know and love, where the hard part is already done.

I am not suggesting that you give up sitting on the cushion, but if you are getting nowhere fast, then you might consider doing the identical sitting practice, but with a focus and technique that you already have skill in. In other words, a subject in which your learning curve is already over, so that you can concentrate with some kind of real joy on the practice itself. Make sense?

We really should not blame ourselves if the routine part of learning meditation technique is boring, difficult, and something we find ourselves slogging through on faith that there is light at the end of the tunnel. The problem with that approach is that without some joy or enthusiasm it may not work or, if it works, the going is very slow, like taking the long-way around.

Whatever we concentrate and focus on (the object) in meditation requires at least some enthusiasm, if not actual joy, on our part. Perhaps some of us can get it up without resorting to non-standard (more familiar) objects of focus. It just did not work for me and I tried it for decades!

The memory of my faithfully practicing when I had no idea of what I was looking for (enlightenment or whatever) with a technique that was foreign to me, and trying to keep my spirits up, is painful even today. As I like to say, if we learn to play an instrument, we can put on a CD and at least listen to the music -- what we are trying to do. We can hear beautiful music, even if we can't play it yet, so we know what we are trying to achieve.

But with meditation, there are no DVDs (or whatever) that we can just play and get a clear idea what our eventual meditation result (enlightenment, realization, recognition, etc.) will be like -- nothing. It is all left up to our own expectations and hopes, which at best are a patchwork quilt. I mean, just where did we get our expectations? Ask yourself. In my case I simply had it wrong, and had it wrong for years. The fact is that I was taught how to physically meditate, but no one explained what I should expect, at least not well enough to help.

So, if your current meditation practice resembles a dry desert wasteland, mix it up by finding an object of meditation that you already care about. Let's face it, basic meditation technique involves concentrating on an object and bringing your mind to it when you find yourself getting distracted. That's the technique. While the breath is often suggested because of its portability and familiarity, any object will do and we get to choose. For me it helped to shake of the "holier than" whatever attitude of sitting on a cushion and the pie-in-the-sky expectations I had.

In other words, you can do this with any discipline you have already mastered, like tying flies, building model airplanes, or any other craft that requires concentration and focus. Something you will find out later in meditation is that we have to make ourselves at home and become comfortable with the procedure and object of focus. We have to just let the mind rest. That's what the technique is all about, so you might as well start relaxing and being comfortable now. A new and unknown situation may not help, so look around for something familiar that you already know and love. It worked for me.

Meditation practice without enthusiasm is very difficult, if not impossible. This is a little Catch-22 that only we can solve. We may have to do whatever is necessary to have interest, enthusiasm, and preferably some joy in practice.

And there is another consideration. Even in traditional meditation technique, we become wedded to the technique of meditation on the cushion and later have to learn to apply the technique to everyday life. It is in post-meditation (everyday life) that we eventually will spend the most time practicing in. The baby is the meditation, and the bathwater is whatever object of

meditation we choose, cushion, tying flies, playing chess, etc. At some time in the future we will have to separate the mediation we learn from the particular object we used to learn it through, so that we can meditate in whatever we do. We have to transfer the technique to whatever we do in life.

As mentioned, I initially learned to meditate while shooting close-up photography. And yes, at a later date I had to learn to separate out the meditation from the photography, and that took a while, but not as long as never learning to meditate properly in the first place.

HOW MUCH PRACTICE IS ENOUGH?

How much time we devote to meditation practice is a conundrum, one that has all kinds of answers depending on how we approach it or who we ask. It is not unlike the salesman who asks "How much do you want to spend?" Of course, just starting out we tend to have no idea. How can we know what we don't know? We are just beginners.

Early on in life I figured out that I would never get to heaven by going to church on Sunday for an hour. It is the same with meditation practice. We are probably not going to get enlightened on a pittance of effort. How could we? Would I learn to play music on guitar by practicing only an hour or two a week? It takes more than that, but how much? And where do we find the time?

I can answer that last question right off. I always chuckle to myself when I run across a friend who claims they are too busy to do the things they really would like to do. I know that is not true. A personal mantra I recite to myself is "Time is something I make," meaning we make time for those things that are important. It may seem impossible, but we do it anyway. Time is something we can make.

As for how much time for dharma practice, the experts say different things like, at least five minutes a day, half an hour, an hour, a good two hours, and on up to 24x7. What I found out after some years is that no amount of time, short of all day long, is ever enough. Ultimately we want to mix meditation with our life, like engaging a clutch, so that we are being mindful all the time. That is how long we should meditate and this is not an unrealistic expectation, but

it takes (pun intended) time. In the meantime we have to start somewhere, and make some preliminary effort. Of course, it is a drop in the bucket, but at least we are on our way.

Back in the beginning of my own meditation practice, I tried to practice every day, even if it was for only a short while. Some days I would forget to practice, so I can remember at times sitting up in bed when I was going to sleep and meditating for maybe two minutes, just to keep my commitment. You can be sure I tried everything, every which way but loose that is.

And for most of us, the simple truth is that we won't be logging enough hours just sitting on the cushion. We just won't. We have to work. We have kids, responsibilities, and so on. It is clear from looking at our schedule that we need to mix our meditation technique with our daily tasks at home and at work, but how is that done? In the long run, this is the only answer, unless you want to become a monk. And I have seen enough monks in my life to know that they too have a busy life aside from meditating.

Meditation, like any other kind of practice, runs on enthusiasm. It's what keeps us going and without it, we are on a dry run and it really can be tedious.

My point here is that the key to how much time we can (or need to) spend on dharma practice depends on our enthusiasm, so look to that, but it is a real Catch-22. If we have no results, there is little enthusiasm, and with little enthusiasm there are few results. Many of us are just treading water trying to figure out how to make all this work.

Well, as they say, start where you are. All advanced meditation practice is based on having at least some firm grounding in basic meditation, what is called

Shamata. Like learning chords on a guitar, without them you are not going to be playing music. Without some experience with Shamata, you are not going to be meditating anytime soon.

So learn the basic technique of concentrating on an object and bring the mind back to it when you get distracted and find yourself daydreaming. That is the muscle-memory part of it. Here is whole easy-to-read booklet on Shamata that you can download:

http://dharmagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx#Dharma

At the same time I suggest you also learn a Tibetan mind-training technique called Tong-len, because not only is it easy, it is portable. You can do it anywhere and at any time. It will allow you to log enough hours to possibly get to heaven or at least on your way to greater awareness. A free booklet on Tong-len is also at the above link.

Shamata is somewhat difficult to learn and in fact, in Tibet (so I am told) students do not even start Shamata until they had finished a very difficult series of exercises called ngondro, which amounts to a kind of dharma boot camp. But in this country we try to learn Shamata straight away. Nice work if you can do it.

But Tong-len is another matter. It is an All-American practice that fits us to a T. Anyone can do it; it really works, and you can watch it work.

The key to the problems of this life is awareness, the key to awareness is the dharma, the key to dharma is practice, the key to practice is enthusiasm, and the key to enthusiasm is to love what you do.

So, get some love in your practice life. I have written about this many times, so I will not go on about it here, but the general idea is, if you can, to work with something you already know and love as a meditation object, especially if you are learning basic Shamata meditation.

And if you don't love your practice, say so to yourself. Don't pretend. Be what you are and ask for help from someone who knows. Mind training is an opportunity we can't afford to pass up. After over 40 years of practice, that is what I believe is the truth, at least for me.

MEANING IN LANGUAGE

The history of thoughts is an old story, one we all have been following for a long time. Thoughts go on forever and are more than just their content and meaning. They share a common nature, and that nature can be seen and looked at in itself. Our thoughts often end up in sentences and words. What makes sentences work is that words have gaps between them, an ocean of emptiness in which words float.

The arrangement of letters in single words is fixed, but the arrangement of words in a sentence is not. The placement of words, one up against another, creates meaning. Arranging words carefully alters meaning and involves the clash and friction of consonants, and the smooth ease of vowels. This is why spoken poetry is so powerful. A simple rearrangement of words on the page changes the meaning.

It is the juggling of words that creates meaning, the friction of words rubbing together to create fire in the mind – light and clarity. Thoughts are the windows through which we can learn to gaze at the nature of the mind. This is what mind training is all about.

As mentioned, words are concretized or frozen thoughts that can be arranged in sentences for effect. Words can be set against one another to dam the flow of thought and retain meaning until we get it.

Sentences rich in meaning slow the mind until experience dawns. "Experience" is the key word here. Meaning has a kindling point where it sparks the mind

and creates light. With light, seeing is possible and then clarity.

Meaning of any kind (no matter how subtle) is always only a reference and not anything in itself, a simple pointer that refers us to have an experience for ourselves, to live! And please think this through:

Remember that the meaning of a sentence is only as good as the "sense" it makes, which is to say meaning is at heart sensual, literally: to make sense. It is all about making sense. Sentences that don't refer us to experience and action are sterile, fit only for pundits.

In dharma practice the action we are referred to is that of experiencing the true nature of our own mind, the clarity of that. And clarity is its own reward, not clarity 'about' something, but just clarity of the mind -- seeing "seeing" itself seeing. As the last sentence shows, words cannot hold the experience, but only refer or point to it. We have to follow the reference pointers (the meaning) and actually go there ourselves (where it points to) and experience it. That is the whole point of the dharma. Enlightenment is a do-it-yourself proposition and that by definition.

Words, frozen thoughts on a page, can be rearranged to create meaning. The arrangement of words prevents them from being meaningless. Working words until they catch fire creates light, and with the clarity of light we can learn to see the true nature of the mind, where there is not anything to be seen but the seeing itself.

In summary, all thoughts depend on their meaning, and all meaning depends on the sense it makes. Sense is a physical experience involving the five senses, thus the word "sense." The algebra of

"meaning" is abstract, consisting only of pointers, references that are not anything intrinsically, but point beyond themselves to an experience to be had, a call to action. This is what Hamlet's soliloquy by Shakespeare is all about – stunning!

We read, read, read, read books, but as my first dharma teacher used to tell me over and over: "Someday you must become the book." It is significant that the Buddha, if he were here now, could not just walk over to us, touch our forehead, and we would become enlightened. The extent of his power was to point out to us how we can enlighten ourselves. This is what is called the "dharma," the pointing out of a method. It is then up to each of us to enlighten ourselves, just as the historical Buddha did for himself.

It is beyond significant that language itself, like a school of fish all pointing in the same direction, endlessly points to the sea of experience that awaits us. At best thoughts are a window through which we can gaze at the true nature of the mind itself. Someday we must each take the plunge.

INSCAPE: THE WAY IN

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins introduced the concept of "inscape" to the English language, a word he coined to indicate our access to the beautiful and profound, the way into allowing the mind to rest naturally. Scholars tell me Hopkins keyed on this concept from the work of Duns Scotus, another of my favorite poets. I can't say I agree with most scholars as to their interpretation of what Hopkins meant by "inscape." I have my own understanding and will use that.

Inscape to me is a natural sign (a signal in our busy life of distractions) that gets our attention and carries us within to rest in the nature of the mind, however briefly. That rest is crucial.

Another way to phrase this is that an inscape is the signature of the beautiful, a sign that catches the eye. For example, on a nature walk, when I finally get outside my busy day and try to relax, it takes time. An inscape is that sign or bit of beauty that first catches my eye and carries me out of distraction and into the spatial-ness of the moment. Immediately I slow down, calm down, and find rest in that beauty. I am suddenly more at peace and beyond the rush of time once again. I am free. I call these avenues (or ways within) "inscapes," as I believe Hopkins did.

I used the example of a nature walk to illustrate inscape at work, but we search out inscapes wherever we are and in whatever we do. Without these instantaneous moments of rest, without some beauty we could not go on. These nanosecond events are essentially timeless connections to the true nature of the mind, which is beyond time -- eternal.

I attempt to create inscapes in language as I write. Inscapes are our way inside this instant, through the particular here and now, and thus beyond time to a moment of pure rest. I call it the vertical dimension. The horizontal is our linear life story, the vertical the inner dimensions. For example:

Every sentence tells a story from left to right, from the first to the last word, but along the way the combination of words, pitched one against another in the sentence, creates peaks and valleys of attention (awareness). These can be inscapes, ways into the timeless aspect of a moment.

Inscapes are designed (like pit stops at a raceway) to attract or flag us down along the horizontal or linear line of our life and guide us within to allow the mind to rest, however briefly. The mind is not limited to rest in naps or in sleep at night, but much more so in these briefest of moments through inscapes of beauty that un-distract us into the experience of pure rest. We escape by inscape and heaven knows we need the rest.

These inscape moments are nothing new to any of us. We find and use them all the time to get essential rest or we would go nuts. It is helpful to become aware of what we are already naturally doing.

Inscapes are an integral part of what is called Vipassana (insight) meditation, where this concept of directly looking at the nature of the mind is learned and practiced.

Of course I, like you, have made use of inscape moments all my life. However, it was only when I began to consciously practice them through close-up and macro photography that I learned to look through these moments instead of just "at" them. Their effect

was compounded by iteration and focused concentration until I began to see through the object I was photographing and look instead at the true nature of the mind. That is where all the rest there is "IS."

These moments catch our eye or catch our ear and in a nanosecond deconstruct our distraction and supplement life with space and expanded time in which we then dwell. That's the point: to render the mind openly at rest.