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# Dharma Writings — Book One 2026

Articles 1–100

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SpiritGrooves.net

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## THE VANISHING SELF AND PERSONA

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

October 27, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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[I'm not suggesting that the following is easy to understand, so I apologize if it is too much.]

What all the dharma teachings on the Self (our having one) point out is that we can search everywhere and not find what we call our 'Soul', also called our personal 'Self', if what we mean by that is an eternal entity that moves through time from birth to birth with a contiguous consciousness, meaning ourselves reincarnated in the next life and remembering who were are and were.

And the proof of the pudding is that we can't remember who we were in our last lifetime, try as we might. And because we cannot find our past lifetime, we have to continue the search for that last lifetime until we have totally exhausted that search and accept that we don't have one.

In other words, not finding a past lifetime does not mean we have not looked long or hard enough, but rather that there is nothing there to be found. We are told that each of us did have a previous lifetime, complete with a 'Self', but that a memory of that 'person' of self that was us is not now available. Gone.

And the dharma teachings point out that what we assumed was our 'person', our Self, was just an assemblage of attractions (likes and dislikes) that we called our 'Self' and that, according to the dharma, deconstructs at death.

Therefore, what and who we are right now is not a reincarnation of the person we were, but apparently just a newly made Self, put together from current attachments (likes and dislikes) in this present lifetime and not inherited or remembered from a precious Self or persona.

Yet, as mentioned, we are also told (and can read about this in the pith dharma teachings) that our previous life's Self and persona does not continue to cohere at death and was not transferred into this current life. Not only that, but the teachings clearly say that there is no permanent Self for that reason, and thus we are not ourselves personally a permanent entity, not now and not ever. What we call our Self or Soul deconstructs, falls apart, and is left

behind at death and does not reincarnate. It's up to us to verify this for ourselves, and thus the popular search for that. At least we have to think about it.

However, there are elements of our previous life, certain persistent set of karma that do manifest in our rebirth, our next life, but are not identifiable as 'Michael Erlewine' or his self. They don't represent a contiguous whole but are just recurring elements from our past that help to form our new and current persona and Self. These feral bits of karma are stored in what is called the 'Storehouse Consciousness' and do travel to our next rebirth where they can be seized on and used to populate our rebirth persona, but do not carry any stamp or signature of "Michael Erlewine" on them. They are just odd pieces of feral karma.

Yet, here each of us are, in the middle of life as we know it and our very 'being' is not itself a permanent entity or 'soul' that will go on forever, but only part of a process of perpetual change, eternally becoming, transparent much like a hologram, an artifact of the changing appearances.

In fact, what we call outer appearances are not only hollow or empty of permanency, but these very appearances are in fact the emptiness itself appearing. The two, emptiness and appearance, are said to be connate, one and the same, two sides of a single coin. And so, what are we to think of all this?

We might want to talk about it.

What exactly is the hard pill to swallow here?

It has to be that what we call being or 'suchness', the sense of substance, of being substantial, and the permanence or gravity in life, and all this is also unreal as in impermanent.

That sense of 'being', while very much present, is impermanent and also in the state of eternally becoming and not a 'being' in the sense of being a permanent entity or 'soul', not real in any permanent way.

We are (and all are) part of pure change and process. Yet apparently, we are used to this, because it has never been different or other than this. That seems to be where the fear comes, from simple miss-takes on our part.

Further, it seems that life itself is one vast artifact, a construction of the mind that obviously is solid enough to stand up in and live as we now live, but also part of a life that itself is forever changing and in flux. That, so to speak, is the nature of this life.

It's not that all of this is not happening or does not exist; it does and is, but rather that all of this has no permanent existence and is in continual change, and we are not a permanent entity traveling through space and time, like an eternal soul. We are the part and parcel of and the very process itself. That exists, but as the old saying from Heraclitus goes "Change alone is unchanging." We change.

As Shakespeare said, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." Shakespeare also said "My soul is in the sky" and "Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream."

As unsettling as some of these thoughts may be, I have to keep in mind that I'm OK right here, warm in my office, when outside it grows colder each day. Nothing has changed but my thoughts. And it's way too hard to keep in mind that Earth is circling the Sun at 67,000 miles an hour, and the Sun circling its center the Galaxy at 483,000 per hour. And yet my mind remains still, sitting here.

Just where do science and spiritual metaphysics meet? It seems a waste of time to envision two trains running at the same time, when common sense tells us that there has to be a uniform theory that expresses them both. We just don't have it yet. At least I don't. Dharma is as close as I have come to understand how life works, the outer appearances and the inner mind itself.

In other words, we have science describing the outside or appearances, and the dharma describing the internal or mind, two sides of the same coin. I feel that in our time, the two are merging.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

SpiritGrooves.net

YouTube.com/channel/UC3cL8v4fkupc9lRtugPkkWQ

http://michaelerlewine.com

"As Bodhicitta is so precious,

May those without it now create it,

May those who have it not destroy it,

And may it ever grow and flourish."

## Tong-Len, the Alchemy of Reaction

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

October 30, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e5cc805a-322c-4785-a990-b846a322aec6_538x811.png*

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 loose 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 mediation 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 a become 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 and 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 and 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 notso-fiendly office worker that 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 oppotunities.

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 dualisms.

Sending and Receiving: Tong-Len

Tong-len is a Tibetan Buddhist method everyone would do well to learn whether they practice dharma or not. It is that useful! And it is easy to understand and practice. Equally important, tong-len is a practice we can do anytime and anywhere. It is portable.

Tong-len is also known by the name “Sending and Receiving” as well as “Exchanging Yourself for Others, or simply "Giving and Taking.” It is similar to the Christian motto “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and with tong-len we make the first move. We give. And the Buddhists take it to another whole level. Tong-len helps to develop compassion in an organic and very natural way. And the technique is very simple:

When we encounter another person who is suffering or in pain, we simply breathe in (mentally that is) all of their suffering and pain; we take it on or into ourself and we breathe out all our goodness, kindness, happiness, and good will back into them. In other words, we send all our goodness to them and receive from them all of their pain and suffering. We take this (again:

mentally) on ourself. This is considered perhaps the quickest method to seriously increase a sense of compassion and to decrease ingrained selfishness. And this can also be done with any world situation, a plane crash, an earthquake, and so on, anywhere there is suffering. Seeing others in pain and suffering is not the only use for this valuable technique. It also works to clear our own personal obscurations on an item by item basis.

In other words, it works equally well for when we encounter people who are angry at us, irritating us, pissing us off, or whatever. The technique is the same. You simply breathe in (mentally) all that which is 'other' or different and separate from you in the other person and breathe out and back to them all of the goodness and joy in yourself, whatever you can muster at the time. In other words, we breathe into ourself all of the dark, bad, painful, offensive, and "otherness" and we breathe out all that is good, kind, and happy in ourself. From the Western viewpoint this is counter-intuitive, exactly the opposite of what most of us have been taught, which is to keep the good things close and keep the "bad" things as far away as possible.

In tong-len we send to others (exchange with them) all our well-being, happiness, goodness, and receive from them all of their darkness, sadness, pain, suffering, nastiness, and whatever it is that 'we' have labeled or can label as "other" in them. And we do this again and again and again until some equilibrium is achieved between the two of us in our mind. They (the other person) won't even be aware of this, so don't look for them to change their expression. You are detoxing 'your' fear and reaction to them, not their own to you. Sounds scary, no?

When I first read about this technique I thought for all the world that tong-len was a medieval throwback from the Dark Ages. As an astrologer who counseled others for many years I had been taught by western psychics to do just the opposite to tong-len, to get as far away from other's pain as possible and to not take it on personally. I had been told to always wash my hands in running water after a personal reading and imagine all the pain, nastiness, and what-not that I might have picked up from my client going down the drain with the water. Tong-len is 180-degrees different from that approach and this was at first very hard for me to appreciate and accept. Frankly I wanted to cut and run.

I am glad I did not because this highly-efficient technique is spot-on as an antidote for our western tendency to isolate ourselves from others and brand them as 'bad' or at least separate from ourselves. And tong-len is perhaps the quickest and most direct way to extend our own boundaries to include

something else beyond our own skin as in: family, friends…. all those other than ourselves.

Tong-len is also useful beyond just those we encounter who are suffering and in pain or who irritate or make us angry. That is just the tip of the iceberg for this technique. People we react to strongly in a negative way aside, tong-len is brilliant as a tool to neutralize whatever confronts us from the outside, whatever we have labeled as different or “other” from ourselves -- everything we have marked as “bad” since our childhood, every attitude we have perhaps unconsciously adopted that separates us from the world around us and send us into a karma- making tailspin every time it appears to us.

All of these are expertly handled with a little tong-len practice. And while proper sitting meditation technique is something that can require time and commitment, most Americans take to tong-len right off. They just "get" the concept straight away and start using it. It is that simple.

In summary, tong-len is an easy technique that can be learned almost at once and that can be used not only on the mediation cushion but anytime and anywhere during the rest of our day. What tong-len effectively does is extend the perimeter of what we consider to be our ourselves outward to include more and more of the outside world, a world that ‘we’ have labeled as “other” than ourselves or for whatever reason just “bad.”

With just a little training in tong-len we learn to become aware every time we catch ourselves labeling another person as someone to close-off and shut out, and we reverse the process. We accept and take them in, essentially making friends with ourselves, because somewhere along the line we have closed the door on that person, food, attitude, or what-have- you? Tong-len opens that door again.

And doing tong-len with people is only part of what this technique can handle. Any attitude, prejudice, hatred, fear, competitiveness, jealousy, etc. that we become aware of in ourselves can be neutralized with this technique. Notice that key phrase “that we become aware of,” because for tong-len to work we have to focus not on the thing we "hate" or react to and then follow that feeling, but rather we focus on the awareness that here is something that "we" hate or don't like. Got it?

For example, if I hate being called “Mike” instead of “Michael,” and you just called me ‘Mike,” I focus my awareness of my reaction to what you just said rather than what you just said and make sure not to follow the reaction and launch into setting you straight with more emotion than it is worth. In other words, we learn to recognize when something is “other” or pops into our view

reactively. We catch our reaction. Rather than react, we drop it, and do tong-len with our own reaction. This type of tong-len also helps to remove our prejudices and obscurations one at a time.

With tong-len we gradually extend the limits of our dislikes and prejudices outward much like when a drop of water strikes the surface of a calm lake, concentric circles open and reach out in ever-expanding rings beyond the drop. We become ever more inclusive.

Neutralizing the separation and otherness between ourselves and the world around us brings enormous benefits. By ending the isolation and separateness (the so-called labeling and prejudice), we get back all of the energy we have locked in holding on to these prejudices and biases all this time. Better yet, once we have neutralized this labeling, we instantly stop creating all of this difficult karma in our mindstream and that stream begins to clear. Remember that every time we invoke a negative reaction to something, even if it is a legitimate gripe, we dig a deeper karmic track in our own mindstream, one that will take more and more work to eventually neutralize or erase.

It does not matter if we have a 'right' to get mad at whatever or whomever offends or confronts us. What matters is that when we do get mad, we only add insult to the injury we may have received by the imagined (or real) affront, internalizing I, and recording it ever deeper in our mindstream. Every hatred, prejudice, bias, fear, and doubt that we have locked up in the world that we imagine as outside us is a reflection of an attitude we maintain inside us. We are the one hurt by it. Each instance takes another little piece of our life energy.

When each bias and attitude is gradually removed, our mind is clearer and our energy greater. And, as mentioned, we are no longer digging our own karmic grave by endlessly reinforcing the trace or track of that "otherness" in our mindstream. It really is a win/win situation, and it is so easy.

Tong-len is the great equalizer and neutralizer. It is perhaps the first Buddhist mind-practice technique those new to the dharma should consider. When I was introduced to tong-len, it scared the bejesus out of me at first glance. But after trying it even for a short while I recognized it for the powerful antidote from my negative attachments that it is.

Tong-Len: How I came to Learn It

In a previous article I described Tong-len, the powerful Tibetan Buddhist mind practice for developing compassion and paring the ego down to size, not to mention that it helps to remove the myriad of biases and prejudices we

inherit from our society or manage to develop ourselves. Here is the story of how I first encountered tong-len many years ago.

I had met this wonderful Tibetan lama (a rinpoche) during a visit of his to Ann Arbor, Michigan and Margaret (my wife) and I were so moved by that meeting that we had to see him again, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche lived high in the mountains above Woodstock, New York and it was the dead of winter. In fact it was during those weird bardo-like days after Christmas and before the New Year. We all know those days. My wife and I piled our three kids (at the time) into our little car and began an 800-mile drive across the country in a frigid cold spell. Our youngest daughter was only about one and one half years old at the time and normally we would not take such a young child that far away from home in the bitter cold. But we did. That was how important it was for us to meet this rinpoche again. We knew we could learn from this man and we were hungry for a change in our lives.

It was a long trip that took two days and by early evening of the second day we had reached Woodstock, New York. Darkness had set in and the cold was so intense that then entire front inside windshield of the car was frosted over; I was using a business card to scrape a tiny hole in the frosted glass to peer out of. We were driving up the narrow three-mile mountain road to the Buddhist center. It was slow going and we were not sure what we would find when we finally got there. Finally, we pulled into a small parking lot outside of a large building that used to be a resort hotel. It had seen better days. This was before the monastery was built, although they were beginning to pour the foundation when winter had set in.

We got out of the car and the little group of us stood huddled by the door and knocking. A high wind on the mountain was blowing sharp as we waited. It was dark and there were no outside lights. At last someone came and the door was opened by a very nice lady; we were invited inside. I guess I should tell you now that we had no appointment. No one knew we were coming. We just had winged it. Even so, the lady (her name was Norvie) was very kind and led us into a small waiting room; she would tell the rinpoche and see if he was available.

I will spare you the whole story of that visit and just cut to the chase to save space here. Suffice it to say that the Rinpoche was very kind, but firm. I wanted to know what I should do in order to become his student. Margaret felt similarly. We liked him that much! And pushy me, because I had been an astrologer and done “spiritual” things for many years, I was hoping to place out of “meditation 101” and get right to the advanced stuff. That tells you how foolish I was. Rinpoche very gently told me that he could see that I had

never harmed anyone with my astrology, but that when it came to learning meditation, because I knew little to nothing about it (and had done little to nothing with it so far) that it was best if I started at the very beginning. This, he said, would be the fastest way.

The fastest way? Well, I had to think twice about that because my arrogance was acting up again, but I respected this man so much that I was willing to do just as he said. OK, I would start at the beginning. And now I am getting to the point about Tong-len here.

When we were about to leave, Rinpoche gave us a small book called "The Torch of Certainty" by a high lama named Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye Rinpoche (1830-1899). Later I discovered this was one of the classic mind-training texts used in the Karma Kagyu Lineage. And Rinpoche pointed out the section on Tong-len for us to consider, the technique I described earlier.

When Rinpoche had said goodbye and was gone we went back outside. In the dark, we could see the bare cement walls of the monastery being built and the high winds were whipping the plastic covering that was hanging from the newly poured cement. It was a little eerie and there were no stars out. Anyway, we drove our little car slowly back down the mountain and managed to find a motel in Woodstock where we could stay the night.

There we were, crammed into one room that had a single (and very small) infrared wall heater that barely kept the bitter cold outside where it belonged. Anyway, there with our little kids we opened this small book and began to read the section on tong-len, a technique we certainly had never heard of before. And it was a shocker.

Maybe it was just the night and the fact that we were huddled together around a tiny heater (with our babies) 800 miles from home on one of the most bitter winter nights of that year. What this book said was to breathe into yourself all the darkness and suffering in the world and breathe back out whatever good feeling and well-being you had. In fact the tong-len technique is often simply translated as "Exchanging Yourself for Others."

Well this suggestion went 180-degrees against what every spiritual person and technique had taught me up to that point. In fact, I had been taught to not take in anything dark, negative, or fear-filled, and to keep such things as far away from me as possible. Psychics had even shown me how to wash my hands after doing an astrology reading for a client and let the harmful and negative thoughts that might otherwise accumulate just go down the drain. So tong-len was saying just the opposite and I mean totally the opposite: that I

was to breathe in the bad stuff and give others or whatever was out there any good stuff I had. What?

I know Margaret and I looked each other in the eye and wondered what had we gotten ourselves into? It was scary and very hard to get our mind around it. At first my gut feeling was to just cut and run and to get the hell out of there. Yet here we were, shivering together in this tiny hotel room so far from home. There was no instant solution. But we read on. We had nothing else to do.

Gradually we learned that tong-len, despite how it appeared to us at the time, was an advanced shortcut to compassion and the handling of suffering and negativity. All my life I had tried to keep as far away from anything negative (people and things) as I could. I mean: who wants that? And here was a technique telling me to do just the opposite, to welcome and breathe all this bad stuff into me and exchange it in the out-breath for whatever good stuff, feelings, and thoughts I had. These Tibetans get right to the heart every time. It got my attention.

Well, we got through the night, back on the road, and finally made it all way the home and with the concept of tong-len still intact. We would give it a try and we did. So there you have the story of how we came upon tong-len.

Tong-len has turned out to be an incredible and efficient method to remove obscurations and all the mental prejudice that we have accumulated, including those that society has gifted us with by just being born in the particular where and when we were. And unlike sitting meditation, which I found quite difficult to obtain results from, tong-len was easy to learn and do. All it required was that I gradually become more aware of my own negative reactions, biases, and preconceptions. Instead of simply following them as I had all my life, I learned to recognize and neutralize them as they arose using the tong-len technique. I made friends with my own enemies and gradually removed the walls of my personality.

Here I have given you kind of a short-hand introduction to tong-len. It would be best to learn it formally from a teacher, if you can. There are also other considerations that are very important, like making aspirations (intent) before you begin and dedicating the merit of whatever practice you do to benefit all sentient beings, that kind of thing. I have covered those elsewhere in a book called "Dharma: The Intangibles," which can be found as a free e- book here.

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

Tong-Len: Mental Feng-Shui

Let's say I see a small puppy or child being hurt or suffering. It is quite natural for my heart go out to such an innocent creature. I am instantly compassionate. I wish I could lessen the suffering and take that small creature in my arms and hold it, giving it comfort. Tong-len is like this.

We recognize and take on the suffering or pain wherever we find it and send back all that we have that might be comforting and kind. As mentioned, our heart goes out in these situations. This is the process. And while it is easier to imagine with something like a hurt puppy, the same transaction can be practiced with all who suffer, and should be. This is what tong-len is all about, regardless of whether the object is a cute puppy or a gnarly old what-have-you. All beings are deserving of compassion, even more so if they are mean and hurtful. Somewhere in there someone is suffering.

And while learning to have compassion wherever suffering is found is where tong-len shines, it can have other practical uses throughout our life each day. It is easy to see where we would have compassion for a hurt child or puppy, but perhaps less easy to see where we ourselves are constantly hurt, often by our own biases and prejudices.

It can be as obvious as the not-so-friendly co-worker that we suddenly meet as we round an office corner. What is our reaction? You know what it is. There is nothing kind about it and we tend to react with dislike and probably fear of the unknown. It can be painful when we know someone has singled us out and made a point of not liking us. When they suddenly appear in our day, the tendency is to shrink back and put up defenses. Am I right? Use your own words.

Tong-len would have us do just the reverse from reacting in fear or dislike. Instead we open up and take in all that we fear or loathe, breathe it in, and absorb it, and then send back whatever we can manage that is kind and open in return. It would seem that we are being vulnerable by doing so, but in fact it is we who become stronger through the process. This is what tong-len is all about. This is mind training folks!

Our prejudices and biases define the boundary between what we consider safe (our Self) and everything 'other' outside ourselves. When we do tong-len in a situation, we are gradually moving those boundaries between self and other so that we are more inclusive and embracing of others. What was once 'other' is slowly weakened and eventually vanishes, becoming known and a part of us. We have made friends with the 'other' parts of ourselves. We are more inclusive.

Tong-len is exactly the opposite of being divisive or polarizing. It weakens and breaks down duality rather than strengthening it. Instead of reinforcing fear and hatred, tong-len gradually removes the otherness out there somewhere and reclassifies it as part of ourselves, as something now known. We are making friends with ourselves through tong-len.

Are the others we are doing tong-len for (and with) helped by our action? They are certainly not hurt by it, and the fact that it makes us a friendlier and more compassionate being can't help but be useful to all who have to come to know us. I would say, yes, it is helpful to others as well to us. Let me summarize please.

Many of us are busy; we don't manage to find enough time for sitting meditation and/or we may not have done enough meditation to begin to reap the rewards of doing so. Sitting meditation takes practice time until a habit is formed that can really be of use to us. Tong-len is something we can do at anytime and anywhere. It does not take long and we don't have to interrupt whatever else we are doing. And it works.

Tong-len need not only be a somewhat drawn-out affair with lots of breathing in and breathing out. We only do tong-len until we feel that we have weakened, neutralized, and otherwise softened the duality we experience, the 'us' and 'them' of it, until we make friends with that other part of ourselves.

It can also be used for smaller and smaller events like winces, grimaces, and so one, whatever we come across in a moment that provokes us. In fact, tong-len is like mental Feng Shui in that when we encounter something that disturbs or upsets us we change its location from outside our mandala to within our mandala. Tong-len allows us to rearrange our self just as Feng Shui lets us rearrange our home.

What About Hate and Fear?

This is about dealing with what we hate and fear in life – a superior way to work with these. It is clear from comments from students that most of you know something about meditation. It is equally clear from your notes here that not many of you have even heard about "Tong-len," which is a totally different (and equally valuable) Tibetan mind- training technique from that of sitting meditation.

Tong-len has to do with our personal mandala, the mini-world we have created around ourselves, what we include in that world, and what we consider as definitely outside of that world. And while Tong-len can be done

while sitting on a cushion (like meditation), it is most often done off-the-cushion while we are walking around doing our everyday things.

We can use it all the time.

Tong-len has to do with the people and things we don't like, whatever comes up on our radar screen that is "other," awful, threatening, or just different. It is also an approach to all the suffering in the world, but I will get to that. This technique is particularly useful when we "hate" something or are repulsed by a person, event, or thing. Sound useful? It is very useful. In fact I am surprised that more folks don't know about it.

Along with regular sitting meditation, tong-len is part of the mental toolbox of every Tibetan Buddhist. For some reason here in the West most people have never heard of it, much less learned how to use it. Let's rectify that now. I have to warn you that Tong- len (from a western perspective) is a radical technique. In this sense it is advanced. It is so direct that it scared the bejesus out of me when I first heard about it. I wanted to run screaming from the thought and I almost did, so be prepared for something a little different.

The idea of Tong-len is very simple and it has to do with your personal mandala, what you consider yourself and what you consider not yourself – outside you. It has to do with when you encounter anything outside yourself, anything other, foreign, negative, opposite, "bad", scary, horrible, hideous, etc. When you recognize something as definitely "not- you," instead of crossing your fingers at it and trying to keep it at a distance, you do just the opposite.

Instead of pushing it away, you pull it toward you; you breathe and take it in. You absorb it willingly and in return send out, breathe out, and let go of all that is good, kind, loving, fresh, fine, etc., inside you. You send that back in exchange for all that bad stuff. This is true for anything you consider outside yourself, especially if it inspires fear, loathing, disgust, hatred, anger, or what-have-you – any "otherness." The concept is easy to grasp.

And you don't just breathe in and out just once, but continually until you have neutralized or normalized or made friends with whatever is outside. Of course you do this with whatever suffering you see in the world. You take on the pain and suffering, breathe it in, and breathe out or send your goodwill and kindness back out. And you do this anytime you find yourself being critical, judgmental, nasty, mean, and so on to something outside yourself, something "not you." I could go on, but let me summarize.

Tong-len is an incredible technique for removing duality, otherness, and extending our personal mandala or world view to accept and in fact embrace

more and more of what has been shut out by us as “otherness.” Just think about it and (more important) try it. This is a shortcut to greater compassion and kindness.

As to whether breathing in all this darkness, anger, and negativity is physically harmful? It is not. In fact, it removes your own negativity by shifting the limits of your tolerance in the direction of greater compassion and acceptance.

Tong-len is taught and used hand-in-hand in Tibetan Buddhist mind training along with sitting meditation. These are the two main pillars of practice. Tong-len is a brilliant way to gradually remove whatever separates you from the real world around you. You can do it all day long wherever you are and whenever you encounter anything strange or “other.” You can do Tong-len and start right on the spot to make friends with whatever is out there and perceived as other, alien, or against you.

It is especially good with enemies or not-so-friends. Instead of shutting them out and taking offence, you open up to them, take in whatever offends you, and give out kindness, goodwill, and your own good energy. You do all of this in your mind, but physical hugging and kindness is also allowed. Check this most potent technique out for yourself. Try tong-len.

Response-Ability

I am taking off my story-telling hat and putting on my didactic hat because I keep running across folks in my life that have managed to paint themselves into one corner or another because they react instead of respond. It makes me want to comment, and I am.

I have been counseling for something like 45 years now and I want to share with you what I find to be a key factor in that experience. Much of what takes place in a counseling session boils down to how a person responds to what is happening to them in their life. We can’t control what others say and do to us personally, much less what happens in the outside world of news events. That is what dictators try to do and they all eventually fail.

And here I am not referring to our own complex inner filters or the neuroses that we ourselves project outside ourselves on the movie screen of life and then intently watch. Rather I am talking about outside events that are actually independent of us and our mental projections, events that we can’t help but react to; we do this all the time.

You and I can’t control outside events (what happens to us), but we do have a choice in how we respond to these external events. Our ability to respond is what, of course, is called ‘responsibility’, a quality much valued in this society.

Although everyone has some kind of response to life, not everyone is considered 'responsible'. We can try to learn the correct response to an infinite series of possible events by rote or we can learn to be more generally responsible. This is what employers so desperately look for when they are hiring, someone who is responsible, who naturally has the ability to respond to events in a useful fashion. Trust me, they get the promotions!

And I am making the distinction here between responding and reacting. A simple reaction is not enough; we all do that. We cannot help but react to outside events, but it is 'how' we react that determines whether we react in a so-called 'responsible' manner.

Again: we can't control what happens to us in the outside world; we can only control our own reaction, the way 'we' respond to it. In low-level jobs there frequently is an attempt to anticipate every possible event and train the employee how to respond, as I mentioned, by rote. Of course, since there are infinite possibilities, that approach can only go so far.

Much better is to find someone with an ability to respond to all situations, someone who is naturally responsible. This is, of course, an employer's dream. So what am I driving at here?

My point is that it is possible to develop our sense of responsibility to the point where we can naturally just respond to events in a useful (responsible) way.

For example, when someone is angry at us and says or does something hurtful or rude, instead of setting off a domino-effect chain-reaction of anger in response, we can learn to consider the source (they are upset or angry) and just respond appropriately. We can't control them, but we can learn to control our reaction and response to them. This is the essence of many dharma teachings, what is called 'skillful means," responding skillfully.

In almost every case, instead of reacting to the rain of problems that life too often presents to us in a defensive manner (protecting ourselves from them), if we could instead receive and just handle them responsibly, it would be so much better…. for us and the outside world.

It is all a matter of awareness, of learning to catch ourselves before we over-react and start to push back, and instead facilitate and respond to incoming events in a useful manner, like not letting life push our buttons. Awareness training is the single most valuable tool I have yet found.

Our awareness is what makes us able to respond; we are aware of the situation. Some people are born more aware and they are naturally

responsible. The rest of us can develop our awareness until we become more responsible. Either way, IMO the key to how we make our way through life (career) is our ability to respond.

Reactive Alchemy

Like going to school for a single class or to church only on Sunday for an hour, with that amount of practice we get what we pay for. An hour or so a week gets us an hour or so a week of training, nothing more. Think it through. If we practiced an hour a week on guitar, we would not exactly be the musician we envisioned.

I don't intend this to sound too harsh, but even an hour a day of practice leaves 23 hours to unravel what we have done and generally accumulate karma. Part-time solutions seldom satisfy full-time needs.

I knew early on I needed to spend more time than that on mind training, but who has the time? In truth, it was not only the time, but also the tedium and boredom I often experienced just sitting there struggling with my mind, usually waiting for the clock to run out. It was pretty much self-defeating and I had no idea then that the struggle was a good sign! Dharma practice should not really be clocked. So what's the solution?

Obviously the solution requires more (not less) time spent, but perhaps in short bursts. Most of the great meditation teachers and texts say to do many short sessions rather than one long session. And they say that we should be careful not to overstay a session by pushing it longer than we feel like. Sure, we can push the limits to see if we like it, but if we don't like it, if we want to cut and run, that is not a good sign. In that case we need to regroup. A certain amount of joy, at least enthusiasm, is required to practice dharma properly. So what are our options?

I already mentioned many short sitting-meditation sessions, but that may be difficult to arrange, fraught with scheduling problems and perhaps self-consciousness. What is needed is a method to practice whenever and wherever we are that does not draw undue attention to itself. Fortunately there is a handy and portable solution at hand, your own moment-to-moment reactions.

It was no accident that my Tibetan dharma teacher (with whom I have been working with for 30+ years now) did not first suggest that I learn basic sitting meditation (Shamata). Instead he pointed out a technique called Tong-len in a Tibetan text and suggested I might practice that.

Now Tong-len, when done properly, is a complete dharma practice that we can do anywhere and anytime, so it is very portable. And it is a perfect example of Buddhist psychology, which can involve going against what we would think is the usual flow, going counter to what our personal preference might be. Our self is used to always going for the good stuff, getting more of whatever we like, not less, and certainly not giving anything away. It is almost like the prime rule of self is that we can always add more attachments, but never take any of them away. Left to its own devices, self- attachment is cumulative.

But Tong-len looks the ego right in the eye and suggests just the opposite, to give out with the good stuff and take in what we normally would totally avoid, like the suffering and pain of others that we see in this world. With Tong- len practice we send the best that we have in us out to another, and take in all of the pain and suffering that they have on ourselves. This is not something most of us would think to do, right? It is counter-intuitive to our upbringing.

However, in Buddhist psychology Tong-len is an express route to spiritual growth, a complete form of meditation all by itself. And it is a lot easier for westerners to learn than basic sitting meditation. I am not going to say much here about how the whole idea of Tong-len freaked me out when I first read about it. I have told the story several times in blogs, but it sure disturbed me. It was counter to everything I had been taught up to that point. And I am not even going to go into much detail about the practice of classical Tong- len. I wrote about it and there are many articles which you can find on the web in many places. Pema Chodron is an expert on Tong- len, and what she writes is accurate.

Suffice it to say that IMO Tong-len is tailor-made for Americans and, better yet, we all already kind of instinctively know how to do it. What I want to explain here is a subset of standard Tong-len. But those of you who respond to this idea, by all means learn the classic Tong-len as traditionally taught, because it is very powerful and totally useful. What I present here is but a refinement, but it may be an easier approach for many of us.

I learned this method from my first true dharma teacher, who shared with me a little trick he did with a piece of string. The secret was that you could add on as much string as you wanted, but you could never take any string away that was once given. At the time I wondered why he would bother with such a trick, but over time I found the profundity in it. And here is the key.

In western psychology the emphasis is often on removing self-attachments by force, often before we are willing to give them up. Deny ourselves, diet, etc. Tong- len (on the other hand) takes the opposite approach. Self-attachment is

removed not by limiting our attachments, but rather by expanding what we identify as self until we identify the entire world (and everyone in it) as part of our self. The more our self becomes identified with everything and everyone, the less hold our attachments have on us and they begin to break down and we see through them. The self eventually implodes. There is no more "self and others," because others have become part of our self. What a brilliant solution to an age-old problem! It is worth thinking this through.

In essence, Tong-len is a method to identify that which we don't already identify with, like everything "else" in the world outside ourselves, especially what we positively reject or don't like -- the "them" is not "me" kind of thing. In other words, as I present it here, this form of Tong-len is about pinpointing our reactions and doing something about transforming them incrementally and on the spot. And it is true alchemy that gives a pure result.

Like all mind training techniques, Tong-len depends on awareness to make it work, so it does require that we wake up enough to notice our own reactions, like if we flinch when someone we really don't like walks into the room. That's a reaction. But it does not have to be another person. It can be a thing or an event, like the wince that comes when we remember we have a dentist appointment -- that kind of experience.

If we wake up to our reactions and begin to watch them carefully, we have a chance to identify and make friends with parts of ourselves that we have somehow excluded from what we could call the inner circle of our self. And I am not talking about an isolated event or two a day. If we are aware, we find ourselves reacting almost constantly to all kinds of stuff all day long. These reactions are perfect opportunities for dharma practice and we can't seem to avoid them anyway. They offer a very rich field of opportunity for transformation.

The point I like to keep in mind is that each reaction that we have is recording its karma in our mindstream. Of course karma leaves its mark, but that is not the whole of it. Karma is also a seed that always grows and ripens in the future. Therefore, every time we react negatively to someone or something, we not only lay down a track in our mindstream, but we reinforce (or underline) that mark by repetition and guarantee that this very thing we try to push away from us will reappear in a larger and stronger version down the line. That is just how it works. And karma grows exponentially, not linearly.

So "reactive Tong-len" is the practice of becoming aware of what we react to, making friends with it, and eventually no longer recording that particular reaction as karma that will (literally) haunt us down the line. If you want to remove the accumulation of loads of karma, monitoring your reactions as

described here is a good way to go. And it is so portable. We can do it on or off the cushion, anywhere we are, and all the time. It adds up to real practice beyond what we might otherwise be able to do. And the best thing is that no time is wasted. This may perhaps be the perfect post- meditation dharma practice.

Now I am sure to get a comment or two that this method is all about us, and very selfish on our part, just freeing ourselves from recording more karma. What about helping other people? The answer is very simple. Certainly any person that you make friends with in your mind, that you used to dislike, benefits from your practice. And until we deconstruct the self and its attachments, until they are transparent, we will never gain greater clarity.

And my Buddhist teachers have always encouraged me to first become less attached myself and then try to help others, and not vice versa. Instead, the accent is always on our own practice until such time as we free ourselves and become clear enough to actually be of use to others, and not to just muck things up more than they already are.

Anyway, I have found that monitoring my reactions, recognizing what I am habitually excluding or find negative, and then soothing or making friends with that part of myself is enormously beneficial. And it is portable and easy to do. And best of all, once we identify with our negativities and neutralize them, we no longer record that particular karma. Clarity improves.

Sometimes it is good to start small and work outward, like dropping a pebble in a still pond. As with the "string trick" mentioned earlier, "if you can't beat em', join em'," meaning: if we can't remove our attachments by attrition, try expanding what we include as our self by identifying our negative reactions, making friends with them, and including them as part of who we think we are. It is like blowing up the balloon of the self until it bursts of its own accord by inclusion instead of denial.

Is this not worth trying?

Overload

[This is a related article, emotional overloads, a perfect candidate for tong-len practice.]

Now here is a touchy issue, my own emotional upheavals. When I discover (I don't always even know) that I am emotionally upset by something, I have learned I must be much more careful than usual. Years ago I had a little mantra that I whispered to myself: "We will withstand shocks out- breaking." I have no idea who I meant by "we," but I guess it was all of us. Anyway, back

then (much like now) emotional shocks of one sort of another were always breaking out. Let's face it; some things in life (even little things) are hard to take, especially if we are sensitive.

I never know when an emotional load might suddenly land on my shoulders and overload my capacitors. My first dharma teacher used to say "I have no pot to piss in," meaning he had nowhere to unload the charge that I am sure he must have carried at times. He did not want to just dump on those around him.

Unfortunately that is what most of us do. We can't help ourselves. The overload just spills over and usually on to those nearest to us, often the ones we love and cherish the most. And it can happen like lightning.

I receive some bad news or something upsets me. Of course I try to manage it, but as often as not it is going to take me some time to process this bit of upset and there I am, right in the middle of whatever I am doing, perhaps surrounded by my family or other people. The last thing I want to do is unload this charge onto someone else, but I am too proud to stop the presses and tell everyone I am having a problem.

Often I don't have time (or don't want to make it public) that I am carrying a charge from somewhere, something, and perhaps someone else that has nothing to do with where I am right now or whomever I am with. Despite attempts on my part to control, my upset just escapes me and before I know it I have dumped the charge (the whole load) onto what otherwise would be a normal communication, charging the whole moment. It can get heavy like that real fast.

Of course, I should immediately apologize and acknowledge that I am under some kind of stress, but too often I try to contain myself and not burden others with what are obviously my problems. And there is the pride issue too. Keeping quiet about it would be fine if I COULD contain myself and if some lightning rod of a moment didn't discharge me onto a friend or family member. Bam! The harm is already done.

Before I know it I have created a situation that demands an apology on my part, and if those around me react with shock or hurt at what I have just laid on them (and they react in turn), the whole scene escalates into a full- scale drama and sometimes all hell breaks loose.

Often, before I know it, I too am taking offence and the original discharge is lost in the general carpet bombing going on around me. It is worse if I don't acknowledge where it is coming from, i.e. me.

I wish I could just issue a warning if I am carrying a loaded charge, like "Get back folks, I'm losing it," but that seldom happens and the overload just slips out and charges the atmosphere. If I could be out front about what is happening, perhaps then others could give me a little latitude as I try to manage my own emotions. However, if I try to keep it private and then lose control, this is really unfair to those around me.

When my feelings get hurt or something untoward happens, it is very difficult not to end up with a charge that won't quickly dissipate. And it can be one of those all-day suckers that will take time for me to work through until it trickles down to anything normal. The bigger the front, the bigger the back.

In the meantime, the best I can do is try to steer clear of other people, but that is not always easy either, especially with family whom otherwise I have encouraged to be near. Even if I announce that I am under a heavy charge, this is not always enough. I try to get off by myself and let it all blow over because close proximity can be explosive when I am upset, but somehow the charge is still communicated and fills the air. All of a sudden, everyone is walking on pins and needles.

And I am not the only one with this problem. As a counselor for more years than I want to mention, this phenomenon is epidemic and worldwide. The Buddhists call these emotional upheavals, kleshas, and they also point out that they are very difficult to remove.

And these emotional events happen so organically. There I am, happy as a clam, and I get some bad news or take offense at something that someone does or says. All of a sudden I am overwhelmed with emotion, just fully charged, not expecting it, and unable to control it well enough. I try.

And the sad thing is that the first person that appears in my wake becomes the lightning rod and gets the discharge, often the full load. It could be our dog who did something wrong or perhaps my wife or kids who just happened to wander into the room. Before I know it I get heavy-handed and what otherwise would be a simple remark on my part becomes a loaded remark, one that sets off a war of words or whatever.

To make matters worse, I too often try to contain it rather than acknowledge it, but the cat is already out of the bag, the harm done. If I would instantly apologize and admit my upset, it would help. But at those times it seems I can't bring myself to cop to it and instead continue to think I can manage what is already obviously unmanageable.

As mentioned, if I would humble myself enough to communicate to those around me that I am upset, they would comfort me I am sure. I could have an

orderly discharge and de-escalation. I would feel better too. Pride on my part does not help. Bottling all this stuff up results in anger and attempts to contain it lead to explosions -- a vicious cycle.

These kind of upsets for many of us are not about to stop happening, I am sure. They can be remedied, but the remedy takes a lot of work on my part to apprehend my hair-trigger reactions and learn to respond to bad news or insult differently, to not take it so personally. That will take time, and I am working on it. Buddhist mind training and the awareness it brings has been the most helpful. Meanwhile, I am doing my best to fess up to those around me when I get a sudden overload.

Does this ring a bell and how do you folks handle this?

For more free materials (e-books, articles, and videos) see:

http://dharmagrooves.com/#&panel1-1

YouTube

http://www.youtube.com/user/merlewine?feature=watch

## ACTING FROM THE GUT

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 2, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/f8ab027d-c3ea-4407-a06d-ca5ae369fa9e_2019x2048.jpeg*

[I'm back on my beat of writing about dharma, so things are better by at least a little bit for me. I colored, created the nimbus, and tweaked this image of Amitabha Buddha, taken from a pen & ink drawying at our dharma center by Sange Wangchuk, who later became the Minister of Culture for Bhutan.]

While all around us war rages on two fronts, we are not aware of the connection between the massive influx of solar influx happening now compared to a quiet sun of just sunlight streaming.

This is a good example of why and how I got into learning the dharma, because it is all about 'Awareness'. Even the word 'Buddha' has its origins in Pali and Sanskrit, and is derived from the word "buddha," meaning enlightened or awakened.

Waking up or becoming aware is the nature of dharma, as opposed to ignoring or being unaware of the nature of this reality that we are living within, which is called Samsara, embedded in almost a complete lack of awareness, or so the teachings say.

The inability to think for ourselves is the result of following thinking to the point of ignorance, of diminishing returns, a tunnel with no light at the end.

And thinking for ourselves demands experience we lack and must have, yet we don't know how to do it. And it does not come from a diet of conceptual pablum, but rather from learning to exercise our minds like we exercise our bodies to stay alive. The mind needs to live too.

And I am speaking here not just of thinking, which is part of the problem, but of vigorous exercise, certainly not just reading another article or book that we try to get meaning out of, yet does not move us to action mentally.

I'm going to try to point out how we can usefully exercise the mind, but this is very hard to do, and it took me years of working with a dharma teacher to get to the point I will attempt to share here. And I don't pretend to point out to you the nature of the mind, but just enough to get some action started in that direction, a bit of starter dough.

And again, I am not an expert, yet I can tell you about my own experience in learning this and something about how it was taught to me, meaning how I finally got the correct idea.

Rinpoche was explaining how the monks in Tibet were taught, and here is one example. Rinpoche asked us what the color of the mind is. Is it red, blue, or some other color. No one seemed to know. He went on to say that each of us should go away from this teaching, and for the rest of the day and night, search our mind to determine if the mind is the color 'Red.' Just the color red and not any other color.

And then the next morning when we all came together in the shrine room, he would ask us individually what we found. OK. That was a bit unusual, asking us to actually do something, but I was game to try that.

And so, off I went and actually, it only took me a couple of minutes to figure this out. I didn't need to spend all day and night on this. Of course, the mind is not the color Red, or any other color. The mind is not Red; it is colorless. Obviously.

And so, the next day came and we all assembled, and Rinpoche asked this or that person whether the mind is the color Red, and he got all kind of answers as you might imagine.

And then Rinpoche explained that in Tibet, they do this same question, only the monks there are asked to spend three days and three nights on the color red. And after that, they repeat the same three days and nights, but with the color blue, green, etc. And this goes on for three straight months.

Well, that surprised me, because I know from my trips to Tibet that the monks are no dummies. Why would they spend three days and nights on the color Red, or any color for that matter. I came away that day puzzled.

And I also came away from the entire 10-day intensive puzzled. There was something I was missing here. There had to be. And it finally dawned on me what it might me.

I was not doing what Rinpoche had asked me to. He didn't ask me to think if the mind is the color Red, but rather he asked us to search our mind, day and night, non-stop, and determine if the mind is Red. There is a difference, and the difference is like night and day, or so I found out.

Rinpoche was not asking us to 'think' at all, but rather to vigorously and viscerally search what we call our mind, with all we had. And it was the searching and the exercise of the mind and not the color red, blue, green, etc. that was important.

When we think of using the mind we do just as I am writing, we ‘think’ and having thought we are done with it, but never or seldom viscerally or vigorously, never from the gut, but always from the mental, conceptual viewpoint. We think it. This is not the mental exercise that Rinpoche had in mind.

Instead, he wanted us to search and massage the mind like we would knead bread or make dough for a pizza. In other words, we need to stretch and pull the mind every which way and for a prolonged time. Exercise. These mental muscles are seldom to never used and they have to be broken in so that we begin to think from out gut, the Hara region, our belly, and not just with our head. Thinking only with our head is killing us.

The point is that we are totally used to grasping things mentally with our mind (thinking conceptually) and not with our gut. We often react with our gut, yet we have never learned to use it correctly, to master it.

Once I understood this, I began to switch hats, so to speak. As a harmonica player for many years, I had learned breath control both breathing in and out from my diaphragm and gut. You have to.

And from that point, when I returned the 800 miles from the teaching, I practiced this exercise of my mind for some three years, very intensely, centering and using my Hara or lower abdomen all the time, while I worked, and while I did other things. I was learning to ‘think’ with my gut and not with my head.

And it was after those three years that I had my first real breakthrough into Insight Meditation, a non-dual technique of full immersion, Hara and all.

Whether this is useful for you reading this, I can’t say. Probably it will go over your head and in one ear and out the other, as they say.

However, I put it out there and would be happy to discuss it with anyone interested.

[Image of Amitabha Buddha colored and tweaked by me just for this blog, based on a line drawing done at our meditation center by Sange Wangchuk. Amitabha is the particular form of Buddha that our meditation center is dedicated to.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## DON'T SAY NO ONE KNOWS; JUST SAY I DON'T KNOW

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 2, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/29998000-8c0b-4513-96d4-00a92d52c450_1024x1024.jpeg*

It's all dharma or a chance to learn dharma. It's not like dharma is off track or something. Dharma is the track, and the only one at that goes somewhere beneficial, so there are no awards for staying on track than dharma itself. Dharma is learning to fly right; it's that simple.

And as the Zen Buddhists point out so successfully, there is a dharma to everything, the correct way for each of us to negotiate whatever pops up for us.

And so, we are not going to run out of dharma and dharmic ways to handle whatever comes our way. And we don't have to become a Buddhist to be dharmic. Dharma was there before the Buddha found it and it's still right there. That's what the Buddha did, realize the dharma. We can do that too.

And so, if that's true why bother studying or practicing dharma, if its already everywhere? Well, the simple answer is we don't have to study or practice dharma. It's just more efficient and easier to do it that way.

It's the same as if I could say to you, here is astrology. It's out there, so go at your pace and figure it out. Or here is a course that will save you a lot of time and get you started learning astrology. It's up to each of us how we want to do it.

Yet, what's not true is that we can avoid the dharma, because ultimately for each of us there is the path for us to or toward enlightenment. And it's not hidden, this path, because it is THE path we will have to take, given our personality, situation, and all of that.

Our dharma path is already out there waiting to be taken, and its obvious because it's our path. If we even try to look, that particular path is what we will find, so take your time or as they say "pay me now or pay me later." There is no real choice here other than to just avoid it altogether, which is what got us to where we are now.

What I'm trying to say here is that there is no way we can avoid dharma, no matter which way we turn or where we go. I certainly tried to go it alone and I taught myself almost everything I know, up to a point.

Yet, after I taught myself everything I know, there were still gaps, huge gaps in my knowledge. I had what is like a patchwork quilt, but with many missing pieces. What was I to do about those?

Well, it took me a while to come to the obvious conclusion, ask someone who knows if you can find such a teacher. And I did.

And it was not embarrassing to be in the position of asking for guidance. Seeking guidance was, actually, enlightening, because my dharma teacher pointed out to me exactly what I wanted to know, which was what I didn't know. Duh.

Why did it take me so long to get around to getting some guidance. Some kind of pride or other.

What a thrill to learn dharma from someone who actually knows, and to fill in the blanks of what we don't know.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

**PRECIOUS, PRECIOUS DHARMA**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 3, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/fdf1b19e-66ce-41af-a7c5-f1c670e2e23d_1024x1024.webp*

PRECIOUS, PRECIOUS DHARMA

By Michael Erlewine

It's precious beyond any words, as anyone who has discovered the dharma knows. The dharma is exactly what we don't have and are hungry for.

I don't mean that dharma is just what everyone needs, although that is true too. What's remarkable is that each of us is tailored for a particular unfolding of dharma that they will respond to. There are said to be 84,000 different dharmas to fit our varying requirements.

My point is that there is not just a generic form of dharma, where one size fits all, but rather we each will respond to a particular dharma path naturally. We will find it, or our dharma teacher will point it out to us, whichever comes first.

Either way, just as an infant finds their mother's breast, so each one of us will find a dharma path, a path to dharma that exactly fits our needs and we will thrive there.

To facilitate this, we have to relax and not force ourselves into dharma, even though we know we need it. We have to discover the thread to dharma in the world around us and pick up on that. That's our path, what in dharma training is called our 'Yidam," the one avenue we are fit to follow, what will work for us.

And so, I write this because you can't pound a square peg into a round hole, and we should not force ourselves to do dharma practices that we don't naturally respond to. That only stains the dharma for us, so we lose the desire to practice dharma at all.

Tread gently is my advice, and you don't know what will work for you until it works for you. And in the process of finding out we can damage our desire to learn by forced practice, just as my being forced to play the piano when I was a kid made me not want to play it. That idea.

Our hunger for dharma, I believe, is a natural hunger, and should be satisfied by finding the kind of dharma, the approach, that is natural for us. There are all kinds, and like Cinderella, the shoe must fit our foot.

There has to be a dharma perfect for us. That's just how dharma works. So go gently into the world of dharmas, feel your way along, and find the thread of the dharma that suits you. And follow that.

And yes, there is a bit of a hurry, but take time to get there.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## OUR REACTIONS

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 4, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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By Michael Erlewin

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Time goes on, and it is in time that every little thing happens and pops up. We are right there. And how we react determines what happens next. In that sense, we are in control of our own destiny, if nothing more.

There is a great difference between a knee-jerk reaction and responding appropriately to whatever happens in the moment, whatever confronts us.

And with that comes the dharma or an opportunity to discover the dharma. It's instantaneous, this moment, with no second takes. And whether we confront the moment with resistance and reaction or can relax and respond to what emerges is all up to us individually. It's going to happen anyway, this moment, and who knows what will emerge and come forth.

We can't control that, but we can learn to roll with the moment, work with it in a positive and responsible way, rather than react negatively and with little to no control.

And there is a very easy form of dharma practice that takes no effort on our part because it depends on our knee-jerk reactions, which are happening anyway. They are beyond our control, obviously. And it's easy to do. Here is how.

All we have to do is to be aware when we react, that we are reacting, and take note of that. And then we just acknowledge or own that this is our reaction despite what caused it, and then just drop it. That's the whole practice.

We don't think or dwell on what caused the reactions or even about our own reaction. We don't noodle on it or turn the event into a train of thought. We just note it, own it, and drop it.

This is a form of reactivity training, working with our own reactions, a particular form of what in Tibetan Buddhism is called Tong-Len. The only difference is that instead of working with the world or other people, here we are only working with ourselves, and our own reactions.

It is reactivity training or reactivity Ton-Len.

And I'm not talking about just large reactions, like a loud car exhaust or a firecracker going off, or even a phone ringing, or when something interrupts us. I am also referring to the thousands of tiny reactions we have, like reacting to what a big nose you have, or I don't like the tie or the dress you are wearing, a multitude of reactivity that goes on all day long.

And each involuntary reaction, no matter how small, sucks energy from us, and this goes on all day. If we can become aware of our own reactions and tone them back, we save an enormous amount of energy that otherwise is spent and lost. Think about it.

And when we consider how many forms of dharma practice require a special time to be set aside or a special place to do it, here it's automatic, all done for us.

We just begin to monitor our reactions, which are happening anyway, already taking our precious energy and disturbing our mind. We don't have to do anything but note a reaction, however small, own it, and drop it. The rest takes care of itself.

You will find that in a relatively short amount of time, reactions are toned back, and turn into what we could call appropriate responses on our part, and we are soon rolling with events rather than reacting to them.

That's it, the easiest and most productive dharma practice I know of. It will change your life if you do it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## THE BORDERLINE: CROSSING AND RECROSSING

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 5, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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By Michael Erlewin

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Living at the edge. I don't really mean living 'at' the edge, but more living on the edge, meaning being nourished by the edge, the borderline between inside and outside, between being and not-being. That's what's happening anyway, so might as well be aware of it.

It's always those borders and the border line that we cross and recross in order to feel anything at all. I use the analogy of rolling a piece of grit, a grain of sand or a tiny pearl, between our thumb and forefinger, feeling it. That is borderline stuff, IMO. That's what we do with our mind.

Where do you want to live? If we are fully immersed with no awareness, we are just that. Not aware. If we are aware with no immersion, we have nothing to know,

So that's why the borderlines in life are so important because we fluctuate between them, the in and out. And those of us who are dharma practitioners of the non-meditation 'meditations' like Dzogchen and Mahamudra have no choice.

It's not all in or all out, but both and neither. Again, it's the borderline I am talking about, not in or out, not all in or all out, but living in and on the borderline between the two, crossing and recrossing.

This is what the more advanced meditations, actually 'non-meditations', are all about, using the borderline to remain aware and extend our awareness.

It's not nothing or something. That's the whole point, that there is none, no point or not a point. And we have to deal with that, which is challenging. Every borderline is like a flame or incandescence that, burning, keeps us awake.

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## BUDDHA NATURE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 6, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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[A little housekeeping here, juggling of dharma terms, and clarification.]

Let's talk about the popular term "Buddha Nature," which became part of the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra, but is not found acceptable by many Buddhists, including me. While I can understand what is meant by 'Buddha Nature', that because the historical Buddha Realized the true nature of the mind, then we too, any of us, can do the same. That has been called 'Buddha Nature.'

I personally don't favor the term "Buddha Nature," and many Buddhists don't, although it is generally accepted, and I understand. To my mind, the dharma existed long before the Buddha realized it, so I prefer using the term 'the True Nature of the Mind' to the term 'Buddha Nature" because it sounds too much, IMO, like it is a Self or permanent "Soul" and that can be confusing to inquirers.

To repeat, just as the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, achieved enlightenment, Buddhists believe each of us has that same potential for enlightenment as the Buddha did for realizing the true nature of the mind. Of course, I agree.

In other words, Buddhists do not believe as do most theists (Christians, etc.) in the doctrine of original sin, meaning that at some time in the past, perhaps at the 'Garden of Eden', mankind 'sinned' and fell from purity and grace, and now each of us needs to redeem ourselves or have Christ do this for us. In other words, Buddhists do not believe in 'Original Sin', that we have fallen and somehow now have to be saved.

It's fair to ask where is our 'Buddha Nature' or where is the 'True Nature of the Mind', even though we may still have a hard time seeing it in others or even when we look at ourselves in a mirror. Why is that?

What do we expect to see in the mirror? Or is it that in the mirror we see the same stuff that keeps us from being enlightened in the first place. Does Samsara (this cyclic world of confusion) drown out or cloud the visibility of the true nature of the mind. That seems to be what the dharma teachings state.

And that's what Buddhists mean when they say we are not aware of the true nature of our own mind. And it gets a little more complicated, because if we already are perfect and pure within, we don't need to improve what we inherently are, but only to remove what obscures the true nature of the mind. We can't improve the true nature of the mind, only reveal it. Discover.

And perhaps we should give up trying to get 'there' because we are already there; we already have within us the true nature of the mind, and for that matter have always been there and so has everyone else. Again, we each already have within us the true nature of the mind or, if you wish, Buddha Nature.

So, it's beyond backtracking or improvement because there is nowhere to backtrack to or need for it. It's more about giving up the effort we are making to get to where we already by nature are.

To repeat, we will never get there because we are already there and just don't realize it. We are not aware of what is our own nature. We just have to cease and desist with the effort. "Relax, as it is" as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa put it.

And so, instead of struggling with 'Original Sin' as many Christians do, Buddhists struggle with Samsara and all of the obscurations that prevent us from being aware of the pure nature of our own mind. And so, practically speaking, both theists (Christians, etc.) and non-theists (Buddhists) have their work cut out for them. Christians work to get back to their original purity, and Buddhists work to remove whatever obscures their Buddha Nature -- defilements, ignorance, and negative karma. These are not that dissimilar, with Christians trying to get back to their pure state and Buddhists uncovering what obscures their pure state.

And, as mentioned, "Buddha Nature" should not be confused with the theist concept of a permanent or 'Eternal Soul', which is why I prefer the term "true nature of the mind." However, regardless, "Buddha Nature" is said to have no inherent Self but is also (like everything else) impermanent.

If these two views are similar, what's the difference? One obvious difference is that Christians hold that they have done something wrong, which they call 'sin', and are "trying to atone for these sins," which IMO is a heavy burden, while the Buddhists have never sinned, but instead have yet to remove what obscures their own view of the true nature of the mind. However, there is no original sin involved.

As my dharma teacher once said to us, “We are the stragglers, the rebirths that in all the time there has been up to now, never got enlightened.” In other words, enlightenment is still in our future, which some see as a problem.

Although, IMO, this is why it can be said that if we see  that as a problem, it is a problem we cannot solve, a problem for which there is no solution, and that is because the problem does not exist. I have a problem with the problem, so to speak.

And as to the process of the reveal of the true nature of the mind, I just say, it is straight forward and “Not a Problem.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## WHY WE ARE ALONE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 7, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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I'm talking about being alone in the dharma. Here is the problem as I understand it from my own experience.

Advice may be all around us. Everyone is glad to help, but the whole point is that when it comes to dharma and 'Realization', we each have to do it by ourselves. That means we are alone, big time.

Yes, of course, we need an authentic dharma teacher, who can point out to us this or that, perhaps how to do it, point the way, yet the nature of realizing the dharma is that each of us has to do it ourselves. It's not that others would not or will not help, but rather that we each have to do the whole thing, realizing the true nature of the mind, ourselves. We may not be used to doing that, to being just out there, so alone.

Not only no one can do it for us, the only thing anyone can do is point out the way. Even the Buddha could but point the way. And even he would be powerless to do it for us because, as mentioned, we each have to realize the nature of the mind on our own. Again, that's the whole point, so get used to being alone enough so this can happen. That's a good sign.

And so, if we find ourselves in the middle of our life and increasingly alone in this, it's not because no one cares or everyone is too busy to take us in and to cherish us, but rather that we have to be on our own in order to realize the nature of the mind. It's not a group project. It's individual. And all dharma training is going to lead to our being on our own, alone if you will. It will keep happening again and again.

We have to accept this, to understand that's why we are continually being isolated. It's not a punishment. We did not do something wrong, but just the opposite. We did something right and we are being exposed in our aloneness to just the conditions we need to do this ourselves. In my experience, these conditions were like a perfect storm.

It's why, when everything is on the table, again and again, we find ourselves left out, thrust into the charnel ground of existence, not to be sacrificed or

ignored, but rather we are being pushed out onto the landing stage ready for us to take off. So, don't fight it.

We are in solitary because although we are not the only one dong this, we each do have to do it by ourselves. Again, it's not a punishment, but rather a requirement for any kind of enlightenment to occur and take place. No one can do this for us. We are going to find ourselves alone in this.

I agree, this is so difficult to understand, because just at the point we could most use support, we have to support ourselves, and are entirely on our own. That's the way it has to be because that's the way it is.

And this is never more true than in dharma and our every step toward enlightenment. Each step is on our own, stepping away from the past, from the group, stepping out on our own, entirely by ourselves and with no help other than guides, what are called the pointing-out instructions.

It can only be pointed out to us. We have to do it ourselves.

And if we want to burn away the dross or connective tissue that binds us to Samsara, we have to be our own funeral pyre and that fire must instantly burn through us like a trail of gunpowder, through the network of interstices within the fabric of the Self, our personality, that becomes incandescent and burns up.

This poem I wrote celebrates this.

PHOENIX

Personality,

Bright beauty of the night,

That terrible crystal,

Burning in the darkness,

At the very edge of time.

Watching,

In rapt fascination,

Fires,

Impossible to ignore,

Forever frozen,

On the face of age.

It is a dark light,

Indeed,

Funeral pyres,

Signifying nothing,

But impermanence.

This is a fire,

That does not warm.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## IT'S NOT WORTH THE EFFORT

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 8, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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IT'S NOT WORTH THE EFFORT

By Michael Erlewine

One thing about having a web page is that I can write about what interests me, and I apologize if it is not all that interesting to many of you. With that said, here is a bit of an esoteric post, but actually we can apply it to any kind of practice we do.

In this case I am talking about Insight Meditation, an important part of Mahamudra training and how do we know when we have achieved it, and where do we go from there? What happens next?

And I am using here the analogy of focusing a camera lens to make a point.

Learning Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is something like resolving an image with a telephoto lens; as we turn the barrel of the lens, it gradually, but increasingly, comes into focus until it is in perfect focus, but what then? Well, it's in focus. Period, end of story.

We don't want to un-focus it, nor can we focus it any finer. It's in focus, where we want it to be. There is nothing more here, but often we continue to strive for even a finer focus and just mess it up. I'm talking about the striving.

Now, in my experience, this is similar to the clarity of the mind achieved through learning Insight Meditation, as used in Mahamudra training. It takes practice, effort, and in particular time to extend whatever original insight or recognition we may have achieved when Insight Meditation is finally successfully invoked. And we have to work with it to have that, to even get there.

Ultimately, it can only get so good, so clear, and then we have insight, immersion into a clear view so to speak. When the mind's view resolves into clarity, we stop making effort to resolve and improve it, because it is resolved. However, from my experience I was not always sure of that and kept looking for what's next. This is a problem, IMO.

Of course, as a bit of a lens expert, I know there are finer and finer lenses, but focus is focus and that's it for this discussion.

Once the nature of the mind is resolved or in focus using Insight Meditation, we have the same thing. It's clear, so at that point we stop trying to focus it or should. LOL. Yet, since we have never been there before we may not know when to stop trying to get to where we already and now are. You can see that would be fruitless.

It takes time, some time, to get used to seeing clearly, to using Insight Meditation, just as with cataract surgery, which I have had twice. Clear is clear and you no longer try to see clearly. You see clearly.

It's the effort I am pointing out here that we no longer need, if we ever needed it. Unfortunately, effort is just the scaffolding we require to get here, and not part of the finished view or image.

This is true of Insight Meditation. Clear is clear, and after a while, there is nothing more clear than clear, so stop trying to focus what is already in focus. And lose the effort. Stop trying.

Of course, I manage to miss the point when I write about half the time, and I feel I have here, so I will take another run at it. I really want to communicate this because at least to me this is key, so important to understand.

If we practice and work toward realizing a particular dharma technique, our relationship until we achieve fruition with that practice is pretty much our entire history of that practice. It's what we know longest and best, including all the effort involved. However…

And there is a 'However' here, and that is: what happens to our effort when we finally perfect realize Insight Meditation, at least enough to our satisfaction, and I will try to be clear. Where do we go from there? What happens next?

And the simple answer is, we go nowhere. It's a 'no go' situation, as in we don't go on 'efforting'. We're done with effort. We just proceed to use Insight Meditation from there on out.

In other words, we are no longer making an effort to get Insight Meditation where we want it. We have done that. And, when we do, we stop with the effort and even walk back any strain or effort we have gotten in the habit of using. We are done with effort. It would have been best if we never needed it in the first place, but that is a little much to hope for.

Yet we are not done with Insight Meditation, because we will go on using it for the foreseeable future, extending and expanding our recognition of the true nature of the mind through Insight Meditation. That's unavoidable.

And so, I'm pointing to our habit of effort that we have accumulated from trying to learn Insight Meditation and how it may not just stop and go away but keeps on pushing us, out of habit. How do we remove no longer needed habits?

I only say all this because in my own case, I found myself having resolved the clarity of Insight Meditation well enough, and then kind of continuing to spin my wheels as if there was something else that needed my effort and had to be done, but that churning of effort is just noise and itself an obscuration at this point.

Because done is done. No more effort. Let it be and relax all effort. We don't need our effort on this any longer, so be aware if it wants to churn onward. Awareness of this problem will lead us to a solution.

And keep in mind that Insight Meditation, because it is a non-dual practice, is a realization, so you can't just un-ring that bell.

The only thing that needs to be done here is to relax and walk back the effort (remove the stain of prolonger effort) and continue to use Insight Meditation as part of Mahamudra, which is a form of non-meditation. The key here is to be aware of any stains from the effort and of course cease the effort.

I'm afraid this blog is one of those that kick the topic on down the road and never get it said or defined. I keep trying.

What I am trying to say is that we reach a point where Insight Meditation is operational and working. All that effort, all that trying to achieve it is no longer needed. However, we the habit of trying is by now deeply ingrained and part of our modus operandi. We just try and make effort anyway, yet by now such effort is an ingrained habit, itself an obscuration. We just do this automatically and have to cease doing it AND repair any stain or damage we made by making it. That's what I'm trying to say in a nutshell. Sorry it took so long.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## AWARENESS OF WHAT?

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 10, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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[Well, today was a little different. I spent about 1-1/2 hours in oral surgery having two things done. First, one of my two front upper teeth broke off and the remainder had to be extracted. I'm a pretty sight, LOL. And after the extraction, a titanium post was implanted into my jaw bone, along with a bone-graft. Implant.

And second, another titanium post was implanted in another empty space where a tooth extracted in my upper jaw.

These will take months to heal and be ready to receive teeth, after which I can smile again. I'm glad I don't have to see myself. LOL

Needless to say, I am all kinds of sore right now. On to the blog]

A question I have is this: Since Buddhism and its dharma is totally about 'awareness', and even the word Buddha is derived from being aware, it is obvious according to the dharma that we are not yet aware enough. I get that.

My question is, aside from awareness, our becoming aware, are we otherwise already enlightened and just don't know it? That's perhaps a bit of an oxymoron for sure, but this points at something to consider. If our inner core and mind is pure and our outer Self and personality is impermanent, that indeed it is an awareness we lack.

If the only thing difference between a Buddha and the rest of us is awareness, and aside from that we are, so to speak, good to go.

Is this true or not true?

It seems to be true. And if that is true then there is nothing for us to do otherwise than to develop awareness. And of course, any Buddhist would give us a thumbs up on that. There is nothing wrong with us other than that lack, that we are not yet aware enough.

If that is true, as mentioned, all that remains is for us to develop some awareness. And that brings me to this: what are the different ways to become aware and how do we find the easiest one for us?

As I have spent some fifty years exploring (and completing) various dharma practices, I have at least some ideas of what they are, how they work, and for me at least, which ones work best.

Some dharma practices look, at least at first glance, like Medieval torture methods. Certainly, it is interesting to look at dharma practice as various ways to make us aware, which is exactly what they are. The problem as always remains with us and our appetite for practice, and what practices best suit us.

Given that all these methods must work for someone, I would hope so, but which of these many methods actually work for us or work on us? That my friend is where our skin in the game comes in.

Certainly, there is a smorgasbord of dharma techniques out there for us to review. I have done that, and I also have done a lot of dharma techniques from beginning to end, so what do I have to say from that experience?

I can say that some of these dharma techniques are arduous, difficult indeed, like doing 100,00 full-length prostrations on the ground, as pictured here. Are they meant to toughen us up or did I just fall into some techniques that were perhaps not right for me?

Well, probably some of both. If I had it to do all over again, what would I do? Well, I would certainly do what I did do, which was find (or perhaps luck onto) a very good and authentic dharma teacher and guide. We can't easily do it all by ourselves. I don't believe we can even do it without a guide, at least as to the advanced practices.

I know, I know. You think you can, and so did I, until I found out I had little to no idea what to do when it came to the more advanced practices. I mean, I didn't even know what the results were supposed to be or look like, other than somewhere, far down the line, I should become enlightened. Everyone knows that.

Sorry folks, that by itself is not enough. We can figure some things out, probably the low-hanging fruit, but beyond that what do we even know to do? You probably don't and neither did I. Although I could teach myself almost anything, I cannot teach myself if I don't even know what it is, if you can make sense of that statement.

Teaching yourself the more advanced dharma is like carrying water in your hands, while working with an authentic teacher (authentic for you) is like drinking from the spigot. Not even close.

And even if we get all that together, each person, every last one, has a particular dharma path they will naturally respond to. It is etched in stone, so

to speak. Yet, we do have to find it. And finding it can be painful, especially if we get stuck doing dharma techniques that are 'not for us' and we don't have the presence of mind to admit it. We can do a lot of 'dumb' stuff for a long while. This I know.

And so, I'm probably not really much help here, since I can't point you to what you personally are going to need. The best I can do is point out that we each need to find a natural way to become aware, one that we feel comfortable with. And I suggest you not do dharma practices that you dislike as all that does is stain the idea of dharma practice in our mind. And that stain is hard to get out.

First, get your mind right and then practice. If you can't do that, there is no point in practicing what you dislike. Instead, find a practice that you don't mind doing.

And of course, we can never go wrong contemplating:

"The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma"

"The Four Noble Truths"

These never hurt anyone, IMO.

And, as mentioned, take the time to find what is for you an authentic dharma teacher. You will have to make an effort for that, but just do it, make the effort.

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## The Secret of Karma

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 11, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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I feel that something I need to pay more attention to is when I get deflated. I guess that means I've blown myself up somehow, if I can so easily be deflated, yet it happens too often to not do something about it.

For starters, things don't always go as planned or I get disappointed. No one else has to do anything. I can get deflated all by myself. And try as I might to avoid it, I go into a tailspin, a corkscrew spiral that brings me down. Where was I that I have to fall? Was I flying too high?

Now the question is, how long does it take me to recover and how do I go about it. That I need to study why and when this happens is clear and that I have plenty of time to do that. And you can't really ever figure these things out.

No one can push my buttons as well as I can push my own. Sound familiar? It should because I am not the Lone Ranger in all this. I've got company.

And of course, I set right about putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again when I come crashing down. It's a process of getting back up on my feet again, so to speak. Of course, it's embarrassing, and I should by now know better, and I do somewhat. At least I am aware of it. I can talk about it.

I no longer cry and moan about poor me. Instead, I just get back up and start looking for excuses to feel better, for some kind of certainty, for some fresh air to pump myself back up enough to at least feel respectable.

By now it's an old story in search of a good ending. I'm not sure when I first became this way, but it was a long time ago, when I was just a kid. It's not just hurt feelings, although that too. It is more like being knocked out of my groove, thrown off track, and finding myself on a southbound train heading for a fall. And the key thought as to awareness is that the damage is already done. It's just a question of how much.

I can feel disappointment as it comes over me. Uh-oh, I'm in trouble now. What can I do to prevent or slow down the crash? Yet, as I learned from Rinpoche, by that time, as mentioned, the damage is done. Karma is created. It's already too late to prevent it. That karma is both created and stored.

Only the solution is not to scrub, scrub, scrub on the washboard of the mind and get that black spot of karma out. That option is gone. The only real option is to prevent it from happening in the first place. And that's the point here and a very important one.

One of the great lessons in dharma that Rinpoche taught me is that the very best way to remove karma is not to create it in the first place.

That concept which may sound trite is worth REAL consideration, IMO. If you understand it, really take it in, it changes everything. And it's the only sane conclusion.

And this is because karma is very, very, very hard to remove once it has taken place. No amount of scrubbing will wash those clothes clean. It has to ripen and take its toll on us as it is paid forward.

If we just don't create it in the first place, we are much, much better off.

[Photo tweaked by me of an old-fashioned washboard.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## The Sea of the Mind

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 12, 2023

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"Come with me, oh my love, To the sea, the sea of love."

The intellect can be so strong, and the sea of the senses stretches out before us like a forbidden fruit that we dare not enter, much less immerse ourselves in.

However, taking the plunge from intellection into the sea of the senses is not as simple as just jumping in the water. By all means try it and see if you can get wet. It's possible, but not likely. We are too far removed at this point and have to take inundation and full immersion one step at a time. We are all dried up and too intellectual, so to speak.

And it's probably all because we retreated into the conceptual mind in an attempt to avoid the hazards of the flesh, which would mean immersing ourselves in the sea of life and acclimatizing ourselves to the sea of the senses, getting used to it.

It's an easy mistake to make, but difficult to reverse. We somehow have to unpack all that intellection and then train in non-dual immersion and that's what the non-dual dharma practices are all about. The dharma has a very particular way to introduce us to what are called the non-dual dharma practices, such as Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen. These non-dual practices are all about immersion beyond thought.

For me, in my case, this took place from a perfect storm of conditions that came together without my realizing it. I certainly did not see it coming. It was the farthest thing from my mind at the time. I had jettisoned just about everything that I could and withdrawn deep into my past, back to when I was kid or at least a young adult. Familiarization for me was somewhere in my past.

What is familiar? That's an important question to answer, IMO. When you snap back in a difficult time, where do you snap back to in your past? Where is home? What is most familiar? At least for me, that was key.

As it turned out, it was not the many decades of dharma practice that was 'that' kind of familiar for me, although no doubt dharma practice laid the

groundwork and set the stage for this. As it turned out, all that dharma practice was still somewhat unfamiliar and in the process of becoming more familiar.

However, when I reached for what I knew best, it was not my dharma practice of over 30-40 years that was home, that was familiar enough. Not even close, and that was a real surprise. I had been doing all dharma all of the time, yet I failed to realize that I was still in the process of familiarization with dharma in my imagination.

It was my study of nature and my being a naturalist that was most familiar, that was home, something earned from early on as a child. Let me tell you, please, I did not know where home was, or with what I was most familiar. I had forgotten.

Yet, I found it like the snap of a rubber band, because in an instant I was back there, where I was most comfortable, surrounded by nature in my time of trial. Who says we can't go home again. I did just that, although as mentioned, it took a perfect storm of coincidences for that to happen.

What I'm explaining here was enough to make me think and think hard; what is the key to the dharma for each of us?

And I can't get it out of my mind, that Rinpoche used to keep saying, over and over to me, that the key to recognizing the actual true nature of the mind was familiarity, becoming familiar with the nature of the mind, including our own mind. Whoa. Rinpoche was right on the money, but I did not know what he meant. Then I found out.

And I found out in the vortex or middle of that perfect storm I keep mentioning, one I could never have assembled myself, but one fate served up for me all on its own.

That 'particular' familiarity means where I was most at home and comfortable in my past. I had forgotten until I found myself back there, in Mother Nature's arms. And that's where it all added up and came to some fruition, right when I was busy being miserable. What a time for a dharma breakthrough. LOL.

And so, that's my message to you reading this, the only message that comes to mind.

Become familiar with the nature of your mind or, as I did, go back and find where you were most familiar with your own mind. You might be surprised. I was, yet it was so true.

I mean, we have it within us already. We just are not aware of it. And so, we must become familiar with the nature of our own mind, which nature has always been with us, and we know it like the back of our hand but are not aware of it. We are it.

The dharma teachings say that recognizing the true nature of your mind is like recognizing an old friend in a crowd.

If there is interest, I would be happy to explain as best I can how to go about doing this, or at least what worked for me.

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## A Familiar Face in a Crowd

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 12, 2023

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I have found that although I have read about all of this in the dharma teachings, especially in what are called the pith teachings, that what happened to me apparently (it appears) is particular to me. That perhaps is true for all of us.

Yet, telling you about my actual experience is the only story I have. And I have told it here before. As they say, it goes without saying or you can say it again. I choose to say it again, and hope that something rubs off on readers that is useful for your own story. In this case it is about the 'familiar', which may not be all that familiar.

This story describes what is called in dharma terms our yidam. A yidam is the particular path to recognizing the true nature of the mind that is destined for each of us to find. Some say that a yidam is secret, yet I feel that is a misconception. It is not 'secret', it is unique to us and thus probably not particularly helpful to others if we talk about it, but we are free to talk about it as much as we want, which is what I do because it's my actual experience. And while it is unique to me because it happened to me just as it did, there may be some generic attributes to my personal story that may make sense and do get through to others.

And it's important to start out by making clear that my experience was above all a 'perfect storm', as they say. It was created from a variety of factors at the time that came together and were beyond my control. I was totally unable to control what happened, call me a victim if you will, yet I don't see it as that.

I am just grateful for this most difficult experience that changed my life and imprinted me at the deepest level. I am going to just tell it as it happened. That's what I have to share. How it fits into classical accounts, I can't worry about. So, here goes.

I was busy sailing along in my life. At the time I was a senior consultant for NBC, working on their website 'Astrology.com', probably the largest astrology site in the world as an advisor, helping to shape content. I am a well-known astrologer.

I never thought I could work for someone else after working for myself for some 36 years, running my own business, but actually I did very well with the situation. I was useful to NBC, happy enough, and making good money. My boss even said once that I did the work of 5-6 people, probably just because I knew astrology so well and for so long.

And it all came to a head when NBC downsized and laid off hundreds of people, and it turned out that I was one of those people. And I did not find out about it at home where I could absorb the shock, but while I was away speaking and lecturing about astrology at a major astrology conference. My boss at NBC was also at the conference which was held in Denver, Colorado. In fact, I had just flown in and was busy setting up my week-long schedule and all that.

And this was when he told me that after this conference, right then, that I along with many others were being laid off with no further notice. Of course, this was not good news for me. In particular, since I consider that I am a good provider for my family and to suddenly at 67 years of age be out of work was crushing to me. What was I to do? That kind of ruined the conference for me. LOL.

At my age, who would hire me and yet I needed to work and make an income. In truth, I had a sterling reputation, so perhaps finding work would not be so hard, but right then my Humpy-Dumpy life was shattered in that moment. I couldn't hide my situation from myself, and I spiraled way down, farther down than I have any memory of, down to the level of the ground.

And at the same time, after trying to process this news, while at the conference, I got an urent phone call from my wife Margaret that His Holiness, the young 17 th Karmapa (like the Dalai Lama, but from a yet older

lineage to which I belonged) was suddenly, and for the first time, coming to America to his (and our) monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY, and they could use me there as part of the video crew. I was a very active member of our sangha.

I had finished my scheduled astrology lectures and was as mentioned all out of joint, so I just grabbed my stuff and flew out of Denver on a direct flight to Albany, NY, where my wife, who was already at Woodstock for the event, drove up to Albany and picked me up.

And so suddenly I was with His Holiness the 17 th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, that I had met in 1997 when I took most of my kids to Tibet to meet him when he was 12-years old. Suddenly I was with the Karmapa again, who was now grown up. His presence and being with the Karmapa were more than comforting to me. This too was part of a perfect storm I am getting around to here.

When the Karmapa's visit was over and my wife and I had driven the 800 or so miles back to our home, I still was faced with the fact that I had no job to deal with. All of this was coming together like a thunderhead, although I didn't see it because I was totally wrapped in my own upset. Things had happened to me that only could be called 'untoward'.

I was no longer comforted by much of anything. I plummeted. And the most shocking thing is that I stopped my daily dharma practice which I had done faithfully for decades without fail. I not only stopped cold and did not practice, I went out into the woods and streams with my camera almost all the time, especially at dawn, when the sun came up. There is where you could find me, crawling around on my belly, soaked to the skin in the wet grass, taking macro photography, photos of small critters and micro worlds through highly corrected lenses. I include some here.

And all this time I was kind of in mourning for a life lived up to the moment when I was laid off, essentially fired. I not only did this pre-dawn photography that one time, but I also did it for six months straight, from late May until the frosts of the coming winter drove me (and my camera) inside. And I watched the sun come up for all those months unless it was raining. I could not even remember the last time I watched the sun rise, and now I was doing it every day. This was more than just unusual. What did it mean?

I don't know what my family was thinking. Suddenly this husband and father was not practicing dharma, was not in the shrine room, and kept deeply to himself like all the time. And the neighbors could not help seeing me along the road, in the bushes, etc., photographing stuff. Why was he not working? I

didn't know any more than they did about what I was doing. I was just doing it, and I didn't care what it looked like to myself or to others. I could care less how I seemed.

That's another important thread here, that I didn't care, not one whit. I was totally beyond caring. I was totally inundated, lost in my life event.

Something had happened beyond my control that made me this way and I was plunged deep into my mind, literally thrown out of orbit, off track, into I knew not where. And I was breaking all the rules, my own rules. I just did not care, for me a first.

And to understand this next part, you need to understand my relationship with Mother Nature, which I have explained here in previous blogs, but will state it again for understanding sake.

I was born and raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, raised out on a country road between two very large farms where my parents built their own house. There were no other houses around and no kids my own age for me to play with, only my younger brothers, and it is hard to look up to your younger brothers. I was the eldest of five boys. No sisters.

And so, with no friends my age, being bused to school, I ended up from a very young age studying, totally interested in, and fixated on nature and natural history, dearest Mother Nature. It is all I did until my late teens, and I was quite precocious at it as well. I knew natural history like the back of my own hand, every critter and bug. I had learned natural law rather than civil law, paid little to know attention to school, and was because of this, a little feral.

Flash forward now to my perfect storm, as I try to sort it out in retrospect. During the upheaval within myself at losing my job at such a late age, and being left naked of any job protection, I reflexed back into my life, searching for comfort and a safe space. And to my total surprise, I flashed right past all my decades of dharma practice without a thought. Unbelievable!

I was instantly all the way back to my childhood, to the comfort and familiarity of Mother Nature, with no hesitation, not even a thought. I would have put money on my falling into my dharma practice of so many years, yet what I found out, and this is my best guess, is that while I was totally into the dharma, I was still in the process of becoming familiar with it, although I would never have guessed or admitted that. There was something more powerful in my past.

Instead, I leapfrogged all that dharma and found myself back with what was the most familiar of all to me, the comfort of nature in my upbringing. And

now, I will do my best to explain what I believe to be true, and this is the part for readers to take in with some careful thought and consideration, because this may be true for you too.

In my dharma training, my Tibetan teacher of (at that point) some 25 years had pointed out to me a number of times that what is important in preparing a student for recognizing the actual or true nature of the mind is becoming familiar with the mind itself, whatever that meant. Those were just words at the time.

And about three years prior to my perfect storm, this same dharma teacher had pointed out, in a 10-day intensive on Mahamudra (one of 31 such 10-day intensives on the same subject I attended over the years), what is called the nature of the mind. And although I had the pointing out instructions as to the minds nature before and never managed to ''get' it or recognize the mind's nature, that time I came away from that teaching with an altered understanding as to what I had been doing wrong up to then.

And for the next three years, until my perfect storm, I had doubled down on my dharma practice, doing it more or less all day long. And so, my point is that I came into this perfect storm having done a very intense and protracted practice. And then came the storm, and I am tying it all together here now.

And so, when I went out into nature after both the astrology conference and the visit with the Karmapa, several different streams or threads of direction began to weave themselves together into the event that I was at the center of.

In my years of being an entrepreneur, I had left my nature study in my past and had not been doing much 'nature' stuff while I built several businesses. And perhaps I had ignored Mother Nature because the sense of impermanence nature confronts us with was just more than I wanted to keep in mind, our impermanence, although it is one of the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma.' And to a degree, we could say I had in my deep upset stopped ignoring impermanence. I was looking right at it again. I remember, one morning when I was out watching the sun rise I saw a lovely Luna Moth trying to land on a branch when a bird swooped down and snatched it away. That's impermanence.

In other words, suddenly I was right there in nature again where I grew up, and familiar with what I had been most familiar with, nature. I ate it up like oxygen and acknowledged my own impermanence and the impermanence of every other natural critter on Earth, like I used to do as a kid. In a way I was struck dumb. Thoughtless, pushed beyond thinking.

And somehow, that ‘familiarity’ punched a button and broke a brittle vase in the mind letting all the contents flow together again or for the first time, and there I was immersed in Insight Meditation, the particular kind of Vipassana that is part of Mahamudra training. This just all happened.

Anyway, I let go and was inundated, as mentioned, immersed in the nature of the mind, but for the first time with intense and vivid awareness. As I gazed through these highly corrected macro lenses at little critters and tiny worlds I stopped seeing just the critter at the end of my lens, and instead started seeing the seeing the ‘Seeing’ itself seeing, if one could find words. As the old poetry line goes, right then “The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea”. The brittleness of duality cracked and broke, and there I was ‘thoughtless’ and fully immersed. There was just all one, not two.

Why else would I go out every morning when it was not raining and watch the sun come up, when I had not even done it once in many years? Yet, it did not come back with me when I went back home each day, the Insight Meditation, but only happened when I was out in nature like that. So, I went out there, like all the time.

I did not have a word for it yet. All I knew was that I had never experienced anything like that before and that I could only do that while out in nature, so out in nature I was.

That’s as far as I feel I have to go with the story to give you the gist of what happened. I have elsewhere detailed how I worked with Insight Meditation and brought it home, so to speak, where it is today and right now. Yet, that can be another story.

I want you to please understand that in order for all this to happen, I had to be shoved out of my comfort zone and into a very difficult time. Had I not lost my job, this never would have happened, at least then. It took me down from my high horse, so to speak.

The takeaway here is, that as Rinpoche kept saying to me, again and again, we must become familiar with the nature of our own mind. Yet the word ‘familiar’ is not just some technical term or description, but he meant we must find what is already (and always has been) familiar in our own mind.

Not some book-learning term somewhere on the outside to ‘get’ or understand, but the very heart of our comfort and familiarity within ourselves, what we are already most familiar with from experience. At any rate, that’s what happened to me. That’s my story, if it can be of any use to others.

And later, that next spring after that summer a close friend of mind, a Tibetan lama who had done two 3-year closed retreats came to visit, and as we walked an early morning road I explained to him as best I could what happened to me, and he knew. He named it, which I had been unable to do. What he said was this:

Just as there is the 'Lama of the Lineage', like my Tibetan teacher, there is also 'The Lama of the Scriptures', all the extant written teachings. And there is also the 'Lama of the Dharmadhatu', a deep inner teacher, yet in addition, there is in my case, a fourth lama called 'The Lama of Appearances', which also is totally capable of instructing us in the dharma, and it is this lama, which appeared through Mother Nature, that I had been learning from all my life. And it was with this that I was most familiar. Period.

I write this down not to just tell of my own experiences but that it may communicate just how important it is to look within our own mind for what is most familiar, and they call it 'familiar' because it is just that, what is most familiar to us already. Not something strange, different, or unknown, but as the pith teachings state '... it's like seeing a familiar face in a crowd." That kind of familiar is what is needed. We already know it, yet just are not aware of it. It's there in each of us. I suggest that finding it is required to recognize the actual nature of the mind.

[Photos by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## "TRYING TO MAKE IT REAL, COMPARED TO WHAT?"

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 13, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/dcd56187-04da-40a8-80f9-d76e8848900a_816x1081.jpeg*

I would like to talk at least once over lightly about what is called Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs in which we weave and bob. And Samsara, as Shakespeare understood, is a play within a play.

Unfortunately, Samsara to me appears all business as usual, packing our every moment with activity that drowns out the light of dharma with its space and emptiness. As I keep mentioning, I don't believe folks realize the following fact.

All the dharma studying I have done makes it clear that those of us not enlightened, and that would be about all of us, have never, not ever, known anything but Samsara as our home. And why does this need to sink in?

It's because we have always been part of Samsara, and we have nothing whatsoever to compare our life in Samsara to. Nada. And to emphasize this, I am reminded of title of this blog, the quintessential jazz tune by performers Les McCann & Eddie Harris in the tune 'Compared to What'.

That's the idea I'm trying to communicate here, in particular the lyrics of Gene McDaniels, who wrote this song, "Trying to make it real, compared to what?"

That's the bit of philosophy I am pointing out here, our trying to reify everything compared to what? They say we have 'Buddha Nature' as our root, but at best we have only 'understood' this intellectually, but never realized it. Otherwise, we would be realized.

And this is only the tip of the iceberg, IMO, when it comes to understanding Samsara and the fact that Samsara is purely a construction created by whatever is not true about life, and yet we call it home. I can appreciate that this discussion is quite abstract and thus difficult to make any sense of. However, there is no reason we can't begin to sort it. It's very elusive, and has taken me years to get a handle on it.

And if I am correct in what I surmise, we have nothing but runaway corruption on hand when it comes to any general consensus concerning Samsara. In other words, we are so far up that creek that we can't see any daylight.

As pointed out, Samsara is (and has been) our home as well as our own construction. We are born into it but are also co-creators of it, if you can make any sense from that.

So, the real question I have is this. If all that we have ever known is Samsara and we have zero experience with Nirvana (enlightenment), then what are we basing our knowledge and expectations on when it comes to the dharma and its practice? Where is the actual experience? Apparently, there is none.

We seem to act as if we have been to Nirvana and came back and now know the way. Yet, I find no mention in all the years of my practice and study about having known Nirvana and every mention of being stuck here in Samsara, and I will add, of our own choice. That's the problem if we have one. Intentionality.

And if Samsara is the sum-total of everything mistaken, all of our fixations and attachments, everything not true, and that's our home and shelter, where we live and breathe, where is our pole star, the guiding light that we call the dharma? How does that work?

Everyone seems so laid back about life, like we are going to live forever, yet in undercurrent we all know the of second of the four thoughts that turn the mind, 'impermanence'. It's always right there looking back at us.

We must have something confused or we would already be enlightened, so what is it? My guess it is our ignorance, our habitual but intentional ignorance as to the true nature of the mind. In other words, we have it just backward and most shocking of all, have no intention of turning it around. We are addicted to Samsara.

We are so comfortable in Samsara, have made it our home, that in spite of its shortcomings, and have up to now only known the darkness of ignoring the light of the dharma, which for us is far too bright for us to dare turn toward it. Samsara itself can be defined as turning away from the light.

In other words, there IS a play within a play. The play that is within a play is Samsara, and the play itself is the construction of Samsara, the fact that itself it is a construction.

And on that construction, our life exists to the degree it does. What bothers me, as mentioned, is that no one seems to worry or be interested in the fact that we are habituated to ignoring the bright light of the bardos, which bright light as far as I know is the dharma itself. And it shines as brightly right now as it does in the bardo, but we are not sensitized to it at this point.

And it's not what we study and practice that we call 'dharma', but rather the actual true nature of the mind itself. The actual nature of the mind is of a brilliance we apparently cannot at this point stand, endure, or even look toward, but rather one that we habitually ignore, and this habit of ignorance is as old as history itself.

Does anyone reading this have an interest in talking about this?

[The image shown here is that of the 'Kalachakra', the "Wheel of Time," the empowerment of astrology, which takes from a few days to a week to offer. Margaret and I took this empowerment in Toronto in 1990, from August 9 th to the 13 th from His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. I have colored this image myself according to the tradition.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## “ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 13, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/05926846-57dd-4ef2-a78f-fad2d65fef9c_1959x2048.jpeg*

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/29185426-6189-4820-8082-8e79a6277ab8_1024x1024.webp*

A Dharmachakra, the wheel of the dharma

By Michael Erlewine

Shakespeare: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances…”

This is a follow-up on yesterday’s post on Samsara, what it is, and its possible deconstruction. That would be the deconstruction of Samsara, apparently our home rebirth after rebirth since time immemorial. That’s if we are to believe the dharma teachings.

I would like to point out that even our excursions from Samsara, like much of the dharma we know, practice, and work with, are brought to us courtesy of Samsara, which lets us out a bit, just to reign us in. Samsara is our filter for everything, including dharma. That comment takes some thought.

Samsara, as I understand it from the dharma teachings, is nothing more than a construct comprised of our reifications, attachments, the sum total of our mis-takes on reality, everything other than the actual true nature of the mind. It’s everything ‘but’, and that makes it a construct that can and could be eventually deconstructed and removed. Yet, we are so indissolubly attached to Samsara that we have no idea of any of this.

If we could take away all of the Samsara that obscures, what would that leave us? If I understand it right, that will leave us with nothing but the actual true nature of the mind minus our obscurations, and the true nature has always been in there anyway. There is, however, at least one problem.

And that problem is that because of the ‘shadowy’ nature of taking Samsara as our refuge, the true light of the mind itself, by comparison, is too bright, actually blinding and way more than we can stand to experience. In fact, we

habitually turn the other way and ignore it. Apparently, we have done this for millennia. And that's a confirmed habit.

And on top of that, our continual incrementing of Samsara compounds itself recursively, thickening rather than thinning the crust of Samsara. We have not only painted ourselves in a corner, but we are also now painting the walls and redecorating Samsara as well. We show no intention to leave, lip-service aside.

Perhaps it would help if we examined what Samsara consists of. Above all, it consists of our ignoring the actual truth, as in turning away from the truth. And we do this with our endless busyness, incessant interests, and that is crack-less, there being no cracks of light coming through. Samsara is a closed system, a black box.

Yet, we are perhaps somehow nourished by the light deep inside us, the light of the true nature of the mind that we can't bear to look at and endure. In other words, the truth remains, despite Samsara. We are just not aware of it and never have been.

And Samsara consists of our programming and reprogramming ourselves with constant entertainment, filling every moment with whatever interests us until our interests and attachments themselves become the glue that holds Samsara together.

That's why the Tibetan word for Samsara is 'Khor Ba', cycling, referring to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth going on forever, and that we each are bound to Khor-Ba due to our desires, ignorance, and karma. And we are said to want to break free from this cycle of Samsara, the question is: do we really want to enough to do so?

And by now, Samsara as we know it has gotten so out of hand that the very light of the truth is abhorrent to us. We speak intellectually of the light of truth and how we love it, but in fact we are like talking shadows, silhouettes against a backdrop of attachments. That kind of thing. We lack even the intention of leaving Samsara, despite all our verbal protests.

Take away all our busyness, entertainments, interests, and what remains is the specter of boredom, lack of interest, whatever makes us nervous or dulls the mind, pure ennui, yet these are and will eventually be the key to our liberation from Samsara.

Boredom is one of the clearest signs that we are in trouble, perhaps the last signal that Samsara has not yet managed to obscure. Look boredom in the eye. Get used to it. It is a portal, not blockage.

The truth as I understand it is that Samsara is basically our ancestral home, the place we have always and forever lived. As Rinpoche pointed out to our sangha, in all the time there is and has been, we are the stragglers, the ones who have yet to realize our true nature. It is still in our future.

And so, we don't stray far from our home here in Samsara, as shadowy a place as that apparently is. We keep ourselves in the dark. Unfortunately, by definition, Samsara is a refuge not from darkness but from light. Samsara is the darkness and shining a light on it destroys it, which is what dharma is all about. Dharma is the single match that can light up eons of darkness.

Because of that, we creatures of Samsara are not afraid of the dark but rather of the light. We are used to being entertained and busy 24x7, and anything otherwise than to be aware, and any crack of light seeping in has to be covered up.

Note: I have been using darkness and light here as an analogy, something we can understand. In truth, in real life, the darkness is the closed busyness, entertainments, and attachments, while light is the absence of those, absence of the darkness, etc. That reveals the light of the dharma.

Take away our busyness, for example, and that exposes us to the light, which here means uncovering and revealing us with no cover to hide in. It's like a baby's pacifier, take it away, the baby cries. For us to be without our cover, Samara, and we react almost violently to the increase in light.

With that in mind, that we are blinded by the light and retreat from it, we might want to begin acclimatizing ourselves to light in small doses to begin with. To do that, seek out boredom, ennui, whatever we can't stand to endure and be subject to. That's a beginning.

Unfortunately, as luck would be, we have it just backward. In Samsara, light is dark and dark is light. We run from the light and hide in the dark. We do this by keeping busy and entertained as much as we can.

We are used to it and can't stand boredom, emptiness, or space. As mentioned, we like to keep it packed full of entertainment and busyness. And when that fails and boredom starts to intrude, we run for the shadows of entertainment and ever more busyness and are led around by our interests. We like things light-tight.

How do you tell someone that the stage called life is actually empty other than for a light high above us that is too bright for us to look directly at. And that eventually the clock of our little busyness will run down to nothing left. And yet, all around us everything is going on. Samsara is full but empty, full of

an emptiness that we fear, and unfortunately at the tip of that emptiness is the light of dharma.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me, Dharmachakra colored by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## ‘I YAM WHAT I YAM; I’M POPEYE THE SAILOR MAN’

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 14, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e562e5af-a241-420b-b185-eb7e42ccbee7_303x400.jpeg*

You youngsters probably don’t remember Popeye the Sailor Man’ who first appeared in a comic strip in 1929, long before I was born, but was in full stride when I was a boy. He usually appeared with a can of spinach in his hand, and he would say “.

“ I yam what I yam, and that's all that I am. I’m Popeye the sailor man. I'm strong to the finich cause I eats me spinich.”

That’s how we learned about spinach, not that we ate it, but I digress.

Recently I’ve realized that I have graduated a bit somehow or at least reached what for me is like a plateau where I can look around. And I am doing that.

It’s like resolving a camera lens, focusing until the image in the lens is in focus, and when it is, it’s focused. I’m focused. I am not saying that I could not get clearer. Of course, I could.

Yet, as mentioned, focus or being ‘resolved’ is just that, pretty much in focus. And now that I’m focused, what should I do? For one, part of me has to catch up with the rest of me, the part that apologizes for being what I am, whatever that is. What am I? LOL.

I came through to old age more or less intact, a bit beat up I would agree, but nevertheless, here I am, as they say, warts and all. And it’s been a long haul, and ‘haul’ is a good word.

I can kind of stop helping myself get it together and concentrate on seeing if I can be more useful to others.

I admit that I am probably only good for what we call the ‘low hanging fruit’ when it comes to sharing the dharma, and not in the running for the high echelon levels of dharma, but I seem to have learned the basics, and it is the most difficult thing I have ever done, and I have done a bunch of things.

The dharma is the only alternative I see to expand and extend outward, with and toward the true nature of the mind. It is elegant, efficient, and seems to fit my slipstream, so to speak.

At my age, I am about as complete as I am going to get, and while I may have limited utility, I do have some. I'm good at something after all. My gyroscope is set and while I may waver, I no longer easily go off track. I know, I don't glow in the dark or point north yet either, but I'm oriented.

And so, being in the midst of stopping my push for more resolution, as mentioned above, I'm resolved well enough. That push, and all the effort that was behind it, has now become more of an obscuration. The sheer effort of the push itself drowns out the finer vibes and has to be discontinued now that it's not needed. I am taking that scaffolding (effort) down a bit at a time, leaving me, well, more free floating.

I have to stop apologizing for who and what I am. Enough already. As Popeye the sailor man said, "I yam what I yam.' And so, I am.

We are free to be who we are. We are free to be free.

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

## WAYS TO BAKE A LOAF OF BREAD

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 15, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/eb8bf649-1cae-4acc-bbda-c54aec421146_1024x1024.webp*

I'm a member of the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and am not a lama but I am surrounded by lamas and have been for decades.

We all grew up together before KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra), our monastery, had a way of making lamas, by offering a three-year closed retreat. In fact, my wife and I became the fundraisers (along with our Chinese community) for the Karme Ling 3-year retreat, so while I did not go into retreat, I was on the scene early on. These were my friends and they became the first group to enter the retreat and come out as lamas.

As for my wife and I, we did not go into the retreat, and the reason for this is because we had four children, who very much needed a mother and a father, and although there are classic stories of dharma practitioners completely dropping their families and going into retreat, we are not one of them. I have no regrets.

As mentioned, I did not go into three-year retreat, but hung back and kind of have served as an outrider, looking after (as best I can) the general welfare of the KTD Monastery and the Karmé Ling Retreat Center.

I have worked for years serving KTD (our monastery) in a wide variety of ways which I won't go into here. And to be frank, I have been adequately blessed by the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, our teacher and the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery.

In fact, there are many stories, for example, of the cook for a 3-retreat becoming realized in some way from just being around the retreat. I feel that in my own way I'm like that. Although I missed all that training, I have been blessed by Rinpoche through being a part of all this for many years. And I too have been practicing all this time, just not on retreat.  I'm not complaining.

I will let this poem speak for me about the issue of standing watch. If you read it out loud, slowly, it is easier to understand it. In the western esoteric tradition, this poem is about what is called "The Monad." It's a high concept expressed here in regular words that hopefully make sense.

EVERLASTING LIFE

What will in words not wake,

Clear sleeps,

And clear, sleeps on.

What wakes stands watch to see that sleep as sound.

What wakes will serve to set asleep,

Inset a sleep with standing words,

That wake,

If ever, last.

And on that last,

In overlay,

Our life.

Yes, to lay at the last a life that ever lives,

To ever last that "last" of life,

And in ever lasting life,

Everlasting,

We have a life that lives at last.

Note: That was written in the mid-1960s.

I quote the poet Milton and the line “They serve who only stand and wait.” Well, I didn’t stand and wait, but was very active in the meantime.

There is more than one way to bake a load of bread.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

Note: If you would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

**FULL IMMERSION**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 16, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0085b1c7-27d0-4907-af0c-d8b698bb93c0_2048x1365.jpeg*

No matter how we twist and turn, change, or shift, that's just our outer form. Nothing deep inside changes that I am aware of. We, any one of us, still have to come to terms with what's inside, with the mind and its nature. The true nature of the mind is right there, waiting to be recognized, discovered, and our access to it trained.

We can change our face, our outer situation, but our mind, not so easily. What we can do is begin to get to know and become familiar with our mind. And to do that we have to, so to speak, come down from our high mental horse, and stop minding everything. I wrote this fun poem.

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,

but you can let the mind rest.

Just let go,

And don't mind the rest.

In other words, we can't 'think' life. We can only live life and we can't do that from way up there in the mental clouds, taking cover under concepts and the intellect. Why? Because it's not satisfying, and intellect by itself has no feelings or sense. It is senseless.

If we want to feel life, we can't just stick our toe in the water; we have to jump in and immerse ourselves, and we can't do that with one hand on our mental steering wheel. It takes all of us, a 'Look Ma, No Hands' approach. We have to inundate ourselves by complete immersion in life, if only for a moment.

And right now, most of us are more lost in thought and not feeling it, than we are immersed in experience. I would bet on that.

As mentioned above, no matter how hard we search for a back door to our living life, to just coasting in the mind, there is no back door, and sooner or later we will come to this fact, that if we want to feel and have meaning, we

have to jump in, take the plunge, enter the water, and that means full immersion and getting involved, our getting wet.

We could say “Come on in, the water’s fine,” yet most people take refuge in the mind and intellect, not in their feelings. Our feelings and actual sense experience can get scary, not that the crazy mind cannot. LOL.

This frigid approach, of not even venturing a toe in the water, leaves us high and dry. It would be no problem, accept it is a problem. The German philosopher Hegel said this very well in his description of what he termed the ‘Beautiful Soul’:

“This soul lacks force to externalize itself... the power to make itself a thing and to endure existence. And, to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from actuality and steadfastly perseveres in a state of self-willed impotence to renounce a self which is pared away to the last point of abstraction... and to give itself substantial existence or in other words: to transform its thought into being and commit itself to absolute distinction, that between thought and being.”

And Shakespeare, of course, said “To Be or Not to Be.”

“Not to Be” is what we are pointing at here, taking refuge in the mind at the expense of life and living it, not daring to live and fully immerse ourselves in life. Intellectuals tend to do this, with too much conceptual abstraction and not enough sensual experience. They lack good sense.

These folks literally lack common sense, the sensual, and they need to wash their mind in the waters and sense of life and inundate their dry words and concepts. Full immersion is what is required here and not just mere words.

That’s it. There you have the idea. And of course, it’s up to each of us to decide how much we are abstracted from life and how much we are involved and immersed. We vary.

However, hint, hint… if we are dissatisfied, we are dissatisfied, and no amount of intellection can fix that. Satisfaction has to make sense, and sense is sensual, and not abstract. Sense is always a physical experience waiting for us to have, if we will allow ourselves to feel it.

How to immerse ourselves in the sea of life is not quite as simple as ‘Just jump in, the water is fine.” Our habit of intellectual abstraction is by now totally established. We don’t just break it as we would break a vase.

That part of us, too much mentation, has to be deconstructed, taken apart, piece by piece and bit by bit, and right now we are not of that persuasion. We are not used to letting go or just jumping in. It's everything we don't do.

We need to do it!

However, this is easier said than done. We have painted ourselves into a corner of words and intellection and can't get out, can't let go. We first have to discover that the mind is not just conceptual, but is a hybrid, a cross between the abstract and full immersion. That's the magic and the mystery.

And to experience this we first have to exercise the mind viscerally and not just metnally, like we would exercise a muscle. The mind is effectively like a muscle. It has to be limbered up and massaged or kneaded like we might knead dough for making a pizza.

And this is done through various dharma exercises, which we should discuss.

"As Bodhicitta is so precious,

May those without it now create it,

May those who have it not destroy it,

And may it ever grow and flourish."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## THE ANATOMY OF A STROKE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 17, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0bcb0d7f-4ba4-46ca-a0dd-6125b734b2f4_1024x1024.jpeg*

I was forced to see the construction behind Samsara, this cyclic world that we inhabit, quite against my will. I witnessed it, nonetheless. This was when I experienced my major stroke. It was choiceless.

From the onset, I found myself trapped in a sort of Limbo, so to speak, not for a few seconds but for days and weeks, until my regular Self (whatever we call it), which had been shattered in the stroke, was able to reanimate itself and close up all its gaps or windows. Until then my eyes were propped open with toothpicks whether I liked it or not. I had no choice but to look.

And what I witnessed, and I saw was terrifying; I perhaps was not so terrified by just what I saw as much as by the fact that I had never seen before what I did in that instant, and I believe few have, that it's not that we cannot free ourselves from Samsara, but rather that we don't want to and have no intention of doing so. To me, that was news and shocking.

It was as if we are like double agents and don't know it, on the surface working toward liberation through dharma, freeing ourselves from Samsara, but internally actually working against it.

It's as if during the day we weave the future, while at night we unravel what was made in the day. We step forward by day, but step back by night. I wish to high heaven that I could share the experience I am describing here.

In a nutshell, it is that we are going exactly nowhere and have no intention of doing otherwise. It's the lack of intention that dumbfounded me, the insincerity, and the ignorance, and probably willful ignorance at that. And the so-called resistance movement to Samsara was, including much of our interest in dharma, in reality just another part of Samsara. We never get beyond the periphery, the city limits, so to speak.

Why? The answer is dirt simple, because we are habituated to the here and the now of Samsara. It's an age-old habit, Samsara, the only thing we have ever known, and we have zero intention of doing otherwise, despite all our protests to the contrary. Don't believe it.

And here, when I say 'We', I not only mean you, but the 'We' includes me too. I want the same thing that we all seem to want, the comfort, entertainment, and false security of Samsara, and the freedom to continue on with that. And even in my revelations from the stroke, all I could think about was getting back inside my comfort zone and back to ignoring the harsh light and truth of reality, and that Samsara is an elaborate construct.

There has to be a reason that in all the time there is and has been, we have never liberated ourselves from Samsara, and I in an instant saw why, that Samsara is addictive like no drug we know. It's one huge habit.

I can't say strongly enough that we have never known anything else but Samsara. It's not like we once know the true nature of our mind, sometimes called our "Buddha Nature," and are trying to get back to that awareness. Not true. We have yet to get there, to be enlightened.

The dharma teachings are crystal clear about this, and I have asked over and over. We have never managed to recognize the true nature of the mind and have always only been an inhabitant of Samsara. It's no wonder that we love it so; we are so used to it.

The power of this major stroke wiped out completely my near memory (and far memory too) of who I was and, more important, how to find my way back to the habits and history that up to that point I had lived in. I could not remember or bring it to mind, my Self, try as I might. And you can be sure I tried with all my might to get back to what I knew, the cloth of my history in which I could hide and feel comfortable. It was not happening.

Instead, what I did see and what I was continually exposed to was this brilliant white light in the mind above me that was shining like a searchlight directly down on me and could not be ignored. Nor could I look right at it. It was too blinding.

I saw this light right in the hospital while I was being carted around here and there. Surrounded by doctors and nurses, carrying on as normal, I was for all practical purposes there right beside everyone else, yet at the same time the stage of my personal theater was wiped clean, empty of everything, other than the blinding light in the sky above me. It was like a waking dream. I was wide awake!

And before we get too fixed on the idea of this white light, that is just an image that I use so you can understand. And this next note may be a little difficult to understand. The white light was not a light at all, but in reality, it simply was the nakedness I felt because I was denied the cover, closure, and the refuge of my normal haunts, my sense of Self, entertainments, and the

darkness that had always shielded me from being exposed as I suddenly was. I was mentally naked as a J-bird.

Like a hermit crab without its shell, I WAS forced to endure full exposure to vulnerabilities that had never been exposed to the stark reality of what I was experiencing. And there is one very important fact to declare.

You might think that when the stroke took place, the mind was confused. Well, yes, there was all the confusion I just described above as to the hospital, etc. However, the mind and its native awareness was crystal clear and just totally there as usual, actually clearer than I have ever experienced.

Of course, I had none of the attachments, likes and dislikes, or history of the Self I had always carried with me. I was stark naked of all of that and just out there, exposed, and desperately trying to find a way back to the familiar Samsara I had always and only known. That my friends was the situation I found myself in.

And this was not like an instant a few minutes, or even an hour, but went on for days and weeks while my totally shattered sense of Self tried to reanimate itself and yet could not. That's what a major stroke can do, wipe that all out like someday, when we die, our very death will do.

One has to clearly separate the physical effects of the stroke, and all the tests and busyness taking place around me, from the utter clarity of the mind, which is unlike anything I had ever known. The natural awareness within us is infinite and clear as a bell. We see everything because without our Self and our Samsaric obscurations we have no closure, no cover, and no history for a spell, and quite a long while at that.

It's like what we call our Self was completely gone, totally deconstructed, and wiped clean, which is EXACTLY what the bardo teachings state will happen to us after death, leaving us aware and more sensitive than we have ever known. That's what happened to me with the stroke, my history and Self was just wiped clean, and there I was, one with the awareness that is. It was excruciatingly painful, but completely eye-opening as well.

And when I was able to relate this to my Tibetan dharma teacher of 36 years training, a high rinpoche, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, he just chuckled and said this experience will stand me in good stead when I die and enter the bardo. Of course!

There are so many ramifications to this experience, so many reflections that it's like a kaleidoscope, so I won't trouble you with them just now. This blog

was just to get the blunt truth of reality expressed and allow folks to react to it as they will.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## THE STRAIGTER THE LINE, THE FINER THE CURVE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 18, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/f4f04675-6ccf-4896-b9b7-db41ba1f45cd_1024x1024.jpeg*

Everything circles or cycles and goes around. Anything that does not cycle does not register. It does not last long enough for us to remember.

And this idea, that the closer we come to resolving the true nature of the mind, the closer we come to resolving infinity. In other words, in this case, less is more. And the closer we come to total resolution, the longer it takes and the more we are extended and infinitely stretched out in the present moment.

This is easy to prove. Just try to photograph a sphere and look at the edges of the sphere in the photograph. It's all there.

Photographers know that photographically resolving any spherical object to its extreme edge involves an infinite decreasing, and that "Infinite decreasing" usually refers to a sequence of numbers that continues indefinitely in a way that each term is smaller than the previous one. For instance, a sequence like 10, 7, 4, 1, −2, −5. Here we show an infinite decrease by subtracting 3 from each term to get the next one. These sequences often approach negative infinity but never actually reach it, as they continue indefinitely. All these factors contribute to the challenge of resolving the extreme edge of a spherical object photographically. It's a bit like trying to zoom in further and further on a digital image—eventually, you reach a point where the details blur and become indistinct. In a similar way, this concept appears similar when it comes to resolving the true nature of the mind. The straighter the line, the finer the curve. It gives the idea of 'packing it in' new meaning or the thought of 'saving the best for last.' That sense of 'last' lasts. It's infinitely extended. And I'm not speaking here of the dharma term 'Recognition', which refers to our initially recognizing for ourselves the true nature of the mind, but rather once we have that recognition, the process of extending and expanding that recognition becomes like the problem of photographing a sphere, and the devil is in the details of resolving the edges of the sphere. The edges require an infinite resolution as with Zeno's Paradox, where halving the distance to a goal becomes theoretically impossible and some kind of calculus has to step in. However, again I am talking not about a mathematical problem here but rather resolving our use of any non-dual practice like I

Insight Meditation. The closer we get to full resolution (resolving), the longer it takes, until some kind of spiritual calculus must step in and take over and (here it comes), we let go. It's the letting go part that I am talking about here. What does it take, how long, and what is the meaning? And there is no avoiding it, no leapfrogging. It's the stretching and attenuation of a certain subtle something that can only lead to release and revelation, i.e., letting go. And that my dharma friends is a BIG letting go. And this descriptions amounts to a definition right here of the non-dual meditations which are non-meditations. Or as Paul Simon put it: "You know the nearer your destination, The more you're slip slidin' away" This is a good definition of the immersion that non-dual forms of meditation require of us. We merge with the oneness, full immersion, where no thought, doubt, or care is possible. Pure awareness. [Midjourney graphic prompted by me.] EMAIL

## THE HABIT OF PRACTICE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 19, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/46682452-55fe-40c4-8b0d-720cb98ab5a4_1024x1024.jpeg*

Our habits cut both ways, IMO, especially when it comes to practicing Buddhism, dharma practice. Either way, habits lay down or create tracks or grooves, and grooves can either smooth our way or become a rut, so some awareness is needed. And I wrote a little poem about just this issue.

PRACTICE A HABIT

Meditation,

While not practice,

Is a habit,

That can be practiced.

Practice builds habits,

But should not itself,

Become a habit.

In other words:

Practice,

To form a habit,

But don't make,

A habit of it.

That poem expresses my view. We can practice to learn meditation, but the goal is to meditate and not to form a habit of 'practicing'. We don't want to practice; we want to meditate. There is a difference.

We can pad a habit with skillful means, and meditation can become a habit, but 'practicing meditation' without just meditating should not be a habit. The two main forms of meditation are Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

The whole kit and kaboodle of learning these two forms of meditation is difficult. IMO, it takes real dedication to accomplish them, especially Insight Meditation.

TRANQUILITY AND INSIGHT MEDITATIONS

We can't have 'Insight Meditation' (Vipassana) without having mastered 'Tranquility Meditation' (Shamata) at least to some degree. Tranquility Meditation provides the floor or stable ground on which we can launch or invoke 'Insight Meditation'.

In other words, we have to just calm down enough to support Insight Meditation. As I like to put it, it's like trying to thread a very find needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation will remove the shakiness from the hands, so that Insight Meditation can thread the needle.

Tranquility Meditation, a stable ground, by itself, is not enough. We need Insight Meditation for liberation to take place.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## INSIGHT MEDITATION IS IMMERSION

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 20, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/420f6355-7e48-4a8f-b98a-7229e49500a0_2048x1365.jpeg*

The word 'meditation' is pretty much meaningless now. Almost everything under the sun is called meditation these days. What happened to the form of meditation proposed by the Buddha and many of the Indian saints, in particular Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation), usually practiced in that order, first Tranquility Meditation and then Insight Meditation?

And these two forms of meditation are practiced in this order because learning meditation is like trying to thread a very thin needle with shaky hands. First, we learn Tranquility Meditation to steady the shaky hands, and once stabilized, then Insight Meditation is possible, which threads the needle.

Insight Meditation is the second stage, but not JUST a "next step" or next dharma practice. It is way more than that because it is a transition from what up to now have all been for us dualistic or 'relative' dharma practices into non-dualistic meditation like Insight Meditation (and Mahamudra and Dzogchen), which are "Absolute" meditations, actually 'non-meditations." So, there is that to consider.

Dualistic dharma practices are inferential by definition, meaning they infer truth, such as, given this or that fact we can then infer something is true. This is how we start out. Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is dualistic, therefore inferential.

As mentioned, non-dual forms of meditation, the second type of meditational dharma practices, depend on our first mastering inferential meditation such as Tranquility Meditation. These non-dualistic forms of meditation include "Insight Meditation (Vipassana), Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

Given that, our invoking of Insight Meditation is not just a slam/dunk sort of thing; the door to Insight Meditation is not an obvious procedure but can be very fickle indeed. It's like, as an older person, when I take one of those ultra-thin produce bags at the grocery store and try to open it with my increasingly insensitive fingers, I can spend two minutes trying to separate that thin plastic and open the bag. Something like that. It's not obvious and not often easy.

One of the problems here is that we don't know what Insight Meditation is until we do. We have had no experience with it and thus no experience with that idea, what it is or even what to look for. You can read all the books there are about it, and that's what you get, something 'about it', but not 'it'. Words cannot describe "Insight Meditation" because it is ineffable, beyond language, as all the dharma teaching state. That's why we have the pointing-out instructions, and they require an authentic dharma teacher to point things like this out to us.

And Insight Meditation is not an idea or concept for us to just 'get'. It's not something to think on or about, but rather something to experience, and something to immerse ourselves in, and we can't just happen to 'find the way', at least easily, on our own. I'd say it is impossible to do it alone, but there may be some rare exceptions I don't know of.

And I'm not trying to be evasive here, but just straight forward and to the point. With 'Insight Meditation', a case of "You can't get there from here" sort of thing, not without some sort of guide.

In addition, at least in my personal introduction to Insight Meditation, I had the pointing-out instructions by an authentic master, followed by several years of very explicit and constant dharma practice, and even then, it required like a perfect-storm of conditions for Insight Meditation to 'naturally' happen. And the conditions were tough, not easy. The outward conditions were such that I was pulled down from my 'high horse', down level to the ground, humbled. It took that to get my attention and for Insight Meditation to just happen.

Is it worth working for? Of course, it is, beyond the imagination worthwhile. Is it easy to achieve? Not that I know of.

For me it was very difficult. You have to want it without even knowing exactly what it is. And then, harder yet, one has to practice, practice, practice, and then let go of all that effort and allow it to naturally happen. And also, the cosmic conditions apparently have to be just so.

That's why it is such a big deal. In the dharma I practice, our lineage calls this event "Recognition," meaning the recognition and familiarity with the actual nature of the mind, and it also exists in Rinzai Zen Buddhism and is called "Kensho," where it is just as respected.

In a word or nutshell, my suggestion is that invoking Insight Meditation is not just a part-time job, something we can do on the side or over a weekend course. At least in my experience, I had to change my life for this to happen. And even then, when Insight Meditation suddenly appeared, it took a year or

more for me to expand and extend it to the point of being able to use it in day-to-day living.

And if you are shy to actually get up, go out, and find an authentic dharma teacher, then that's a problem you must solve. There are no armchair dharma practitioners when it comes to Insight Meditation. We have to go to meet our maker, so to speak. Do it ourselves. Otherwise, we might as well just cast our bread upon the waters and let karma decide.

Given all that, Insight Meditation, IMO, is the pearl of great price.

[Image worked up by me.]

EMAIL

## LEARNING TO MEDITATE PROPERLY

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 20, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2913d1c4-5dd2-42ce-b48b-6edc240a2649_1024x1024.jpeg*

A few of you are interested in learning Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), and are willing to start at the beginning, where we should start. I will explain that here, but first I want to tell a brief story of how I started seriously meditating.

Decades ago, some 40 years now, the second time I met with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery), I was so impressed with Rinpoche a few weeks before in Ann Arbor Michigan, that in those Limbo-like days between Christmas and New Year of 1983, Margaret and I decided to drive 800 miles to his monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY, with my entire family. We never had a babysitter for our kids in all those years, not ever, until our oldest could act as a babysitter. We took our kids everywhere we went. Why would we leave them?

As it turned out, these were the coldest days of the year, just bitter cold. And crazy as it sounds, I didn't even call ahead to see if Rinpoche was at the monastery and could see us. We just piled into the car and drove all that way. Our youngest child, May Erlewine, was only one-and one-half years old and we were driving a tiny 4WD Toyota Tercel, dark blue.

When we got to Woodstock and began driving the curvy three miles up the mountain to the old summer retreat house where Rinpoche lived, it was so cold that I had to use a cardboard matchbook cover to scrape the ice crystals from the inside of the front windshield in order to see. There were five of us (and all our luggage) in that tiny Tercel.

This was before KTD monastery was even built, and there was just an excavation for the eventual monastery, with some cement poured. It was freezing up there and the strong winds whipped the plastic covering the cement forms making an eerie sound as we stood at the retreat-house door in the dark and knocked. There were no lights on. We really had just winged it.

After a long time of knocking a light came on and the door opened. A woman named Norvie welcomed us into the building and I explained why we had come, which was to see Khenpo Rinpoche.

As luck would have it, Rinpoche was there, and although totally unexpected, she told us that she would ask Rinpoche if he would see us. We were led to a small anteroom and took off our jackets and hats. In later years we got to know every room and bathroom in the place by heart, until they eventually tore it down to build a new complex.

And that night Rinpoche eventually came down along with his translator Ngodup Burkhar, who was to become a lifelong friend. Rinpoche spoke no English. And, as mentioned, we had met Rinpoche on Halloween, some weeks before.

In the interview I explained that we had come all the way from Big Rapids, Michigan to see him and asked what should be our next step in working with him. We had decided that Rinpoche was the teacher that we had been looking for, and that is an understatement. Rinpoche was the perfect guru or guide for us. And I am getting around to the point of this story, although I admit, kind of slowly.

I explained to Rinpoche that I had been an astrologer and studied spiritual ideas for many years and did some meditation. And that I hoped that I could kind of place out of Meditation-101 and start at some of the more advanced practices like the Ngondro or something like that. Rinpoche took this all in and then began to speak.

He very gently told me that he could see that I had never harmed anyone with my astrology, yet he felt that as far as meditation goes and we would be working with him, and that the place to start was at the very beginning.

Of course, ignorant as I am, I was a little taken aback by having to go to the end of the line of practices, which is the beginning of learning meditation. However, I felt so wonderful in his presence that I just dropped all that and accepted his suggestion of starting at the very beginning. I could do that.

This was more than fortunate because, as it turned out, I didn't know squat about meditation, although I assumed I did. Rinpoche then gave us a book called "The Torch of Certainty" by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, and instructed us to read the part of that book on the practice of Tong-Len, exchanging yourself for others. And with that he wished us a goodnight and was gone.

Well, we got into our care and went back down the mountain in the frigid conditions and found a little motel in Woodstock, just a room with a tiny infrared-type heater in the wall. And put the little kids to bed and opened that book and read about Tong-Len.

What we read was quite unnerving, because in the practice of Tong-Len, you breathe in all the darkness and problems in the world, and exhale all of the light and goodness within yourself, and again and again.

Well, that was just the opposite from what the psychics and mind-readers had told me, that we should always wash all the darkness out of our body, our hands, etc. after doing a reading for someone, and keep all the purity and light in ourselves. And here, this Rinpoche was telling us just the opposite. This was my introduction to Vajrayana Buddhism.

What were we going to do? We loved meeting Rinpoche and yet did not want to get into some kind of witchcraft or whatever this Tong-Len stuff was.

And here we were, 800 miles from home, with all our babies, in a tiny cabin, outside of which was nothing but the howling wind and frigid cold. That was an interesting night, to say the least.

As it turned out, we decided that our respect for and the warmth coming from Khenpo Rinpoche overpowered our fear of the dark and strange practice of Tong-Len, as it appeared to us. And I was at peace with Rinpoche's wanting me to start at the very beginning of learning meditation. All I can say, how lucky I was to overcome my arrogance and just start at step one with meditation practice and learn it correctly.

With that said, I will offer here a short course or several blogs on Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), perhaps not every day, but often. This should provide what you need to learn Tranquility Meditation, which we can learn without an authentic teacher, although I have certainly been given permission from my dharma teacher to offer this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me. Not a photo of our family, but one created by me for this article.]

EMAIL

## GROUNDHOG DEJA VUE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 25, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2add711e-a30c-4d51-8984-a3571648e85b_1024x1024.webp*

Perhaps drifting too far from the shore, it's time I tightened up a bit and pulled myself together again. I feel like an old jalopy rattling down the road and losing parts as I go along. There is nothing to compare what I feel now to except where I came from, which is when I was younger, and as to what's ahead I can only imagine, and I can imagine pretty well. Not a lot of fun, but is there a saving grace?

I should know better because the pith dharma teachings spare no effort in talking about the failure of the human body and the trip to the end of the line. It's more than clear and it's hard to find an upside, yet of course I'm looking for one. And the whole thing, death itself, may be an upside for all we know. There is so much we just don't know.

I can't help but peek behind the curtain of age and wonder whether it will be better to drop this aging body and just be free of it. And let's not forget Shakespeare, with Hamlet's soliloquy, and this worry:

"… But that the dread of something after death,

The undiscovere'd country, from whose bourn

No traveler returns, puzzles the will,

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of?

"Thus, conscience doth make cowards of us all,

And thus, the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

And enterprises of great pith and moment

With this regard their currents turn awry

And lose the name of action."

Is there such a thing as our going to meet our maker with open arms, where we are anxious to see what's there and, of course, it's not like we have a choice? When there is no choice, what's the best attitude and approach?

One becomes at least inquisitive as to what it will be like to be free of age, free of the physical, and to find ourselves floating beyond time and space, but still some kind of consciousness paying our way forward once again, driven by our karma.

And beyond this life, left with no way to turn back to and no cause to remember where we came from, which apparently is soon forgotten, our slate is wiped clean even of ourselves. Venturing onward, while parts of our karma, like iron fragments reacting to the magnet of rebirth, assemble a new Self piecemeal and offer an opportunity for someone new to discover who they are all over again. We would be the last to know.

Scarier than hell, yes. Impossible, apparently not. And, again, all the dharma texts state we have done so (taken rebirth) innumerable times before. Yet it doesn't mean that we don't have our heart in our mouth each time. Imagine!

I have no memory of such an event in the past, and yet apparently, I have no choice but to experience this over and over, much like the movie "Groundhog Day," a dharma film if I ever saw one.

With all the accumulation of experience from an entire lifetime, what parts of us at death are persistent enough to persevere through the veil of death and reanimate in yet another personality, one that requires a new start to figure life out all over again. What a thought! And not so far away, either.

Is this a 'Coming Attraction' and not just a loss of this life?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## INVOKING INSIGHT MEDITATION

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 26, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c135ec35-e356-4df4-8a88-1a9c3dea2fd2_1024x1024.jpeg*

[This is another long draw, here an explanation as to how I first encountered 'Insight Meditation" as part of Mahamudra non-meditation, as well what it took to allow this to happen, and how I have cultivated that original realization. So, for the few and probably not the many.]

I want to explain as best I can a spiritual event that took place. The main event or realization was experienced while lying in the wet morning grass, peering through a high-quality camera lens at small worlds, in other words macro photography.

One moment I was looking through the lens at a small critter or plant, and the next I was no longer seeing the object at the end of my lens, but instead I was seeing the 'Seeing' itself, the whole enchilada, and at that point there was no see-er and no object to be seen, but just immersion in the seeing itself. This was a new experience, a non-dual experience, and it did not go away. Stunning! It in that moment all one thing, and no longer two. I was not there, but only the 'Seeing' itself.

And what was obvious was the crystal-clear clarity and luminosity of the entire immersive moment and its emptiness of any and all elaboration, like no thoughts or worries, no anything.

I had never experienced this before in my life and I found that I could repeat the immersion, the 'seeing the Seeing' by looking in a certain way, again and again. Of course, I did that, over and over and over. I was mesmerized by the clarity.

And this special kind of 'insight' stayed with me when I went back home that day, the clear imprinted memory of it, yet I was not able to 'see' in that way at home and around the house, but only out in the fields and woods at the crack of dawn. And so, because it was for me such a profound experience, I found myself going out morning after morning to watch the sun come up and to look in that same way and have that same experience. I did not want to stop doing it. I was already down the rabbit hole.

And I did this from late May until late November when the cold weather drove me (and my camera) inside, about six months straight of going out like that. By that time, I had quite a lot of practice with this new technique, although it was a kind of a nail-biter for me to go into and get through the oncoming winter and see if the experience was still there the following spring. All winter I was trying to invoke this insight in my little photography studio, inside at home, but I did not have quite the same experience, although something like it was almost possible.

The whole experience was initially an event but the repetition of it also became a learning experience, a learning path I was on and very interested in, perhaps already even addicted to. There is no going back from that.

Now, the above is about the event and the experience itself. It does not tell us what led up to it and the conditions that it required, which were crucial.

Nor does to say much about what happened after that summer and what became of the experience. However, both the before and after are VERY important to at least know something about, so here goes.

BEFORE

Before the event, what led up to it was not just business as usual. What led up to the event was critical and key to the event itself and the event could not have (I believe) happened (or be understood) without an understanding of the conditions that caused or at least colored the event. I share this so those of you reading this don't assume this just happened to me out of the blue. It didn't. It was a long time coming, but precipitated by a harsh event.

What did happen was that what I call a 'Perfect Storm' of conditions, so untoward and jarring that I was forced out of the groove I had been in for I don't know how long, many, many years and I suddenly found myself with a job, laid off and without any means to take care of my family. As a good provider, this was a profound shock to my system. My apple cart was turned upside down in a day and I had to react and deal with it. It changed my life and direction.

And the shock and my upset are what propelled my out of my routine and into taking refuge not in my family and not even on my meditation cushion (as I would have expected) but leapfrogging all of that back to my childhood love of Mother Nature. I had been a confirmed naturalist even as a child and in the shock of that upset I found myself seeking the familiarity of my childhood intense study of nature. Familiarity with our own mind is key, with our own history. Like: Family.

Of course, there are a ton of details I could share that would perhaps better set the stage for this perfect storm, yet I believe you have enough to get the idea. I suddenly found myself under siege from the world and these events, so I reached out for something familiar and known, and ended up not on my dharma cushion or consoled by my family, but reaching back to my early childhood and what went on into my teenage years, my familiarity with the natural world around me.

And so, the point here is that I was brought down from whatever 'high horse' I was on, down to the level of the ground and kept there by my reaction. It was in this special cauldron that a spiritual experience and realization was possible. And now, something about the future after that experience.

AFTER

For me, it is more difficult to describe what happened after I experienced what I came to call 'Insight Meditation' or if I am being generous to myself, a form of Mahamudra non-meditation. And here is what I am doing or attempting to do with this post.

I am here building a vehicle, a time-release capsule or 'ark' of words that will last as long as I can make them last in time and by lasting long, imprint the mind of anyone who can carefully read this with long-lasting words that wake (come apart), if ever, last or at least much later.

These words are meant to endure or persist to the degree that they are carefully crafted and can withstand not-being-understood and by that imprint the mind of the reader deep enough that they make sense and last long enough in the mind to be understood. And with that said:

I started with that first moment when I was plunged, immersed, in what is called non-duality, a oneness that had no perceiver and no perceived. And that moment was not only a passing experience, but at the same time, as mentioned, was an experience that I was aware of having AND through which I realized the nature of what I was experiencing. It was indelible and stayed that way. That's the nature of a realization.

And not only did that experience imprint my mind, but that realization, because it was a realization, was permanent, and repeatable. I did it again and again. And I not only did it again, but I did it for something like six months straight as much as I could manage. Yet the question arose, what am I to do with this repeatable form of insight?

I ran out of summer and even fall, and was forced inside, and by that time my insight experience was habitual, albeit that it only seemed to happen out in

the morning air while watching the sun rise. Yet at least it was there and had become a practice. Where do I go from there?

It was a shaky time, getting through winter, and onto the next spring when I could get back out in nature and see if it was still viable and happening. As mentioned, trying to jump start it inside over winter was touch and go, not too definitive.

Spring brought warmer temperatures and I believe I was out as early as late February on sunny days trying to confirm the state of things, of my practice. I still did not have a real name for what I was experiencing or realizing. I could care less because the fact that it was working was enough, but of course I wanted to find a name for it.

And that came in spring where a dear friend of our family, Lama Karma Drodul, a Tibetan monk who had completed two three-year closed retreats came to visit us. As we walked the nature trail on a bright spring day, I explained to Lama Karma just what I was going through.

And to my surprise, he knew exactly what I was experiencing, and even had a name for it. I was experiencing what is called the "Lame of Appearances," meaning that the natural world itself is also a perfect teaching of the dharma, and I was experiencing that.

Lama Karma explained that there are four types of lamas. Of course there is the "Lama of the lineage," which I had of course with my Tibetan teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. And then there was the "Lama of the Scriptures," all the extant dharma scriptures and writings. And third, there was the "Lama of the Dharmadhatu," where the very essential nature of the mind is an instructor, and finally, what Lama Karma said I was experiencing, the "Lama of Appearance," where the nature world surrounding us, 'Mother Nature' is also a perfect reflection of that dharma and can serve as a lama or guide to us in pointing out the dharma path. I had invoked that lama.

Whatever the name was that Lama Karma pointed out, it was by then clear to me that I was experiencing some kind of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) because it was non-dual and permanent. It did not come and go, yet neither was it very adaptable. More or less, it only worked when I was out in nature photographing. I wanted to do something about that, but how?

To put it in a nutshell, doing something about it was very, very difficult, one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life. However, the beauty of what I realized through Insight Meditation was so profound that I never gave up on making it more useful. I was quite naturally driven to expand and extend this dharma technique.

And it took me about a year and a half of non-stop effort, trial and error, to move the Insight Meditation I knew from photographing nature out in the wild, inside and home where I could use it everyday for other things, in particular for writing like I am here. I wanted to do that more than anything else I could think of.

However, it didn't just move. Period. When I tried to use my will to make it happen, nothing happened. I was powerless to even move it a fraction of an inch, so to speak. It was not a matter of will power, apparently.

Then, after many, many months (I never gave up) I noticed a teeny, tiny bit of movement. At last! And that smallest of threads I grasped by the end and began to work. I write all this so that those of you who can identify with this know that it is not impossible, yet can be very difficult, so don't give up.

And during this time, I was realizing that the expanding and extension of Insight Meditation, the so-called "Recognition" as to the actual nature of the mind is natural and had to be done. From the smallest portal through which we kind of gaze, that thread or opening must be worked with and expanded and extended until it embraces the entire world. It's like turning the inside out and the outside in.

And what kept (and keeps me going) is the incredibly clear and luminous nature of Insight Meditation and the Mahamudra non-meditation it is packaged in or part of.

I have tried to present here what my experience was, the realization of that experience, and the perfect storm that allowed it to happen, and what I have done (and had to do) afterward to bring the realization to full use. I hope this is useful for someone and not just a bunch of words.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## THE CONTINUITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 27, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/162eac66-c18a-43fb-be69-d899696e0ff6_1024x1024.webp*

Well, how about that, the dharma teachings all seem to agree on the continuity of our consciousness virtually forever, just not a continuity of the person now known as John Michael Erlewine. At least we get something out of this, for less is more than any, and any is better than none. As old age rolls along, I am more willing to settle for less. LOL.

If we use up one lifetime and then rebirth to another, the Self left at the end of each life is pretty-much worn out. If you are 82 like I am, all you have to do is look in a mirror to observe a declining asset. The writing is on the wall.

And so, our Self does NOT reincarnate as the same "Me, Myself, and I" at rebirth but our self exists temporarily for each lifetime and is then discarded; however, apparently, although I don't continue on, an edition of my complete karma does move forward through time like a great barge in what is called the 'Storehouse Consciousness', and from that barge a collection of our most virile or ripe karma apparently is selected to create a new persona for our rebirth, but the use of the word 'our' is a misnomer.

However, at least it will be my karma continued, just with a different name on the driver's license or on hers.

And so, what can be considered as the downside of all this is that with each rebirth, we start out again as a baby, and after birth we also begin to assemble a new Self and persona based on our parents DNA and our karma. And so, we are still there and at the same time not there anymore.

So, the scary part is what we might call the blackout, when we tune out from our last lifetime and begin to tune into another station, our rebirth, but as a new persona – someone else. This has to be stranger than fiction.

Talking about having a sense of humor, I guess that it pays to have one.

And so, a careful reading of the dharma texts states that our consciousness is continuous and will remain in effect virtually forever, however the caveat is with each rebirth comes a new Self or persona being constructed anew. It gives a whole new meaning to "Where's Waldo."

I don’t like rollercoasters much anymore, but it sounds like a new rebirth comes pretty close to a wild ride.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**IT'S COME TO THIS…**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 28, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/acf3e799-3297-4feb-b53b-8fb71b6db7ec_1024x1024.jpeg*

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Round Flate Stones for Skipping

Skipping Stones on the Surface

By Michael Erlewine

Each day, as I look for where to focus or rest my mind I come up with the same exact location. I don't want to do this, that, or some other thing. I just want to rest in the nature of the mind enough to be immersed (and yet also remain aware). It's like skipping a flat stone on a still pond, where the skipped stone samples the water as it goes. I include photos.

In meditation, these alternations are EACH just momentary.

Touch, sample, touch, sample, touch, sample, and so on.

Or… Sample, Look, Sample, look, Sample, Look, etc.

Or better yet:

Immerse, Look, Immerse, Look, Immerse, Look, etc.

Only, by now, after all these years, the process for me is contiguous, seamless, so instead of an alternation as illustrated above, there is only a single stream of consciousness, so to speak. Like a laser beam I turn it where in the mind I like, on one thought or idea or another or none at all.

And, by design, the only product of this process Mahamudra Insight Meditation) is the writing that is appearing here that you are reading. It's like a utility or tool, yet it is also complete in itself. And by complete, I mean the process itself produces an output, these words on a page, however, at the same time it is self-sustaining; I am resting in like pure oxygen, perfect clarity. Non-dual means no thoughts or any distraction.

There is nowhere else I want to be, and I am complete right in this here and now. This is a form of meditation, in the form of 'non-meditation', just resting in the nature of the mind itself, yet sampling.

There may well be something else that I could do and that could be done, yet at this point I don't know what that is. More impactful, I don't seem to care or worry about it just because this present moment of Insight Meditation, while it may seem or may appear solipsistic because it does not need to go further than right here, is nevertheless self-complete. Perfect.

Perhaps, I have come thus far and no farther. As to how to get beyond this point, I have no idea, because I have no desire to be anywhere else than right here. This is either a good thing or a problem. You tell me.

In any case, this is a distinct form of meditation. It is non-dual, meaning immersive, yet clarified by seeing, not just looking, but also seeing -- insight. And it is, as mentioned, seamless, continuous, clarifying, and free from thought and doubt.

If that is OK with you, then that is what I would like to continue to do, this particular form of non-meditation. I have no one to ask because I have not seen it described as I am describing it. And you know that I have looked.

However, it's not just immersive with no awareness. It is immersive followed by insight and this awareness is dualistic enough to result in words like these, in this form of non-meditation, which is non-dualistic/dualistic, a kind of 'practical' form of meditation that I can do for hours each day. And I do.

Is this portable and can it be used as in the Zen tradition for things like "The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," etc.? It would seem so, however am I missing the whole point somehow, and do I care? That is a question for others to decide.

There is no doubt that through this form of productive non-meditation I (at the same time) continue to extend and expand my recognition as to the true nature of the mind, which is what my beloved dharma teacher asked me to do. It was the last thing Rinpoche said to me.

I am doing that, yet I am, so to speak, also 'living to tell about it', if you follow me. And that's a little bit of humor.

I want also to play with my dharma friends, yet try as I might, I am busy doing this form of non-meditation and never quite seem to fit into the textbook descriptions of what I should be doing, or anyway, that's how I see it. I have described it above, nothing more and nothing less.

Does that mean I am in or am I out of what is acceptable. I really don't know, and it seems (I have checked) I don't really care. Color me acceptable or not acceptable, I seem not to do otherwise than what I do, and it feels organic and natural.

Could I straighten up and fly right? I'm already doing the best I know how. For me this is flying right. I just may be non-typical and not fit into any kind of mold that I can locate. I'm sure I fit in somewhere, yet I just don't know where, and worse, worrying about this is itself an obscuration so I may have to stop doing that.

I might have to just be me and not quite fit in anywhere. LOL.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## REALIZING REALIZATION

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 28, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/3638e156-3092-48ee-a53f-85f1ac75ce14_1024x1024.webp*

[Yesterday at 2:50 PM EST an X-Class solar flare (the highest class) erupted and there are perhaps 3 CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections) heading inbound toward Earth that should impact Earth around November 30-December 1.]

The dharma teachings talk a lot about the three stages, Understanding, Experience, and Realization. 'Understanding' is just that, grasping intellectually what is being said. "Experience" is simply yourself experiencing what is understood, and 'Realization' is the most difficult of the three, which is why I want to discuss it here.

With any realization, in particular large realizations, there is the collapse or deconstruction of the dualistic view that obscured the realization as it was realized that that view is not accurate or true. Realizations are automatic and it goes with the territory that there is some kind of breakdown or re-Viewing of what went before. That deconstruction can be devastating for us yet enlightening.

And of course, there are little and greater realizations. They happen to us all day long but are much more dramatic the larger the house of cards that comes cascading down, or in the Tibetan analogy, the so called, 'snake in the dim light that is realized to be a rope'. The is no remedy needed, just the realization itself. That kind of thing is a realization of an experience and not an theoretical understanding, and often is somewhat dramatic in effect!

We have the realization, and depending on its size, what remains when it comes over us is the stripped-down truth, the remains of the misapprehension, what was seen to be false, what we got wrong. The miss-take falls away and is replaced by the reality, the truth, the correct View. We see clearly. We realize. That's what 'Realization' is.

This is more than just similar to when some tragic or powerful event happens to us and shatters the Self, like a death in the family, our sense of ourselves, leaving us temporarily without a Self or any familiar ground to stand on, an imagined 'reality' which has crashed or withdrawn beyond our ability to reach it and make use of it. The Self is often temporarily eclipsed by the realization, leaving us with an emptiness of  or unreachability of the Self.

And so, whether the cause of the realization is tragic or enlightening, the effect on the Self seems to be similar, a shattered Self or a Self temporarily not available, unreachable for all practical purposes. And what remains is a kind of starkness or field of emptiness that leaves us with no alternative but to witness that emptiness and a dharma opportunity to have a good look around until the Self closes back in.

Of course, we immediately try to put our Humpty-Dumpty Self back together again after a realization, as the old poem goes:

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

All the king's horses and all the king's men

Couldn't put Humpty together again.”

In other words, it takes time to recover from a realization, any major realization, a time when there is essentially nothing obscuring us or our view, or at least less obscuration than normally.

And it appears that a realization is neither good nor bad, but just a realization and how we react to it or take it is up to us. Yet, either way, a positive or negative reaction, it takes time for our sense of a Self to gather itself together or reanimate and once again exert some kind of control over us, or even to be available to us.

We have no choice but to wait that out. And that wait or ‘empty stage’ of our life is an excellent time to learn what we can about our situation, a kind of dharma field day.

In my own case, as the pith dharma teachings tell us, I find that realizations can be enabled by our looking directly at whatever problem or situation that directly confronts us. If we double-down and look directly at the nature of the confrontation, it can resolve itself, which means that we can realize or resolve that situation through realizing the actual or true nature of it, which may or may not rearrange or change our View.

And by ‘True Nature’ it should be understood that by looking directly and perhaps repeatedly, the ‘miss take’ on our part falls away, revealing the truth, the reality in terms that we can plainly see and understand as reality.

And I am not speaking through my hat. I have the experience to prove it. Recently I was struggling with a very deep and emotional problem, what the dharma calls a “Klesha,” an unimaginably difficult situation, was even in the

midst of writing a very sad account of it, when it occurred to me that the dharma teachings, not to mention my own guru very clearly stating that when you have this kind of profound problem, to just look directly at it, and it can resolve itself. Anyway, that came to mind, and I tried it. What did I have to lose?

So, with my problem firmly in mind, I looked directly at the nature of it. I even doubled down on it. And to my total surprise, lo and behold, the problem began to churn and dissolve. And in the dissolution, I saw my own original take on it as wrong, a miss-take of the whole problem, and behind it and shining through it was the reality, the true cause and nature of the problem.

I watched my entire house of cards, so to speak, vanish before my eyes leaving me with the correct view for the first time, which I saw as correct and that I had it all wrong up to then. It was exhausting and painful but also clarifying and exhilarating.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## DON'T PRACTICE A HABIT

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

November 29, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/f20c8e56-3376-4372-9526-4e4808d9ceba_1024x1024.webp*

Yes, I believe practice makes perfect, yet I do have one caveat. Dharma practice time as measured by how much we do each day is not what I believe works. It is a question of choosing your dharma practice times, doing it when you feel like doing it and not just because the clock strikes 8 AM and it's time to practice.

Of course, doing it by the clock works somewhat, it's just a clunky way to practice, IMO.

Another approach is to say that practice is just time we put in and because everything cycles, we wait for a creative time to spontaneously arise somewhere within our allotted or scheduled practice time.

I know. I know. Always practice at the same time every time and it pays dividends. The dividends do come from practicing each day; however I question the scheduling.

In my experience, it is much better if I wait until I feel like practicing (or doing anything, for that matter, like work, etc.) until I feel like it. Of course, if one never feels like work or practice, then set your clock and just do it. I'm talking here to the more pliable folks out there who can take advantage of the moments when they feel like getting something done.

I have learned to look at what I have to do on a given day, take note and keep checking with myself do I feel like doing this or that right now. It's not that I may be thrilled to practice at any time, for that matter, but what happens is more like, when I check my availability for practice, I come back with "Why not, I'm not doing anything else right now." And so, I do it.

Staining our dharma practice by forcing ourselves to practice is bad habit, because, as mentioned, the forcing ourselves stains our desire for dharma practice. I have done dharma practice for many decades, so I have some experience in this.

In fact, at one point, it got so bad, so stained, that I had to stop practicing and begin again only doing it when I more than less was up for it. Be careful, is all I'm saying here. Habits are hard to break, especially bad habits.

The whole idea of practicing anything is questionable IMO, and in my experience. Practicing meditation is to help us learn meditation, not for us to learn to practice meditation. Get the horse before the cart on this one.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## WHERE IS THE COMPASSION?

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 1, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/95bcc834-0c28-41c3-bd72-45148a74e520_1024x1024.jpeg*

I have gotten at least one question as to where compassion is in my dharma practice. Of course, it is right there, front and center, in the nature of Bodhicitta, which I mention at the end of each blog very clearly.

My guess is that folks don't know what Bodhicitta is, since it is a foreign term. Bodhicitta essentially is another word for "Compassion," and a very special kind of compassion.

There are two basic types of Bodhicitta, Relative or 'Aspiration" Bodhicitta and Absolute or 'Engaged" Bodhicitta.

Aspiration Bodhicitta is just that, the intent or aspiration to attain enlightenment for all sentient beings. Aspiration Bodhicitta is largely conceptual as the word 'aspiration' suggests. It is the empathetic understanding of the suffering of others and the desire to alleviate that suffering.

Absolute or 'Engaged Bodhicitta' is a bit harder to define. As I understand and have experienced it, Engaged Bodhicitta is a byproduct of 'Recognition', the recognition of the true nature of the mind. When recognition is attained, Engaged Bodhicitta arises with it.

I would describe Engaged Bodhicitta as a constant heartfelt compassion for all sentient beings that is like a realization in that once aroused, Engaged Bodhicitta does not slacken, or go away but remains constant and on point through thick or thin.

So, Aspiration Bodhicitta is the good intent to benefit all sentient beings by realizing enlightenment and Engaged Bodhicitta is an inner yearning and devotion to doing everything one can to bring all beings to enlightenment.

I am a subscriber to Engaged Bodhicitta. That's about the best I can do in differentiating these two kinds of Bodhicitta, and both are types or kinds of a special compassion.

Of course, I have been a lover of natural wildlife since I was six years old, and have raised or rescued about every animal you could imagine, as well as

served as a board member of a wildlife rescue operation, skunks, possums, racoons, deer, rabbits, squirrels, lizards, snakes, salamanders, frogs & toads, birds of all kinds, and on and on . Our backyard was filled with numerous stainless-steel cages with injured or abandoned birds and animals that were nursed back to health and released.

These years I am more concerned with sharing dharma with anyone and everyone interested in it on an equal basis.

Bodhicitta is engaged Compassion.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## "I'M ALMOST A SCHOLAR…" LOL

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 2, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/70a86fc6-3c38-4c7f-b860-7d00c986b113_1024x1024.webp*

Yet I'm not by any means a scholar. I can, at times, dip into the more scholarly tradition of dharma teachings and absorb what I can until I cannot absorb more and am forced to withdraw to keep from desiccating, not able to make further sense of what I am reading. In other words, I make forays or excursions into the more intellectual realms, gather some understanding, and then get out while I can, back to a language I can make more sense of. I depend on actual experience for most of my knowledge, and not my imagination or theoretical intellection.

I wish I could endure the intellectual longer, and over time I have been able to increasingly grasp the scholar's view, but at any given scholarly reading I can only take in so much and then it's 'out of there' for me, back to something I can feel and that makes sense. In other words, I am not a scholar although I wish I were and would be if it only made more sense to me. Intellectuality, for its own sake, is not for me. The knowledge I get is not worth the beating I take trying to understand it, if I understand anything form it at all.

So, I am a victim of the low-hanging fruit when it comes to scholarship. And I can even feel the love of scholarship when someone skilled in scholarly dharma speaks of it, and wish I could feel that way too, but as mentioned, highly detailed scholarship apparently is a cut above my pay grade.

Yet, it's not like all I can do is pick from the scraps that fall down from the table. I do have a practice of my own, however it is very much my own and fashioned from what I do understand, personal experience, and whatever realize I can mange. My only real problem is dharma as I know it is peculiar to me, to my history, and my aptitude. It does not usually match the textbook descriptions of this or that dharma realization enough to be confirming. Frustrating, so take note that we have to confirm our own practice by reaping the fruits of our own effort. Dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project. No one can do it for us.

And so, I am left forging my own way while at the same time looking to see if what I know and am does match what I'm led to believe or expect. So far, there is not a very good match, however I am very comfortable with my own

dharma practice, which is perhaps how it is supposed to be, almost totally individual. We must each confirm ourselves, and be our own witness.

If I were unhappy with my practice, I would try to do something about it to better understand just where I fit in, yet as mentioned, I'm good with what I have and need to stop trying to compare it to anything else. That comparison itself is an obscuration, a disturbance.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## CONSTANT DISTRACTION

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 3, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/82db7f75-8e09-4730-aadc-6ebc9c146b28_1024x1024.jpeg*

Looking for entertainment in all the wrong places, more of a habitual habit or reaction than any inherent need. We habitually look to hide in and be absorbed in busyness, and our endless personal interests and attachments, or whatever it takes to soak up the sense of ennui and boredom that can face us at every turn. We are always doing something. We resist the sense of empty 'voidness' which confronts us like a mirror. Why is that or, better yet, what is all that hiding on our part about? What are we hiding from and in?

Samsara distracts and fixates us in a plethora of ways, helping to shut out any open space or sense of peace and keeping us distracted, fascinated, and riveted to entertainment of one kind or another. This distraction keeps us busy all the time so that we cannot experience cracks, gaps, and space to unwind or be exposed to openness of any kind, distracted from the open sky of the mind.

Samsara is a closed system and likes it like that. We are habitually signed, sealed, and delivered to Samsara. And Samsara is an almost perfect karma making machine. We are accumulating karma faster than we can remove or ripen it, keeping us tethered to Samsara for eons and this will go on for a long, long time.

Moreover, if I am to believe the numerous accounts in the dharma teachings, we have never, not in all the lives and rebirths we apparently have lived, we have never known anything other than Samsara as our home and refuge. And the teachings say that ignorance was there from the beginning and is unborn. To say we are habituated to Samsara is an understatement. We were born in it! It is our home. And we have known nothing else and have nothing to compare it to.

When the dharma offers us refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, it is refuge from Samsara which is all we have ever known and where we have always been. That's not an easy thing, to just reverse and turn around our habitual life of being forever in Samsara.

We are fixated on Samsara, sealed tight like a drum, busy fighting away boredom and open space, all the cracks of light shut out.  And yet that room and some space, like the open sky, are just what we need.

If you wonder about this, just check your quotient for boredom and ennui. If you work hard to avoid being bored, by keeping busy and entertained by whatever means, and yet are always distracted and don't even realize it, then you are tithing with Samsara. If you are not always busy and not easily bored, that's a good sign, IMO.

In Vajrayana dharma, the keys to our liberation from Samsara are always the things that we turn away from, rather than toward. We are perpetually distracted and don't even know it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## NOT A DHARMA TEACHER

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 5, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/11faa267-152c-47b7-9bb9-4b1b526710b7_1024x1024.webp*

Something I want to make clear is that I am not a dharma teacher, don't pretend to be, and have no need to be, and this is why.

I don't make any claims to be a dharma teacher because all I have is my own experience to discuss. I know (and have known) many lamas and helped to raise the funds for our monastery's 3-year retreat center, lamas being those dharma practitioners trained to teach others.

I did not train in a wide variety of dharma techniques, although of course I practiced and completed the standard series of dharma practices at least once. And I did 'The Ngondro' twice, what is called "The Extraordinary Preliminaries," so I do know what I know.

In other words, I have the experience that I have had, and I work with that and from that. About my own experience, I am clear.

The dharma is not something I just practice, but I have actual experience gained from that practice, and perhaps even something to say about that experience and how that works.

Like many of my readers, I have practiced and studied dharma for many years and like to share my dharma experience and perhaps point others in the right direction if they have questions I can answer.

However, what I most like to do is Insight Meditation itself as part of Mahamudra meditation and when appropriate discuss dharma experience with others.

I know from hard-earned experience just how helpful and important learning about the dharma can be and I like to share my interest and knowledge as best I can. I also know how much time can be wasted through not having a guide or a friend familiar with the dharma.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## THE PROBLEM WITH LEARNING DHARMA

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 6, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0f855a92-6242-4629-b4e3-9c627980b130_816x1456.jpeg*

[This article pertains to learning the more advanced forms of meditation which are called 'Non-Meditation."

Dharma practice is not like practicing a musical instrument, such as a guitar. With practicing playing a guitar, we of course have to learn the frets, tuning, notes, and so forth. However, we also can put on any guitar player's music we admire on the audio system and actually listen to what we are trying to learn.

With dharma practice and learning it, we have nothing similar to playing a CD or DVD that will acquaint us with what enlightenment or any kind of realization sounds or looks like. We have no experience and barely an idea until we actually have the realization or enlightenment for ourselves.

And so, as mentioned, although we find ourselves practicing dharma, we have yet no actual experience or idea what it is that we are trying to achieve with our dharma practice. I find this problem handicapping and particularly difficult to solve.

Having myself increasingly become more practiced and skilled in the dharma, starting back in the late 1950s, I came to respect what I detailed above about having no idea what our goal looks like or what actual experience, much less realization, would be like. How do we solve this?

The traditional answer to this seems to be unpopular with Americans because, so it seems, we like to believe we can do anything we want to all by ourselves. Umm, yeah. Wishful thinking, IMO. I tried that.

I know from my own struggles to match my dharma expectations and anticipations to reality, that actual practice brought with it very mixed results. Certainty and confirmation of dharma progress can be very hard to get.

I was often so wrong as to my expectations, that it's almost like I had to figure this out all by myself because the teachings seldom matched up to my experiences, and as for 'realization', good luck. And it's true that with the dharma, we each have to turn the wheel of the dharma by ourselves, because no one can turn it for us, not even the Buddha. That's the whole point. Dharma is do it yourself only.

However, there is a traditional solution to all this, although as mentioned above, this is not a solution most Americans cater to, and that is: find an authentic dharma teacher or guide to help us find our way. They do exist, but we would have to look.

This is not just an alternative option, but rather this is 'THE" required option passed down through the ages: secure an authentic guide or dharma teacher and work closely with them. The pith teachings go so far as to say this is the ONLY possibility and that without it, we are going, well, practically nowhere with our dharma. Read that again, please.

And I speak from bitter experience. Early on, I was convinced that this dharma stuff, whatever it is (I had little idea) has to be able to be figured out and that I could do it. And of course, I tried. And I tried and I tried and I tried.

And I even got some of it figured out. I did, but by and large I did not and could not do so without guidance. And that's what I discovered after years of effort.

Perhaps we are too proud to ask an authentic dharma teacher for help, or are we too shy to ask, or just too lazy to go through the steps of finding an authentic guide. Ask yourself?

Or perhaps we are content with just casting our bread upon the waters of life and letting what comes. Or our attitude is that fate will be a case of "Que Sera Sera" (whatever will be will be). Perhaps we just don't care to put that kind of effort into the dharma.

Again: you can ask yourself.

In my own case, I eventually figured out that in fact I needed help, and set about finding a dharma teacher that I felt was authentic. And I went through a string of dharma teachers, including meeting the 14 th Dalai Lama face to face, the 16 th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje), Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the 17 th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje), and a great many others, all very authentic dharma teachers. I met them all.

Of course, I learned from each of the above mentioned dharma teachers, all different and all authentic. For example, just because the Dalai Lama is the Dalai Lama does not mean our vibes synchronize. I loved meeting him, but did something click? No.

Instead, I first meshed perfectly with the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) monastery. Who can explain it. I just instinctively knew I could learn from this dharma teacher, and I did, for 36 years. I was a devoted student.

And so, you get my point. We have to actually reach out, search for, and find a dharma teacher we ‘vibe’ with and who will accept us as a student. If we can’t do that, well, then we can’t and must continue on just as we are. It is up to us.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**OUR NATURAL NATURE**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 6, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/b4655d6f-050d-4727-aa5d-7865b894e33e_1024x1024.jpeg*

OUR NATURAL NATURE

It's right there, right now, the natural nature of the mind itself. There is nothing else but that. It's not that it is hidden or secret, but rather it is just because we are not looking that we don't see it. What to do about that? Well, the obvious answer is to look or learn to.

It's hard to separate the dualism of subject and object. In fact, it can't be done, and this is because more separation or distance just exaggerates the problem and this we don't need. We have separation.

Separation is not the answer, but rather inclusion, combining, immersion, and solution, the two becoming one, much as the poet Sir Edwin Arnold wrote "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea" or the ocean wave collapses and becomes one with the water. That.

If I think back into my own past, back to May 6, 1964, that night in Berkeley California when I first took LSD, it was all laid out for me and crystal clear. So, it was not the lack of clarity that hung me up, but rather the decades it took for me to make practical sense out of what I saw, what I realized on that one life-changing night. It changed my life and is responsible for my enduring interest in the Dharma.

And what I saw then was nothing less than the nature of the mind and how it works. I not only understood it, but I experienced it in the flesh and consciously. However, I was not prepared by any means to 'realize' that the outside world that I lived in and saw, was actually inside me, mostly my own projection and not something outside that was real and other than me.

In other words, what I realized was that the outside was me again, my own projection that I watched projected on the screen of life, the outside world, and took to be real. In the slowness of expanded time there was no mistaking it, the outside world that had me by the short hairs all my life was my own projection, a projection that had me transfixed in its 'otherness', which was not otherness at all. It was 'same', just my own projection.

It was just me again, me projected beyond my own skin upon the screen of the outside world for me to watch, thus I was transfixed by my own inner fears. Before that night, before that moment of realization, I had unknowingly cowered from life, intimidated by what turned out to be my own inner projections writ large on the screen of life. It could not have been more clear. It was certain.

It stunned me with its truth, that realization. And yet, in that very same moment I was simultaneously liberated from that life-long duality. Realizations are one-way only and you cannot un-realize what has been realized.

However, that realization required that, practically speaking, I had to reorient my entire life, not based on duality as I always had been, me against the world, my Self and the 'other'-world outside me, but in that moment the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea and was seen to be one and the same, the duality of subject and object was resolved, seen and experienced as one.

The problem, as mentioned, was that if what was realized was certain, and I was certain it was, this meant, that had stopped seeing double, stopped considering me in here and the terrifying world out there.

Instead, from that moment and night onward I could start doing something about the overshadowing world I saw out there. I no longer was a "stranger in a strange land," me against the outside world.

From then on, I had to, and I did begin to reorient, rearrange my life, because I had seen that I could, that I had skin in this game, and that I was persecuting myself with my own projections. I could stop doing that. I was an equal part of all this.

First, it took time, and a lot of it, to 'Grok' and add up the implications of my realization. Everything changed in an instant just as the Tibetans say, that a single match can light up the darkness of eons. However, the repercussions of that realization were not only extensive, but they were also total, a total realignment and rearrangement. In other words, that realization revealed instantly what had to be done from that point forward, but I had to actually do all that, change my life around.

The byproduct of any realization is our reaction to it and what that realization requires us to do by realizing that.

Responsibility.

However, like that single match that lights the darkeness, from that moment onward, every day and every night, I never forgot and totally remembered

what was realized and began a total inversion of my View, letting the outside in, and the inside out.

And this took me days, weeks, months, and many years to fully respond and accomplish, yet as mentioned, never for even one instant did that light of the mind go out. That illumination was eternal, always the same. I had seen it. And it was me that had to rearrange my 'everything' to align myself with reality, the realization that what before was dualistic, me against the world, was in an instant realized as non-dual, me against myself and nothing more than that. And most important, that I could do something about that and did.

I was essentially liberated there and then, on May 6, 1964, in Berkeley, California. It was done. Only it took me many decades to adjust to that realization. That was the rub.

And back then, that night in Berkeley, California, my understanding of dharma was still rudimentary, just forming. And in time, as the decades passed, and I ran out of the low-hanging fruit of my realization, things I knew how to do, I found in the dharma the tools and means to complete that realization, not theoretically, but in fact, actually.

Was it worth it? I had no choice because that is what a realization is all about, realizing. One can't invert a realization, can't go back but only forward. Yes, we can let a realization go fallow and not continue extending it and expanding it, but there it sits until we finally work with it. It does not go away.

And so, ultimately all my dharma training has been an extension of the one night in 1964 as I wandered the campus in Berkeley, when I realized that it was not me against the world, but that outside world was also me, just my own projection. And most important, in that realization, was the fact that since it was already me that I could change it myself, and I did.

And that has been a long journey, one that is still being extended and expanded day by day. And even though, since then, I have been introduced to other dharma realizations, realizations all resemble one another. They are a direct introduction to the nature of the mind, our natural nature.

We align with it and not vice-versa.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**FROM THE HEART**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 7, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/4224f98a-4001-4fd4-9aa4-527f64ed5416_1024x1024.jpeg*

We have to learn to turn away from what currently distracts us, however exciting that may seem or whatever that is, and learn to look directly at the nature of our own mind. It's that simple, yet apparently, it's almost impossible to do.

And by distraction I don't just mean a mosquito buzzing around our head. Distraction here means always being busy and occupied with either our interests, whatever we entertain ourselves with, and even our fear of boredom or the empty spaces in our lives.

And I mean that we are almost always locked into what we have going on and seem to subscribe to slogans such as "Idle fingers are the devil's workshop" and the like. If we find ourselves fighting boredom and avoiding it, that's exactly what I am pointing at here. Our dance card is full.

And by that fullness is sealed any cracks that might let in the light of realization, our inability to look directly at the nature of the mind. We don't do it and effectively can't do it. We don't know how, so we never look.

This is all part and parcel of having been in Samsara, like forever, lifetime after lifetime, say the pith dharma teachings. We are signed, sealed, and delivered to Samsara, born in and through it. And we might ask: what's wrong with that? This world isn't so bad.

Of course, I get that. I'm here too.

However, I'm talking about removing what is unnecessary, which with Samara means almost everything, so there's a cause for pause. If we start peeling that onion, we are going to end up with nothing, which is just the point. We seem to be terrified of that 'nothing'.

If I am to believe the great Mahasiddhas, whose view is so respected, they would have us believe that by removing our obscurations, which Samsara is nothing but, we end up with clarity, with seeing clearly. What is that worth?

This I can vouch for and from actual experience. The result of Insight Meditation is not only clarity, seeing clearly, but with it comes full immersion,

meaning no subject and object, and actual rest from the storm of life. In fact, IMO, there is nothing I have ever experienced more useful, meaningful, and addictive than the Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra. That's saying a lot.

Why can't we just order up some of this Insight Meditation or get it wherever you get it. Of course, you can, but where you get it is not a place, but rather a way to achieve it, and that requires real effort on our part, plus a special form of guidance.

I would say that all my writing, the reason I write this blog, is to tell folks about Insight Meditation and its parent Mahamudra, which is not a form of meditation, but rather non-meditation.

That alone is inexplicable, so how to even approach it?

It seems that learning this special form of non-meditation is too much trouble and requires such extraordinary effort that very few people will bother learning it. And yet there are innumerable dharma books that speak of little else other than Mahamudra or Dzogchen non-meditation.

I talk about it because I have little else of equal value to speak of, and on the off chance that one or two of you out there can catch the scent and make the trip. There is a host of dharma teachers out there waiting to assist you, yet the only way you can signal them is by showing aptitude, intent, and progress.

And so, we have something like a Catch-22, a seeming paradox or Ouroboros. That one koan that has to be solved in order to proceed, IMO. It's almost sad, requiring each of us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps in order to stand up and be noticed.

The dharma teachers can but water and fertilize us and help us to grow, but we have to do the growing on our own. And with dharma this is very difficult, at least in my experience.

What's missing IMO is very simple. We are so used to looking out at the world, that we have seldom-to-never bothered to look inside at our own mind. And because of this, we know very little, meaning we have almost no experience and have not become familiar with what is most familiar of all, our own mind.

Unfortunately, we can't just stop and look at the mind. It seems we have to un-look at a whole lot of other stuff first and learn to direct our gaze inward rather than outward. It's not as simple as just turning our head and looking.

Our head is used to thinking, intellectualizing, and that is not the kind of looking we need. We have to learn to immerse ourselves in our own mind, to ground ourselves, and not just intellectually, in order to take a peek.

I had to learn this myself and it was not easy because I was used to just thinking with thoughts, and only enough to understand intellectually, yet not enough to ground those thoughts in the sense world and make sense of them, which is an experience. It comes from the heart.

We have not experienced our own mind, much less realized its nature. We have to start with that understanding and experience for ourselves what we understand. We need that experience to accumulate before we can even begin to realize the nature of that experience.

This takes increasing familiarity with our mind not intellectually, but viscerally, from the gut, emotionally, before we can generate enough experience, much less accumulate that experience.

Of course, that is what Insight Meditation and the non-dual meditations or 'non-meditations' are all about, immersion.

We are so used to thinking that our mind is the intellect and that everything can be thought out intellectually, that we have never exercised our mind from the Hara or lower-abdomen, much less massage or knead our mind like we would bread or clay.

It's a whole discipline to move our mind from the intellect down to the lower abdomen. It takes time and effort to become familiar with our mind as anything other than a thinking machine. That all has to be done before Insight Meditation can be invoked and take hold. We have to be centered in the gut, the lower-abdomen or Hara region, speaking from the diaphragm and not the upper chest.

I learned this from years of playing the harmonica which has to control the diaphragm both in and out, so I had a leg up on this. Even with that, I had to be directed in this by an authentic dharma teacher before it came spontaneously.

And so, there is work in dharma training that has to be undertaken and that cannot, to my knowledge, be avoided. Even when I finally got the message as to what to do, it took me several years to do it plus what I call a 'perfect storm' of a situation that pulled me down from my high horse long enough to complete the training. Only then did things fall into place.

No one said it would be easy.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## DOING NOTHING

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 8, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/19707b4b-4f4c-45b9-a418-fc232ea1a82f_1024x1024.jpeg*

DOING NOTHING

By Michael Erlewine

There is nothing to say, and so it either goes without saying or you can say it again. I'm in the 'you can say it again' camp and have always been there. I want to share dharma experience.

And I am most comfortable just there, resting in the nature of the mind. It's like no other activity I know, quiet, with no thought, at peace, and with no sense of time.

Non-meditation is a process of deconstructing Samsara by first of all not contributing to it, being able to not make it worse, which is done by being distracted from our usual distraction, actually ignoring Samsara and embracing not the shadows but the light of the dharma. No karma is made in non-dual meditation because it is not meditation at all. It is non-meditation.

Yes, it's bold to dare it at all, but once done, irrevocable, in like Flynn. And once tasted, no choice. There's no food to be eaten and nothing to be done. This poem I wrote is clear enough.

MEDITATION IS NOTHING

The books say:

Seek a place of solitude,

And meditate,

But it's just the other way round.

When meditation,

Naturally occurs,

There is no place in the world,

That you feel comfortable,

Try as you might.

Not here or there,

Not doing this or doing that.

Only nothing feels right.

You just want to hold real still,

Let the mind rest,

And then park yourself,

Somewhere out of the way,

Like on a cushion,

Or

In a place of solitude,

Because:

Nothing is going on.

Note: What can I say? True meditation is not difficult because it's not meditation. It's non-meditation, nothing at all.

I can't find any food I want to eat, or anything I want to do. The only place where I feel comfortable is right here, sitting in non-meditation. It's not a room or a place around the house, but rather invoking Insight Meditation and immersing myself within it.

The hunger was never for food, not for something to do, but for the luminous clarity of immersive non-meditation.

These are all words. And words cannot reveal, but only point at or toward. Words are not enough.

Whether here at home or out in nature, the sacred space is not a place we can find, but an inside in which we can rest.

It is freedom from constraint, like a tube we can slide into, away from distraction, like a soundproof room without a sound.

We are free to see nothing at all and not be seen.

No one nowhere.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## WHO NEEDS SCIENCE FICTION?

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 10, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c94d8c55-d4ae-49ae-9b69-9b009e0bc06c_1024x1024.jpeg*

In general, folks don't like talking about the inevitable, our passing on, at least not so much.

Those of us who are learning to follow the path toward dharma can't avoid what is called 'impermanence', preparing for our own impermanence, at least an acknowledgement that it is still out there and exists.

And if we really acknowledge impermanence, we are not just preparing for the end of this life but looking beyond the end of dying in this life, and also considering beyond that on into the next rebirth. According to the dharma teachings, we are guaranteed a future life, but are not privy to what our identity will be in that life, UNLESS we can help determine that in the bardos.

In other words, there comes a time when we stop polishing off this life and turn our attention to rebirth and a next life. We look beyond the veil of death, that over-shadowing, to life anew, an anonymous rebirth that, although we won't be there, is also ours. How's that for a puzzler?

To repeat, we can't help but focus a little on our coming death and dying, yet at some point we can leave off with that and begin to focus beyond death and toward rebirth, which actually is probably more interesting for us even though 'personally' we won't be present. That realization is a tough one, IMO, yet please tell me where is the choice?

Yet how do we fit into rebirth when we are not going to be there in person? Well, apparently, according to the bardo teachings, we are going to be there as our karma, the good, bad, and the ugly. And so, it's still all about us except we can't take it personally, because it isn't our persona. We will have to discover our Self all over again. Remember what that is like?

We won't remember who we have been or even what we have done to get us to this point, any more than we can in this life remember who we might have been in a previous life. Yet, apparently, we will wake up as a new person just as we have done in this life. Certainly, it's like the movie "Groundhog Day."

And this view is not as convenient as certain other 'religions', who believe that our person or 'soul' is permanent and that in our next life, 'Michael Erlewine'

will continue his journey through time and space. The Buddhists point to the fact that right now most of us have no memory of a previous life. I know I don't.

At best I have had a couple of like waking dreams in which I momentarily slipped into another role or lifetime, but only for a few seconds. Otherwise, I have always been right here in this life and have no other kind of memories.

You would think that If I was going to be who I had been in my last life, some kind of a permanent 'soul', I would have at least some inklings of who I was before now. I don't. And so, although I would like to believe I will live on as me, my person, I have no sign of that and every sign that I don't move on as a previous person. The past is closed to me.

And though, as an astrology counselor, I have heard from my clients all kinds of tales of what and whom they thought they were in their last lives; none ever were convincing, IMO.

Which leaves me with what the dharma points out, that somehow it is that our karma moves on, but the "Me, Myself, and I" does not, yet my karma takes on a different personality based on the parents, DNA, and circumstances of our rebirth.

As mentioned, it would be most convenient if I could have a contiguous persona from life to life, but as mentioned, having checked as carefully as I can for many decades, I have zero memory from my last life. I guess, if that's the case, as it seems to be, anonymous rebirth keeps things fresh and a bit exhilarating. It certainly has my attention. It's a little scary as well.

Who needs science fiction? It's amazing to me that more folks don't raise an eyebrow to look into death and what comes after, and yet for all of us it's just around the corner.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## STAR TIME: TODAY'S ASTROLOGY

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 12, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/6ba0eba8-735e-4280-a35a-1faeffbd5917_2048x2048.png*

For December 13, 2023.

[I have been studying and practicing astrology for over 60 years, and if you want this delivered to your inbox on Facebook, I am out of 'Friend Requests," yet you can "Follow" me on FB and this does the same thing. If you find these daily astrology reports useful, please let me know and 'LIKE' this post or comment so I know to keep doing it. And if you read this daily Star*Time report, I will gradually graphically show you how to do this yourselves over time.]

There are four charts each day, (1) our KARMA CHART, the traditional geocentric chart, because it will show us the current outer situation in which we are working. (2) our DHARMA CHART, our heliocentric chart, our tribe or archetype, how and who we are inside, as you get to know us. (3) KARMA Phase Chart, an easy to read story of what the Karma chart shows. (4) Dharma Phase Chart, an easy to read story of what the Dharma chart shoes, our inner self.

As to the colored aspects, the GREEN lines indicate the soft aspects of the Sextile (60°) and Trines (120°) and indicates using the mind, while the RED lines indicate hard aspects like the Opposition (180°), the Squares (90°), and the Semi-Squares (45°) aspects, which indicate activity. Now look, as the days pass, how the chart patterns arise and fall and combine with one another. Using just these patterns, you can learn to read a chart. And the Phase Charts tell the story. Here is today's Star*Time. If you read what I write as you look at the charts, you will gradually learn what you need to know to do your own astrology.

DATE: December 13, 2023. A brief look at the cosmic weather for today.

KARMA INDEX (OUTER, the Earth situation we ALL find ourselves in)

The Karma Index for today. The Full Moon has passed, which means we have changed polarities and have started another cycle for the month. This seminal point part of the cycle, where we can receive a new 'tone' or inspiration, out of which a new thrust or growth will eventually come.

There is a lot of urge, of wanting to experience going on, and this continues to be more of a 'thinking' time, reflective, as we are all taking it in and watching it all happen rather than so much react. However, new, or renewed ideas should come in the next 24 hours or so.

Career or vacation thoughts may be on the mind, thinking about and loving our career or the path we are on.

PHASE CHART FOR THE KARMA CHART

Using the Sun in the Karma Chart as the focus, in this phase chart, note how the Moon and Mars (and widely Mercury) point to the birth of ideas in the waxing First Quadrant, powerfully. Something is being born here, flavored by the Venus/Pluto phase conjunction which is getting down to the nitty-gritty.

However, the rest of the planets are all on the Waning half of the phase chart, which means they are all reaping or drawing meaning and conclusion. These planets are 'Taking' and not at this time "Giving'.

DHARMA INDEX (Our Solar Archetype, inner attitude, and how we might respond.)

As for our inner sense of ourselves, things begin to come together and by now our mind is working with our hands, so to speak. Thinking and doing are more coordinated and cooperative.

The urge to change or adjust, to take action about our situation, grows stronger each day, and by now we can see or at least reflect on how all of this relates to our career, our Life Path, which is indicated by the planet Jupiter (Guru in Sanskrit).

By now, we should be getting the message from the cosmos of our inside and growing clarity is confirmed. And what is really helpful is that our insides are more even and balanced, a certain stasis or ground that we can stand on and allow inner insight to occur. This is a bit unusual, so take advantage of it to kind of look around in this fair-minded opportunity. Notice our the planets are (roughly) spaced somewhat equally around the wheel. Very important.

PHASE CHART FOR THE DHARMA CHART

Using the planet Earth as the focus, we see that Jupiter and Uranus are in the First Quadrant, so something is being born and forming with Jupiter (path, vocation) and Uranus (break-thru, invent), with Saturn in the Second Quadrant gives us the power to build on this. And Mars is featured as the most external or outwardly seen, most public planet just now. The planets

Saturn, Pluto, and Mars are the only planets in the public lower hemisphere (quadrants 2 and 3), and the rest or in the upper hemisphere or hidden.

CONSIDERATIONS:

PHASE CHARTS

Note: Those of you who do not understand what the Phase Chart is might do well to learn about it. Here is a book I wrote about it and how to chart it or Phase Charts are part of the last program that my brother Stephen and I designed, Blue*Star, which if you are on PC is available from Matrix Software, the company I founded. I no longer have any financial connection to Matrix or receive ANY kickbacks. I am just sharing with you where I made sure to place some of my key techniques, so they are safe and sound.

For those learning astrology, Phase Charts are the easiest way to turn an astrology chart into a story you can read yourself. They show the phase angles of all the planets laid out so can see where they belong in the 360-degree wheel. If you follow this daily report, you will soon learn it.

Full-Phase Aspects: Astrology's Mirror

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/FullPhase%20Aspects.pdf

[Charts from Blue*Star on the PC.]

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**ASTRO*TALK For December 14, 2023.**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 14, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a796eebc-35f1-4094-8fcb-ed3e4d7c3d64_2048x2384.png*

ASTRO*TALK For December 14, 2023. GEOCENTRIC CHART (Karma Chart)

Still a lot of change, and a desire for change.

Mostly Receptive, taking it all in

Thoughts on vocation or life-path

HELIOCENTRIC CHART (dharma chart)

Quite stable

Think and Do

Action or aggression

Independence

Details below. Still ramping up here. My goal is to offer a graphic sheet with basic information on it, followed by a more detailed breakdown of the basic current information.

I have been studying and practicing astrology for over 60 years and now that I am retired, I would like to make information as to what's happening in the cosmos available free to anyone interested. Astro*Talk is that.

And, if you want this delivered to your inbox on Facebook, I am out of 'Friend' requests, yet you can "Follow" me on FB and this does the same thing. Astro*Talk is now on Facebook, Substack, Medium, and Instagram.

If you find these daily astrology reports useful, PLEASE let me know and 'LIKE' this post, comment, or otherwise let me know to keep doing it. And if you read this daily 'Astro*Talk' report, I will gradually graphically explain over time how to do this yourselves. There are two charts each day:

(1) 'Geocentric Chart', for the current situation we are in, the traditional geocentric chart (karma chart), because it shows us the current outer situation in which we are working and embedded in.

(2) “Heliocentric Chart’ (dharma chart), our tribe or archetype, how and who we are inside, what is going on in our whole solar system.

DATE: December 14, 2023. A brief look at the cosmic weather for today.

(1) ‘GEOCENTRIC CHART’, (karma chart), the outer Earth situation we ALL find ourselves in.

The Full Moon has passed, which means we have changed polarities and have started another cycle for the month. This is a seminal point and the part of the cycle where we can receive a new ‘tone’ or inspiration, out of which a new thrust or growth will eventually come this month.

There is a lot of urge and desire, a wanting to experience going on (half empty chart wheel), and this continues to be more of a ‘thinking’ time, reflective (basket chart pattern), which suggest this is a time when we are still taking it in and watching it all happen rather than so much do anything about it. However, new, or renewed ideas should come in the next 24 hours or so.

Career or vacation thoughts may be on the mind, thinking about and loving our career or the path we are on, as Jupiter is the tip of the wedge pattern (Venus, Mercury, Jupiter).

(2) “HELIOCENTRIC CHART” (Our Solar Archetype, inner attitude, and how we might respond.)

As for our inner sense of ourselves, not so reflective inside. Things begin to come together and by now our mind is working with our hands, so to speak. Thinking and doing are more coordinated and cooperative. This is shown by the red-colored T-Square (Venus-Mars-Saturn) activity, connecting the green-colored wedge (Venus -Mercury-Saturn) mental.

The urge to change or adjust, to take action about our situation, grows stronger each day, and by now we can see or at least reflect on how all of this relates to our career, our Life Path, which is indicated by the planet Jupiter (Guru in Sanskrit).

By now, we should be getting the message from the cosmos inside us and growing clarity is confirmed. And what is really helpful is that our insides are more even and balanced just now, a certain stasis or ground that we can stand on and allow inner insight to occur (somewhat even distribution of planets around the wheel). This is a bit unusual, so take advantage of it to kind of look around in a more fair-minded opportunity. Notice all the planets are (roughly) spaced somewhat equally around the wheel. Very important.

CONSIDERATIONS:

I pay a lot of attention to what are called whole-chart patterns, which I will display using colors. As to the colored aspects, the GREEN lines are the soft aspects of the Sextile (60°) and Trines (120°), and they indicate the mind and using it, while the RED lines indicate hard aspects like the Opposition (180°), the Squares (90°), and the Semi-Squares (45°) aspects, and these indicate activity and action. Together they create an endless kaleidoscope of planetary patterns.

As the days pass, look how the chart patterns arise and fall and combine with one another. Using just these patterns, you can learn to read a chart. And the Phase Charts each tell the story. Here is today's Astro*Talk. If you read what I write as you look at the charts, you will gradually learn what you need to know to do your own astrology.

[Charts from Blue*Star on the PC.]

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**ASTRO*TALK For December 15, 2023.**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 15, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/600b3abe-7c33-4991-bb06-695256b78abd_1759x2048.png*

GEOCENTRIC CHART (Karma Chart)

Getting a handle on change.

Better focus and able to receive and care.

Still a lot of change, and a desire for change.

Perhaps starting to see how you might use this change.

HELIOCENTRIC CHART (dharma chart)

Quite stable.

Coordinate, thinking and doing.

Taking action or aggression.

Need good advice.

And, if you want this delivered to your inbox on Facebook, I am out of 'Friend' requests, yet you can "Follow" me on FB and this does the same thing. Astro*Talk is now on Facebook, Substack, Medium, and Instagram.

There are two charts each day:

(1) 'Geocentric Chart', for the current situation we are in, the traditional geocentric chart (karma chart), because it shows us the current outer situation in which we are working and embedded in.

(2) "Heliocentric Chart' (dharma chart), our tribe or archetype, how and who we are inside, what is going on in our whole solar system.

DATE: December 15, 2023. A brief look at the cosmic weather for today.

(1) 'GEOCENTRIC CHART', (karma chart), the outer Earth situation we ALL find ourselves in.

There is still a lot of inner urge and desire, a wanting to experience going on (half empty chart wheel), and this continues to be more of a 'thinking' time, reflective, receptive (basket chart pattern), and while this is still a time when

we are taking it all in and watching it all happen rather than so much do anything about it, we now are getting in control and can better focus.

Our natural bent toward compassion, caring for things and others, comes into view.

Also note very intense solar activity, an X-Class 2.8 solar flare took place at 12:20 PM EST on the 14 th , the largest since September 2017, and a couple others almost as large. There are no doubt CME (Corona Mass Ejections) taking place and heading toward Earth.

(2) “HELIOCENTRIC CHART” (dharma chart) Our Solar Archetype, tribe, inner attitude, and how we might respond.)

The emphasis of Action (Mars) peaks today, and we are less coordinated than we were yesterday, but also not so given to thought and thinking, but actually doing something about our particular situation.

And what continues to be really helpful is that our insides are more even and balanced just now, a certain stasis or ground that we can stand on and allow inner insight to occur (somewhat even distribution of planets around the wheel). This is a bit unusual, so take advantage of it to kind of look around in a more fair-minded opportunity. Notice all the planets are (roughly) spaced somewhat equally around the wheel. Very important.

CONSIDERATIONS:

I pay a lot of attention to what are called whole-chart patterns, which I will display using colors. As to the colored aspects, the GREEN lines are the soft aspects of the Sextile (60°) and Trines (120°), and they indicate the mind and using it, while the RED lines indicate hard aspects like the Opposition (180°), the Squares (90°), and the Semi-Squares (45°) aspects, and these indicate activity and action. Together they create an endless kaleidoscope of planetary patterns.

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[Charts from Blue*Star on the PC.]

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**ASTRO*TALK For December 16, 2023.**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 15, 2023

GEOCENTRIC CHART (Karma Chart)

A sense of independence.

The eye is guiding the hand.

Better focus and able to receive and care.

There is still a lot of change, and a desire for change.

Reaching public awareness.

HELIOCENTRIC CHART (dharma chart)

Not so much independence.

Going by our feelings.

Very much stable.

Coordinated thinking and doing.

Getting things done.

Could use 'big picture' good advice.

There are two charts, each important:

(1) 'Geocentric Chart', for the current situation we are in, the traditional geocentric chart (karma chart), because it shows us the current outer situation in which we are working and embedded in.

(2) "Heliocentric Chart' (dharma chart), our tribe or archetype, how and who we are inside, and what is going on in our whole solar system of which we are one part.

DATE: December 16, 2023. A brief look at the cosmic weather for today.

(1) 'GEOCENTRIC CHART', (karma chart), the outer Earth situation we ALL find ourselves in.

There is still a lot of inner urge and desire, a wanting to know through experience going on (half empty chart wheel), and this continues to be more of a time of detailed focus, and while this is still a time when we are taking it all in, we now are getting in better control and can better focus. Some things could be done.

A focus on public awareness is present.

(2) “HELIOCENTRIC CHART” (dharma chart) Our Solar Archetype, tribe, inner attitude, and how we might respond.)

Less emphasis on action (Mars) than in the last days, as that whole configuration starts to breaks up. Also, less coordinated than we were yesterday, and not so given to thought and thinking. Things seem to be taking their course.

And what does continue to be really helpful is that our insides are more even and balanced just now, a certain stasis or ground that we can stand on and allow inner insight to occur (somewhat even distribution of planets around the wheel). As mentioned yesterday, this is a bit unusual, so take advantage of it to kind of look around for a more fair-minded opportunity. Notice all the planets are (roughly) spaced somewhat equally around the wheel. Very important.

CONSIDERATIONS:

If you want to learn more about some of the features on Astro*Talk, here are some free booklets that will introduce you.

STARTYPES PATTERNS

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev%20Nov2015.pdf

LUNAR CYCLE

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

INCLINATIONS: ORBITAL INTERFACE

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Interface-Fin.pdf

RETROGRADE: BURN RATE

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

SOLAR ACTIVITY

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

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[Charts from Blue*Star program my brother Stephen and I designed on the PC. I am not longer connected to Matrix Software, although I founded in in 1977. I will be telling you about this program which does all the techniques shown here. I need to do a write up on it. Also, I am asking them to give anyone a discount who reads this report. Contact me.]

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## SELF PROJECTION

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 18, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/d35dd124-d104-481d-99bd-c2403c0bfb4c_1024x1024.jpeg*

Some of you are not going to like me running this tired idea past you one more time, yet I can't help but do it. Why? Because it is so very, very important.

As a point of understanding, I agree with you; it's just another concept. However, as for actually experiencing this, much less realizing it, that is another thing entirely. I am going for realization here yet starting with understanding the idea.

There is no end to this attempt to communicate that there is no such thing as we, the subject, in here looking out, while out there is the object we are perceiving, independent from us. Never was and never will be. We are all together one.

According to the dharma teachings that was a misunderstanding from time immemorial. We are born with it. And it's true today.

I learned this on May 6, 1964, in Berkeley, California, when I first dropped acid, some Sandoz LSD, fresh from Switzerland. That night was to change my life forever in an instant, although I looked at that instant all that night and did so for the next 30 years or so, until dharma training helped show me how to use it properly. It was a perceived difference that was none, the first I ever knew.

As mentioned, decades later, the same thing came up with dharma practice and dharma realization, although it took me a little while to appreciate that I had done all this before, back in 1964, yet did not know then all of what to do with it, how to work it. It had all the profundity of a realization.

In that instant in 1964 I realized that everything out there in the world, everything I saw out there for my entire life was for the most part my own projection. Yes, LSD enabled me to do that, to see (and in slow motion at that) that I was busy projecting my own innermost fears onto the outside world and then watching them in rapt fascination and being freaked out by what I saw. I had done this all my life to varying degrees. It's called duality, mistaking two for what is one, and that is what Samsara is all about -- duality.

And in my life up to that point, never, not even once, had I known or even suspected that the outside world was to a great extent my own projection that I was seeing. This never crossed my mind. I assumed that the outside world was the outside world and totally separate from me and I was already 22 years old.

And then, that night, as the poets might say, the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea. And just like that I realized (and realizations are forever) that what I saw out in the world was nothing other than my own projection. I saw this repeatedly that night, in 3D and real time. There was no longer a me in here looking at the world out there, such that I had to protect myself from it. I was in fact creating the world I saw outside of me and I realized this!

The realization was that 'Me, myself, and I', along with the outside world, were all together already united and one. There no longer were two, me and them, but only the one bunch of us together, and already totally familiar. Suddenly, I was in on the joke, so to speak.

And a correlate of that realization was that since this was all my own projection, I could do something about it. I could change my perception, which would change my projection, and begin to make friends with the outside world, person by person, and moment by moment. I started that night.

This all may seem obvious, but is it? Here you are 'understanding' intellectually what I am saying, yet that is paper thin. In 1964 I was not only experiencing it in real time, but most importantly, I realized it. And as I mentioned earlier, realizations are forever. That's what the dharma is all about, realization.

It wasn't for me obvious until that night I realized that the world was my own projection. What a surprise. And so, that's the power of LSD and I imagine other hallucinogens, the power of perceiving the two, subject and object, as in fact one, united. It plunged me into oneness. There was no choice.

And I was struck dumb by that realization. And like the Tibetans put it, even the light of a single match can end the darkness of innumerable eons. And that's what happened to me that night, a single realization that ended a lifetime of

darkness, fear, and suffering, at the same time offering me a differential, a way to gradually change what I saw. Of course, this took time, lots of it.

As Shakespeare said in his tenth sonnet, “O, change thy thought, that I may change my mind.” In an instant, I changed what I thought, I realized, and that flipped me, changed my mind in an instant that night.

This is what studying and practicing the dharma is all about, deconstructing the duality that Samsara is based on. When our dualistic house of cards collapses, unity appears.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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## Winter's Impact

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 19, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ff4812e3-4f23-4e2a-9e3a-2863fbd9e747_1365x2048.jpeg*

In winter, I can get a little ‘stir crazy’ and retreat into my tiny photo studio and do that. It’s not that I go outside as much in the summer as I like air and having all the windows open. And so, I’m getting ready for winter.

This year I’m gearing up a little on my photography and have decided, on my own, that a ‘picture is worth a thousand words’. And they are.

As hard as I work as a word-smith, a simple photograph says more if I take my time. And we can’t beat Shakespeare for his take on dharma, especially with his sonnets, like Sonnet 2.

WHEN FORTY WINTERS SHALL BESIEGE THY BROW

“When forty winters shall besiege thy brow

And dig deep trenches in thy beauty’s field,

Thy youth’s proud livery, so gazed on now,

Will be a tattered weed, of small worth held.

Then being asked where all thy beauty lies—

Where all the treasure of thy lusty days—

To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes

Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.

How much more praise deserved thy beauty’s use

If thou couldst answer "This fair child of mine

Shall sum my count and make my old excuse",

Proving his beauty by succession thine.”

This were to be new made when thou art old,

And see thy blood warm when thou feel’st it cold.”

Only, here I would substitute when “83 winters shall besiege my brow…” and then add ... “This fair photo of mine, shall sum my count and make my old excuse.” That’s how I feel about photography.

Of course, close-up photography was how I experienced Insight Meditation as it first came into my life. What a marvel that was! It took me almost a year to realize what happened to me, for the actual realization to set in and be named.

And so, I can’t help but have a special fondness for photography, and I drift back into it every once in a while. Right now, I’m drifting and looking to take my photography to task and to kick it up a notch as well, if I can.

And so, these wintry days that are coming on, like the windy snow that blows here today, are enough to send me up the steep staircase and into my photo sanctuary. I’m also growing some collards up in that area, and the three large pots I have planted have sprouted.

I’m puttering around up there, creating more space where there is none and getting some extra lights set to compliment the skylight and two south-facing windows. I plan to also work in the early dawn when there is not enough light yet to see by.

And we know that in just a few days, the Sun will reach the Winter Solstice and begin to move north again. And I with it, already looking for spring. Getting through the winter as we age gets tougher every year, yet it each year also passes more quickly.

And I pray to be on to the next thing to do, rather than to the next thing I eat. LOL.

[Photo by me these days.]

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## The Process of Refinement

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 20, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/aa89d52b-ef60-416b-8929-b0b2ae76c71f_1365x2048.jpeg*

By Michael Elrewine

I know, the following is something like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but there is a point here. It's more like the old saying, "The mills of the Gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine."

"Insight Meditation," at least in my experience, starts with insight, a breakthrough view, like porthole, or if you like, like a tear in the fabric of Samsara, which is called recognizing the nature of the mind and how it actually works. The view, once penetrated, then widens from there, becoming increasingly more inclusive, and gradually incorporating more and more of our samsaric world within it. That's the path, opening up, and Samsara deconstructing.

As my dharma teacher would say to me, and these were his last words me before he passed, "keep expanding and extending your recognition…"

That porthole of recognition is more like a mobius strip, increasingly incorporating more and more of samsara, until we have turned ourselves inside out and thus, I mostly agree with the Advaita teacher Wayne Liquorman's statement:

"As you walk the spiritual path, it widens, not narrows, until one day it broadens to a point where there is no path left at all."

Exactly, and what then? Well, we are where we are supposed to be. It can't be all path and no fruition. Perhaps we can say it's like breathing air. We have to keep on breathing to live, so some process continues. And I do agree that we keep on refining our view, expanding and extending it, until we are fully enlightened. And that's what the sacred texts I have read say.

I'm not saying that we arrive anywhere else other than here and now. What I am saying is that we get some of the rough changes out of the way and gradually refine our view so that we no longer have to roil the water as much as we once did.

And so, I can't agree with Liquorman that there is no path left at all. That is an overstatement, IMO. The path gets increasingly finer and more refined, yet we are still doing something all the way until we are enlightened. Whether, after that, it's like breathing, meaning the process of enlightenment is continual, rather than our ever reaching a static state, I can't say because I don't know, probably the former.

What I can say is that sooner or later we arrive through this process such that this samsaric world that we live in is pretty much incorporated into our view. Or as my dad used to say, "things get down to a gentle roar."

What is germane IMO is that this need to be on a path, to always be forging forward itself evaporates, and is seen at this point as itself an obscuration, that effort, if there is any.

Of course, these are things we don't need to be worrying about yet. LOL. Worry, no, awareness of, yes.

[Recent photography by me.]

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## The Turn of the Year

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 28, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/dadffe48-34c5-430d-83e2-2dd9af3af36e_870x2048.jpeg*

As mentioned in an earlier post, the end of the year for me is the point of the Winter Solstice, not the Gregorian Calendar and January 1 st . And so, in my book, we are already around that corner as the Sun heads northward. Light is increasing.

Since the Winter Solstice, winter has officially started, the temperature grows colder, and the winds become more obvious and chilling.

Here in north-western Michigan (Lower Peninsula), in Winter, unless we are snowshoeing or whatever, most of our time is spent indoors. This year there has not yet been any real snow.

Certainly, thanks to the Winter Solstice, my indoor plant lighting has reached a low point, where even at full blast, the plants are not getting enough light, so there is that. I am trying to move the plants closer to the light, and I'll have to wait it out and see if there is enough light to grow anything.

And so, given all the above, here we are, heading into winter full blast and waiting it out until spring.

As for me, I'm not feeling particularly philosophical these days; I have no idea why, other than just the upset and disturbance of politics, wars, and whatever is distracting. And it's not just me. I feel most all of us are distracted in these times and not as open to the spiritual insight we may wish. We are trying to cope with everything going on and some perhaps have shut down a bit.

My current philosophy is not so cerebral, but more prayer-like. And prayer to me is not about reciting texts or saying a few words, although I know that is popular.

My idea of prayer (common among dharma folks) is more the bringing to mind my root dharma teacher (or any teacher we have confidence in) and then holding that thought in mind while connecting to the third eye (forehead, pineal) with the white syllable 'OM', and then next at the throat chakra with the red syllable "AH', and finally at the heart chakra (middle of the chest) with the dark blue syllable 'Hung'. With intent, hold each syllable in

mind for a moment. I include here the images of those three Sanskrit syllables, OM, AH, and Hung.

Of course, I don't expect you to use "OM AH HUNG" unless you are familiar with it. You could use 'God', 'Jesus', 'Buddha', or whatever. Bring to mind what best works for you. Prayer is the intent and not just the words or syllables. I sincerely bring to mind my dharma teacher and confidently say the syllables "OM, AH, HUNG" as a form of prayer in these times.

[Graphic by me.]

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## Light Is Light

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 30, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e57a63e7-83d5-4d98-9ffa-ddc6dcba5593_1416x2048.jpeg*

For reasons not always clear to me I feel it is not appropriate at this time to write about the more advanced forms of meditation, as I have been doing for years. These times are perhaps too distracting, and I believe we all need something more immediately useful and practical.

Even at my best, writing about the ineffable Dharma that traditionally cannot be put into words, seemed perhaps a step removed from practical, yet I feel something like this needs to be available, and I addressed what I felt was that need.

Yet, today I feel our lives are under siege by all of the ongoing world and political events, each demanding some part of our attention, with the result that, by perhaps an order of magnitude, we are distanced from the more subtle concepts. We are busy enough just keeping up with events that tax our focus and concentration.

Yes, after saying that, it's still the middle of the night and I wake, as usual, and do something for a number of hours before heading back asleep. Yet, as mentioned, these days I don't seem to be guided by an urge to talk about the more advanced and nondual forms of meditation, like non-meditation. And so, here I sit.

And I have been working and concentrating on, as of late, photography, a visual medium. Of course, I have always, and for good reason, claimed that 'Liberation Through Hearing' as we see in the Bardo Teachings is not the only View available to us. I have long been an advocate of 'Liberation Through Seeing', liberation through the eyes and the visual arts, like graphics and photography.

And for many years I have been a 'nature' photographer, working with natural light and natural subjects, like flowers, plants, and Mother Nature's critters. I saw no need to use special lighting in my work, as I felt that such lighting was perhaps non 'organic' enough. I've got organic on the brain.

Well, kiss those thoughts goodbye. Suddenly, I realized that light is light, and natural daylight at some 5600 Kelvin is no different than 5600 Kelvin light

produced in my studio. That statement is easy to say and rolls off the tongue, but I found it mind boggling when I tried creating natural light in the studio and saw the results. I could see no difference. None. Shows what a prejudice can do.

And so, this realization precipitated me into learning to use natural daylight temperatures in the studio and not only from the light coming in from my windows with a southern exposure. I can mix the two and there is no difference that I can see. And seeing is what we are talking about here. Visual.

Therefore, in the last month or so (especially since it is winter out) I find myself exploring lighting my photographic subjects indoors and, in the studio, and realize that I have ignored these lighting considerations all along, so to speak. And they are considerable and consequential.

Anyway, I'm on a learning curve, one that is affecting my photographic work and I have been leaning back into that medium recently and for the time being. It is not that I can't work with words. I can and continue to do so, writing things like these articles.

However, I continue to find (and always have) a certain liberation in the visual realm through photography. Certainly, as the old saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." I realize this in fact and through experience.

And so, although I have known by label and equipment about photographic lighting techniques, I can't say that I have actually mastered all of that, as mentioned, perhaps because I considered it artificial and not natural enough. I ignored it.

Against that view, I have recently reconsidered, and I realized that light is light and that since photography is all about light, I have only mastered one half of the equation, so to speak. I am rectifying that and exploring how to use light itself to paint images more than I have to date. And as I look at Mother Nature and 'natural' light, it is clear to me that all of the techniques of lighting exist in nature and that I have just ignored them up until now.

And so, as Robert Blake in "Baretta" used to say, "That's the name of that tune." And with that, I am writing. I will have to follow this thread for a while. At least I'm talking to myself again. So much to learn. LOL.

[Photo by me.]

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## STORY: VISITING TIBET'S GOLDEN CHILD

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

December 31, 2023

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/f4820f0f-bcd0-42bf-8059-e28a3b97176c_812x960.jpeg*

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*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/78107011-5498-40ba-9d85-cd2208a3919b_985x1378.jpeg*

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/99089ddb-16e9-4e9b-b6da-b933664182be_1336x2048.jpeg*

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[The 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, in 1997 at Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet.]

By Michael Erlewine

In 1997, at the request of my dharma teacher, an one month's notice, I dropped everything and took my family on a pilgrimage to Tibet to see the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, the young Tibetan lama that the Eddie Murphy movie "The Golden Child" is said to be patterned after.

Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the head of one of the four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. At that time, the Karmapa was 12-years old, but his incarnation goes back seventeen generations. In fact, the Karmapa Lineage

was the first of Tibet's reincarnated lamas. The current Karmapa is the 17th, while the current Dalai Lama is the 14th.

“Our Pilgrimage to Tibet”

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf

I had no real idea how this trip would affect me. Above is the free e-book for our entire trip, yet here I will pick up the story from the point where we actually arrived at the Karmapa's ancestral home, Tsurphu Monastery in the Tolung Valley, deep in the mountains of Tibet at some 15,000 feet in altitude.

There I sat, with my wife, two of my daughters, and my son in a little room waiting to see the Karmapa. We were about to spend three days there as the Karmapa's guest. We came with all kinds of letters of introduction from our lineage.

Apparently, every day at 1 PM the Karmapa has a public reception, where a procession of visitors file up, offer a white scarf, and get his blessing. We wanted to do that too, but were told to wait and that he would see us privately.

As mentioned, we had come with letters of introduction from a number of high lamas. It seemed that from the moment we arrived, all the monks there knew we were Khenpo Karthar's students. We could see them whispering. We belonged to Khenpo Rinpoche and they seemed to know exactly who that was, all the way to Tibet.

The time ticked away on the slow track as we waited with anticipation to see the Karmapa. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, but in his previous incarnation as the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje, and I felt like I had been in endless touch with him through the lineage all this time. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the spiritual leader of an entire lineage of Tibetan monks, a lineage most famous for its yogis and meditators.

Until one month before, we had little hope of ever seeing the Karmapa, since it was very uncertain when or if the Chinese would ever let him leave Tibet. He was essentially a prisoner in his own monastery. And now, here we were at his ancestral home, about to meet him in person.

[Note: The young Karmapa secretly escaped to India from Tibet in December of 1999]

At last, the summons came. The Karmapa would see us now. So off we went in single file toward his interview room, some two stories up from where we were. And I was right in the middle of the worst of my altitude sickness, still

sick and getting sicker. I don't do well at high altitudes, slipping into bronchitis, having to go on antibiotics, and all of that. I was not well.

As I climbed the steep stairs toward His Holiness I had to stop and do heavy breathing, just to keep enough oxygen in my lungs. Every few steps, I would find myself gasping for breath as I climbed upward toward the interview room. And please understand that the average Tibetan stairway is more like a ladder (like on a boat) than the kind of stairs we are used to, and steep. You literally hang on and climb.

We eventually came to a small courtyard in the open sun outside His Holiness' room, where we took off our shoes. I actually had to sit down and pant. How embarrassing. And then up another short ladder to the interview room itself, where I arrived, still trying to catch my breath.

I plopped down on my butt at the back of the room, while everyone else was up front prostrating to the Karmapa. I was so bushed that I did not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama. All I could see was this young man kind of inset into this wall of golden brocade at the far end of the room. I got up and slowly moved forward.

Through the 1960s and onward, in my quest for spiritual teachers, I had seen many gurus in person, and so was preparing myself to actually be in the presence of the Karmapa.

In the past, when I met great spiritual presences, most were imposing, some almost regal. I was very much getting ready for a similar experience here, you know, me seeing them. However, the Karmapa was different. In the end, in his presence, it was me that I saw, not him. Here is how that happened.

As I reached the front of the room, there was the Karmapa, looking better than I could even imagine, and I had imagined he would be great. All of 12 years old (by our calendar) and five feet tall, but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, he filled the room with his presence. All I remember is how happy I was to see him, like a child sees his mother. I remember kind of getting through my prostrations and fumbling to offer him a white scarf, while kneeling down before him.

He looked at me like I had never been looked at before. His eyes look straight into my eyes and then he ups the ante by focusing intently within me. I was being seen. His dark eyes, almost like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, were actually moving in and out, trying to get the right focus. His pupils moved.

I have never seen eyes do that, be able to lock gaze with you and then, with the gazed locked, still move in and out, getting a fix. Yet that was just how it was. The Karmapa examined me for a few seconds and, in the grip of his eyes, it seemed as though time stopped, and then all relaxed and time moved on again. He placed the white scarf over my head, gave me a welcoming kind look, and I sat down in front of him with the rest of my family.

There was chanting going on. Gradually I realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later we found out that we were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders, complete with Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us privately.

It was very intense, with His Holiness leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know, one invoking the protector deities. And this one was complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja many times before, but never one quite like this, certainly not one with the Karmapa himself leading it! And I don't really know how to describe what happened next.

I begin to identify with this puja as not much different from my own practice in many ways, and I found myself examining just where I was with my daily practice, and what it was all about for me. I had done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/evening for many years. I was to do it until my death or until I completed it by realizing the essential nature of my own mind, whichever came first.

Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mandala, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of that practice. What was that practice and what was the essence of it? I thought how in my own idea of myself, to my mind I was somewhat of a tough character, and I carried that strength or toughness into my practice.

In fact, I loved the fierce wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, there in that room with Karmapa, that same strength, toughness, or we might even say fierceness came up in the mind and began to be examined inwardly, but in a new light. And this was no idea that I was playing with.

Instead, I was examining myself or, to be more exact, I was realizing part of my self, in this case, that part that had been practicing all these years, the one who did the practice.

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but a shell or shield covering up this extremely sensitive inside. I was tough, because I was so…so sensitive and, at heart, even kind.

In that moment I was flooded with a state of compassion or rather the realization that I was (and always had been), in my deepest part, compassionate, concerned, and caring, and that this was my natural state.

It was not something to strive for, but already in fact always the case – the state of my very being, something that only had to be uncovered, opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for that was already my natural state. All I had to do was to let go of what obscured this insight, relax, and let it shine through.

Again, I should point out and be clear that this was not a concept or idea, but a realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my fierce presence, was none other than compassion.

It was as if, like taking off a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed as I was overcome with this, now so obvious, realization that I was, in essence, very simple – just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world.

I was at ease and all of my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all the suffering I saw around me. In that moment, I understood myself and my practice, right in midst of that Mahakala puja with Karmapa. I was at peace and at home.

And later, when we left the Karmapa and very slowly drove back down 40-miles on a road that was not really a road at all, we saw rainbow after rainbow after rainbow.

So that is what Karmapa was about to me at first metting, not some powerful being sitting on a throne. Rather, there was enough space and time within his mental mandala and presence for me to realize myself. It was not the Karmapa I saw when I was with him, but myself. I realized my own nature, not his. That is my definition of a spiritual being, one who helps me realize myself, not who they are.

After the puja, we spent some time together with the Karmapa during which he gave the answers to the questions that we had brought to him. He did not skirt the tough questions, but was clear and unequivocal in his answers. I was deeply relieved, both from the experience I just described and to hear the various particular answers. And later, he came out in the courtyard and just kind of hung out with us. After all, my son Michael Andrew was about the

same age. I doubt that very many western families with kids had ever made it to Tsurphu Monastery.

I had heard many stories about His Holiness, both this incarnation and the previous incarnations, stories of amazing actions, all pointing to this extraordinary being.

Somehow these stories help to inspire faith and confidence in the Karmapa, that he is who he is -- that sort of thing. Yet these stories were nothing compared to the sheer brilliance of his presence. And this kind of thing defies words.

How do you explain that when you are in the presence of His Holiness, you have a different idea of yourself, of who you are, why you are here, etc.? I learned things about myself when I was in his presence that I never knew before, important things. The word is "realization." I realized things about myself that I had never realized before.

And I understood why my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, wanted us to go to Tibet and meet the Karmapa in person. It occurred to me that if I could start my life over, I would drop whatever I was doing, go and see the Karmapa in person, preferably in an interview like we did. And only after that would I pick up my life again. I didn't understand who I was or how best to make use of my life until I met His Holiness. We spent three days with the Karmapa, as was even invited to stay overnight with him.

In the beginning, phrases like "His Holiness" and "guru" were literally foreign to me and smacked of exotic cults and all of that stuff, a hangover perhaps from the New-Age fads of the 1970s. But meeting the Karmapa, eyeball-to-eyeball, was not foreign at all. It was only too familiar, like knowing myself finally for who I am, confirming who it is I always hoped I was.

[Photos by either me or my wife Margaret.]

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## We Can't Unrealize

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 4, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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Tibetans love the concept of seeing a coiled snake on the floor and realization it is just a piece of rope.

Just as we can't unsee what is seen, we can't unrealize what is realized. If you think it's hard to realize the true nature of the mind, it's impossible to un-realize what has been realized.

What I write each day is more demanding as time goes on. And by 'demanding" I don't mean it takes me more time. What I mean is that the bar continues to be raised so that I have to be increasingly more integral in what I write, as I see it, to communicate to others.

I am reminded of the widening gyre of Yeats poem "The Second Coming." I certainly am not escaping the widening of the gyre. I have to work within it. That is the nature of Samsara.

In practical terms, the whole concept of Samsara means we work against what's good for us, against our own true nature and are not even aware of it. That's what Samsara is, failing to realize the nature of the mind and how it works. In other words, we work counter to our own best interests.

Is it any wonder that from time to time we are brought down a peg or two and have to rebuild our little house of cards?

We should welcome this sobering rather than continue to ignore or work counter to the truth of our existence or lack thereof. One thing that helps is to recognize that we are not to blame for ignoring the truth of reality. It is not like we once knew and turned away. My dharma teacher made it very clear that we never knew and have never known anything but reifying and ignoring reality. We have yet to be aware, much less to realize it.

And it is not conscious ignoring on our part, but rather ignorance is our heritage. We were born into it and of it. And it is not a case of original sin as some faiths have it. We did not know and then fall away from grace. We have never known grace although it exists within us all this time. We don't realize it. That's the key issue.

And this is why the word Buddha means “aware” because the historical Buddha succeeded in becoming aware of what we are unaware of. He became aware and understood, experienced it consciously, and then ‘Realized’ the true nature of the mind and how it works, and that realization, like all realizations, stuck.

Realization is not something that comes and goes. Realization comes and stays. That’s its nature.

In other words, ‘Realization’, by nature, dispels ignorance because it is nothing more than that we see our mistake, how we mistook reality to be something it is not. And in that moment of realization, as the Tibetans say, the darkness of eons of ignorance vanishes like striking a match in a dark cave.

The only thing that happens is that we can suddenly see because of the light of awareness, and the darkness just vanishes. However, realization is a one-way street. Once we realize, we cannot go back to not having realized, to not seeing. We have seen or realized and thus we have realized.

The Buddha became aware and with that stopped ignoring the true nature of the mind. And he spent the rest of his life trying to point out to the rest of us how we too can realize the true nature of the mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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## The Terrible Crystal

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 5, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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What is hard to see, IMO, and this the pith dharma texts explain to us very well, is that we have constructed this world around us. We have not just been born into this world, but as we are born and grow, we are creating our new persona and world as we go. And so we are, by nature, complicit in who we are and where we find ourselves.

The poets have called this persona or Self that we have created the ‘’Terrible Crystal’ because by creating our persona or Self and then reifying it, we paint ourselves into a corner at the same time. The concept of a permanent ‘Self’ holds us back as much as it may appear to hold us together. It cannot be depended on. We each are a victim of our self to the degree we take it as permanent or as a “Soul.”

And I understand that this is easy to say or write about, but VERY hard to realize that we are actually doing this. The Tibetans in my experience take a series of different approaches at this e idea of construction, trying by various ways to jog us into realization.

However, apparently that is very difficult, otherwise we would all be realized by now. As my main dharma teacher explained to us, we are not enlightened. We are the stragglers, the ones who never got enlightened in all the time that there is and has been.

And we are so habituated to ignorance, to ignoring the actual nature of how the mind works, that further progress seems hopeless. There is nary a crack in Samsara’s seal (and its hold on us) that we can use to deconstruct it. Samsara is a closed system, and we are at the center of it.

That we are at the center and it is all about us; that fact alone should be a clue. We are continually creating the problem faster than we are reaching any kind of escape velocity from Samsara. That’s a good definition of hopeless.

Unfortunately, our habit has been to kick the can down the road, go along with the crowd, put off change until the next rebirth, and not bother to paddle back upstream and analyze our own constructions, much less solve them. This is what is called ‘Samsara’. It is just ‘life’ to us, what we know. And

if that's our habit, and we can squeak by, who is to tell us otherwise? Only ourselves. And here we sit.

Anyway, that's the situation we find ourselves in, being swept along in the river of time and not knowing how to sail or negotiate that river. This is why folks who study and practice dharma, those who have had some training, do their best to get our attention, to flag us down, so to speak, and point out alternatives to taking it on the chin as we do, passively.

To a marked degree, we have created our particular situation, our entire world, and only we can do something about it. That's why the Buddha or someone like him, cannot just touch us on the forehead and we are enlightened to all this. That's not going to happen, and there is a reason.

One of the difficult concepts to grasp, IMO, is that dharma is a do-it-yourself proposition. No one can do it (or is going to do it) for us. We have to do it by ourselves, with all the help we can get. In other words, we each must turn the wheel of the dharma on our own. It won't turn itself and others can't do it for us.

The point of writing pieces like this is to help inform anyone interested that the dharma texts tell us that it CAN be done, exiting Samsara, and that we just actually must to do it ourselves. We don't have to be swept along in time as we are now. We can learn to paddle. We can sail.

And chief among the tools to accomplish this is realizing that this world we find ourselves in is our own projection. We are not just at the mercy of the circumstances we find ourselves born into. We have ourselves created those circumstances as we go along, and can by that fact uncreate or with effort, change our situation at will. We just don't yet have the will or the awareness.

However, changing our situation requires that we drive a wedge into one of the cracks in Samsara and widen it. And to do that, we first have to find that crack. Samsara likes to appear seamless and intimidating. And since we each create our own Samsara, we have to outwit ourselves in order to be liberated.

And so, the very first thing, the first step in that process, is to be told, have it pointed out, that such cracks exist and that we are at least the co-creator of our own situation, the situation we find ourselves in the middle of.

However, we do have to find confidence in and take it on faith that this can be pointed out to us.

The seminal pith dharma teachings can do this yet learning and practice takes courage and time on our part, and above all awareness that we need these teachings.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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## What Samsara Is

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 7, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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What's unique to me is my own experience and whatever in that experience I have managed to realize from it. I don't have to be shy or apologize for that. We each have a unique history. You do also.

Trying to fit my personal experience and dharma insights into a traditional dharma pattern or mold I find impossible. The teachings themselves say there are 84,000 dharmas. Whether that is just a high number and how the dharma scholars came up with that sum, I'm sure I don't know, yet it suggests a lot of leeway – different dharma paths for different folks.

Aside from Samsara, everything else in this universe is dharma or dharma compliant. It is just Samsara that is counter or not dharma, an opaque dam that holds back the waters of our own liberation. It keeps us from full immersion and realization.

Aside from Samsara, we can take any part of our mind and this world and it becomes another direct path to enlightenment. So, what's the holdup?

Well, of course, that would be Samsara that is holding us back, aside from ourselves. And perhaps we have to keep reminding ourselves what Samsara is. What is it?

Samsara amounts to everything that we are attached to that resists change, whatever we try to grasp or cling to because we insist that it must, should be, or is permanent, like an eternal "Soul" or a permanent Self that continues on at the next rebirth, and around which everything revolves from lifetime to lifetime. The pith dharma teachings say that such a soul just does not exist. It is untrue. Everything changes and is impermanent, not static.

Our own clinginess and attachments are an attempt to stop the wheel of dharma, the wheel of change itself from turning as it naturally does. We insist and resist, yet we don't have that power because that entire View is a mistake.

And by that same frozen grasp or grip, that insistence, we are thereby dragged along, banging ourselves against the walls of time as we go. All we have to do is to let go, yet we can't seem to manage that. It is we who keep the show

static and in stasis, and it's killing us, so to speak. Learning to let go is more than just good advice; it is imperative.

Pliancy, flexibility, suppleness are what we need, the ability to let go and allow ourselves to enter the flow of change. And to stop damming ourselves up against change. That's a bad idea and we are doing this to ourselves. Only we can stop it.

And the great dharma Mahasiddhas, who were not monks, but just lay people like ourselves, yet also astute dharma practitioners, have written volumes of suggestions, and perhaps the chief of those come from the Mahasiddha Tilopa, who ground sesame seeds during the day and ran a brothel at night, and he wrote as words of advice to us:

Don't Prolong the Past,

Don't Invite the Future,

Don't Alter the Present, *

Relax, Just as It Is.

* Also added in some texts, two more suggestions, which are subtexts of "Don't Alter the Present," and they are:

Don't Analyze or Examine.

Don't Intend or Control.

These six words of advice have been passed down and commented on innumerable times, and in essence they say: Relax, be fluid and bend with the wind.

As for a samsara story, I have one and will share it. Many years ago (mid-1980s), when many of the great rinpoches had fled Tibet and were temporarily homeless (they had left their ancestral monasteries), they sometimes toured our dharma centers, including our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan, the 'Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Choling).

And one of those Rinpoches was one of the four 'Heart Sons" of the 16 th Karmapa, Ranjung Rigpe Dorje came and spent a week with us at our center with his attendant.

One of the things we did was take His Eminence to a nearby pine forest, where there still was original growth trees, huge trees reaching into the sky. Their lower branches didn't even start until about forth feet up, and the forest

floor beneath was covered with moss and soft grass. We had a picnic there on the grass.

And His Eminence remarked that “This is very nice Samsara.” Of course, sometimes Samsara is nice. As we left the pine forest and were driving back on back roads, a miniature almost-tornado came up. It was pouring rain and the windshield wipers could barely keep up, with dust-devil whirling winds pushing the car around in the road.

Margaret was in the front seat with me, and His Eminence and his attendant were in the back. My knuckles were white from trying to control the wheel and we were struggling against the storm. I happened to look back at the lamas, and they were sound asleep, completely out and relaxed.

That was a lesson right there.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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## Pointing Out What Cannot be Pointed Out

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 8, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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This is going to be one of those mind-twisters, for which I apologize. I don't know a clearer way to say this.

A perennial problem in dharma instruction is trying to put into words that which cannot be put into words, yet over the centuries endless reams of words have been expended trying to do this. It's not like the great dharma teachers don't know better than to attempt to describe what cannot be described, but rather they hope something rubs off on the reader, some inkling.

If these words (or actions, signs, and signals, etc.) are shared by a Mahasiddha or great dharma teacher to a student, they are often called the "Pointing Out Instructions", pointing out the actual nature of the mind. This is hard for students to grasp.

For example, in Mahamudra meditation, when we are not just learning and practicing it, but are actually doing Mahamudra, and this is a form of non-meditation. We don't do anything other than just rest.

What this means, is that when we are doing Mahamudra properly, "We" are not actually doing anything but resting in nature of the mind and then perhaps reflecting on that or reflecting that experience. Here I'm talking mostly about the combination of the Insight Meditation itself and then 'reflecting' of that insight.

And by 'reflecting', this means we are aware that we are (or just have been) aware (through the insight), yet that awareness itself is not an awareness of any 'thing' or object. Mahamudra is non-dual. It has no object and no subject seeing an object. Resting in Mahamudra is, as mentioned, non-dual, meaning we are fully immersive for however long we can sustain it, most often momentarily, followed perhaps by some awareness or reflection that we have been aware or were immersed.

And while the duration of actual resting, immersed in the true nature of the mind, can be short, it can be done successively, repeatedly, as often as we like, with each momentary immersion followed by the reflection (duality) of

the immersion, whatever that may be. And this string of immersion/reflection can be strung together in a seamless chain of light -- insight and reflection.

And after the insight, we may have a reflection not of any 'thing', since in Mahamudra there is no object or subject, however, in the world we live in (Samsara), we very much have both subject and object and in reflection some light from Insight Meditation may be reflected.

My point is that alternating between immersion (non-duality) and duality (subject and object) in rapid succession does not in itself create an object. The clarity and lucidity that is intrinsic to full immersion in Insight Meditation, can be pointed at (like a flashlight) at whatever thought or activity we are actively involved in and it's like the immersion with that thought or idea in mind sheds light on the thought upon withdrawal from immersion. Insight Meditation is like a flashlight that illuminates whatever it is directed at.

In dharma training, duality (subject and object) is called Relative and non-duality (full immersion) is called Absolute. And there are caveats.

The main caveat here is that our idea of resting in the nature of the mind has to start somewhere, and by that, I mean using our normal idea of resting, as in 'give it a rest' is where we have to begin as that is all we know.

And we can do that by stopping what we are doing and just resting in that moment as best we can. Relax. This can be awkward at first, yet in time, if we do this as often as we can think to do it, over time we can actually rest and stop just trying or making an effort to rest.

Obviously, trying to rest and actually resting are two different things. And there is one step more I have to share, and it is complicated than just resting, and this cannot be put into words except very poorly. It can't be said, not because it is secret, but because it is ineffable, beyond description or words. The closest analogy I have found is presented in this short video on polymers, which I find illuminating, very much worth seeing.

"Stretching Polymers"

In this video, I found it helpful to view what is called "Necking," when a polyethylene polymer plastic is stretched. See the above demonstration. When a polymer plastic is stretched, the polymer chains in the original plastic are not aligned, but when carefully stretched the polymers align and create a plastic that is very much stronger than it was, and also crystal clear. This is the principle that makes Kevlar armor so strong.

The above is just an analogy, yet one I find instructive if we consider the kind of resting required for Insight Meditation. It is not just that resting is clarifying,

but rather that the particular ‘clarity’ achieved is another order of magnitude more clear and lucid than we have ever known. Insight Meditation is stark or vividly clear AND it occurs without any sense of duality (subject and object).

This event in dharma terms is called “Recognition,” and it refers to our recognizing the true or actual nature of the mind for the first time. I can’t tell you when this will happen or exactly what causes this or how, but this in dharma training is invoked by the ‘Pointing-Out Instructions’, where the result (what is pointed out) is a non-dual (no subject and object), a fully immersive insight or experience.

That recognition experience, so to speak, is actually a form of mini realization. An insight in Insight Meditation is a vivid and non-dual experience that is realized. We are aware, but not aware of any ‘thing’; just vividly aware.

And the point in explaining this is that this experience of vivid ‘insight’, is like a spiritual flashlight that can be pointed in any direction we wish, and the insight itself is not a thing, but rather something like a light or torch, that when directed at an object, can’t help but illuminate or light up any subject or

‘thing’.

That’s about as clear as I can make something that cannot be described in words. Insight Meditation shines the light of truth wherever it is invoked. Or it is like a star in the sky of the mind, that lights up anything in its vicinity.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## How to Remove Bad Karma

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 9, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/23cfe2cf-fc08-4bc6-bd5b-f1baae6a9a82_1024x1024.jpeg*

A question that comes up in many of the pith teachings is how do we remove the 'bad' karma we have accrued not only in this lifetime, but throughout the many rebirths we apparently have had.

The answer to that question would take a library of traditional dharma texts to answer, if we had time to even read it all. And of course, many who study this are concerned about what they can do to erase and remove all the karma that has been accumulated.

However, when I first looked into this, I was not prepared for the key or most useful way to remove our accumulated karma. It took me by surprise, but after I took it in and thought about it, this is obviously the true solution.

And that advice is to stop accumulating karma which will take a toll on us. Don't create bad karma in the first place. Just don't continue to rack up the kind of actions and intent that leads to karma. Of course, I never thought of that. Duh. Yet, it's the obvious correct answer.

OK, good. How do we go about doing that, not committing actions that get recorded in dharma's little-black book of the karma we are liable for, which is kept in the Alayavignana, popularly called the 'Storehouse Consciousness', which is a crucial part of Samsara.

One thing each of us can do to lessen Samsara's hold on us is to stop reifying everything, stop exaggerating, gilding the lily, so to speak. Probably more than trying to erase the past ( ' Out damned spot ') in order to lessen our karmic load, we could, in addition, stop accumulating still more karma. That's an easy solution in theory, just not so simple to actually carry out.

The dharma texts say it is very, very difficult to remove karma, once recorded and accrued. It is much easier to record it in the first place.

What makes us feel secure or real? A lot of that is our many attachments, each of which binds us further into Samsara. The same goes for generally grabbing onto everything as ours or whatever is important for our Self-identification.

It's like we are hanging on to Samsara for dear life, constantly reifying our identity, upping the ante on our attachments, and identifying, identifying, identifying with ourselves, our Self, as more important that what we actually are, that which had created and constructed that Self by amassing attachments to form it. A bad habit.

The consistency of our Self is maintained by all the things we paste or post on to it. Our Self is like a great magnet for all our attachments, likes and dislikes, growing and seeming ever more and more real to us, although we have passed reality long ago and by now are deep into pure reification, gilding the lily, as they say. We make our Self more real than reality will support. That weighs us down and amounts to Samsara personified.

The dharma texts continually state that we have no Self in the sense of an eternal Soul or an entity unaffected by impermanence and change, yet that does not deter us from magnetizing what Self we have in an attempt to ignore reality and pile on, shore up, and decorate our "me, myself, and I."

And the pith dharma texts don't kid around as to our eternality, our continual reification and attempt to personally persist in time. beyond the corners of this life. There is nothing permanent other than change itself. Everything changes and no matter how much we gather to make our identity as real as we imagine it to be, nevertheless we (our Self) are just an empty hologram that will shape-shift and change right out of permanent existence. So, what's the good news?

There is no promise of good news, yet my opinion as to what is encouraging is the fact that here we are right now. We are alive and present. How did that happen?

Sure, we rally around the flagpole of our personality, trying to keep it up to snuff, while the wear and tear of time tears it apart, because our personality is a losing game. According to the pith dharma texts, our personality or Self ends, as our body does, at death. What moves on?

Apparently, we have never (not ever) had a permanent existence or eternal soul, and yet, here we are existing, just not permanently. We have never been an entity that is independent of time.

Apparently, disparate karma, as recorded in the Storehouse Consciousness, proceeds forward after our death, and is then cherry-picked as relevant to create a fresh persona (Self), yet that rebirth personal is not the coherent Self or persona of this, the previous life.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## A Shift of View

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 10, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
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*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/70035c18-f809-4e0b-9105-f12a3bc9419b_1365x2048.jpeg*

OK, OK. Yes, this is winter. It started snowing a little while ago and will probably keep snowing for who knows how long. It's beautiful, of course. And cold.

I don't know whether it is just the winter doldrums, trapped inside like I am, that are getting to me or a certain change of heart and view that's come over me of late. Either way, I'm embedded in a shuffling and shifting of priorities that is pointing inward.

And it is not something I can surf or just ride out, but more like an inner shifting or pivot, a reorientation. I'm changing. I'd like to talk about it here, but just how to do that I'm not sure. I will use photography as an example, since that is something, I know well and also what I consider visual dharma, 'Liberation Through Seeing."

In photography, lighting is very important, especially to the camera, because proper lighting makes it much easier for the camera and lens to take a photo without artifacts or approximations, especially if, like I do, we stack photos.

It's no different from using our eyes to look at a scene that is not properly lit. We can't see clearly or clearly enough. Come up with some good lighting and the scene is much easier to see and resolve. With photography this is even more important.

As a nature photographer since 1956, I was used to only using natural light, even in the studio, having two large south-facing windows and a skylight

directly overhead. I fell into the assumption that artificial, or studio light was not ‘organic’ enough for me and I avoided it. I almost never used it.

Apparently, this assumption was just prejudice on my part, and I became aware of this when I happened to use a couple of studio lights set to daylight Kelvin. I live in northern Michigan and in winter it not only gets very cold, but we also get gray days all the time, sometimes for what seems like weeks at a time. Hard for me to photograph with no direct sunlight.

And so, when I didn’t have enough natural light and it was gray and overcast, I turned on some LED nights set to 5600K (daylight) and finished a shoot. To my surprise, when I looked at the results, I could not tell the difference between outdoor light coming in the windows and the studio lights.

And then it dawned on me that light was light and Kelvin was Kelvin. All this time I was excluding daylight studio lights from giving any kind of assistance, because it was not ‘organic’ enough for me. Big mistake, meaning I was just plain wrong.

There was no difference that I could see between the two types of light, natural daylight and studio LED daylight. And a corollary I also became aware of is that due to this prejudice, for many decades I never tried lighting my photography subjects other than with one light, outside daylight, either going outside or using daylight coming in a window.

And because of this, I didn’t have what are called hair lights, rim lights, fill lights, or anything other that one light source, usually called a key light. I did everything with a key light.

Anyway, of late, I’ve begun relaxing my light prejudice and, so to speak, letting the light in where it is most helpful. Of course, I knew by name all the different lighting techniques, and even had the equipment, only I never really used them. Now I’m exploring and using them. Oh My.

It's like a whole other world, the other half of photography is lighting, suddenly available to me. That’s the analogy using photography.

However, this is also happening in other areas, yet those are more difficult to put into words, and I’m still figuring it all out. My take on dharma is also shifting and that’s a little terrifying for me because I don’t know dharma as well as I know nature and photography.

To hazard some words, I will say this:

The dharma path I have travelled for many decades of course leads to this present moment. And as I take more and more of everything that occurs (and

is present) to the path, the path becomes increasingly inclusive, ever widening until it is more like a plain than a path. The path is now everywhere and so it does not seem to lead anywhere else than here. And I'm here.

That should say something.

[Photos by me. Nikon Z7 II, Nikkor Z 105 MC Lens.]

EMAIL

## Pointing Out Pointing-Out

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 11, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/80bc33d0-640f-4bda-a9e3-d48075bffb23_1024x1024.jpeg*

With an interest in dharma, what are we going for? Like the historical Buddha and many great dharma practitioners that followed, we are going for enlightenment, yet there are several distinct steps along the way.

The first big hurdle or 'Ring Pass Not', a barrier we must work through, is called in the Karma Kagyu tradition "Recognition," meaning recognizing the actual or true nature of the mind. In Rinzai Zen Buddhism, this is called "Kensho."

It's somewhat of a big deal, and not something we can buy, be grandfathered into, or work around. We either have Recogntion or we do not, and if we do not, then we have no idea where the door or opening to it is located. We can't fake 'Recognition', only fool ourselves.

In other words, it's not a place we can get to without having actually gotten there, pretend as we may. And so, there is a huge pool of dharma practitioners who have reached the point where they are ready to recognize the actual nature of the mind yet have not. I can tell you something about that state is like because I have been there, swimming in that pool.

I will share one story about receiving the pointing-out instructions a number of times and NOT getting it, my being unable to recognize the true nature of the mind. Without going into needless detail, I received the pointing-out instructions from very authentic dharma teachers a number of times, but perhaps because I was not properly prepared failed to recognize the nature of the mind, try as I might. And I will narrate this particular very embarrassing pointing-out story.

In the 1980s, I received a personal message at our dharma center that one of the Heart Sons of the Karmapa (I will not say which one for privacy) that I should come to see him right away. He was visiting here in Michigan at the time.

Just to be clear, there are four Heart Sons, and these are the four tulkus that are in charge of transferring many teachings into a new Karmapa when he is

found. Next to the Karmapa himself, these are traditionally the highest rinpoches in the lineage.

Of course, I jumped in the car and drove to the town where His Eminence was staying and told the center I was here. Well, soon I was ushered into a private interview and the door was closed. There I was alone with His Eminence.

His Eminence had me sit in a chair and pulled another chair right up in front of me and began giving me the pointing-out instructions as to the actual nature of the mind. Wow!

This involved speaking to me, very close and in my face, and doing various things with his hands around my head, and I had no idea as to what his gestures were all about. I just did my best to receive the pointing out.

This went on for some time, until His Eminence finally gave up. I was not able to recognize the nature of my mind and finally had to get up, head hanging down, and make my way out of the room. Needless to say, I was disappointed and embarrassed to fail at this. And I drove back home with perhaps close, but no recognition.

I am just letting you folks know that 'Recognition' of the mind's nature, at least for me, was not just a walk in the park. Yet, I had no choice but to keep trying. And some years later, I received the pointing-out instructions again from my main dharma teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and from his instructions, something sparked and I understood something about what was required and set about working on that for several years and it did lead to Recognition.

I am very grateful to Ven. Khenpo Rinpoche who by pointing out to me the nature of the mind became my Tsawi Lama. The particular dharma teacher who finally succeeds in pointing out the nature of the mind to a student is said to be his or her Tsawi Lama, their Root Lama.

It took me many years to prepare myself enough that I actually was able to receive the pointing-out instructions. If we are on this path, we don't give up. We keep on keeping on.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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**SHOCK AND CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE:**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 12, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/082748aa-f1c2-423a-8b57-5989cbe07855_682x954.jpeg*

Here is part of a teaching by the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche where he talks about his serious automobile accident, what he went through in recovery, and how it changed his life. I will post some excerpts here. I found it very revealing and with some similarities to my own major stroke account.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche:

“The interesting message to me personally from Jamgön Kongtrül was a sense of maturity and a sense of growth: you have to take care of yourself and everything is left up to you personally -- one has to develop one's own dignity, one's own sanity and one's own resourcefulness I think my journey up to here became one big journey of that nature.

“I was driving a little car, which was recently purchased at the time, a sudden blackout overwhelmed me, and I ran into a joke shop. I broke in the door of the joke shop, which is a shop that sells tricks.

“Having been unconscious for several hours, I woke up in a hospital bed. A fluorescent light above me was my first experience. Subconsciously, I had heard sirens and people talking about: “Is he alive or is he dead.”

“And that was a very interesting, extraordinarily powerful message to me personally. It was a question of there still having been a faint hesitation whether I should work on myself or simply to take refuge in my reputation, in my robes, in my monastic vow alone.

“Relying on my credentials -- that's what it boiled down to.

“This was an expression of a certain fear in me, myself personally: suppose I give up my paraphernalia, so to speak, my outfit -- I'm going to be a fish out of water.

“There was still some doubt as to whether the transplanted sanity from my guru was going to work or not. In other words, I still wasn't convinced, still not committed to the teaching properly. And obviously, the only help for this that existed was this sudden message, this shock, this accident.

"If you're not going to behave as you should, like the good boys and good girls of the lineage, then this is the message--and make the best of it: WHOMP!

“And it took some time to recover from that message obviously Having realized this message, the instant

reaction was: unclothe yourself, be naked.

“A certain time after my accident, my marriage to Diana took place. This was a very important part of my life, extraordinarily important . It was a further commitment to my life, to trusting basic sanity, working with the world, and further unclothing myself  not particularly looking for an ideal wife and home and washing machine and TV set and motor car, which is going to provide you with hospitality and comfort. It was an act in the unclothing process.

“You go out, you go and open to the greatest extent you can in your life, in terms of being naked, reducing yourself to a fetus, completely opening. Doing that creates and created a tremendous uproar obviously. Because people love for that naked person to be clothed, masked, encased in a suit of armor.

“For the first time in my life I experienced that sense of nakedness extraordinarily powerfully. I was not only stripped of my monk's robes and my celibacy, but also stripped of my skin and my flesh. You become a walking skeleton. You are still alive and your heart has not been stripped away and your brain hasn't been stripped away. But apart from that, everything has been stripped away. Which is a fantastic experience.

“Not only are you stripped of your own culture but you are stripped within the alien culture, full of pollution, motor cars, airplanes, jets hovering above your head-- and people gossiping about you, murmuring. It was an extraordinary stripping process.

“The basic question is after that if there's any sanity left in you. Does your sanity remain or was it nested in your clothes? Was it in your skin or your flesh, or was it in your heart and brain, in your bones properly and completely.

‘That's the test of whether you've been completely indoctrinated (in the positive sense) and completely blessed, so to speak, in the basic core of your marrow and in your heart thoroughly and completely.

“If so, then the messages become extraordinarily stronger and stronger, constantly. Then your bone begins to create flesh, which begins to grow out and develop; and your flesh creates skin, and your skin begins to create clothes. And you begin to develop a new human being. The basic point is: how much can you give in. And having given in, how much can you grow out. . . “

End of quote.

Trungpa Rinpoche's words speak for themselves, but they underline my own teacher's continued emphasis to be aware of any shock, any sudden surprise, in terms of a loss of Self and possibly recognizing the true nature of our own mind.

We may or may not be a Buddhist practitioner, but in the lives of any of us there can be shocks outbreaking that may break us down, temporarily shattering the cohesion and stability of what we call the Self, yet at the same time opening new doors of awareness.

In my case, I have never sought out shocks or events of that import, but nevertheless at least several have occurred to me in my life anyway. And each of these three shock events shattered my self-security and the glaring gaps or vacancies left by each of these shocks brought profound clarity of a dharmic nature to me in response.

When the Self is eclipsed by reality, even temporarily, the response is like that of sunlight on soil. The seeds of dharma sprout and grow, at least this has been true in my experience. I am somewhat ashamed to say that without the prodding of fate (and destiny) by way of adversity, aside from meeting Margaret (and the kid's births), no other of my experiences has been as fruitful for me dharmic-ally as big upsets. LOL.

And while, I never sought for or welcomed any of these sudden onslaughts to my Self, after I got over whining and being disappointed at my fate and difficult karma…after the smoke cleared, so to speak, my internal dharmic growth blossomed like a flower. That I can't deny.

I can see the same pivotal nature of these type of shocks in Trungpa Rinpoche's above account.

[Photo of Chögyam Rinpoche used with permission.]

EMAIL

## Dreaming the Dharma

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 13, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c6f02aac-9d5e-4e9b-b522-0d0db7a424c6_816x1456.jpeg*

Some folks have asked me to share how I got interested in the dharma. Here, in brief, is an early history, up until I met my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. After that, an account would be a lot more technical, with all the different practices involved. This early time was more about intent and imagination.

I became interested in the Dharma around 1959, when I became fascinated with Zen Buddhism. My friends and I would stay up late at night and talk about Zen, Ingmar Bergman films, and perhaps peyote . We had our hot plate to make hot water, terrible instant coffee, powdered creamer, and lots of cigarettes to keep us awake.

At that time, it had not occurred to me to personally practice dharma. I just wanted to read about great Zen monks, haiku, and look at shoji screens, bamboo mats, and teak furniture. Of course, the raked-sand Zen gardens were fascinating, and I watched about every film and short by director Akira Kurosawa and owned most of them. I loved he idea of the 'Ronins', yet I did not yet even have a guru.

All that late-night talk gradually shifted into an interest in sitting zazen. I sat all day sesshin with Zen teachers like Roshi Philip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, had my back hit with the kyosaku (wooden stick), and whatever else I could invoke. Yet still this was not a regular daily practice. That took a while. I was like a Zen dharma voyeur, a dabbler.

Somewhere along in there I segued from Zen into Tibetan Buddhism and studied the Tibetan Book of the Dead, volumes by Walter Evan-Wentz, and stories by Anagarika Govinda. Back then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were few books on Tibetan Buddhism and no Tibetan lamas in Ann Arbor that I knew of.

Along with talking about dharma, my friends and I also spent entire nights listening to jazz like John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" in 1961. Or driving into Detroit late nights and seeing jazz greats like Cannonball Adderley at clubs like the "Minor Key." There was so much happening.

In the late 1950s in Ann Arbor, Michigan, there was no music in the local bars until after November 9, 1960. That was when liquor by the glass laws were repealed, and there was money to hire live music. Until then, jazz in Ann Arbor was held in apartments and homes, mostly up on around the U-M campus. I know because I hung out there, just a high school kid, barely tolerated at these all-night adult gatherings.

We kids ended up off to the side, being inconspicuous, sitting on the floor, with our backs against the wall, listening to jazz players like Bob James, Ron Brooks, “Turk” Pozar, and Bob Detwiler play. Small groups formed and improvised far into the night. Pot was smoked and wine drunk, but not by us, the few high school kids who managed to sneak in. Desperate to be a part of all this, we kids used to snort the ashes left from joints in the ashtrays. That was some harsh stuff. LOL. But the Ann Arbor music scene back then is another whole story. Some other time.

In the early 1970s, I was stunned by the cover art of books by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and equally by his writings, especially his book "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism.” My eyes are very sensitive to what is visual, part of my interest in ‘Liberation Through Seeing’.

And that came to a head early in 1974 when the Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa in person came and gave a talk in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I lived. I was so enthused by his forthcoming visit that I ended up being his chauffer for the weekend and designing the poster for his talk that I silk-screened myself helped to put-up all-around town.

Meeting Chögyam Trungpa, face to face, and eyeball to eyeball, and hanging out with him was life changing. After that weekend with Trungpa I came away a dharma practitioner.

For one, Trungpa Rinpoche took me into a room, sat me down, and taught me Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) for an hour or so, just the two of us. Believe it or not, until Trungpa, I had never thought of myself as a practitioner. I was mostly a dharma talker. Trungpa made it clear that the dharma was something to actively do, not just talk about. What a great introduction to sitting meditation.

I am very devoted to Trungpa Rinpoche, yet I did not follow him or join his group, and for two main reasons. His American followers all had to wear suits and ties and they drank alcohol like there was no tomorrow. I had been a performing musician, and by that time had my fill of alcohol, and you pretty much had to die to see me in a suit.

Like so many things in my life. I got a wonderful sense of Trungpa Rinpoche and that was enough to inspire me, those few days. I took him to heart. That was sufficient.

And so, in brief, that is roughly how I got interested in the Dharma and the story of my path up to the mid-1970s. It was some time after this that I met my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and became a fully committed dharma practitioner. And that's when my dharma practice began in earnest, which is very much more detailed, but if folks are interested, I could tell that story at some point.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## The Lama of Appearances

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 14, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/281c52b1-4ff8-434b-a182-011d19d87f43_1365x2048.jpeg*

Mother Nature lays it all right out for us, the good, the bad, and the scary. In other words, as to dharma, we can read it in the sacred scriptures (Lama of the Scriptures), hear it taught by word of mouth (Lama of the Lineage), naturally intuit it (Lama of the Dharmadhatu), or learn it from Mother Nature directly, which in dharma terms is officially called the "Lama of Appearances."

In my case, due to how I was brought up, far out in the country, with no neighbors or kids to play with other than my brothers, I fell into learning the dharma from Mother Nature, not that I knew the word dharma or had heard of Buddhism. I learned from "The Lama of Appearances."

And carefully schooled I was, self-schooled, yes, driven by my own interest in and fascinated by the natural world around me. There was really not much of a choice. Nor was there a better teacher than nature, at least at the time.

However, learning directly from Mother Nature kind of ruined school for me, being taught by anyone other than the natural world. I knew, early on, what learning was about for me, and primary education at school was no match compared to the natural history all around me where I lived.

Being forced, however kindly, to learn in school did not measure up to learning at the rate of my own natural interest. And so, I had no real choice. If what I learned in school did not compete for my interest in nature, and it did not, there you have it, a problem.

Nature does not mince words, and concepts like 'impermanence' are never candy-coated, but straight out obvious to me as a child from my constant observation of the natural world. I was brought up on natural law, so society's law lacked the crystal-clear insight of nature. I already knew better, even as a young boy, and without realizing I was offended by the clumsy efforts to educate me otherwise.

It was the inspirational factor that was missing. Let me explain this by using photography as an example.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins came up with a concept that struck me as true. He even made up his own word to describe it. He called it "inscape."

Inscape was to Hopkins an insight or path into the eternal or beautiful, literally the way in, a sign, and signal of the beautiful and true. I will try to explain.

I look forward to my trips out into the fields and woods. They offer me a chance to get my head together, to relax from the day-to-day grind of running a business (now retired) and generally a way to relax a bit.

This is not to say that just going outside and walking in nature means that I am instantly relaxed. That usually takes time. It is the same with taking nature photos.

In the first ten minutes of a morning photo walk I often don't see all that much to photograph. This too takes time, time for me to slow down, open up, and 'see', to let the natural beauty all around me in.

It could be that I was still filled with all the workaday-world thoughts, the things I have to do, problems, and what-have-you. It takes time for my mind to relax and let go of its constant chatter.

This endless worry and thinking affect my photography. And here is where the word 'inscape' comes in.

As I get out there and wander through the fields or wherever, I gradually start to slow down and relax. I begin to see things that are beautiful, scenes that I might actually want to photograph.

Slowly my view of the natural world around me starts to open up again and I begin to view things differently. I begin to 'see'. It takes time and usually does not happen all at once.

This little pattern of leaves over here or the way the light comes through the forest canopy, grabs me just a little bit, tweaks me, and the chatter of my mind begins to slow and then goes into pause.

As I continue to walk along, some little thing or scene appears beautiful to me; I am touched by it, however lightly at first. I gradually get distracted from my daily distractions and begin to center. That's when the inner me wakes up.

These little moments are 'inscapes', ways out of my mundane world of distractions and into the beauty of nature or, more accurately, back into the natural state of my own mind or being.

As I take my time, I am able to see the beauty in things once again, and what I am seeing suddenly seems worth photographing. Like most of us, I photograph what catches my interest, what I find beautiful or worthy in the world around me.

These inscapes are signals that catch my attention, and they flag me down on my busy way forward to nowhere-in-particular. These moments and signs are how I stop going nowhere, and manage to almost miraculously arrive somewhere once again, perhaps only at my own peace of mind.

This is one of the functions of the beautiful and true, to catch us in the turmoil of life, flag us down, and induce us to pull over and take a moment of rest. Time out.

These moments of inscape are different on different days, and different for different people. They represent the clues or signs that catch our attention and show us the way into the beauty of the natural world, actually into the beauty of our own mind. Some inside light turns on.

Another way of saying this might be: what is beauty actually?

What happens when we see something beautiful? Beauty is not simply somewhere out there in nature waiting to be found, but always here within us, locked within us, we who are seeing this nature, we who can now see the beautiful. Like the old saying, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. “True.

Beauty breaks down the rush of the everyday world and opens our heart a wee bit, making us vulnerable again, open to experience and input. Through natural beauty we go inside and experience the inner beauty of things, which is none other than our own inner beauty.

That is what beauty and truth is for, to be touched on, seen, so that we find once again the beauty within our own hearts that we may have lost through the distractions of our daily life. We look outside in nature to see in here, to see into our own heart once again. And we can be sensitive to beauty in our photography.

I would hate to tell you how many photographs I have of this or that butterfly or critter that are perfectly good photographs, but are empty of magic or meaning. They are well lit, well composed, and have everything that makes a good photograph except the ‘magic’ that keys or excites me.

Instead, they are ‘pictures’ of a butterfly, but they have not captured any essence of anything. They might as well be in a field guide – snapshots in time with no meaning and for no one.

The reason for this, so I tell myself, is because they just happened to be there, photographic opportunities. I saw them and I took a photograph, but at the time they did not instill or strike any particular beauty in me.

This, to me, is what I call “gotcha” photography, taking a photo because I can, not because I saw beauty in it or was moved to do so. There was no inscape moment, no moment of vision – snapshots only.

I find that it is really worth paying attention to what strikes me as beautiful or meaningful and photograph that, rather than just photographing the Grand Canyon because it is there, or I am there.

A lasting photograph, in my opinion, requires more of me than that, by definition. It has to mean something to me and, for that to happen, I need to actually be moved or inspired. Photographs that have special meaning for me usually have some form of inscape into a special moment that inspires me to capture the scene in a photo. I see beauty in those moments.

We can wander for miles looking for something to photograph, chasing down this or that butterfly or animal… searching. Or we can slow down and let nature herself show us the signs, here mudras, the inscapes through which we can relax and begin to ‘see’ naturally and photographically once again.

We can listen to our own intuition. This process of inscape, of insight into the sublime in nature (the sublime within ourselves) I find to be the key to good photography and to creating photographs that are real keepers, at least in my mind. If we don’t touch our own inner self in our work, we touch no one at all, but when we are touched by a moment, I find that others also feel this. Touch one, touch all.

[Photo by of  a Night-Blooming Cereus by me.]

EMAIL

## Liberation Through Insight

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 15, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e687e5aa-9ab3-4a6d-bffa-aa2a9c4d3ac9_1024x1024.jpeg*

Perhaps a better title would be “Deconstructing Samsara.” My ante in to have continuous insight Meditation is that I use it each day (for hours) in many things I do, like writing this blog. The words that I write are pinged off the immersion available in Insight Meditation, flavored by it, so to speak. If I can explain it well enough, this should be interesting.

My experience of Insight Meditation, although mostly in brief moments, is one of great clarity, and reflection on that clarity when I come out of that moment’s immersion does its best to shape or embed my words with meaning from the traces of insight available to me upon reflection, on coming out of nondual immersion.

There is no describing non-dual experience. However, there are traces, what the Tibetans call perfume or ‘smells’. Something rubs off and is available to us upon dualistic reflection after complete immersion in Insight Meditation.

The value of Insight Meditation, as part of Mahamudra, is its ability to lessen, solve, and remove the hard duality of Samsara, through insight realization, one instant at a time. They add up!

And the key is that while for most of us Insight Meditation is very brief, these moments of insight can be strung together like beads on a string or mala, one after another, until it is a stream. It is very much like digital sampling on a CD or DVD. The sampling is often enough so that to us it appears seamless. The same with Insight Meditation.

It’s why I write about this so often. Insight Meditation gradually and consistently deconstructs Samsara. It is liberation through insight, through ‘Seeing’. And we can do it. How incredible is that?

To learn this takes some real effort, at least it did for me in the beginning, but it’s not like working in the coal mines, more like sampling from the mind of light. It’s a privilege not a drudgery. I can do it all day, now that I have done my best to squeeze the effort out of it that it took to learn it. In large, it’s not taxing, yet I do find myself doing stints of it and taking breaks, which suggest I

am not all the way there yet. Close. However, I do that with most anything, do some, rest some, do some, etc. It's like breathing.

Insight Meditation is a main link to what might be called my 'dharma practice," yet the path of dharma for me has widened so much that by now it resembles a level plain or a high plateau rather than a narrow path. There is nowhere to go other than right here. And that's where we are. Insight Meditation, moment by moment, eats away at the heart of Samsara, gradually loosening and deconstructing it.

That's why it is so important to learn.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## Recognition of the Mind's Nature

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 16, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/9b217b9e-ddad-42c0-bd74-23e80c312486_1365x2048.jpeg*

[I first learned to recognize the actual nature of the mind and how it works through close-up photography, creating photos like these , and not by sitting on my meditation cushion. Liberation by 'Seeing'.]

We are a victim of what we know, and this is true about anything, any study or topic. I know what I know, yet I don't know all of it about anything. There are a few things I know quite well, enough that I could teach them. These would be astrology, photography, music, rock n' roll concert posters, archiving popular culture, and probably nature study. I could also teach a course in being an entrepreneur, yet I doubt many could do the homework for that.

I also know something about dharma and have studied it for many decades, yet I don't consider myself a teacher of dharma. I like to share dharma with others. And I know a few parts of dharma training quite well, but I am a sharer of dharma, not a teacher. I can be a dharma friend.

In other words, I don't have a PHD in dharma because I only know my own path, the thread that has led to me as I am now. And I'm not interested in knowing everything about dharma just for the sake of knowing it. Rather, as mentioned, I just want to take the next step in the path of dharma that works for me.

So, with dharma, I can't say to readers, do what I do, because that makes no sense. What I know is just too personal and unique to me. The best I can say is that we each should do something to get to know the actual nature of our own mind. Become familiar with your mind.

Of course, with dharma practice we can talk about what are called the 'Common Preliminaries' and even the 'Extraordinary Preliminaries', what is called 'The Ngondro', and Lojong, because they are dualities and can be talked about. And we can talk (but it would make little sense) about the various deity practices that come after the above, which practices are very detailed. Yet, information on what I mentioned above is readily available in book, video, and in-person format.

What's not available and what I do talk about is the pivot from the dual or relative forms of dharma training mentioned above to the non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

That remains a mystery to many because all (or any) of the nondual dharma practices can't be put into words. These topics result in an abrupt halt and are a ring-pass-not. I write about them, yet I know how difficult that is (from my own experience) to make sense of.

The non-dual dharma practices are not something we know or have ever known. We have no idea what the non-dual experiences, much less their realization, are like.

And my writing about the nondual dharma practices also is, for me, a way of clarifying all this for myself. There is nothing more subtle or difficult to negotiate that I know of. Also, I know of nothing more important to communicate than how to make the transition between dual and non-dual dharma, particularly because it can't be done with words.

Yet, many of us continue to use words (or try to) to get as close to understanding as possible. I'm using them here right now. And why I don't stop doing this is the belief that at the very least, some bit of insight might rub off.

And there is a long history of dharma teachers (and sharers) throwing everything including the kitchen sink at this problem. Zen Buddhism has a long tradition of jolting, shocking, upsetting, and doing whatever to a student necessary, trying to jog or jolt them out of their dualistic rut and into non-dualism, which once achieved is irreversible.

Realization is realization. It has the word "real' in it and that for a reason. When we 'realize', there is no going back to unrealizing. For example, when we realize how to turn on a light switch and get light, that is not something we forget next time. We realize it once and for all.

Yet, there is a vast difference between realizing how to turn on a light compared to realizing the true nature of the mind, yet the principle is the same. Realization.

And so, when someone realizes the nature of the mind and how it works, this makes a profound difference in our lives, and, as mentioned, once realized, there is no un-realization.

It's exactly like the light switch and turning it on. Once you realize how to do this, you can turn on the lights!

It’s the same with realizing how the mind works. We suddenly become familiar with the nature of the mind, meaning we can work it. Like realizing how to drive a car, we can drive it.

We have never known how to ‘drive’ the mind, how to use and work it. Suddenly we can. It’s no longer a mystery. After that, there is nothing standing in our way toward enlightenment other than our own effort.

[Photo by me.]

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**Insight Meditation: A Story**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 17, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/416f5cfe-f9fa-4cc5-9ef4-8058762dcf27_2048x2048.jpeg*

One might ask what proof I have to show how important learning Insight Meditation can be for a practitioner. As I have repeated here endlessly, Insight Meditation is one of the non-dual dharma practices, non-dual meaning it cannot be described or expressed in words. This is traditional.

That makes it very difficult to communicate because it can't be communicated in language. It is ineffable. However, over the centuries countless folks have done their best to put Insight Meditation in words. So, what can I say?

Also attempting to express this in words, I can say this to describe this non-dual experience, my original recognition of the actual nature of the mind. I will do the best I can, yet if you consider what I am saying, you may get at least some idea of how stunning Insight Meditation is once we learn to invoke it. It's not just another dharma practice. It is a key transitional practice.

I will put aside the very special circumstances as to how this 'Recognition' that led to Insight Meditation came about for me, yet these conditions were considerable, should be discussed, and have to be noted for clarity and understanding as to how this is possible. I will say a few words.

This dharma event came during one of the most difficult times I have ever gone through, when I was at my lowest ebb. I had just lost my job and suddenly had no way to support my family. I was crushed and my Self was shattered. However, apparently, it took this kind of sobering event to pull me down from my high horse and sober me, so to speak, enough to allow this breakthrough to happen.

I was so popped out of my normal groove that I did not even do my daily on the cushion dharma practice, something I had down ritually for decades. I was just too upset and all I wanted to do was get out of the house and wander in nature. This went on for many days.

Anyway, this dharma opening happened to me at dawn years ago in the late spring, when I was out in nature with my camera and lenses photographing plants and small critters. I was crawling around in the wet morning grass just as the sun came up during the time when the morning light for photography is

very good. I was trying to forget all the hard knocks I was going through and I just didn't care about much of anything.

At the time, I was looking through the camera lens at whatever I was looking at, usually plants, flowers, bugs, and the like. And I had to have patience because Michigan is mostly flat and susceptible to wind, so often one has to wait for the wind to die down to take a photograph.

There I was peering through the lens, waiting for the wind to die down, and concentrating my focus on the subject, when for no apparent reason I was no longer just looking at the plant or subject. Instead, I slipped into seeing the 'Seeing' itself, seeing the whole thing as in the line "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea."

Suddenly, I a subject no longer, and what I was looking at was no longer an object (but still visible, of course), and like waves subside into water, I was fully immersed in the moment, lock, stock and barrel, yet crystal clear and devoid of thoughts .

And this was not a momentary passing insight or moment, but once invoked that day, it stayed as long as I concentrated -- the clarity, lucidity, and stillness.

And the impression stayed in my mind even when later that day when I went back home and no longer was out in nature. At home my mind was just normal again, yet the impression of the Insight Meditation was something I could not forget or put out of my mind. It was by then an imprint like LSD leaves an imprint.

In fact, from that day forward, whenever I went out and photographed as I described, I could enter that same non-dual state if I followed my little photographic ritual. However, as mentioned, when I returned home, I could not invoke that same state. My mind was just normal. Needless to say, that summer and fall I spent a huge amount of time out in nature photographing.

And now comes what I consider as, at least to myself, some reason or proof of the importance of this event, which I hope you can appreciate.

For the next six months, from late spring of that year until the winter frosts drove me inside, I was out every morning when it did not rain, watching the sun come up, crawling around in the grass in the fog and morning dew, looking through my camera lens and invoking the same vivid non-dual experience. It was like a portal had been opened, yet only when I was photographing as I have described.

And I'm talking here of every day. Before that, I can't remember when was the last time I watched the sun come up? It was years before, yet now I would not

miss a day in order to have this vivid insight experience until physically it was too cold for the camera and myself to be outside, in late November. In other words, this went on for some six months straight.

That, to me, says something and it should be enough of a sign or flag to get your attention as to the import and imprint of this experience, at least for me. And why am I explaining this?

And that is because this experience was so life-changing for me that I can't help but do my best to explain what I can about how and when it happened, in case it could be useful for others to discover something similar themselves.

How strange it was to suddenly discover or open that portal into the non-dual world after a lifetime of a dualistic view. And it only existed when I was out in nature doing close-up photography, which is why, with all that daily photographing, my skill in photography improved a lot.

Yet, as mentioned, when I returned home each day, I could not invoke Insight Meditation around the house or anywhere else. It was like the rabbit hole in "Alice in Wonderland." I had to go out there in nature and look through that hole each day so that I could re-experience that state, again and again. It's not like it happened and then just went away. It was an open port into another world, but I had to go outside to peer through it.

The Insight Meditation was always there if I went through the ritual of photography as described. Yet, as mentioned, my life had changed because of it, and dramatically. And, as winter came on, I was forced indoors, and my camera did not like the extreme cold. So, what happened then?

What happened is that I built a little studio in a small room in the upstairs where we live. And in that room, I did my utmost to create conditions similar to photographing outdoors, but in a studio with plants, cut flowers, and things like that, anything that was alive and green.

And, with some work, I was able to reestablish my experience of Insight Meditation right in the studio. I was so grateful.

And so, I nursed my photography experience in the studio until spring rolled around. And then I was back outside again, as early as sometime in February, doing photography and experiencing Insight Meditation. And life continued on into that spring and summer as it had the year before. However, by then there were, as they say, two trains running.

One was the Insight Meditation and photography, and the other was trying very concentratedly to see if I could move the Insight from photography into

some other part of my life, like for instance writing. If I could expand Insight Meditation to include writing, it would greatly improve my life.

Yet, as detailed, my window into Insight Meditation was like a portal or a rift in the cosmos that I could peer through provided I went through a strict procedure, that of photography, as I have described.

And I tried to make that shift beyond photography to happen. I willed it to happen, again and again, yet that went nowhere. Try as I might, over and over, day after day, to make that happen, I could not. I could not even lift even one finger by will. Obviously, I was doing something wrong, but I had no idea what that was. This went on all winter and into the spring. I was exhausted from the effort to make something more happen, yet nothing budged.

However, I did not give up. It took me over a year before something moved inside me, and even then only tiny amount. And that was only a beginning, a first sign that there was hope. And then, inch by inch, or micrometer by micrometer, that inner portal began to open wider and include more with Insight Meditation than just photography.

And I would have quit long ago had not the Insight Meditation been so crucially important to me. And to make a long story short, inch by inch, I enlarged the portal, that hole in Samsara, to include the act of writing. And today, that portal includes writing 100% as well as photography. And I have not asked for anything more, yet I feel that expansion and extension continue, and inclusion is ever more inclusive.

And, as mentioned, this was not a matter of will. Instead, it was a matter of letting go, relaxing, and allowing this to happen naturally. And later, having discussed all this with my dharma teacher of 36 years, his last words to me before he passed on (96 years old) was to keep extending and expanding my recognition as to the mind's nature.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

## Talking About Dharma

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 18, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/b529af5f-b7db-42fb-8ff3-269296a4ba9d_1024x1024.jpeg*

It's hard not to refer to my own experience in talking about dharma because that's all I have. How's that for a Catch-22?

How to do that without seemingly gilding the lily, reifying our own experience and thus appearing too self-oriented. Not sure how society wants us to handle this. It is not socially acceptable to refer to ourselves too much, not to mention be labeled selfish.

Historically, this seems especially true of any reference to dharma and it's results. We are not supposed to have any experience much less claim realization. I have spent decades watching how the Tibetan masters handle this, which is always professing that they have no realization whatsoever, and at best they say they are just repeating or parroting what they have read or been taught.

I get that, some kind of humility, but it is so transparent as to be embarrassing. Of course, they have some realization or knowledge, otherwise they would not be rinpoches or high teachers. This must be some form of cultural etiquette.

And it's worse for those of us just learning dharma, when all we have, if we are honest, is our own experience for sure and what little realization we have accumulated, with no one else to speak for us or about us. And, as mentioned, it's ridiculous to parrot the masters and feign humility.

At this point, we don't have enough realization to even be humble and are trying to figure out what actually we do have. I have stumbled across this endlessly over the many decades I have been practicing dharma.

This is particularly true in that non-man's-land from when we begin doing deity practices and eventually segue into the non-dual practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen. No one talks about it.

Not only are the non-dual practices ineffable, meaning they cannot be expressed in language, yet folks either can't or won't try to talk about them, even though over the centuries there are libraries of written teachings that do.

Yet, people like me are expected to make sense of all this, each on our own. Yes, I understand that we each have to turn the wheel of the dharma on our own. However, I see nowhere where it says we have to do it alone. There is no reason why while practicing individually, on our own, collectively we should not discuss and try to bring clarity to the process of practicing dharma.

Dharma may be self-secret, but there is nothing secretive about the non-dual dharma practices other than the inherent difficulty of accomplishing them. IMO, we need to be able to talk about all this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## "Suck Any Sense from that Who Can"

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 20, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/f3007bd9-0fe8-429b-9858-d7595e1f2d4c_1365x2048.jpeg*

The above title is from a line by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, making sense from words. Squeezing some life or sense out of language. We are so bound to conceptualization, that it too often does not lead to actual experience. Without experience it seems that we cannot realize anything. It has to make sense, or it is literally nonsense. And the senses traditionally in dharma terms are six: sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and mind itself. However, for experience to make sense we have to break the habit of only conceptualizing and without that conceptualization leading to actual physical experience. All the senses point or lead to experience, which experience then can be realized. As mentioned, the six senses are: sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and mind itself. Oddly or interestingly enough, the 'Sixth Sense' is also called 'ESP' or extrasensory perception, referring not to the five common senses, but rather to what can be sensed with the mind. At the same time, while we are familiar with using the five common senses, most of us don't claim to sense life with the mind. In fact, it's almost an oxymoron, sensing with the mind. And yet we do it all the time as best we can, even if we may not realize it. We intuit. The 'Sixth Sense' commonly suggests a more mystical ability, while simple intuition is associated with the subconscious and immediate or direct insight. Yet, IMO, each of us intuits like mad, constantly, and as best we can, feeling for the future, sensing and precipitating experience with all our senses, and then squeezing out some meaning. We can ask ourselves which of the six senses can be used by us to create or further spiritual experience. I find it is worth considering carefully. Of course, to some limited degree, we intuit with all the senses, yet they all don't often lead beyond the senses to extrasensory or spiritual experience. We wish. As for me, it seems that I have activated the sense of sight as an on-ramp to spiritual experience. And of course, as a dharma practitioner for many decades, I have done the same with exploring or 'sensing' with the mind itself. I have been trained. In my case, visual art, such as photos like the one posted here, which I took today, can serve as inscapes, a way into the beautiful, a lift upward. Of course, we each have our own sense of beauty, so you will of course find photos that work for you. I just share here one that I react to. And through years of patient (or not so patient) dharma practice, with the help of

Tibetan rinpoches, I have slowly learned to turn my gaze inward, sense with the mind, and generate experience that can then be realized. The ‘realization’ is the hard part. The realization as to the nature of the mind, becoming familiar with the mind’s nature, is what dharma is all about. [Photo by me takend today.] EMAIL

## The Root of the Root

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 21, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/470c7a40-07b5-47b9-9618-bc7387c7c80c_1024x1024.jpeg*

When I peel back the layers of what probably is the dharma onion in my life, I already understand that there is nothing at the center. That's traditional dharma.

Yet, as far as I know, what is the deepest layer or imprint I have found so far and where did it come from?

That's my question and I'm parsing that word, the Quest-I-On.

I believe that the deeper I go, using depth or 'suchness' as the measuring stick, all of my attachments get closer to being the same and funnel together. In other words, they are not very different from one another.

It's like spinning the wheel of life and arriving at what I am most stuck on, the heart of my heart, so to speak.

And this is beyond my family of kids and grandkids, and also my parental family of four brothers, and so on. And beyond those, are all my life's loves and interests of which the Dharma is what I would have put money on as the heart of my heart for many years. I have been concentrating on dharma for decades.

However, when the time came for dharma to speak to me directly, I was surprised to find that dharma spoke to me not from the meditation cushion I have sat on for all these decades, but rather from Mother Nature herself. Nature spoke for dharma.

When, during a time of extreme duress, I reached out not to that mediation cushion, but leapfrogged the cushion and found myself back with the early imprints of nature itself.

That was how I was raised and who or what raised me, Mother Nature.

Of course, my parents and family cared for me and brought me up. No question. Yet, as to who or what raised me internally, when push came to shove, and it did, I found myself trusting Mother Naure as my guide and teacher. This started when I was young, about six years old.

There is no doubt that Mother Nature and Dharma are to the greatest degree identical, two buttons on the same shirt. I know that. Yet, at the same time, of those two, Mother Nature came first and it is that which I am most familiar with and trust. There is no question.

And when it came time to introduce me to the actual or true nature of the mind, that task fell to Mother Nature as to where I wound up when 'Recognition' arose.

The birth canal, so to speak, was through Mother Nature, and her portal Insight Meditation arose and was invoked.

Of course, they are essential one and the same, the dharma and Mother Nature. It's just that my deepest and earliest imprints were made many decades before I ever heard the name Buddha or could understand what the term dharma meant.

For example, recently I watched a long series of episodes of a 'Reality TV' show. And while that was very interesting to me psychologically, what I found myself watching most, what was I was most enthusiastic about and brightened my day, were all the short video moments of various insects, lizards, snakes, and animals spliced into the narrative.

And every time any greenery was present, or a swamp or pond, all I could think about was how I would like to be there rooting around in the grass or shrubbery, seeing what life lived there.

I have always been impressed and fascinated by lush vegetation, jungles, swamps, and the like, because of the profusion of life in those places.

Anyway, that's the tell of the tale for me, familiarity with nature and the natural environment.

My history as a child was just too rich with exposure to nature, all of which left an indelible imprint on me at an early age and that imprint continued so until my late teens. Like a play on the old saying. "You can take the boy out of nature, yet you cannot take the nature out of the boy."

My many decades of dharma training have preoccupied me all this time, yet when life's 'push come to shove' events brought me to my knees, so to speak, it was Mother Nature where I woke up in when I gathered my wits and pulled myself back together again. That was a surprise.

As mentioned, dharma and nature are essentially one and the same, just different labels. Yet Mother Nature predated my introduction to the dharma by some long time and is where I feel naturally at home. I realize that.

And perhaps most importantly of all, it was Mother Nature that taught me how life actually is and that is very different from civil or society's laws. Nature's laws are how I was trained and what I judge life by. And my practice of Dharma has kind of been a finishing school for me.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**Authentic Experience**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 25, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/d0c0cae8-dc5a-4cca-b90c-e022adf95786_1024x1024.jpeg*

I grew up in the 1950s and beyond, back when a college degree was what separated the classes in our society and in high school as well. It was all about college prep and the divided classes that resulted, those who were preparing for college and the rest of us who were not.

I quite naturally bucked that, never finished high school, never got a diploma, and even though I was accepted (without a diploma) into the University of Michigan, I chose to drop out of college after only three weeks because of boredom, which choice only further separated me from my peers. I was young with a thirst for life experience, not more education. I certainly took "The Road Less Travelled By."

Instead, I chose to follow what then was called 'The Beat Generation' and Beatniks, which introduced me (oddly enough) to an even more elite view, that of the Liberal Arts, and at a notch higher than we would find in a college Liberal Arts degree. The Beats were deeply immersed in poetry, literature, jazz, and the Fine Arts, along with spirituality well beyond what college seemed to offer.

To me the Beat Movement was what 'elite' meant; they were, IMO, the true elite, The Jack Kerouacs, Allen Ginsbergs, and a vast array of European (and some American) poets, writers, and philosophers. In 1960, I hitchhiked to the West Coast and California, where I lived on the beach in Santa Monica's "Venice West," right on the beach in an abandoned walk in freezer in an art gallery called "The Gas House."

And although the Beat lifestyle, at least for me, got funkier, the purity of the intellect found there only became more even conceptual and well, finally, pure intellectuality. "The Beat Movement" was more an idea than it was satisfying.

I knew and sensed something was wrong, but I did not know just what it was. It took an introduction to Zen Buddhism and eventually to 'The Dharma' to tell me different and even that took a long time for me to get the point, that there was no point, no fixed state of mind, or place to arrive at other than the way we travelled. And I wrote this little poem back then.

“Look at yourself, first yet first,

No better and yet not worse.

Now get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as you may, your hearse.”

And the slowly dawning realization was that it was not higher or more refined intellectual clarity that I required, but rather just the reverse, that all that intellectual conceptuality had to be immersed (dunked) in authentic experience and fully, if I wanted to gain any realization as to what this life is actually about.

The book and concept of Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road” in 1957 and “The Dharma Bums” in 1958 were for me symbolic of what I was missing in my life, authentic experience. I wanted th more than anything.

For a kid, a young man coming of age in the social environment of the post-war 1950s, how does one get oriented? Everything I knew, the kind of experience I came up into was mostly some kind of uniform conceptuality with, crew cuts, conformity, strict gender roles, “Modern,” suburban, and of course movies, television, and the middle class.

And in the midst of all that conformity, that uniformity, a great storm was already forming, which is kind of summed up in the tune by Muddy Waters called:

“The Blues Had a Baby and They Named It Rock n’ Roll.”

And nothing could stop that music tidal wave. Kids like me, somehow sensing the blandness of the times, just naturally found us going against it. You have a positive pole and that is attracted by a negative pole. My generation, riding the leading edge of the “Baby Boomers,” found us in opposition to the sterility of the 1950s. It was like magnets. And I am getting to the point of this article.

For me, all this turned on the fact that conceptuality can only be refined so far and then it self-deconstructs. In the 1950s we were living the life of a highly refined and sterile conceptuality, in which the meaning of life could NOT be found by still further refinement, but just the opposite; any meaning came from plunging into authentic life experience. And only that could scratch my inner itch.

It was all about abandoning the elite conceptuality of those times and immersing ourselves in what makes sense, and not just an artsy-fartsy idea of sense.

The glory of the ‘conceptual’ was not what it used to be in the America of the 1950s. The liberal intellectual college elite was not only dying; it was mostly already dead.

And the reason is that the whole country, including the liberal intellectual college-educated elite, was realizing the shortcoming of their state. Intellectual isolation is, to put it simply, self-limiting, a form of punishment, and just no fun. There is no ‘meaning’ there.

As a country, and perhaps as a world, since then we have moved the focus of our identification from the intellectual stratosphere downward toward common sense. We were taking the plunge yet we don’t know how to dive deep.

And that is what dharma was then and is now, plunging into direct experience and full immersion, putting out the flame of the pure intellect in authentic experience and, eventually, realizing that. It’s all about realization, yet there has to be actual and authentic experience for there to be something to be realized. That’s the rub.

One problem with the 1950s, and even the Beat Movement, the 1960s Alternative Culture, and certainly the 1970s Spiritual Movement was (and is) the lack of grounding in common sense, simple experience, in order for there to be what the dharma calls the “Realization” of that experience.

We have to live from the gut, the ‘Hara’.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## Prayer

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 28, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/f880cfd9-26fb-4c26-b6b1-89b95538a60d_1024x1024.jpeg*

What on Earth is 'prayer'?

It certainly is not what I was raised in catechism class when I was a kid to consider prayer, which is praying to or at something or someone, basically a dualistic prayer, which IMO hangs up before anything can be answered.

Praying to something like God or some spirit as an object seems somehow divisive, more a form of separation than of inner union.

As far as I can tell, for me, prayer is what in non-dual, non-meditations like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, we call Insight Meditation, an intent with no limits.

Prayer, as I know it, certainly is, IMO (and in experience) nondual, meaning full and complete immersion, an intent resulting in no subject and no object.

It's more like bringing something or someone to mind, like whatever is holy, and with that in mind then just resting in full immersion, a shot of light in the dark.

IMO, prayer is not a guided meditation, because nothing is guiding us or is an object, but more like 'pointed' meditation, not meditation on an object or subject, but rather bringing Rinpoche or spirit to mind (pointing), and then resting in some kind of immersive intention, resulting in resting in the nature of the mind without support of any kind.

Obviously, I don't know how to express it, but somehow prayer is internalizing an intention by full immersion and resting in that inwardness and immersion.

The result is nothing external and nothing at all, for that matter. It's a pure intent made, yet not distinguishable.

A pure intent that does not touch the walls of time and thus is free from friction and goes on forever.

I know it's mundane, but the song by 'The Platters', "My Prayer" always comes to mind. This tune itself is a prayer, IMO.

If you can and will, please tell me about what is prayer for you? I'm sure I just have one view of it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## Distraction

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 31, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/bcaba3b9-2001-4e0d-acfc-a439116d55af_1024x1024.jpeg*

"Distraction" from what? That would be a distraction from allowing ourselves to rest in the true nature of the mind, which we may not have ever done.

If we are attached to something, and by 'attached" I don't mean just fixated on something we want or like, but also attached by our interests, whatever we are busy with. Our interests, even if productive, are forms of attachment.

And my point is that attachment or 'focused interest' confines our scope, narrows it. If we can relax and not have a limited focus, a more natural intuition can arise.

I noticed this a number of times. For example, when I am on a project, fixated on doing something, whatever it is, my intuition just dries up and goes away. However, when I snap out of the fixation and it subsides, all my 'feely' intuitions start to pop up again.

That tells me something.

For one, we are our own prison wardens, and our constant busyness and fixations narrow our scope so that we can no longer sense or feel the more intuitive parts of ourselves. I have experimented with this and its true.

The moment my fixation 'pops' like a balloon and goes away, I start to feel intuitively again. In other words, if I am fixated on some interest or other, I get tunnel vision and can see little else but that, which is a pretty good definition of Samsara, IMO.

And when that fixation is resolved or runs out of steam, then that distraction evaporates, and I am once again more open to just feeling normal again. And it is then that new ideas to think or write about begin to bubble up into my consciousness.

I just share this for those interested, to see if you have something similar going on.

The message for me is that, as mentioned, I am my own worst enemy, and my tireless effort to fixate on this or that closes me off from what I really seek, which is to naturally be intuitive and live life.

It also reaffirms my dedication to dharma because it reinforces the idea that moving away from the purely conceptual and into the more immersive non-dual states of non-mediation is the key to liberation from Samsara and all of the above.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me of some sea anemones, with their feelings relaxed and open.] When they are threatened they pull in all those tentacles and wait it out.]

EMAIL

**The Linear Tube of Time**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

January 31, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/b7ed191d-ff90-478d-a697-4567ca40874a_1024x1024.jpeg*

I try to pry my fingers off any stick-to attachments, yet this is inefficient and would take forever.

It's fair to say that ANY dualistic endeavor, any situation with a subject and object, accumulates karma faster than we can remove it. That boat will sink faster than we can bail it out.

And so, this makes Samsara, in all its facets, a losing situation, a downhill slide toward the oblivion of increasing karma.

And this is why the great Mahasiddhas have repeatedly pointed out to us that anything short of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is hopeless and that the best way to remove our accumulating karma is not to accrue it in the first place.

This obvious fact is a precious suggestion for us. Work on not accumulating karma in the first place. Work on the one who is busy accumulating karma (which would be ourselves), instead of trying to remove the karma that we have already accumulated. Karma, once accumulated, is very, very hard to remove without it first ripening.

Cut the root, not the branches.

In summary, dualistic situations like we find with words and language are inherently flawed and can't be entertained without accumulating karma. Even if it is a slow leak, we are still accumulating karma.

This is why there is such an emphasis on the non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, of which Insight Meditation is an integral part.

With Insight Meditation, which is non-dual, we are totally immersed, with no subject and no object, thus nothing 'sticky' for karma to cling to.

In fact, as mentioned, this is the preferred (and only) method to remove karma, both as a preventative and a remedial measure. What this means is that through Insight Meditation, we avoid adding new karma and at the same time begin to deconstruct existing Samsara (the karma maker) one moment at a time.

We transmigrate by transforming Samsara into Nirvana, a bit at a time, turning Samsara inside-out like a glove.

What's difficult or problematical is that Insight Meditation is not just something we can do without training. It is not linear as in simply the next step in a line of steps, although it is what has to come next of after dualistic dharma practices. That's what is meant here by non-linear.

Rather, Insight Meditation is a step beyond or outside the box, beyond a linear approach into, as mentioned, non-linear space, something few of us know anything about – non-duality.

We are not 'witnessing' in non-dual meditations because there is no subject or witness and simultaneously nothing to witness. That's why it is pointed out that non-dual meditation is also called non-linear and also non-meditation.

It is the full immersion of non-dual 'meditation', our being without a subject and an object, that avoids or cuts out the attachment or stickiness, the clinging, that accumulates karma. There is no one that clings and nothing to cling to.

And yet we are not used to letting go and being fully immersed, which is, of course, non-dual; we are used to the dualism of language and Samsara, which is 'sticky'. We cannot just let go and fully immerse ourselves at will without training. At least that's the way it has been with me.

And so, IMO, the first step is being aware of the problem, that it exists, and that we cannot just immerse ourselves in clarity without thought and thinking. Non-dual immersion is not natural to us, and apparently has to be first pointed out and then taught.

That's how I learned it, by having it pointed out to me by an authentic dharma master.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me. The tube of  time and being careful not to touch the walls and create attachment-friction and thus karma.]

EMAIL

**The Pool of the Non-Dual**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

February 1, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/221110fa-172c-4e48-8503-919a3bb4f47c_2048x2048.jpeg*

Attachment means friction between reality and Samsara's misapprehensions and the friction of that duality is the sign of karma accumulation. Samsara is that accumulation.

And so, we try to slide or travel down the tube of time without touching any of the walls, so to speak, without creatin the friction of attachments. Of course, unless we are a Zen sensei or dharma master, we leave a trail of sparks (karma) banging against our attachments which make up the walls of time.

It is the nature of Samsara that we create more karma each day than we resolve or remove. We just pay karma forward. Clinging to attachments, reifying, and layering up reality, what is called "gilding the lily," results in a massive accumulation of karma that is blinding. Historically, we are used to accumulating karma as we go along. The dharma texts we have never (not ever) been without it.

Lessening or removing that karma is difficult to almost impossible, despite all of the duality dharma practices to efface it. Inevitably karma will ripen in time and express itself. A careful reading of the dharma literature will support this. However, the non-dual dharma practices can deconstruct Samsara.

Aside from not creating karma in the first place, once we have mastered the dharma preliminaries (Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries, Lojong, and the like), the key to removing or breaking down karma is training in the non-dual, non-linear dharma teachings like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, fueled internally by Insight Meditation working with Tranquility Meditation. Even conceptually, the non-dual forms of meditation, which are non-meditation are impossible to put into words or understand without actual experience with them. We have never known that.

As mentioned, while working with the dual forms of dharma training, the Common Preliminaries, Lojong, the Extraordinary Preliminaries, and the Special Preliminaries, which we can accomplish on our own, with a group, and with a variety of teachings and teachers, eventually we have to master the non-dual meditation practices which are said to be 'non meditation."

However, the transition to the ‘non-dual’ forms of dharma training, such as Mahamudra and Dzogchen, is a different story. We cannot do it by ourselves or even in a group. It depends on having an authentic teacher with whom we can work and who is willing to work with us on a one-to-one basis.

In fact, there is a large pool of practitioners who have gone as far as they can with the duality dharma practices mentioned above.

I am reminded of the way migrating salmon school in deep pools while going far upstream. I have seen them. In a similar way, this large pool of practitioners wait for an introduction to the nature of the mind and perhaps are unable to locate and mix their minds with an authentic teacher who can guide them to deconstruct duality enough to immerse themselves in the actual nature of the mind. Becoming familiar with the nature of our own mind is what advanced dharma teachings are all about.

And this next step cannot be grandfathered to us, bought, or found on our own, because there is a singular requirement. Nor is there a work around, bypass, or backdoor way into the nondual dharma practices.

And it is here that many diligent dharma practitioners sit and wait, like the salmon in a pool, for the missing ingredient, an authentic master and guide who can introduce them to the nature of the mind so that they can become familiar with it enough to work it themselves.

It is like learning how to drive a car. Usually someone who can drive a car instructs us how to do that. It is the same with being introduced to the actual nature of the mind. We have to be instructed, the technical word is “introduced” and that means finding a teacher willing to work with us, from whom we can naturally learn, and this is often not an easy task.

Of course, we actually have to want this enough to make an effort to find a dharma teacher for this particular introduction to the mind’s nature.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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## Gap in Practice

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

February 2, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/530c274f-86e7-49e5-8880-6abbcc7997d8_1024x1024.jpeg*

As mentioned yesterday, the only visible or 'glaring' gap in dharma practice comes as we complete what are called the preliminary (dual) dharma practices and ready ourselves to be introduced to non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

This gap faces all dharma practitioners and can take a little to a very long time to negotiate because by ourselves, on our own, we cannot just tackle it. The introduction to the actual nature of the mind requires that we have an authentic teacher to work with. That stymies a lot of folks, either out of shyness, or lack of understanding what is required here.

And, as mentioned, we can't just do this step on our own. And this is a huge difference, IMO, because up to that point our progress with dharma practice is pretty much up to us, how much we work with it. In fact, dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project, with this huge exception.

For this transition, we require help in the form of instruction, what is technically called the 'pointing-out instructions" as to the true or actual nature of the mind before we can proceed. And after that, once again we are on our own and progress is up to us.

And not only is our progress with the recognition as to the actual nature of the mind in the hands of our guru, an authentic master, we are also facing an introduction to the non-dual practices and as it is written, they are ineffable, beyond words and language.

So, it's not like we know what we are getting into. We don't know what is ineffable and it can't be known or studied without being first introduced to the non-dual dharma practices. We can't do it without help at this point.

And solving that equation can take time and a different kind of effort on our part than we are used to. And the fallout of this situation is what I liken to a pool of practitioners suspended in time until they first get that instruction (pointing-out instructions) and second that instruction takes hold, and they attain the recognition of the mind's nature. Those are two different stages.

I know that in my own case, I received the pointing-out instructions a number of times and failed to recognize the mind's nature. It's not like we can fake it and declare we have recognized the mind's nature. We either have or have not had that recognition, because it's not an understanding or even an experience. It is a recognition and the realization of the experience of ordinary mind, when we have become familiar with the nature of the mind and can work it.

Yet once had, recognition is undeniably obvious. A door opens that we did not know where it was, a portal or rabbit hole, and down it we go. And, by definition, it is like nothing we have ever experienced before in our life. It is magical or miraculous.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## 'Kensho' in Zen, 'Recognition' in Tibetan Dharma

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

February 3, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/87f53380-679a-4d04-b47b-005a8bf9fc90_816x1456.jpeg*

I thought it might be helpful to point out some of the similarities between what is called "Recognition" as to the true nature of the mind in Karma Kagyu Tibetan Buddhism and what in Rinzai Zen Buddhism is called “Kensho.”

The term "kensho" is often translated as "seeing one's nature" or "awakening," and it represents a profound insight into the nature of existence.

Both "Kensho" in Rinzai Zen Buddhism and the "Recognition of the mind's nature" in Karma Kagyu Tibetan Buddhism refer to profound experiences of insight and realization on the path to enlightenment. Since I am not skilled in Rinzai Zen, I have asked ChatGPT to help me a little bit with this article, so I don’t write things that are not helpful.

While there are differences in the terminology and specific methods used in these traditions, there are also some similarities in the underlying principles:

DIRECT EXPERIENCE

Both Kensho and the Kagyu Recognition of the mind's nature emphasize a direct and non-conceptual experience of ultimate reality or the true nature of the mind. These experiences are not based on intellectual understanding alone but involve a direct, experiential realization. It’s all about familiarity with our own mind.

TRANSCENDENCE OF DUALISTIC THINKING

In both traditions, the practitioner aims to transcend dualistic thinking and sees through the illusions of separateness. The experiences are often described as a direct encounter with the fundamental nature of existence beyond ordinary distinctions.

PROFOUND SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

Achieving Kensho or the Recognition of the mind's nature is considered a transformative event that brings about a profound shift in the practitioner's perspective. This shift can lead to a greater sense of freedom, clarity, and understanding.

INTEGRATION IN DAILY LIFE

After the initial realization, practitioners in both traditions continue their spiritual practice to integrate the insights gained into their daily lives. The goal is not just a one-time experience but an ongoing transformation that permeates all aspects of existence. In the Kagyu tradition, it is a process of extension and expansion of our recognition.

NON-CONCEPTUAL AWARENESS

Both Kensho and the Recognition of the mind's nature involve a form of awareness that goes beyond ordinary conceptual thinking. The experiences are often described as direct, unmediated encounters with reality that bypass the limitations of conceptual understanding.

It's essential to acknowledge that while there are similarities, each tradition has its unique teachings, methods, and cultural contexts. The language used to describe these experiences may vary, but the underlying goal of realizing the true nature of reality is a common thread in many Buddhist traditions.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## The Widening Gyre

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

February 9, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0ed4ef62-7aee-49ec-9c6b-c84f7f784169_1024x1024.jpeg*

The solar flares continue to ramp up. There was almost an X-Class flare only a few hours ago. Energy packets from the sun will be heading our way, each more than we can digest in the moment, so we can either hide out and lie down or try to surf the change. I am trying to surf the change this time, and trying to use this powerful energy.

I got my second shingles vaccination today, which always brings some fever. I have a low fever and am working through that.

However, I am falling behind with the blog writing. Very busy and not much to say. My dharma blogs get few comments and without those comments I have communicated about everything I know, over and over again. Personally, my dharma activity over the last years has migrated off the cushion and into everything I do all day.

I feel that's the way it is supposed to be. It's all dharma all the time, IMO. If any dharma questions come up on this blog, I will try to answer them, if I can. And I will write more dharma-related blogs as I am moved to do that.

As a musician and student of music I well know that music is enlightening, at least for me. As a photographer, I also well know that images are worth 1,000 words. Our six senses are our means for enlightenment, IMO.

I hope to pursue photography fueled by a new camera, the Hasselblad X2D 100mpx, which is on its way to me as I write this.

As mentioned, the six senses are also a means for our liberation, if we realize this. Personally, I depend on hearing, seeing, and insight, which are three of the six: ears, eyes, nose, touch, taste, and mind.

We are in a widening gyre.

To read this article, see BIO, and select the 'Substack' Link, or paste the above URL into a browser.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**"As It Is"**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

February 14, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0d808589-2bf7-4137-9428-695e9df35236_1693x2048.jpeg*

The great Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, who recently passed away, was a wonderful teacher. I have had many teachings from Thrangu Rinpoche, received him at our center, been to Thrangu Monastery in Tibet, and received all of the 3-year retreat empowerments from him.

Here are some inspirational excerpts from Rinpoche's vast collection of teachings:

“One of the slogans in Lojong (Mind Training) is ‘Rest Within the All-Basis, the essential nature.’

There are two aspects to the All-Basis (Skt. alaya, Tib. kunshi): the consciousness aspect called the all-basis consciousness (Tib. kunzhi namshe) and the wisdom aspect called the all-basis wisdom (Tib. kunzhi yeshe). What is the difference between these two aspects?

Even though the wisdom quality of this eighth consciousness is ongoing and unimpeded, we may not yet be aware of the empty nature of phenomena. Not realizing this is called the consciousness aspect of the all-basis.

This ignorance forms the foundation for the other seven consciousnesses. However, with meditative training, we can see that even though there is no entity there (i.e., when we look for this consciousness, we do not find anything), present at the same time is this wakefulness, the wisdom aspect of the eighth consciousness.

So, our task as a practitioner is not only to rest in the nature of the all-basis but to also be aware of its nature.”

END QUOTE

And IMO, the above advice is pretty much a recipe for all advanced dharma practice. Resting, resting, resting is what we have to do. And ‘resting’ does not mean some dharma-ized kind of rest, but just rest as we know it when we take a load off and just give it a rest.

Perhaps where we rest is key. In this case, we rest not watching a football game or a movie, although we could do that if we can. Here rest means letting

go and resting in the nature of our ordinary mind, something we all need to become more familiar with.

I found it very difficult to just rest in this manner. As mentioned, for me the most difficult concept to get through my head was that rest is rest. We must rest.

And to rest, we have to let go of just endeavoring ahead into the future. Instead, we must let go and relax, as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa so succinctly said: “Rest, As It Is.

Whatever and however it is for us, we must rest there, in that.

And not rest with a thumb on the scale of the future, where we are going and how we plan to get there.

We must even abandon all hope and expectation. The Mahasiddha Tilopa so concisely said to us everything we must consider:

Don’t Prolong the Past.

Don’t Invite the Future.

Don’t Alter the Present.

Don’t Analyze or Examine.

Don’t Intend or Control.

Just Relax, As It Is.

[Photograph by me.]

EMAIL

## Spring Snake Meet

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

February 27, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e6ed4903-1d37-48e5-86c4-5afcc0ce9202_1354x662.jpeg*

[First real warm day, with a temperature up to 67 degrees F out and we were walking in the woods, following Mitchell Creek until we reached the fork and then coming back a different route. It's too early, yet these two garter snakes were out and carrying on their mating ritual. Usually they are out a bit later, but this spring  is all turned around. You might have to look carefully to see the two heads meeting.]

OUR BEING IS BECOMING

I am always aware of the lack of living beings in our northern forests compared to, let's say, the profusion of life in the Florida Everglades where I have been a number of times. It reminds me of the analogies as to how a CPU computer chip works. CPUs are so fast that the chip seems to endlessly wait for an event or instruction to come through.

In a similar way theoretical physics and quantum mechanics view matter as being made up mostly of empty space, like a hologram. And theoretical dharma posits a being that has no actual permanence, but where at best "Being" is in the process of becoming but has never arrived.

Theoretical physics suggests that the solidity of matter is illusory and is mostly empty space with dynamic quantum fluctuations. Similarly, in theoretical dharma, the concept of impermanence challenges the notion of a fixed and enduring Self, highlighting the ever-changing and transient nature of existence.

Just as the holographic principle suggests that our three-dimensional reality may be a projection from a lower-dimensional space, impermanence suggests that our sense of a permanent Self is an illusion arising from the interplay of various transient factors.

It reminds me of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" where Prospero says:

"We are stuff as dream are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

Or Shakespeare's play "Much Ado About Nothing."

Perhaps this life is much ado about nothing, about space empty of matter rather than matter empty of space as we would have it. Unfortunately, I am not a mathematician.

I am aware of our fear or the challenge of our ‘being’ as, at best, only becoming and never arriving at any kind of permanent being or existence. What we call being is but an impermanent ever-changing process of becoming that appears to be at the verge of being yet is not and has never arrived there.

That impermanence or lack of being makes us nervous, although apparently it has never, not even ever, been any different, which is why all the dharma sages keep telling us to just “Relax, As It Is.”

No matter what we ‘think’ and imagine, after untold millennia, apparently we are still here now, whatever and wherever that is.

[Cellphone by me.]

EMAIL

## Coming Events Cast Their Shadow

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

March 1, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0101af05-8ae1-4590-9e9f-ab8ae5e8e57b_1024x1024.jpeg*

The Signs of Change: I'm not going to address here coming events for the world. Instead, I want to outline some coming events and change I sense in my own world. I know it is change is coming because its partly here. It all starts with how feel and the changes I am going through, IMO.

And not all changes are of the slam, bam kind that are all too easy for us to be aware of. There are subtle signs of big change that it pays to be sensitive too. I am going through one of those right now, but I have yet to grasp it consciously.

I can feel change coming. It's happening now, at least personally, yet only barely. It kind of comes in edgewise, slicing up what I remember, but not yet present enough to reveal itself so that I can recognize it right off and get a handle on it. Too soon for that.

This kind of subtle change always comes with a dawning sense of clarity, a kind of clean feeling like I am finally getting down to the nitty-gritty and am about to give up pretense of one kind or another.

Yet, as mentioned, while I sense something changing, it is barely there, more of a whiff or almost a premonition rather than my being able to grasp it whole. What are the signs?

One sign is that I'm tired or wearing out what drives me on or forward in life. It's very subtle, almost a sense of ennui, but not so romantic as that. A tiredness.

It's like the sand is running out of the hourglass of satisfaction of my being happy with how it is with me. Something is about to change for me, and this is just the tip of the top of the iceberg of change. It's like the old Dylan line: "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones? Only, I'm Mr. Jones.

I don't know and I can't yet say what it is, only that I sense a change in the air, and I know this because I am being distracted from being satisfied with the way things are going just now. What was satisfying no longer is, but yet this is

very faint or subtle. It's like I catch whiffs or glances of the coming change, but only out of the corner of my eye, so to speak.

I know that I will be the last to know, because it is 'Me, Myself, and I' that is changing and not something or someone out there. It's hard to see yourself changing when that's what is changing. Yet, here it is, in the offing, just beyond the pale, and still out of sight.

Anyway, hard to put into words, but the idea here is that this 'somewhat dissatisfaction' gradually, but eventually, turns into the recognition of change and a renewal, with the satisfaction that whatever change is happening is for the best and is satisfying. Again, what are the signs?

The upset of not knowing what is happening to me levels out and gradually is replaced with by an interest in the changes taking place. A new version of me is emerging, one more integral, down-to-earth, and in a word "worthy." What's not to like with that?

Well, I have not reached that point in this current sense of change I am now experiencing. I'm only at the point where I realize that I am changing and trust that the change is going to be for the better after all. The first sign of relief.

I can't yet put my finger on just how I'm changing, yet of course would like to. All kinds of fears are starting to be dispelled or evaporate. Fears like I'm changing for the worse, that I am losing the thread of dharma that I cling to, and on and on.

Yet, this thread of dharma that I cling to, the clinging itself has to go, sooner or later. As odd as it sounds, we can't be attached even to the good or sacred things. Attachment is attachment, no matter what we are attached to, the good, the bad, or the ugly, so to speak.

The training wheels have to come off the bike, the scaffolding to build a house taken down, etc. if actual freedom is to arise.

We must be free of our attachment to dharma and all its trappings if freedom is to be. Like a garage sale, "Everything has to go," all of it.

Anyway, that's the kind of change I feel happening just now. Losing my guardrail, even my attachment to the good, in this case the dharma that I have clung to for many decades, while so helpful all this time, has to dry up and also blow away.

The good, for goodness sake alone, or as my first dharma teacher used to say to me, again and again:

“My God is no beggar. He does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet!”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## Initiation Into Life

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**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

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Although I have had many ups and downs in my life I have been very fortunate in the area of having perfect life teachers and guides. The universe has always provided me with key people who have appeared in my life, connected with me, and transmitted information essential to my future. Most of my Facebook friends know I have worked with Tibetan teachers for the past 50 years or so but I had other teachers before that.

I'd like to share with you something about the most incredible teacher from my early years and that is Andrew Gunn McIver, a man who literally changed my life.

And, as I am getting older by the day, I must warn you that in what I write here I am not going to sanitize or tone-down my accounts of what happened back then. Why should I? I am putting it out there so that some of you might know that these kinds of experiences still exist in the world and not just in movie plots and novels.

And after I introduce you to Andrew I will attempt to communicate some of the esoteric teachings and initiations he shared with me those many years ago. This may not be of interest to everyone, so note that please.

One morning sometime in 1967 (or perhaps earlier) I met what appeared to be an old man on "The Diagonal" of the University of Michigan campus. He looked a lot like the writer Bernard Shaw. This meeting was to change my life forever.

In fact, here is a poetic (and perhaps exaggerated) account of that meeting that I wrote as a journal entry long ago and which, while certainly over the top, will give you at least a flavor of what that first meeting was like. You were warned of this above so don't complain.

"It was somehow ordained that they should meet. It was permitted. Preparation for this kind of meeting began far in advance. Perhaps they put on their first disguises hundreds of miles and maybe hundreds of years apart - lifetimes ago. Even the heavy layers of flesh were hardly adequate as they reached each other in that first moment. All others even near wore protective

glasses and thick shielding. The light which was all around was white hot, and it's very heat had hidden them.

"The old man's eyes (like crystalline stalks) burned staring straight inside himself. Then both their eyes, intensive, meeting no resistance, shot out and one into the other. The old man let his secret start between them and he was understood - known.

The impulse from within each shot out into the other. Eyes eyed other's eyeing. Their words resounded in that great silence and then wore off, consonants crackling, and their voices sputtered out in the silence. Silently speaking, this conversation sputtered on endlessly like static in a radio. There was no reason. Sight itself was seen seeing.

"And their eyes soon lost the heavy shine of flesh and, flat out they were seen seeing, eyes straight-out that sought support inside, and inside, settled, seeing light itself shining out. When their sight struck they stuck, united in two, tying inside into itself. They were one and moved together parallel. In unison, they shared this dance and saw 'that' seeing. In unison they sought to set inside each eye, sharp strength. They were inside insight itself. Mind moved.

They were of one mind and matter. What matter what remained. And they showed their soul's insight that shot forth and froze forever, now already formed. Their eyes, once set singing inside, just shot out. And then the eye, once set singing, slowly settled and shared insight."

As fantastic as that account may appear, it 'was' like that. And after that, for almost two years we worked together. The old man walking with the young man walking. Andrew would talk; I would listen.

Andrew Gunn McIver was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1887. He served in the first world war where he had the job of recording the dead. Later he emigrated to Canada where he worked as a lumberjack even though he was only a little more than five feet tall. As a young man he was burly, strong, and had red hair, fair skin.

And he also worked for many years as a travelling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. Later in his life he ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan where he spent the final years of his life working as a custodian… "cleaning up after others," as he put it. During those later years Andrew McIver became an important fixture on the U. of M. campus where he met and probably befriended hundreds of students like me.

At the age of 66, a time when most are retired, he was caught in a boiler explosion at the University and was almost killed. He spent six weeks in the

hospital covered with burns and had to start life all over when he was released. His hospital stay had used up all his savings and at the age where most people are no longer working he had to start over from scratch.

As mentioned, he was a custodian at the University of Michigan until his retirement. His last years were spent living in a single room on a very modest amount of money. His passion was the mind itself and all the world religions, particularly Buddhism.

Andrew was in his eighties when I first met him there on campus in Ann Arbor. A red-head in his youth, Andrew's now-white hair contrasted with his fair skin, which had a reddish hue.

With his long white beard, as mentioned, he looked for all the world like Bernard Shaw. Andrew's fierce eyes were intense and yet very vulnerable at the same time. He had no fear of any kind and would just address people straight out.

"It's not 'Touch me if you dare!', but "Touch me if you ARE!,'" Andrew would declare. To meet his gaze was to know what compassionate wrath is, fierce but open and kind at the same time, removing what had to be removed, supporting what needed supporting. There was no B.S. with Andrew McIver. Your whole being rose to the occasion the moment your eyes met his.

In my experience Andrew was the only person I had ever met up to that time who did not have some form of shadow or dark side. The effect of contact with Andrew was always positive. He consumed darkness and had a kind of love affair with the Sun.

As a redhead, his fair skin should not have been exposed to the Sun more than necessary. Yet Andrew above all loved the Sun and would stand in it for hours on end until his pale skin would just peel away exposing red patches.

"Imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun," he would growl at me, "That's hot stuff!" He felt he had been consumed personally in the very heat and cauldron of the life process, and that what remained had been purified. This seemed true.

"You have to choose," he would say, "between being a diamond or a pearl. A diamond is the result of a very long time and immense pressures while a pearl is created to protect the organism from irritating matter. Which one will it be?" Andrew was, without a doubt, the diamond and he shone forth with an intense light.

Many days I would look for Andrew around campus and often find him sitting on one of the wide cement benches along "The Diag" up near State Street,

usually in the full sun. I would spend whole days with him listening to the various aphorisms and lessons he would speak to me of.

Although normally talkative (can't you tell from my writing?) I seldom spoke when I was with Andrew, almost never. I just could not find anything important enough to say to interrupt whatever he might be saying. And I absorbed the information Andrew offered with a great thirst. Communication of this kind was what I had longed and prayed for my whole life. This was the real deal.

Andrew would say that he was tuning me like an instrument and that one day, years from then, I would respond to the information he was placing in my consciousness. He told me that straight out.

And the things he said were absolutely true and often, after 10 or 12 hours of intense listening, I would be so exhausted as I stumbled home that I felt I would have to be sick and throw up. It was like chemical radiation, the information he shared was so strong.

Andrew spent a great deal of time in the libraries of Ann Arbor, particularly in the public library at the corner of 5th and Williams where he read intently on mostly Eastern religious topics. He would write out short quotes from various books on tiny 3x5 slips of paper. At his death I found thousands of these slips, each with writing on both sides.

The sad thing to me was that the reason Andrew wrote down the quote was often more profound than the famous quote itself. I only wished he had written out his ideas in his own words. His juxtaposing of the quotes was more brilliant then the original quotes. Think about that!

Andrew not only would repeat certain themes or sayings, he would ask me to memorize and recite them. And he did this in front of others, often at Circle Books, the local metaphysical bookstore where I worked.

There, around a low circular oak table, Andrew would ask me to remember and recite particular aphorisms in front of a group of other people gathered there. I was often embarrassed because my memory (on the spot) was not always that sharp, but it was a sign that Andrew took some stock in what he was drilling into me.

Andrew had been for many years a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. He was familiar with almost all branches of metaphysical and occult wisdom. His reading was vast. He was very familiar and had worked with the Max Heindel school of Rosicrucianism and knew the book "Cosmo Conception" inside and out. He was familiar with astrology, numerology, occult science,

and about every kind of metaphysical study. He was perhaps most interested in Buddhism of all forms, in particular, Zen. Also Sufi wisdom.

During my years with Andrew McIver, he initiated me into a lineage of esoteric knowledge some of which I will attempt to share with readers here if I can find the words.

As mentioned above, Andrew would tell that me that he was reading this deep esoteric knowledge (like you would write out a script) deep within my mind and consciousness. He literally would say that he was tuning me like one would tune an instrument and that many years from that time I would remember, and this knowledge would come alive in me and live on.

That my friends was a powerful experience!

And to give you just one example, as I related earlier, he would repeatedly say to me . “Michael, imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun,” he would then growl at me, “That’s hot stuff!”

And years later when I become well-known as an astrologer it was heliocentric astrology (sun-centered) that I became an expert in. Literally, I imagined myself standing at the center of the Sun. That is how it works. That is what initiation and lineage can be like.

And the proof of the pudding (to me anyway) was when I traveled with my family in 1997 to Tibet to meet His Holiness the Karmapa high in the high Himalayas (something like 15,000 feet). In that remote place the Karmapa (who did not speak English) through a translator, gave me a name. “ You are Tenzin Nyima,” he said. This translates as “holder of the Sun” or “Keeper of the Sun.”

Before I try to express his teachings in words I should tell you a little more about him. When I knew him, Andrew spent much of his day working with language, with words. Palindromes were a favorite, words or phrases that read the same forward as backward, like the famous one about Napoleon, “Able was I ere I saw Elba.”

More often he would take a word and create a list of all the other words that could be derived from it much like the popular game today called “Boggle.” And most often he would take the English language and spell words out on the spot to me, like the word ‘initiate’ -- “In-It-I-Ate.”

Andrew would declare that this helped to give insight into the inner meaning of the word. This was his gospel or as he would say it “Go Spell.“ From his point of view the words themselves were signs that described their own nature. Their secret was in plain sight.

He would also do any and all kind of word games, where letters were rearranged. Not crossword puzzles mind you, but other sorts of word gymnastics. He had very little money and true to his Scottish heritage was somewhat frugal on top of that.

He lived until the very last months of his life in a tiny room at a boarding house. The few belongings in his almost empty room were always neatly placed.

He loved to read newspapers and, in particular, the fresh news of the day, but with a special twist. It seemed that whatever happened on a national or international level would also happen to Andrew in his life at the personal level.

For example, when race riots broke out in Detroit, that same day Black youths broke into Andrew's tiny room and destroyed something. Andrew was totally aware of this and felt it represented a level of consciousness he had earned by burning off various obscurations.

Just like we astrologers say that the cosmic dance up in the heavens is acted out down here on earth at the same time, so what happened in the news on earth seemed to happen to Andrew McIver personally and daily.

It was the imperfections, Andrew would say, that kept him still around on this earth and he would show his slightly-bent little finger on one hand that had been injured years earlier.

This imperfection, he would say, helped to keep him from passing on. I never knew if he was just kidding or using this example to instruct me in one of life's secrets. I was always the rapt student.

And Andrew was an expert on just about every business establishment in the campus vicinity. He made a point of visiting them all and would not stand for bad service or the deterioration of service. He was always vocal about this sort of thing, would make his observations known to management, and if unanswered, he would avoid the place completely. I would not like to own one of those businesses that Andrew shunned. They are all gone today.

There is no question that Andrew McIver was a protector being, perhaps what the Tibetan Buddhists call a 'dharma protector'. He was fierce, although his indignation at those who harmed others never burned anyone. He was living fire that did not burn.

The correct term for what Andrew often exhibited would be righteous wrath, wrath at all and everything that obstructed and obscured the pure flowing of the life force.

Perhaps you can imagine encountering a five-foot figure in his eighties on the campus of the University of Michigan and casting this old man a condescending kindly glance, only to be suddenly eye-to-eye with the most vital force in the universe. Unforgettable!

And I will mention this just once: Andrew was 'with' us but not one of us, in that his personality had no shadow – cast no shadow. He was so perfectly clear that his presence was like a window in this dream we all have called life, a window through which I could at times gaze. He was only there to help. Aside from that he was not there at all.

Andrew had a notable chance-meeting of the governor of the state of Michigan, who greeted Andrew as if he was one more doddering senior citizen in a group of elders. "And how are you," Governor Romney said in his obsequious politic voice. Andrew responded, "It's not 'How are You?' but 'Who are you?' that matters," he replied, to the governor's complete confusion.

And Andrew was very careful with what he ate. Over his long life he had tried eating almost everything and learned what each thing did to his system. He could tell you exactly what certain foods would do to his body, producing a boil here, a rash there. For example, this particular brand of tomato soup would cause a rash here on this part of his right ankle, and so on. He ate very simply and would cook food for me once in a while. Andrew taught me how to boil coffee by dropping the grounds into boiling water, turning off the heat at once, and covering the pan. We would often drink coffee together.

And he had real powers. I could recall many times when I approached Andrew at a time when I was in a foul mood. Andrew could sense this at once and would always tell some story that led to an emphatic action of some kind on his part.

He would be talking along, getting more and more crisp about some point when, taking the newspaper that he usually carried, he would bring it down sharply in his hand or on the edge of a table or something. Whack!

In that instant, at the precise point where the sharp sound occurred, my headache or bad mood would just vanish. It was gone.

Andrew did this all the time, like swatting a fly. Andrew McIver must of had many students and I know that many people benefited from his presence. I only knew a few of his other students personally. As time went on Andrew and I became almost inseparable.

On Andrew's death on March 9th, 1969, I was the one who worked with the police, contacted his sister in Scotland (his only remaining kin) and saw to his burial.

Andrew was buried in the Forest Hills cemetery near the corner of Observatory Street and Geddes Road in Ann Arbor, up near the students dorms on the hill. I saw to this and designed a tall granite stone with the symbol of the Sun on it, a circle with a dot in the center. I enclose it here. He would have liked that.

If you want to visit his grave, it can be found just inside the fence near the sidewalk along Geddes Road, about 3 blocks from the cemetery entrance and to the South. I often visit there when I am in Ann Arbor.

Well, I have told you something about Andrew McIver, but for me the most important point was that in Andrew I had found an individual and a person who had no shadow, no personality flaw of any kind that I with my outsized critical eye could discover.

Andrew McIver was absolutely transparent and empty as far as obscurations were concerned. He had none that I could see and I had looked you can be sure. And yet his mind was as vivid and lucid as a cloudless sky. As mentioned, you could see right through him into yourself. And through Andrew I could finally see into the future of… myself, i.e. that I had a future.

It was clear when I met Andrew McIver that this man cared more for me than I knew how to care for myself. I sensed this and trust and confidence arose in me (for the first time in my adult experience) for another 'person'.

Through Andrew I could see clearly and I was able to open my heart to him with no reservations. And with that gesture, all of my fear of other people vanished and I ceased to be hung up on other people's personal faults.

This is not to say that I stopped recognizing flaws in those around me but rather that I was no longer afraid that others could infect me, that I would end up like them if I listened to them.

Andrew McIver was like a pole star in the general direction of my life. Because he was authentic, genuine, I was able to trust my own judgment because I had with me now the experience of the real deal, a fully realized being who, once known, left no doubt in me about who was a poser and who was not in those around me.

Once I encountered someone like Andrew, I could never again get caught up with those who just pretend to know. I now know the difference and knowing that I could have compassion for those who just pretended as opposed to

fearing them, debating them, or thinking they were contagious. It made all of the difference.

I promised to share with you at least a taste of Andrew McIver's teachings. As I get right down to doing this it is clear to me that these teachings are not only very useful and profound but also very, very difficult to realize experientially. There is a long journey between grasping these concepts vaguely with your mental understanding to realizing that they are actually true, much less living that reality consciously.

This is what is called esoteric or occult (hidden) doctrine and this kind of learning has usually been passed down from mouth to ear, not because it is secret or forbidden but rather because it is self-secret, hidden from ourselves by our own ignorance, which means society chooses to ignore the obvious, And these kind of teachings are hidden in the obvious, in plain sight, the one place we would never think to look.

Andrew McIver was very much about what are called climactic life events, pivotal points of change on which our life turns, times where there is a definite before, during, and after. These kind of events are often called rites of passage or life passages, gates we each pass through whether we are aware of it or not.

Andrew called these passages 'initiations' and he would often say: "We are all initiates, but it is a question of to what degree." Andrew's view was that each of us goes through and experiences all of life's passages or initiations fully but often with little or no awareness of what is happening to us and thus no memory of the event. It was never consciously recorded.

This is perhaps why he was so fascinated by Buddhism because as we know the word "Buddha" simply means awareness. Gaining awareness of what we are going through in our life was very important to Andrew.

Recognizing these great life events or rites of passage are important, but even more important is celebrating them. So many of these deeper life initiations are never spoken of in public, much less actually acknowledged and celebrated. It would seem that in these current times each of us celebrates our own most intimate self secretly, privately, or perhaps with almost no celebration at all. This indeed is sad and unnecessary, but true.

Andrew was very aware of astrology and in particular the motion of the great timekeeper, Saturn. The planet Saturn completes its first circle or return to its original birth place in the zodiac around thirty years of age. According to Andrew, one of the key or main life passages (climactic events) is that first Saturn return.

You know the old phrase “Never trust anyone over thirty.” Well, there is a reason for that. The area of time in our late twenties and early thirties marks a great life initiation, a great passing or passage. Andrew used to say that 33 was the year that Christ died, and he would also say that 33 is when ice melts. And there is the 33rd degree of freemasonry, and so on. In life the 33rd degree or year marks a pivotal change for every person although most of us have only a dim awareness of it.

And although we all experience our Saturn return (this rite of passage), not that many of us do it consciously and with full awareness. Instead, we tend to sleepwalk through these life changes and miss or ignore these important inner passages or events. Andrew McIver was very much into helping people (especially young people) go through these rites of passage consciously and with full awareness before they were thirty rather than sometime later on.

“Awareness is everything” was his view, so you can see it was quite natural for me to eventually wander into Buddhism which is all about being more aware. Andrew wanted those people under thirty years of age to go through the great Saturn initiation with their eyes open and not ignorant (ignoring) and asleep in their bodies at that crucial time. His philosophy was very much one of “go and meet your maker consciously” rather than be dragged into awareness reluctantly.

Waking up was what Andrew McIver was all about. And there is much more and it gets deeper.

I will present two esoteric truths for you to consider, and I warn you that they are not easy to grasp and may even appear as pure nonsense, so don’t jump to conclusions.

Relax and just let these concepts roll over you and do their work for a bit. Thinking won’t help you now. These concepts work internally on their own. Here will just attempt to point them out. You will either get a glimpse of them or you won’t.

The first esoteric concept is that all of the hoo-haw about being “born again” is nothing other than becoming aware of this great rite of passage that takes place around the thirtieth year. Although Christians have claimed it for their own, there is nothing particularly Christian about being born again. We all are born again by virtue of living beyond the age of thirty but not all of us are equally aware of it. When we do become aware of this, that is what is called being ‘born again’. Again, awareness of these events is always the key, not whether you experience the event. We all experience this passage, but we don’t all remember it.

And while it is perhaps best to have this awareness of being born again 'while' you are going through the rite of passage at around thirty years of age (because it is an event that happens to each of us), we can become aware of it at any time after that. In other words, we can also realize that we have become born again anytime later on in our life.

However, it can only happen once, this awareness, this being "born again," and not over and over. That is what defines a 'realization," the fact that once you have experienced it you never forget it. It is not something that waxes and wanes, that comes and goes, but is instantly a permanent part of us, a realization. And now for the really esoteric part, the hard part to grasp.

In the esoteric sense the 'death' we all wonder about, perhaps fear, but have no choice but to look forward to, does not come at the live-long end of life like we imagine or have been told.

On the contrary, the important death comes right smack in the middle of life, around that first Saturn return. In other words, death happens in the midst of life and after 'that' death are only the 'after-death' experiences, what the Christians call the resurrection. We 'are' literally born again, each of us right in this life.

In other words, we die and are born again right in the middle of life and not at the very end as we imagine. There are different kinds of death.

By the time we reach the old-age end of life we are about dead, physically, but the death that counts and that everyone fears happens right during life itself. In fact, the prime of life (like the top of the bell curve) is simultaneously the exact point of a psyche or spiritual death (and rebirth) for each of us.

I know this may be hard to understand for some of you who are reading this, so I can appreciate that you may want to just ignore all of this and move on. But there may be a very few of you who can grasp this very esoteric or occult (hidden) concept and make it real for yourselves: realize it consciously. And I will try to explain this in more detail, but know this:

Andrew McIver was very much into initiating anyone (those who could grasp it) into these concepts and helping to prepare us to experience this great rite of passage consciously and not have to piece it together later in life a bit at a time or not at all.

Some of you have commented or messaged me that these concepts are hard to understand. Well, yes they are. Don't feel like the Lone Ranger. It took me years to understand these concepts and that is pretty much par for the course, so relax and let it permeate and percolate.

Keep in mind that the statute of limitations never runs out on this realization because it is not about 'time'. By definition, it is outside or beyond time as you and I know that term. That is the whole idea of Saturn we are discussing here.

Remember that in astrology Saturn 'IS' time itself, all the time in the world, all the time you and I will ever know. And once Saturn completes its first full cycle (which is around thirty years of age – 29.4 years) it starts to repeat itself and to go over the same zodiac degrees for a second time. This repetition is key.

That is when we start to wake up, because during that first round of Saturn we are all caught up in the clutch of time and unable to release ourselves. Our body is busy growing itself. When Saturn gets repetitive, starts to go over the same material again at thirty years, it is like a Déjà vu experience for us.

Somewhere inside we dimly know that we have done this before, been here before. Time's (Saturn's) grip on us starts to fail and we quite naturally begin to wake up and (as the Christians like to say) are born again. This 'born-again' experience can be sudden and all at once like a lighting strike or it can be gradual and slow like the Sun coming up. It takes all kinds and this experience varies just as we all vary from one another.

Since we live in a materialistic time and in a materialistic society we have been trained or indoctrinated to focus only on the material body and its eventual death. That's materialism, plain and simple. But there is another more-important death or change that happens to us and that death happens right at the prime of life, right when the physical body stops growing and is complete. And that change is (we could say) the "death" of death, which is why it is a rebirth or a being born again.

It is unfortunate that the concept of being born again has been Bogarted by the Christians. It is not their fault that they were smart enough to catch on to this, but their enthusiasm can be off-putting to the rest of us to the point of driving us away from our own experience of this climatic event, an experience we each need to complete ourselves.

Here is more about the way Andrew presented this concept to me:

He spoke of this 'being born again' epiphany as like a space capsule, one that each of us builds during the years that our body is growing and forming, those years when we are less than thirty years old. He spoke of this time as if during these early years we are on Earth or within the body. And it is at that time that we make changes, choices, and otherwise modify our own personal vehicle, our particular space capsule.

However, he taught, at around thirty years of age that space capsule we have formed through our youth (the body) is launched into space and then time (as we know it) just stops. Think about that for a moment because that is the end of time or the "end time."

Time no longer has dominion 'over' us and ceases to fascinate or transfix us. You could also say that Saturn (Satan as the Christians say) loses his grip, and we pull free of that force, the force of time. Then, as Saturn starts to go around in its orbit for the second time, degree by degree, we are launched, ready or not, beyond time and out in space.

Because modern society has lost the awareness of deep inner changes (rites of passage) like these, there is no discussion and little awareness of this natural life initiation. We each are left to figure it out for ourselves privately, to celebrate alone as best we can what would better be celebrated outwardly with our family and friends. But as it is, we each get short services and silence from those around us. We enter that silence.

This great inner change (the loosening of the material death-grip on us) releases us from the body and we float free like an astronaut on a tether in space. In the occult tradition this is called "entering the Silence" and it can be a somewhat frightening experience when time stops.

This of course is just an analogy, but it is an apt one. Andrew McIver made it very clear to me that once our vehicle is launched beyond time (around thirty years of age) it cannot be altered physically. Whatever we have achieved, however we have formed it, all of that remains just as we left it.

In other words, we leave the body at that time just as it is, finished, half-finished, or unfinished. We just up and move on, which is the awakening experience I am trying to describe here. I am not going to call it "born again" any longer because that phrase carries too much baggage.

We wake up or become aware which (as I keep saying) is what Buddhism is all about: awareness. Nothing more.

Andrew spoke of three orbital periods of Saturn, three cycles of thirty years each: the cycle ending at around thirty years, one ending at sixty years, and a final one at ninety years. And he said this:

We spend the first thirty-year cycle building our vehicle (growing our body), the second thirty- year cycle repairing the damage we make launching our vehicle (getting out of the body), and the third thirty-year cycle (if we live so long) actually becoming a conscious part of the creative force itself. That last cycle is incredible, so think about what that might mean.

A traditional analogy is that of flower. First there is the bud (first cycle), and then the opening of the flower (second cycle), and finally, beyond blooming, the total relaxing of the flower (third cycle). I may do another blog or two, but for those of you with an interest in this I have a free e- book that I wrote years ago called:

“Astrology of the Heart: Astro-Shamanism”

It is all about this concept and you can download it here:
http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig

This awakening experience can happen around the age of thirty or ANY time later, whenever we start to realize that we have already left (or are leaving) the body.

This wraps up the blog on my life teacher Andrew McIver. Of course, words cannot express my debt to Andrew or my deep-felt love and appreciation for the man. He caught me in the throes of struggling with my own personality, successfully tamed me, and then proceeded to instruct and initiate me into my own mysteries. It changed my life.

Looking back from now it seems that Andrew was some kind of emanation that appeared to me. I have no idea how I merited it, and it came at the end (and caused the end) of years of my struggling to not-take anything from anyone. Remember, I never graduated from high school because I literally could not be taught.

Part of that problem was because if my would-be teachers had personal faults, I refused to learn from them. I used their failings as an excuse to ignore what else they had to say and would take nothing from them because I did not want to end up being like them. I did not want the bathwater that perhaps came with the baby. This was a mistake (miss-take) on my part.

Lucky for me Andrew helped to correct that mistake. He was so perfect in every way that I had no complaint and just had to listen. He had my undivided attention. This is what I mean by “he tamed me.” With Andrew I had run out of excuses, run out of time.

Even today there is a quality about Andrew McIver in my mind that was more like a dream than real. A better way to say this is that the dream was real. He was more than I ever dreamed it could be. And through Andrew I got over my resistance to other people and (as I mentioned before) their personalities and in two ways.

The first way is that by meeting someone who I felt confidence in and that I could totally trust, my inside world or psyche was projected outside myself

into (and through) Andrew and that opened a window on reality that gradually widened. In other words, my outside and inside began to mix and merge and this was key. Like a drop of water in a still pond sends ever-widening concentric circles that are more and more inclusive, so did my pent-up inner psyche go out into and through Andrew, gradually mix with that threatening outside world, and both myself and the world become more balanced or equalized.

And second, having known Andrew, having known authentic wisdom, I never took another wooden nickel from those who had no authentic experience and literally did not know what they were talking about, those who had perhaps abstract knowledge but no experience and no realization.

For me this was a big thing. Before Andrew I could not tell who was authentic and who was faking it. I had no reference point or experience to go on.

Although I did not know this at the time, it was a sign of strength that I was able to manifest a real-life teacher in my outer world, that it was even permitted to happen. These things don't just automatically 'happen'. You have to want them, ask for them, and pray for them. You have to REALLY want and need this. Andrew was that bridge to the outside world that I needed and that I had been waiting for all my life up until then.

I will close by sharing with you what I now see is an important truth. Although I needed a pristine and perfect example in the outside world to have confidence and to forge a wormhole into a new dimension, this was a misunderstanding on my part. Of course, I found that example in Andrew McIver, but since then I have learned:

It does not matter what the personality of your teacher is like. Of course, it has to be within the limits of your tolerance for differences, within your idea of what is accepted behavior. But that aside, what is important (and the only thing that is really important) is that the life-teacher is capable of pointing out to you the way into yourself. That alone is initiation.

There is no teacher of any kind, nor has there ever been or ever will be, that can do it for us. The whole point is that we have to do it ourselves, to actually have the experience and to learn to "know." All written words, all spoken (and even all silent gestures) are only signposts, pointers to having the real life experience for ourselves. All are signs that point to our jumping into the pool of life and experiencing it for ourselves. It is the only way to know.

A teacher is someone who can point out to you how to realize yourself. That is their entire job. Period. They don't have to be your friend. They don't have to look or act perfect. Their personality is their business, not yours.

The only question to answer is: CAN they (are they able) to point out to you a method for you to know yourself and for you to know the true nature of your own mind. In other words: when they present it, do you get it? As I understand it, that's all that is required.

Andrew McIver was very much in the "now" and would say to me more than any other saying: "Michael, this is it!"

[Here is a photo of Andrew Gunn McIver and his tombstone.]

EMAIL

## The Times They Are a-Changin'

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

March 4, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/96f6e6d3-036d-487d-9db3-b94d038df722_2048x1976.jpeg*

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0c6d9cd4-bdc4-4154-a69f-cace0080b402_2048x1976.jpeg*

Don't' take this too literally, but the bonfire of our mind is consuming both facts and imaginations in a conflagration. The past is but a memory in decline. There is no refuge there.

I am reminded of the poet William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and the line "After dinner I asked Isaiah to favor the world with his lost works; he said none of equal value was lost . "

And the future is not yet graspable, not in our hands. There is no refuge there and it is foolish if we believe there is, which leaves this present moment. Here we always are.

I have always been fascinated by the idea of 'truth' and the fact that the truth in us lasts, and I delight in saying that "Truth is the Future."

And I say that because it is only the quintessential truth that will last until then, until the future. The truth will still be there then. The rest will fall by the wayside and be lost in the conflagration that was mentioned above. We are by definition stuck between a rock and a hard place to grasp.

And of course, there is always the kaleidoscope of the ever-changing planetary patterns in the heavens above, especially true with our own solar system and these heliocentric patterns there that the planets are bound to.

These changing planetary patterns bring one geometric whole-chart pattern into focus and then dissolves it again. And we are living that. And with these changing patterns, my mind comes into focus and then fades with the degradation of the pattern, like a twinkling star.

I seem to know when to go take a look at the current whole-chart astronomical patterns only to often find it is the same general pattern as the pattern at my birth. Somehow, I'm aware that my natal pattern is happening.

And when it is, I'm in focus once again for a time and then it's gone. I can offer a funny story.

Back in the early 1970s when I was discovering and documenting all this whole-chart planetary patterns (I called them Star*Types to myself), I was calculating an looking at these Star*Type patterns in various groups of people, my family, my friends, musicians, etc.

Well, one day I had the idea that I should do the Star*Types of all those people I did not get along with, in particular my 'enemies'. Why not, and so I did that.

When I got them all calculated, what I found is that almost all of them had Star*Type patterns just like mine. What a shock! Apparently, I didn't like people like me, too much competition. In a nutshell, I didn't like myself in all of its many forms.

I learned a major lesson right there and began working on liking or at least tolerated myself and myself in other people. If you would like to do that yourself, here are two free books that can help.

"StarTypes: Life Path Partners"

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

"Dharma Chart / Karma Chart: Astrological Empowerment in the 21 st Century"

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev%20Nov2015.pdf

And here is another anecdote: I can't say if this only happens to me or that it happens to everyone. I do know that the current whole-chart pattern in the sky is not there just for me, but for everyone. And as it changes, forming and separating, life changes with it. These changes mean something, certainly they are not nothing. They are right there and happening.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I am fine, even with everything around me in this world in what appears to be chaos. And the chaos is deepening, not lightening. That turning political and war-driven gyre draws us deeper within and is not spewing us out, at least not yet.

And with it, as mentioned, the political spiral surrounding us also deepens. We are falling into it, not coming out of it. Beyond the obvious outer chaos, there each of us sits, doing the best we can to be stable in the whirlwind of changes engulfing us.

I should sleep, yet I cannot. I mean well toward each of us and even collectively. We have no choice but to ride this one out, to see these changes through to their destination, whatever that will be.

When it is done, this chaotic time, no matter the outcome, there we will be, maintaining our own inner compass, even if the compass of the world and these times is convulsing. Our inner gyroscope will still be silently spinning and stable as best we can manage it.

We are personally not these outer changes, unless we are, yet we are in these changes, embedded in these changing times.

[StarType whole-chart patterns for men and women, created by me.]

EMAIL

**A Dharma Story: The Drawing**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

March 6, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/fee48dc4-d6ab-494e-8ced-c67d5fff4c45_891x1136.jpeg*

> *Since many of you like these stories, here is what I consider a marvelous story. Many years ago, in the 1980s, I had a dream. It was very vivid. And in that dream, I presented my dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche a drawn image or portrait of himself. It was one of those dreams that is magical, somehow more real than waking life. For that reason, I felt it was important that this dream be made real and acted out in actual life. After the dream and its imprint in my mind, I began actively to consider how this could happen. I tried on many ideas. I finally settled on a sketched portrait, but finding an artist good enough for the job was not easy. I only knew of a single such artist, one of the finest draftsman in Michigan, a man named John Felsing who was renowned for his life-like portraits of wildlife, especially birds. I have a number of his watercolors. I contacted Felsing and asked to visit him. Then Margaret and I traveled the two hours to Lansing where he lived and sat down with him. I explained my dream and what I was hoping he might do. After some discussion, he agreed to do a drawing and I gave him a really nice photo of Khenpo Rinpoche. Several months went by and I heard nothing. Then one day a large envelope came in the mail. It contained a first sketch of Khenpo Rinpoche. To my dismay, the drawing he sent was a sketch of an elderly oriental gentleman, but not the dynamic rinpoche I knew. This would not do. I got on the phone and carefully explained this to John Felsing and he said that he would try again. To assist him I then sent him some of Rinpoche's dharma teachings and one of his books, a book I also worked on called "Dharma Paths." Again, several months went by and then one day another large manila envelope showed up in the mail. I hesitated to look inside; and then with bated breath I carefully opened the package. When I did, this time the image was actually of the Khenpo Rinpoche Margaret and I know and love. Apparently the books and Rinpoche's own teachings helped to communicate the idea of the man himself. I let Felsing know that he could now do the finished drawing. And the ending to this story is remarkable. When the artist Felsing finished the final drawing, he personally called me on the phone to notify me of that. And as it happened Khenpo Rinpoche, who (of all things) was*

> *visiting our dharma center that very day, was about to do an empowerment for our local group that evening. Felsing did not hesitate a moment, but said he was coming to Big Rapids to see Rinpoche. He jumped into his car, drove through the oncoming night to our center and, when he arrived, he formally asked Rinpoche to give him "refuge." Refuge is a short ceremony that takes place when someone discovers that they have great respect for the dharma, respect not only for the historical Buddha, but also for his teachings (the dharma), and the sangha (those monks and nuns who embody the living teaching). It is a request you make of a teacher. Felsing's request was honored, and Rinpoche gave the refuge ceremony, which includes giving those who ask for it a dharma name. Apparently during the months that John Felsing was working with Rinpoche's image and reading some of the teachings, he was moved by what he learned and had developed a true respect for the dharma. He was inspired to become more actively involved in the dharma and so asked to receive the refuge ceremony. I am struck by how a simple contact with Rinpoche, even at a distance, made such a difference. [Here is the drawing that the artist John Felsing made of Khenpo Rinpoche]*

By Michael Erlewine

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[Here is the drawing that the artist John Felsing made of Khenpo Rinpoche]

EMAIL

## My Thoughts on the Hasselblad X2D Camera

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

March 15, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a0e6cbc0-e0fb-4fed-a2cd-2f8808a10145_1500x1107.jpeg*

This is not a camera review, but rather my just talking about this camera which is new to me. There are scores of reviews on line and I have read most of them while waiting for my copy to arrive.

It takes me quite a long time to become 'familiar' with new photography equipment. I have been working each day on the Hasselblad X2D 100 m-pixel camera for a few weeks.

This is a special camera for a special kind of photography. I am getting to know it, warts and all, and I really like it. It does much of what I want a camera to do, and I have a whole set of Nikons to use for what the X2D can't do.

However, the X2D does a lot of what, at heart, I most like these years, although with a 100 m-pixel sensor, this is at the expense of storing all those quite large files. I have not finally decided, but mostly I am tending toward NOT keeping all the layers, but just being satisfied with the stacked results, the final result, and keeping those.

I have kept, over the many years, some million Nikon images, mostly used in focus stacking, but enough is enough. I always hoped that some emerging technology in the future would allow me to restack the layers and come up with better results.

However, in truth, even though that may happen, I doubt I would do that re-working all that much. This is because I seem to move on from whatever I have done.

Mostly I am a creature of this present moment and am quite happy working with whatever I'm working on, old or new. If I ask myself, what do I care about, I'm afraid the answer is not so much just the resulting photos, although they are important, but rather the process itself. That's where I live, or so it seems. However, the X2D is catching my attention as to results as well.

If I give up storing all the X2D layers, life will be easier and also more sensible. It's me that's not been sensible.

I have tried, of course, all the various ways or modes of stacking with the X2D, and as I have discovered, the Symmetric mode makes no sense, the Infinity mode causes me fits, and the Near Limit mode works and makes the most sense.

I have had many cameras, it seems, the first mirrorless Hasselblad (not ready for prime time), the first FUJI GFX (same), about four different Sony DSLRs, Pentax, etc., and many Nikon cameras, several of which I have.

If I don't 'like', meaning actually become fond of a camera, I tend not to keep it.

The Hasselblad X2D is, for me, a keeper, and I am already knee-deep in it, and am happy about that too.

Of course, I have to get it to perform, but patience and steady practice for me does the job.

I wish I could afford more lenses, but for now I have to be happy with what I have, at least until I sell enough old F-mount lenses to afford them. I am selling about fifty lenses on Ebay to pay for the X2D and a couple of lens. And I know something about lenses

I have been interested in APO (apochomatic) lenses, which are highly-corrected lenses for a long time and the sharpness and lack of aberrations they offer. I still am interested, but one thing I am learning from the X2D is that technical perfection is not everything.

The resulting photos, even if technically imperfect, are also as important as the process through which they were made. And while the X2D 'appears" to defy gravity a bit and looks pretty good even at impossible F-stops as to diffraction, I can live with that, contrary to my previous view. Trying to perfect the 'perfected' no longer interests me… so much.

And so, I seem to be saying that I really like the Hasselblad view, at least so far.

Yet, I believe I am saying something else as well. And that is while sharpness, lack of aberrations, and other corrections are important, they are not everything. Technical perfection is the starting place, but not the final result.

There are many admirable photos that lack all of these technical qualities. Yet, I am surrounded in my studio by some of the finest APO lenses that can fit on my cameras, so I don't lack those.

Above all, it seems to me that I am trying for photo images that scratch a certain inner itch I have. They include sharpness, but also are enhanced by the out-of-focus areas we call bokeh or bouquet.

I am a kind of Impressionist, seeking to capture an inner impression that can't be put into words. Heaven knows I have tried to write all this out.

I don't do photography professionally and never had that desire. I do it because I like and often love to do it and for no other reason. I also do it because close-up photography was also for me a gateway to dharma, the means through which I had a major spiritual or dharma realization, which came not sitting on the meditation cushion, but rather out in the wet grass crawling around on my belly in a summer meadow, watching the sun come up. That was what was where I got Insight Meditation, at least where for me, it was permitted. Through photography I celebrated that insight breakthrough.

I can also do this with words, at least I try. And although words are said to not be able to express the ineffable, I get as close as I can.

And since "a picture is worth a thousand words," with photography I sometimes can say through a photo something closer to my deeper impressions than even words can come.

And so, while sharpness, clarity, and a photo that is well corrected are important, IMO these are not as important as communicating the impression I try to get across to myself.

Photos are not only techniques, but also about spirit and communicating spiritual insights.

EMAIL

## The Karma of Effort

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

March 16, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/118027dd-34bd-4af9-ba32-9c7ad53331e3_1024x1024.jpeg*

There is some karma to effort and often a lot.

I am reminded of Shakespeares  Sonnet 129 and the line:

"The Expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action," although I would modify it to read "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame is 'effort' in action."

And this is just to say that with any endeavor, we leave behind us a trail of effort expended, effort perhaps we needed to get anywhere at all, yet effort nonetheless and it leaves traces and scars.

There are no doubt more natural ways to accomplish the same goal and forcing ourselves is not one of them.

I'm talking about learning dharma here, yet the same principle is true for any other kind of endeavor, anytime we find ourselves making an effort beyond what feels easy and natural. We do it all the time, especially in daily repetitive tasks that we don't feel like doing. Undue effort is one of the major causes of the deadening effect of karma.

What's the problem with a little effort, with pushing ourselves beyond what we naturally want to do? Well, the obvious is that are doing something more than we feel like, and by that we accumulate the scars or karma that result from this.

And yes, it varies from a little trace to a lot, actual scars that accumulate that at some point have to be removed in one way or another.

Again, here I am concerned with the results of effort learning dharma, about the last place we might want to accumulate karma and it is detrimental to the dharma itself.

Dharma wants to be purified and anything that is attached to it will be removed. Here what will be removed are the scars or remains of undue effort that we make trying to learn the dharma.

One dharma practitioner responded to this by saying something like, “Oh well, we will just use the Vajrasattva mantra (a cleansing practice) to clear away whatever remains as karma and that will take care of it.”

My response to that comment is that this is just wishful thinking and that karma, once accrued, is not easily remedied or removed and IMO they have another thought coming.

And of course, the classic comment on this in the scriptures is that the best way to remove karma is not to accrue it in the first place. Yet, with undue effort, ineffectual effort, this is hard to avoid.

Rather than go on describing the problem, let’s just jump to the question of what we do if we have generated karma through our efforts that has to be removed. And again, I am talking here about dharma effort.

When we have persevered in our dharma training and finally been introduced to what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana), it is at that point we begin to realize how much baggage we are dragging along with us because of the karma from effort we have made that was not natural but forced.

Indeed, it is an obvious stain to any insight or realization that has dawned for us and just as obvious, it has to be removed because now we can see it. And this can be a painful discovery, IMO and experience.

As mentioned earlier, there is not much we can do with karma that we already have on the book, so to speak, yet the purification of that karma is not an option, but rather a necessary step in our path. How to do this?

And the first step in this process is to not add any more karma to the pile by not making any further undue effort. Instead, we must just relax our efforts, smooth them out, and naturally rest in the nature of the mind. Stop struggling.

As for the old karma we have already accrued from years and decades of over-effort? That will have to just fade away as best it can. No amount of scrubbing will erase it, and that kind of scrubbing will likely just add to the problem.

If anything helps, it is that at last we are aware of the situation, what we did, and that this accrued karma is ours to remedy, but remedy without effort.

The effort to relax is something like an oxymoron, yet that is the condition we face. Relaxing in the present moment so that no further over-effort occurs is the first step. And this will typically take a long time for us to relax enough.

If we are aware of the results of our undue effort, then we are no longer adding further karma to that already accumulated and this is a big deal and a true accomplishment.

It takes a lot of exercise in our dharma practice, removing the kinks as we can, and becoming more fluid and natural. And this may require we remove the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, of our dharma practice, replacing meaningless effort with actual living dharma. This is key: don't keep mindlessly practicing.

I'm hoping you get the idea here without further description. If we get the true insight that comes with Insight Meditation, than we can finally see the forest and the trees.

In other words, we can see what to remove and what to allow to remain in our practice, and the idea here is to rejuvenate our practice so that it no longer is just a practice that we do but actual meditation, now that we can see and feel what that is.

The value of Insight Meditation and the insight as to what that is reveals to us exactly as to what was organic and real about our dharma practice and what was feigned and a meaningless effort to practice. The artificial dharma practice has no meaning and needs to be removed, meaning: don't do that anymore.

And the very good news is that with Insight Meditation at last we can see what actual mediation is and just do that, letting go any attachment we have to the effortful dharma practice we have dragged along in our wake all these years.

I hope that this is useful to those who can see what I am pointing at.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**It's Now or Never**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

March 31, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/704a80e5-dbc7-4bf5-a80c-33847eacac30_1152x2048.jpeg*

The well of the present moment is always right here and now, no matter what excursions we make, whether we dwell on the past or imagine the future. The present does not and cannot go anywhere else but here.

Of course, we each have our reasons for reflecting on what has passed on or anticipating the future results of time. However, we should keep in mind that time out or away from the present is just that, not being in or focusing on the here and the now.

It's not a question of blame, that we should or shouldn't be distracted. Rather, it is simple mathematics as to time spent focused on the present moment. If we are absent, we are not there.

Focused attention, which is what meditation is all about, as each of us soon find out, is not so easy to do. We are all over the place from moment to moment. And it is not the case that this is being focused is something we can force ourselves to do out of sheer will, at least for more than a short time.

We are soon exhausted trying that. The only antidote or approach I am aware to remedy this is allowing the mind to rest, just as it is, without our help or our doing anything at all.

I have to repeatedly remind myself that nothing I can do, outside of just letting go and resting will get me anywhere at all and that the main goal of what we call 'meditation' is simply greater familiarity with the nature of our own mind or 'the' mind that we all have access to.

This was always pointed out to me by my meditation teacher for 36 years, the idea that he was introducing me to the nature of the mind, yet it was up to me to become familiar with it and to extend and expand on the familiarity. I must become familiar by becoming familiar, by familiarizing myself with the mind's nature. No one can do that for us.

We can dance around that as long as we want, yet sooner or later we get on with the process of familiarization with our own mind, which as mentioned is called 'meditation.'

Flexibility and familiarity with our own mind only make sense and without it we are, well obviously, unfamiliar and inflexible. The mind is very much like a muscle rather than just a ‘thinking’ device.

And this familiarity is the process of coming to terms and realizing we are not the boss of our own mind anymore that we are of another person’s mind. The mind is the mind, and our only option is to become more familiar with it, so we can work with it harmoniously and get in synch.

It is a bonus that if we can become flexible with our own mind, we can extend that flexibility to all other minds as well. We each have our own take or purchase on our own mind; that’s personal to us.

However, everyone else has their own grasp on the mind and  it is the same mind that we each are becoming familiar with, although we each have our individual or personal take on it.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

## Cutting the Root

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

April 1, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/8308d320-333b-43fa-9151-d2874333ac13_1024x1024.webp*

The Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche had this say:

“Delusion is like a dream and an illusion, but we have not realized this when we are resting in the state of peace known as Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) . There’s less delusion in the state of Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) , but the nature of the mind and the nature of the delusion have not been realized.

“For this reason, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) does not serve as an antidote for delusion. It’s a temporary solution, though a steppingstone on the way to a deeper understanding. The mind becomes very relaxed in Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) , and the delusion relaxes, too, but the ‘nature’ of that delusion has not been realized.

“In Vipassana (Insight Meditation), the mind and delusion are realized to be empty, like a dream or an illusion. In this sense we say that Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) suppresses delusion and Vipassana cuts it from the root.”

The above quote says what has to be said and is very clear about it, the difference between Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana), suppressing delusion and cutting the root of delusion once and for all.

The act of suppression, and the effort required to do that, eventually gives way to removing that effort which cuts the root of delusion.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## The Well Beyond Words

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

April 7, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/06107003-1332-42c7-8a7e-47afa219d7c2_1296x2048.jpeg*

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**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
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**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/4db248a3-84e8-4d95-93e5-48620bc2b0be_1152x2048.jpeg*

I have been working with words since I was a young man, even a youth. And I have studied the English language, teaching myself how to use it, but most of all by actually using it.

I well know the crush and crackle of consonants and the deep moaning and cry of vowels as they struggle to express my thought.

And I'm not belittling language because I love it. However, I also know that language alone can never express the inexpressible because by definition language is dualistic and thus divisive by nature. That's the nature of language.

And most of all I well remember that when push came to shove and I was most up against the facts of life, it's not that language failed me so much as that another door remained open when all else shut down.

And when, for me, the perfect storm formed and came down the line of time, it was not words that helped me then.

And when I reached for my meditation cushion and for the results of decades of dharma practice, I was referred instead not to that cushion but rather I leapfrogged all of that and found myself taking refuge in Mother Nature, and back into that formative time when I was quite young.

I didn't know that dharma practice and my experience of Mother Nature knew each other, although I did know they were linked and made of the same stuff.

What is sacred to each of us is just that, sacred. And sacred is as sacred does, as we do what is sacred for us.

And when, in that perfect storm, and a storm it was, I took refuge, that refuge was not in my perfunctory dharma practice of forty years, but stepping clear of all that, I woke up immersed in the moment, finally seeing the 'Seeing" itself seeing and seen.

Now, this was a simple thing, as natural and familiar as letting go and resting. There was nothing done and nothing doing but seeing through sight and seeing. And there was no one doing it.

Of course, as mentioned, this insight will not fit into words. That's what I have been saying here.

And of course, I'm not abandoning words. I'm using them right here as best I can. It's just that, when words fail, and they cannot help but fail to express the inexpressible, the ineffable… that back then I let go of all that.

And when I do, I find myself in the well of the present moment and once again outside in the natural world, in my case in Mother Nature.

And like I did back then in that time, I stepped beyond time and was swept up by and became one with the natural world, camera in hand and peering through the most refined lenses at the tiny worlds of closeup nature.

I find myself once again heading into the woods and streams.

Can I express with a camera what I see myself merging with? Or are these photographs just the residue of something more than themselves, the signature of the real.

At any rate, yesterday I went out into the forest with a camera, tripod, and an over-the-shoulder bag of filters and diffusers. And while, during this long winter I worked to lighten my load, to carry the smallest tripod, bag, and the lightest-weight camera, I gave up all that.

I have to take a large camera, a heavy tripod, and a good-sized bag. There is no real choice. It is painful to carry all that for miles or even a short way.

That seems to be what is required if I want to take photos properly, about 12 lbs. of equipment.

And there I went, crossing that wooden bridge into what now is called “Clay Cliffs Nature Area”, about a block from my home. It only recently has been given that name, yet I have walked these trails for some fifty years.

[Photos by me.]

EMAIL

## The Vision of the Eclipse

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

April 8, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/687de3c5-f571-4561-8874-b38f36e896af_1619x2037.jpeg*

The Sun and Moon are called “The Lights,” and they, along with Earth, make up the key triad of traditional and modern astrological factors. Only the intense solar discharges at the time of flares and related phenomenon supersede ‘The Lights’ in importance. Here we will be looking at the two primary monthly lunar events, the New and Full Moon, in themselves, and their relation to eclipses.

The Lunations

Time is perceived as a continuum, articulated by cycles such as the monthly solunar cycle. The monthly alignment of the Earth, Moon, and Sun at New and Full Moon are recognized by most cultures as key articulation points. The Tibetan Buddhists are very clear that these two days, New and Full Moon, each month should be set aside for observation. In ancient Tibet, they did not have Saturdays and Sundays off as we now do. Instead, they had important astronomical events like the New and Full Moon set aside as days of observation.

At these times, we should observe our mindstream. Just as these three bodies fall into alignment at the key lunations, our inner qualities, what are called the ‘winds and the channels,” also come into alignment at these times.

More important, if the New or Full Moon happens also to be an eclipse, the spiritual alignment is very much greater and deserves even more consideration.

Eclipses are special times. New and Full Moons and eclipses are times when information is circulated, when alignment occurs.

### Eclipses

Eclipses are simply New or Full Moons with extraordinary alignment or focus. They have been considered for centuries to be astrological events of the first magnitude. If we consider New and Full Moons to be important, then eclipses represent the keys to the lunar cycle for any year.

The New Moon contains an impulse or insight that grows to fruition at the Full Moon. Eclipses, then, provide moments when extraordinary insight or vision are available to us. It is possible for some of us, at least at certain times in our lives, to experience what has been called the "Vision of the Eclipse," and to remember or keep that vision in mind by its very imprint. There appears to be a theme or principal insight connected with major eclipses. Let me make clear just what we mean here by the word vision.

"Vision" does not mean the fairytale dream picture we might conjure up -- but it is related. A vision is a moment of extreme clarity or understanding, when 'in a flash' we know or experience something in its entirety. We take it in. There are times in each of our lives when we have vision or see some intrinsic truth about our lives -- about life itself.

### The Vision of the Eclipse

As mentioned above, there appears to be a common or communal vision that occurs around the time of major eclipses. While each of us interprets the insight or vision in a personal way, the theme or essence of the vision is a common global experience. And it is possible to share that vision.

Although we all experience it at once, only some of us are capable of remembering the experience in a conscious fashion. It seems that there are moments in life when we are privileged to be consciously aware of the vision of an eclipse at special or crucial times in our lifetimes -- times when we are particularly aware.

The message or vision of any given eclipse will tend to dominate our deeper or subconscious minds for months surrounding that eclipse. It is a peculiarity of these eclipse moments of insight can happen days or even weeks before or after the actual moment of an eclipse.

That is: the eclipse theme pervades the time prior to and after the actual physical event. Sometimes eclipses happen in pairs, two weeks apart. These are particularly powerful, and the whole time between these events can be a kind of waking dream - a vision.

Learning to recognize a moment of vision and taking advantage of these enhanced moments of vision surrounding and eclipse can be important. If the point in the zodiac where an eclipse occurs is in high focus in your natal chart, then the particular eclipse may have special importance for you.

In general, eclipses of the Sun (New Moons) represent vision into the nature of our life (ideas about life), while eclipses of the Moon (Full Moons) represent a waking experience or sensational event -- living in our own dream.

THE VISION

I have written here before about eclipses and their meaning spiritually. Here in the west, we don't have such a strong tradition in this, but in Tibet, India, China, and many other parts of the world eclipses are considered very, very potent and personally meaningful.

In Tibet, for example, they are considered as extreme opportunities for the observation of our mindstream, something we usually pay little or no attention to or, if so, only fleetingly.

The Buddhists in particular have focused on eclipses as rare opportunities when our more subtle internal or spiritual energies naturally come into alignment or attunement, when things that otherwise we would seldom notice line up and can be more easily experienced by us, that is if we know when and how to look for them.

Eclipses are, above all, times of vision or insight. We grow up with the idea that "visions" are little scenes or pageants that appear in the mind to us like movies.

Actually, the reality is quite different. Visions are times of intense experience when information perhaps vital to us is streamed and imprints itself deeply in our consciousness, more like a brand. Some traditions actually explain it as if a sacred scroll of some kind were placed deep within us (imprinted) and only over time will it unroll and reveal itself, literally speak or reveal itself to us. We read it out from deep within out mind over time.

I don't want to get all other-worldly or Twilight-zone- like about this, as the Tibetan Buddhists are very matter of fact about eclipses and their value. As mentioned earlier, eclipses in their view are rare times of inner alignment, times not to be ignored by us, but times when we should pay attention and observe.

In fact, Tibetans traditionally set these eclipse times aside as days of observation, just as Christians have holy days that they observe. And by 'observation', they mean just that: to observe our mindstream, our stream of consciousness carefully. Take time to do this as opposed to ignoring this opportunity with business-as-usual.

And although every eclipse (or New or Full Moon for that matter) has a vision or insight available to us, most of us have minds that are too noisy to receive that vision. We effectively manage to ignore them.

Perhaps they are too subtle, and we are not yet aware enough to grasp them. This is also what the Tibetans call "self-secret" in that these opportunities hide

themselves not because they are some hidden secret but because we lack the faculties to perceive the phenomenon. Our awareness is not subtle enough.

However, I believe that at the time of an eclipse certain individuals either are naturally sensitive to this information or are rubbed awake by life events enough to consciously experience these eclipse visions. At any given time, some of us are awake and experience this consciously. And of course, trained meditators develop awareness of these visions. I will not dwell on this here, but it is worth understanding.

What I do want to point out is that we have an eclipse of the Sun on Monday April 8, with New Moon at 2:21 PM EDT at 19-degrees of Tropical Aries 24-minutes of arc. And while the exact moment of the eclipse marks the precise center of the eclipse time, the effect of an eclipse is not so simple as the moment when it is at its maximum.

Two weeks prior, on March 25, 2024 at 3:00 AM EDT, we had a penumbral eclipse, so this whole time period now has been very special.

The whole lunar cycle around an eclipse, in particular the week before and after an eclipse is when the so-called eclipse vision arises and imprints, so don't get too specific about a day and a time. The vision of an eclipse fills the whole time around it.

Be aware at these times of intense experiences that rivet you and involve you totally. They can sneak up on you. A "vision" is not an idea that you will simply grasp or that comes to you, but a total experience that is beyond your understanding, that envelops and absorbs your complete attention, and will only reveal its meaning to you over time.

This is where the concept of the sacred scroll and its unrolling comes in. Eclipse visions are always totally absorbing and require time to absorb. In other words, they have a future for you to work through and thus the idea that these visions are somehow prophetic comes into play. It is not that they tell the future but that they will only reveal themselves over time. They have a future for us. It takes time to assimilate their meaning or message. You get the idea. I have told you enough about eclipse visions for now. I want to say something about this particular eclipse.

Most important, a "vision" is not something outside, but something inside. You can't "look" for it, although millions of people will witness this eclipse visually. You won't see its meaning outside in the world and you won't even "see" it (objectively speaking) inside. It is not about our "getting" it but is much closer to us than that.

The vision of an eclipse is something we all experience together (the whole world) and it is only the awareness of what we are experiencing that we may lack. That is why meditators meditate, to develop greater awareness of what is going on. Like the old Dylan song "Ballad of a Thin Man," it is "… because something is happening here but you don't know what it is do you, Mr. Jones? ..."

Well, except for a few serendipitous moments in our lives when we spontaneously awaken to these visions, we don't see them unless we train for them. That is just the way it is for us. We are normally too distracted for such subtleties.

"Visions" are moments of complete identification in the present moment. These are not experiences of objectification or polarity (stepping back), but just the reverse. They are moments of stepping forward and subtle rapture, when we seize on something (or are seized) so absorbing that we drop what we were thinking before and are caught up (despite ourselves) in the present. These are moments strong enough to demarcate or articulate our future from the past. They are important enough for us to forget our distractions. And at these times it is possible for us to just drop the past, to not follow the freight train of our past actions that has been taking us nowhere in particular and to actually cast off in a new direction, turn over a new leaf, so to speak.

In other words visions are pivotal points (pivots), moments of deep imprinting that are stronger (more significant) than what we were doing up to that minute (what just came before), that is: all of our immediate past that we had been slave to. These moments of vision CAN mark a turning point for us, up or down.

Visions are moments that we can seize or become aware of and that mark this particular time forever in the mindstream as one of our turning points. Or we can be totally unaware of what is happening to us as we usually are.

Of course, we don't often have the awareness to realize these moments of vision. Nevertheless, visions are experiences that are more real than our so-called "real" daily life. That is how they imprint on us; they literally 'eclipse' (pun intended) whatever we have been obsessed with in our day-to-day goings on up to that moment. These are opportunities to turn away from or drop the past and old habits. However, eclipses are a double-edged sword and equally can be opportunities to reinforce old habits and the past and lock them in for the future. Perhaps that is why in astrological tradition eclipses are also sometimes much feared. And that is perhaps also why the Tibetan monks suggest that these eclipse time are times to observe our own mindstream and take note of what appears, to find direction.

In summary, visions are not pipe dreams or ideas that we conceptualize. Far from it. Instead, they are very intense experiences or times that are more real than regular life. In fact, in most cases we only realize that we have had a vision much later, over time, as we find ourselves bringing that time or the experiences at that time to mind, again and again, as we try to glean its meaning for us. Visions are known by the fact that they eclipse the path we were on before they occurred and mesmerize or transfix our attention, effectively demarcating or serving to separate the present and future from the time that came before.

They mark a gap in our train of consciousness, one that we can take advantage of to move forward or backward. This is the rub.

I am sorry folks if these words fail to register. This is the best I can do to describe the nature of visions around the time of an eclipse. These visions can be before or after the actual moment of the eclipse because the vision experience is all-encompassing, and it is only the 'awareness' of the vision that may lead or lag the actual event by weeks or even months. It is the awareness of what is happening that is missing for most of us, most of the time.

[Graphic by me.]

EMAIL

## Not Knowing the Nature

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

April 16, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/76ad7be5-4945-453e-a8cd-9e85fa573ff4_1024x1024.jpeg*

I have access to the same mind that you do; we all do. That's the mind. What we do with it is up to us. The dharma texts state that the mind admits to training. We can train the mind. In fact, it is required that we be introduced to the mind's nature.

How hard is that? Like any other kind of training, it can be hard. It involves effort and undue effort can stain as well as help.

As for our conceptual flights of fancy? Is that just our conceptual imagination or does our imagination, what we 'think', have roots in the reality of the mind? Can we get down to earth or are we stuck in Conceptuality?

What goes up comes down, eventually, but for many of us (most folks) our thoughts are not well grounded in reality. In other words, we don't know from experience or are unable to realize what we are thinking or talking about. We are huddled at the tip of the top of the mind in an intellectual abstraction.

Does what goes down also come up or rise to consciousness, and what's the difference between the two?

The top and the bottom, if brought together, complete and make the whole, correct? Is that what 'duality" is made for, to come together? How can we blame those who want to unite the divided and dual to make them one? Were we once whole (non-dual) and somehow came apart? That's the doctrine of original sin, but the dharma does not support that.

The dharma texts say we are already and always have been one, united. The two (duality and non-duality) were never separated. It's our view that is distracted, out of joint. We are not in touch with our own reality.

And the sacred texts say we have never been any different. It's not that we once were whole and that now we have somehow fractured that wholeness. And I have checked this VERY carefully with the rinpoches. They all say that we have never been whole, meaning even though we are whole in truth, and we are, we have never been aware that we are one and undivided, except perhaps intellectually. The top of the tree dies out if the root is not nourished.

That’s the whole enchilada, folks, our lack of awareness that we are already whole and one. That’s also why the word ‘Buddha’ means ‘aware’ or the one who is aware. It’s all about awareness.

In other words, we don’t know what we are talking about.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**Liberation Assured**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

April 25, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/44bf6e8f-d6e5-42f4-99fc-33ca80157e90_1024x1024.jpeg*

A question I have found myself in the midst of this year is just where is my photography headed?

It's obvious that I am all ginned up about what I want to do next with my photography bent. It's been there since 1956 and received growth hormones when cameras turned digital and we didn't have to risk film any longer.

And of course, it was quickened when in my life, photography segued with dharma and became, to a significant extent, intertwined and melded. From that point photography has been unforgettable in my life, so what am I to do with that?

Well, until now and from the onset I have been expanding and extending the type of Insight Meditation (a form of dharma practice) I do when photographing images.

However, instead of extrapolating from photography outward into the world, I find myself now reversing that, recursively turning photography on itself and on top of that, doubling down.

I can't say exactly where all this is headed otherwise, I would already be there, and I don't have that feeling either.

It's more like I'm celebrating the concept of liberation through seeing, through sight and 'Seeing', what in Tibetan dharma is called Thongdröl.

I have heard of five types of liberation in the Tibetan system, which are Thongdröl or liberation through seeing; of course the classic method of liberation through hearing or Thödrol as seen in the "Tibetan Book of the Dead," Myongdrölor, liberation through taste; Drendröl, or liberation through recollection, and Takdröl, liberation through wearing or holding.

I don't have a teacher or instructor for these five. What I do have, aside from an extensive experience with liberation through sound, as in listening to music, and what I am pointing at here, is liberation through sight and 'Seeing'.

"Liberation Through Seeing." I have actual experience with and this was also where and through which I first recognized the nature of the mind, at least as

far I have been able. My dharma teacher of 36 years said it was not a shallow recognition.

That this visual liberation was folded into and through photography, cameras, and lenses, is just the way it went down. I would never had expected this and was totally surprised, most of all because I had the mistaken assumption that if I practiced dharma long enough, one day something would come to me while I was sitting on the cushion doing my dharma practice. That's what I thought the dharma texts said.

Not true at all. Of course, my decades of dharma practice all pointed to some end, yet it was my mistake to assume that that end had to be explicably of the formal sit-down-on-your-cushion dharma activity. I was clueless.

In reality, dharma realization or whatever we want to call it is far more feral and virile than that. It lives, is alive, and exists in its natural state, and not only in writings or even in organized religion. Dharma is wild and free.

Of course, of course… I had it all planned out for my dharma cushion, and I found out, as I like to say: that thought and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

I never got too far or far enough with the Judeo-Christian concept of God or Heavenly Creator, whatever that could be. It was stillborn in my book and not what I would call living.

The actual reality of life, when realized, is nothing but alive, vivid, pungent, and unmanageable compared to my intellectual concepts or constructions of all this.

Instead, it's a doubling back, recursive, incisive, and explicit punctuation in the face that I did not expect or anticipate. That's the beauty of it! We can't affect it at all.

It's the last place I ever thought to look and yet the first place I went when push came to shove and the chips went down.

And that, in a single word, is what my Tibetan dharma teacher had pointed out over and over and over, "Familiarization" with the nature of our own mind, meaning what we are already familiar with and have always been familiar with.

### As they say, "Who woulda thunk it?"

Yet, the that is what for me was a dark time, the perfect storm so to speak, when I assumed that I would seek out my dharma cushion and sit on it, when

instead I leap-frogged the whole enchilada and sought out and found my sense of Mother Nature that I first knew as a child, a young boy living far out in the country with no neighbor kids and only the natural world of Mother Nature to instruct me.  And instruct she did, imprinted.

I don't want to blather on, but just to say that the obvious is where we end up, where we always have been, the most familiar to us of all, whatever that is for each of us. Of course that's where we end up because that's where we are.

**Surprise; it's not a surprise.**

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## SEQUE

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 1, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/d844ea89-d6ad-4739-82c1-0d24aa9766d2_2048x1732.jpeg*

Just a note that I have been on Facebook since June of 2007, and I have been publishing the collected articles I have written as books for each quarter of the year since 2015 up to and until 2024, with the first quarter just now.

The same inner voice that led me to write these blogs for many years tells me that I have completed what I am able to do.

Of course, I will continue to write what comes to mind as I always have, yet when it comes to dharma and its practice, I feel I have communicated what I have to say as best I can and in triplicate. The sense of Bodhicitta driving all this is still there, but my need to express it is taking a back seat to photography and silence.

Anyone interested in my take and history of dharma training has more than enough to search out here in these thousands of articles. Heaven knows I've had to do just that and practice to understand what I have.

I am available, ready, and willing to answer any questions that come up about what I have written. Just ask here and I will do my best to answer.

In the meantime, I will be posting more photography and less words, at least until I am inspired to do otherwise.

These blogs are available in the dharma section of free e-books at SpiritGrooves.net.

As for this last year (2023) and the first quarter of 2024, here are the links to those.

2023 WINTER ARTICLES

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/FACEBOOK%20EDITS%202023%20WINTER.pdf

2023 SPRING ARTICLES

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/FACEBOOK%20EDITS%202023%20Spring.pdf

2023 SUMMER ARTICLES

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/FACEBOOK%20EDITS%202023%20SUMMER%20V2.pdf

2023 AUTUMN ARTICLES

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/FACEBOOK%20EDITS%202023%20FALL%20FIN.pdf

2024 WINTER BLOGS

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/BLOGS%202024%20WINTER.pdf

[Graphics by me.]

EMAIL

## Step Outside

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 2, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/66b47778-59d7-488a-a316-39e52f1e96ce_1536x2048.jpeg*

[The lilacs are starting to bud, and I just put in three rows of turnips.]

The first step is like washing the car to get it clean. I need to step away from my attachment to dharma and habits built up over more than fifty years of dharma training. I love dharma, yes, but over-attachment to dharma is no different than attachment to any other thing. I have to step outside for the moment and get some fresh air.

Along with the good habits come some bad habits or residuals that are just debris, scars left over from wasted effort, trying too hard, trial.

And attachments are sticky like glue. Best to let it all cool off and take this up again later on down the line.

This is true of any attachments, especially if they are part of a crucial part of our life. It can be hard to tell the wheat from the chaff after decades of exposure.

And it's tempting to think that we can carry it all with us and by more effort shift the load around until it is manageable and at the same time not drop or lose anything.

However, the point is that we have to drop stuff, need to lose both weight and karma.

Especially if you hang on to it, cling to it, dharma or not, it's best to set it aside, even if it is the pearl of great price. Clinging is deafening blind.

If it is not meant to be, you can't lose it because it's not yours to lose, or anyone's.

Best to find out now what's real and what's not, before death do us part and we're playing for keeps.

We can only take with us what's ours and there is no way we can lose that.

All that detritus, the scaffolding, and scars that obscure life from us, can't last long anyway, so let it go or give it a shove.

As they say, it's "All Good," but it's not all good. It's all good for something, but it may be just be good to it let it go.

In my own case, I've been at this dharma training too long with no letup. Heaven knowns what's been woven in with the weave of all that dharma practice. Obviously, something, otherwise I would not be getting messages to comb it out.

Whatever mold or shape my dharma practice has made of me, it's time to take the training wheels off and allow me to assume the form that's been shaped by the practice, warts and all.

Trying to get the warts out is what I am talking about here.

Freedom from attachment of all kinds.

[Photo of lilacs by me.]

EMAIL

## Waving Like a Prayerflag in the Wind

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 6, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/87256e5a-b811-4520-bc98-eed89bfb9f3d_1756x2048.jpeg*

There is no way to get off this life-train on the linear track of time that I want to consider, yet perhaps I can loosen up and become more pliant and better ready myself for entering the bardos.

All of that which weighs me down, whether it's karma or just the accumulation of the detritus and stiffening that comes with age, the need for pliancy, flexibility, and remaining fluid becomes obvious. I only have to look around me.

When I consider the relative ineffectualness of verbal and conceptual description, the wasteland as to the scarcity of meaning in words arises into view.

Words can but describe but are not themselves the meaning they attempt to convey and point at, nor can they evoke that meaning except perhaps rarely, which, as mentioned, is obvious by just looking around us at all the chatter.

It's no wonder that what we feel, like music or what we see in the visual arts and media are more popular than the more abstract intellectual constructs of concepts and words. We all know that, yet we persist in verbalizing what apparently can't be put into words, and what we keep attempting to put into words, but words do not (and cannot) themselves carry definitive meaning.

"Ineffectual," is the word I'm looking for here, which reminds me of that description of insanity, where we continue to repeat the same action and each time expect a different result. I've come up against that, of course. We all have.

And my response is to change my modus operandi, because obviously while words are perhaps at best helpful, they are not helpful enough to be useful in a major way. They are not a solution. I have tried this for over a decade and a half.

Intellectual vacuity is well known and it's ineffectualness documented ad infinitum. The great dharma masters have testified to this for centuries and at the same time they continue to use words to try to convey what they can, acknowledging that the ineffable cannot be put into words.

I hear that, and it's why I am more looking into other vehicles than language to communicate, such as visual forms like photography or the feeling of music, both which I know something about.

Over the years I've done my very best to put into words whatever I am trying to say, but after well over a decade of intense effort, I have to agree with the historical dharma teachers that what cannot be put into words cannot be put into words. Duh.

So, I am looking at photography as a substitute or at least as an adjunct to words, and also to music. Music rules.

So, to recap: my shift in approach here on Facebook and other media is to acknowledge that words alone, apparently, are not that ultimately useful except perhaps to the very few. Of course, I understand this and see no point in beating a dead horse, as they say.

I will rework my approach to blogging about dharma, in particular, and see if I can also communicate more with photos, since my own approach to dharma (as I know) is very much visual. I will hopefully write the occasional piece here on where I am at and what I am up to.

Since I see that I am in no danger of ignoring the dharma, I can hopefully loosen up a bit, become more flexible, and cast my bread upon the waters, so to speak.

I spent much of my life trying to get into the groove of life, and now I see that there is no danger of popping out. That's my confidence in and trust of the dharma itself.

And so, I'll expose myself to the elements a little more and surf the waves of life if I can. I see no point in rigidity and would rather wave like a prayer-flag in the wind.

Meanwhile I have three rows of turnips in a raised bed waiting to germinate.

[And my Datura is blooming.]

EMAIL

**Not A Walk In The Part**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 8, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/37b44104-ed9e-4b5e-813a-40b607e4e04f_1536x2048.jpeg*

[First, a quote from SpaceWeather.com today: "X-FLARE CHAMPION OF SOLAR CYCLE 25: Active sunspot AR3663 produced another X-flare today , an X1.0 category blast on May 8th (0145 UT). This makes it the most active sunspot of Solar Cycle 25 so far. Since May 3rd, the active region has tallied five X-flares, more than any other sunspot in the past 7 years. It may continue to run up the score as it approaches the sun's western limb later this week."]

And now, please forgive me for some fire & brimstone thoughts about rebirth:

As the poet Milton put it:

"… And trip it as ye go,

On the light fantastic toe."

More commonly known as "Trip the light fantastic," or, for me running the gauntlet.

Whatever in us is not going for rebirth is just that, not going for rebirth and ends here. However, whatever part of us 'IS' going for rebirth is also doing just that and even if I don't wake up as 'Me, Myself, and I' is going to be someone somewhere else – still a precious cargo.

At this late date in life, I can't worry about what's going on to rebirth and what's not, what's packed to go and what's left behind. "All ashore that's going ashore" is my refrain.

I see the coming demise of my personality as a hindrance I have to overcome at this point. I wrote this verse back in my twenties during what I call my "Shakespeare Period."

"Who could let such a bargain pass,

As this poor century will allow,

On coming in I'm asked to leave,

And when asked to leave, I bow."

Or this one, same time period:

“Look at yourself, first yet first,

No better, and yet not worse.

Now get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as you may your hearse.”

And there is always Wordsworth’s poem “Intimations of Immortality” and the line “But trailing clouds of glory do we come…”

Anyway, from whence we came, here we are, and from here we will go on again, or some part of us, if only our karma and traces of attachment.

You know and I know that this kind of talk is mostly conjecture. We have no memory of previous lives, at least I don’t, and experts on this are few and far between, and I have had the good fortune to meet a good number of Tibetan rinpoches and have not retained much from those contacts about this particular topic -- rebirth.

The high rinpoches vouch for the validity of all this, but what filters down to folks at my level is a bit like sand slipping through the fingers and the hourglass of time keeps running.

About the best thing I come away with is to do some exercises to get my mental and physical bodies supple, more flexible, and be prepared for anything or at least for something, because something is coming.

And so, while we battle the onslaught of old age and learn to deal with it, at the same time we have an eye out for what’s coming next, after death. To think that dying will just turn a switch from on to off is, in my opinion, wishful thinking. It’s not over when it’s over; there’s more.

How much we should consider or prepare for the ‘more’ that’s coming is up to us. We can whistle in the dark and trust that we will do what comes naturally to us at that time, or we can at least examine our options and the alternatives as to what does come after death.

I choose the latter approach, to examine my options, yet so little is known and apparently, so few know this area of the mind that it’s hardly worthwhile to inquire. We are mostly left holding our own opinion which is ignorance.

Of course, we can always wing it. However, there is a whole subtext in the dharma teachings that encourages us to prepare now, early on, before death, for what will come then.

And I'm urged on by understanding from a study of the sacred teachings that travelling the bardos is not going to be a walk in the park.

And so, the best advice I know is to relax and be still.

Being still and stillness is always present and right here waiting for us to settle down and shake off our attachments and self-consciousness. Letting go is the issue, the problem, and also the solution.

The way to think of it, IMO, is our letting it go on, whatever is already going on, as if we could stop it anyway. Standing in the way of progress, 'progress' being the flow of life itself, is impossible and any attempt on our part to get in the way only further implicates us. It is a fool's errand.

Instead, bending with the wind is in order, going with the flow, and as mentioned, not getting in the way of the progress of the Samsaric world. We are not traffic cops, but more like petitioners.

[Photo by me today.]

EMAIL

## Light at the End of the Tunnel

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 10, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/cbdfb4ba-4dd3-4202-91d2-d5c894f3ba00_1024x1024.jpeg*

[From SpaceWeather.com: " SEVERE GEOMAGNETIC STORM WATCH: Giant sunspot AR3664 has now hurled at least four CMEs directly toward Earth. Their combined arrival this weekend could spark severe (G4-class) geomagnetic storms with mid- to low-latitude auroras. Although this is a potentially significant space weather event, it is not going to be the next Carrington Event. If the coming storm were a hurricane, it would be ranked category 4, not category 5."]

As for me, I am still writing on topics I am occupied of late with on a day-to-day basis. In this case, I am torn between and want to perfect the now ancient photography tradition of a photo having subject and object, where we collectively are the viewers and the subject of the photo is the object of the photo. I know, color me crazy.

A more modern or progressive take on photography, IMO, involves dissolving this distinct dichotomy or duality between subject and object. It's time that the photographer comes down from the ivory tower and takes a bow along with the object of the photograph. Mixing in key.

Just how does the photographer let his or her hair down in all this and join the crowd?

One approach would be to get more abstract, merging the subject and the object, the photographer and the subject of the photograph into one soup. We see modern art has crossed this bridge many decades ago with many of the modern abstract artists.

And modern jazz has done pretty much the same thing with all kinds of artists, like Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and a host of others.

Why photography, which also has its abstraction-oriented photographers, not taken hold of the public's attention in a similar way and caught on?

Perhaps because dualistic thinking and duality of all kinds is one of the hallmarks of Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs we all find ourselves embedded in.

Our iPhones, our video watching, etc. and etc. reinforce our habituation to visual dualisms, our seeing and objectifying something, subject and object. Subject seeing object. There are ramifications here related to the male objectification of woman and working that out.

As mentioned, my view of all this is that it is time for the photographer behind the camera to be more visible and to mingle with their viewers. The image of the Wizard of Oz comes to mind, the little man behind the curtain pulling the strings pulls back the curtain or comes out of the closet and steps into view. What then?

Or like the magician that finally shows the audience how the trick is done, which is antithetical to stage magic altogether, forbidden, and should not be done. What is it in Samsara that is verboten, forbidden, and keeps us with our nose to the grindstone of duality? It is habit.

Again, looking at some of the other uses of the senses, I mentioned abstract art, modern jazz, which breached the duality barrier and have begun to merge duality into a uniform nonduality. Photography is so embedded in our dualistic habits that violating that subject/object dividing line is very resisted. How would we collapse that duality.

I suggested that using a wide-angle lens might be a start because a wide-angle lens has a lot more room to take in the entire situation for the photograph and not just the focal object of the shoot, but the whole room, including the photographer taking a photograph. That's what I am getting at here.

It's like the Heisenberg or indeterminacy principle, where the looker is one with the 'Looked at," which is how life is, non-dual. We are all in the same boat. There is no one and no way of standing outside. We just made that up until it became our habit, which is deeply ingrained.

We like to believe there is a separation between subject and object, but there is none. We are all non-dual and in the same pickle. Traditional photography encourages duality and has depended on it. And we bought into it, hook, line, and sinker.

I have discouraged this dualistic view of photography, first by stacking focus so that there is no longer a single point of focus or a set plane of reference to guide the eye. Stacked images let the viewer decide where they want to focus. This is, IMO, freeing.

I am now ready to go further into this by folding in the photographer to what is being photographed, perhaps a little at the time, but ultimately completely,

so that if what we see is duality, then we know this is ultimately not the point. Enfolding.

I quote Reality TV as a harbinger for this, as in that new kind of media, where the distinction between the producer and the produced is slimmed down. Some Reality TV has the subject of the show photographing themselves. People seem to like that, the mixing of the producer and the produced. What does that tell?

It tells me that subconsciously perhaps or gradually there is a trend town deconstructing strict duality, this formidable habit that seemingly we have little control of.

We (perhaps unknowingly) want to see the wizard behind the curtain of our duality, and it gradually is being revealed through all the various media, music, modern art, and probably all other forms of expression. And perhaps secretly we want to come out of whatever closet we are in and join the fray. To me this gives hope that even on a grand scale reality is leaning toward freedom from duality.

Individually we may not be aware of what we are doing, yet collectively we as a mass also gradually change or yearn for the unity of non-duality.

I who have knowingly and unknowingly studied this can't help but push my own forms of expression toward liberation from the dual toward the non-dual.

Certainly, for me, my decades of dharma training have oriented me in this direction, toward nonduality. My physical forms of meditation have gradually graduated from dualistic forms of meditation like Tranquility Meditation toward the non-dual forms of meditation like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation.

Today, I for the most part do nondual forms of meditation much of the day, actually called "non-meditation", because no effort is involved to "meditate," in my case Mahamudra Meditation, and particularly Vipassana or Insight Meditation.

We all may want to turn the inside out and let the outside in, so we are one.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## "Looking at the Looker"

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 13, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c44a1c8d-674d-4ec2-b81f-e31cc09dba7e_1024x1024.jpeg*

[The flurry of X-Class solar flares and their CMEs is dying down, a good time to take stock as to how we have weathered the forces of change. How are you different?]

The Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

"Looking at the looker is not like the eye consciousness looking at a visual form. It is the mind looking at itself. And since we have a mind that is of the nature of emptiness looking into its own nature, the object and the apprehending subject are not two different things to begin with. Being of the nature of emptiness, the object and the apprehending subject dissolve into that emptiness. So, there's a slight fluttering, but it doesn't really go on that way. It quickly resolves itself if we actually get in touch with the emptiness."

About 20 years ago, I wrote the following poem about the same phenomenon.

LOOKING AT "LOOKING AT"

I'm looking at "looking at."

I'm not looking at what "looking" is looking at.

No, I'm just looking at "looking at."

That is: I'm trying to.

You see:

When I'm looking at "looking at,"

It's not the looking "at" I'm looking at,

Because:

What I'm looking at is also doing the looking at.

So:

Am I looking at the "looking" at or the looking at?

MEANING:

The “happy” recursive loop, like a hall of mirrors, is unlimited reflection reflecting. It’s neither here nor there, up or down, in or out, but rather is what is called non-duality. It’s not meditation because it’s non-meditation. Effortless. Intent less.

Also called the “Present Moment.”

That’s why all the fuss about “Be Here Now,” being in the present moment and not dwelling in the past or the future.

Certainly, this present moment is recursive.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

**Tales of the Sea**

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 18, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2a793b2c-c66f-46e9-bf4b-73bfc261fc4b_1024x1024.jpeg*

I said a prayer. I prayed for an answer, and I got one, although not exactly as I expected, and I should remember my own poem of years ago:

BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

“Looking at the mind,

It’s not what I’d expect.

Expectations can’t define,

And you can’t expect to find.

That’s the nature of the mind.”

In other words, I should stop expecting and just listen up, be aware, and pay attention.

The hunger for true dharma insight perhaps grows from a tiny seed or insight, but in time it is overpowering. It outstrips any other kind of knowing, IMO.

The return from the sea (nondual immersion) is welcome if only because it confirms the certainty of awareness. We are still there because we are here now and aware of it.

Take a dip into the nonduality of the present moment. Give up that fixation on objectivity. Feel free.

‘Nonduality’ is not only the natural state of the mind, but the most addictive habit I know of. If you can do it once, you can’t do it just once. It’s like the old Disney comics I grew up with, with the image of Uncle Scrooge diving and cavorting in his money bin. That’s how enjoyable resting in nonduality is, IMO.

I am reminded of the poet Wiliam Blake’s verse:

“How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?”

I can't speak to what is closed by our senses five, but rather I can look at what duality does to us as far as exclusion goes. It shuts us out from being part of life – self-exclusionary.

We are forced by duality into being a bystander rather than a participant in our own life. How off-putting is that!

Looking for a binary solution to this, like turning a switch from OFF to ON, is unlikely to work. Our habit of standing back and watching, always insisting on being the subject of "Self" while everything other than us is the object of our gaze is pretty much endemic in Samsara, this world we live in..

It is rote beyond rote, baked in, and by this duality we are frozen in place, so to speak.

Going beyond this toward non-duality is more like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where we ever so carefully remove one stick after another from the pile, deconstructing our mental prison.

Just like we have a physical exercise regime, particularly as we get older, so do we need a mind-training regime to follow if we want to work to deconstruct our habitual dualistic stance and habit.

Actually, such a regime is little more than accustoming ourselves to relaxing and letting go of our habit of being glued to the subject when in reality we are as much an object as anyone else to the dualistic minded.

Like so many things in life, I wish non-duality was easy, but it's not. How do you tell someone to hurry up and relax?

It was not easy for me, and my first insight into true non-duality came after years of struggling to meditate, by the realization that when the dharma masters say to relax, they are not talking about some special dharma-kind of relaxation, but the same kind of relaxation when we sit down and put up our feet and take a load off -- relax.

Relax is relax is relax. However, "trying" to relax is not relaxing, so there's the problem. We can't just tell ourselves to relax and expect it to happen.

We first have to realize we are not now relaxed, at the moment. And it is functional (helpful) to relate dualistic thinking as the same as nonrelaxation. If we are the subject that is watching, the bystander or wallflower so to speak, then we are not immersed in the moment. We are standing back and looking at, watching life.

If you just want to watch then, no problem. All of us can already do that. It's the mode of Samsara.

However, if we want to actually live the life we have, that's another story. We would have to stop watching from a distance, step forward into and get immersed in the present moment.

I found that that took some work.

What's is your plan for deep relaxation? We should discuss topics like this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## "How Does Your Garden Grow?"

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 22, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/31872e8a-df80-4993-9c0b-2dd182645ce1_1024x1024.jpeg*

Moment to moment and at least day to day I find myself adjusting my take on life. There are no hard and fast rules for living, IMO. Life requires constant adjustment.

And then there is inertia, whatever we have set in motion, be it good for us or bad, continues to accumulate. It does not just stop but hurtles on through space and over time.

There is life to our actions beyond whatever rules and guides we formerly follow or lay down consciously. Just like seeds grow when watered, there is an organic and natural sense to life that is going on despite our conscious interaction.

I find this is true of whatever we could agree is considered 'dharma," our spiritual growth. Our dharma has its own momentum and is greater than whatever our plan for dharma practice involves. Once a seed of insight is embedded within us, it has a life of its own, one beyond our plan for it or even our knowledge of it.

Just as a plant grows from a seed if watered, so do the results of karma and dharma grow within us and take on a trajectory of their own, once set in motion. And a simple seed or act is all it takes.

Our garden of dharma grows despite our awareness of it. And, after some time has passed, we may or may not become aware of whatever change in our state has accumulated. Of course, the reverse is also true. The effect of our accrued karma debt also accumulates.

My point here is that our life is organic and quite beyond whatever we may 'think' of it objectively, different from our projections or expectations.

Life itself is feral beyond our ability to tame or even be aware of it. This is a blessing, because left to our own devices we tend to miss a lot.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

## The Familiar

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 23, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/aa48a087-2b9a-4ac8-812a-ffbf2bacf539_1024x1024.jpeg*

In dharma truth, familiarity with the nature of our own mind is the whole thing. However, the concept of 'familiarity' can be subtle and hard to get right.

The ultimate refuge is the mind itself. When all else seems distracting and one wants peace, as in peace of mind, there is always the familiar. What is that?

And when I say peace of mind, I mean our own mind, just as it is for us as opposed to 'textbooks' or other's take on the mind. Each of our own minds.

Becoming familiar with the mind as we know it is not, as we might think, our becoming familiar with what is or has been unfamiliar, the 'unfamiliar' and strange, but rather our not searching elsewhere than right here and now where it has always been, OUR finding the familiar as already familiar and recognizing it as familiar. We are at home there.

At the last, it's familiarity that we find; and by definition it's already familiar to us and not some stranger. We don't have to move an inch. We just cease and desist with this sense of 'otherness," other anything -- duality.

Abandoning pretense, abandoning pretending even with ourselves because what possible use could it be? It's just us. As mentioned, we turn to and find what is familiar rather than we become familiar with what is unfamiliar and strange.

Familiar is already familiar. It always has been this way. That's what the word itself says.

Familiarity is a refuge, not somewhere outside to get to because we don't have to get familiar, we already are. We are already familiar. It's not outside, but inside us, and makes up our core.

We just stop pretending and fall back into and accept what already is familiar to us, just as it always has been. Plain old us. That is the familiar.

Recognizing what is to us already familiar (yet unique) about our own mind, our particular take on things, is empowering, that is: accepting the nature of things as recognized by us. This is recursion at its most effective.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

### ... Not Inherently Existing

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 27, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/deb0c586-596f-4c5f-8fa8-d3f1a2ebf551_1536x2048.jpeg*

The Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“The nature of the mind is also dharmadhatu, the sphere of reality. Dhatu means “that which offers no obstruction.” If we were talking about space, we would say that space is everywhere. There is no place we do not find space.

“Anything can come into and pass through space, but nothing will ever be limited by space. “No obstruction” indicates that there is an opportunity for anything to appear without being obstructed as if by a mountain that stands in the way of something else.

“Dharmadhatu indicates that place where it is completely suitable for faults to be abandoned and for all the good qualities to increase. To say that mind is both empty and dharmadhatu means that it is not inherently established and is free from creation, abiding, and cessation.”

In Rinpoche’s comments, the line “… that it is not inherently established” boggles the mind, which I describe as “our being is becoming,” meaning that we have no permanently existing soul that skips from life to life but are created afresh at rebirth based on our unsatisfied karma and attachments.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

## Knowing the Nature

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 29, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1d2d3b1b-fa5e-46a3-84e7-d6fdd2eb1567_2048x1742.jpeg*

Our take on the nature of the mind (as to what is it?) is individual and thus in that way unique to us. The particular clarity that we recognize as liberating (that wakes us up) is familiar to us and guides our way. We know it when we experience it because it wakes us up.

It may come from our teacher or guru, a particular flavor that is home to us and like a compass always points to the truth. For us, it becomes the smelling-salts of our dharma, and keeps us awake. As mentioned, that's how we know.

This does not mean that other dharma teachers and their styles are in any way wrong except to our taste they might remain slightly unfamiliar, slightly off-putting rather than on-putting.

Traditionally it is said that there are 84,000 dharmas, a way of saying that there are innumerable paths to enlightenment, and for each of us there is (or will be) one unique path, a particular way toward enlightenment that will work for us. That path is often called our 'Yidam'.

In that way we have little choice but to keep our own counsel, and eventually learning to stay on our contacts becomes our guru and guide. We learn to guide ourselves by feeling our way to light and clarity.

This vast sea of life we traverse is wide and can be rough. Staying afloat, right-side up, is what I am addressing here. There is little real choice, IMO, but to learn to navigate the waves. This is what is called learning the dharma.

Our dharma practice eventually turns away from just reading texts and hearing verbal teachings into our personal gyroscope, rather quickly, and in the long view of learning dharma, our being able to stay balanced and afloat. We have to do it.

Appropriately, this is as easy or difficult as actually turning the wheel of our own dharma. That wheel of dharma won't turn without us turning it, degree by degree. It waits on us to move on this. As my dharma teacher put it, in all the eons and history there is, we are the stragglers, the ones who up to now have been unable to get enlightened.

Considering that we have been waiting to become enlightened for eternity, it's not out of place to understand that no one can enlighten us but ourselves, our own effort.

If we are waiting around for someone to do this for us, we are going to be waiting for a long time, which apparently we have been doing up until now.

[Photo by Me.]

EMAIL

## End of a Long Retreat

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

May 30, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**

*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/58d8af47-730c-43de-b485-cac1e26b6252_2048x2048.jpeg*

Here is a decision Margaret and I have come to. We have reached a point where we are going to rachet back our Covid defense and try to rejoin our family to a greater extent. It's been four years. Sure, I will wear a mask to the grocery store or any close social environment. My doctor told me that because of my history of strokes and heart attacks, I should try not to get Covid, and I have done my best.

However, for family things, like visiting my kids and grandkids, we will just ask them if they feel well and good. And if they are fine, we will just mix without masks. However, it they have recently been to some social event and are worried about exposure, we will talk about it with them.

We look forward to seeing our family more and without so much Covid worry. We need to celebrate our family life more than we have been able these last four years during which we have been retreat.

Meanwhile, as to where I stand in my own spiritual state of mind, here I am, once again casting about and feeling around for where I'm at, which means I've been somewhere and done something in these last four years, at least enough to end up in this particular state of mind.

And I'm not sure I even want to sort it. Some things can't be fixed and stirring the pot does not always help. Right now, letting things just settle out is my approach. Given a little time, what's important, like cream in coffee, will rise to the top without my help.

What's to say I don't like it just as it is, unmixed and unsorted? At least I don't have the energy to organize what may not need it. Just like NOT turning over the garden soil has its benefits, letting sleeping dogs of the mind lie is apt and perhaps more organic.

As mentioned above, Margaret and I have been pretty much cloistered for the last four years because of Covid, shut up, with almost no public get-togethers other than very rarely to see our kids and grandkids. Margaret especially has been cloistered. As for me, I also was cloistered, other than trips to the grocery at 6:00 AM when they opened, wearing a mask with a HEPA filter.

We have been isolated like we never have been in our lives, kind of in a closed retreat for four years.

However, as mentioned, recently Margaret and I decided to start our reentry back into society. We will still wear masks to shop, grocery stores, and in closed settings.

With our kids and grandkids, we will not wear masks. However, we will make sure they are healthy and, in some cases, they may take a covid test if they have recently been to large public events. Other than that, we will begin mixing in. Of course, outside in the open air is just fine to get together, as it's summertime.

As mentioned, although we have been pretty much in solitary confinement, this last weekend we attended a public festival in the open air, had a great time, but also, I believe, afterward underwent a bit of reentry culture shock. It's been four years of confinement we have had.

It may take time to once again enter the stream of rubbing shoulders with the public. Just as we have not been exposed to who-knows-how-many colds and viruses these last years, in the same way we have not suffered the shocks and knocks of mixing with society. It's been a long time we have been in strict isolation.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

## The Alchemy of Reactivity

*By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net*

June 11, 2024

**PHOTO LINK BELOW:**
*https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/01bd1c6c-4261-40b3-a398-8b28a130bcf0_1024x1024.jpeg*

[This is a little bit complex, yet if you grasp the concept and can manage to do it throughout the day, it gives big results, especially if you have trouble finding time each day to meditate. Reactivity training can be done while doing whatever else we are doing.]

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf

The above free e-book on the alchemy of reactivity, was written years ago. The first article is too abstract, so if you have time, start with the second article on the reactivity Tong-Len. Plus read through these (just made now) remarks if you have time. This is based on some remarks from folks about clinging, etc.

What is the difference between fixating and clinging to attachments as opposed to decreasing our reactivity?

The antidote in either case, so to speak, is relaxation, letting go and allowing the dualities to collapse.

It seems that reactivity training is a preliminary practice, a part of Lojong, one of purification, purification not so much of conceptual stains as it is of our basic energy and endless involuntary interruptions.

Doing Tong-Len internally, with ourselves, as opposed to with others is, as mentioned, one of internalization, a purification practice like Vajrasattva, but rather than emotional or emotional 'klesha' purification, it is a simple purification of our energy stream and life flow.

If we are reacting involuntarily throughout the day, to this, that, and the other thing, not just with major reactions, but also with reactions ever so much finer, I would define 'reaction' as whatever we involuntarily react to, rather than what we naturally and appropriately respond to, 'appropriate response'.

If we react and are disturbed daily by macro and micro events in our life stream, that's what I am pointing at here, whatever requires adjustment on our part, what surprises us rather than what we can take in stride.

What is reification?

Reification is when we give importance to something that is more than it naturally warrants, when we gin it up and layer it beyond what it can support in truth.

What is clinging?

Clinging is attachment, pretty much another word for reification, when what we have reified, we are unable to scale back or give up the excess. Whatever it is, it is more than 'enough' or what reality or the truth demands. We puff ourselves up, so to speak.

We end up carrying all this excess as a burden to bear and it weighs us down. That is a sign of attachment, the mess we have made of our ourselves and our "Self.".

Frequently different words are just another side of one another, like a Venn diagram. I feel this is true of words like attachment, reification, and so on.

If we exaggerate something beyond its value or worth, that is reification. Undue attachment is reification and vice versa. Samsara, this cyclic world we live in, itself is one huge attachment or reification.

How do we bring our attachments down to the size that the truth warrants? How do we reduce our 'clinginess' to the point it is no longer clinging? Same thing, IMO.

As dharma practitioners, it seems we are familiar with our attachments to overage -- reification.

However, what I am pointing out here is not about that kind of overage, but rather how our existent reactivity relates to the purity or ease, not of our mistaking something for what it is not, but our basic energy flow. If, throughout the day, we are constantly interrupted by our own involuntary reactions, whether writ large or small (micro), that warrants our awareness as much as what we call reification and clinging.

The great meditation master Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso stated:

"The five sense consciousnesses are satiated with bliss."

They are pure conducts, and not dualistic.

If we can remove the involuntary upset that each involuntary reaction causes, neutralize or smooth it out into what we could call an appropriate response rather than an involuntary reaction, that amounts to a major net gain, AND prepares for us to relax into what the poet calls "… The dewdrop slips into the shining sea" – nonduality and full immersion.

We have to let go of all that. The dualist dharma practices are all about division and becoming aware of it, pushing that envelope.

The non-dualistic dharma practices are about just the opposite, letting go of what we have accumulated, sutting down the dualisms. Again, IMO.

The noteworthy points about Reactivity Ton-Len are:

You are not dealing with an imaginary 'Other', but only with yourself. And the concept of exchanging oneself for others in traditional Tong-Len, requires a dual definition of the "Self,' of course.

When we deal only with our own actual reactions, we are confronted with something totally close and happening to us. When we find ourselves reacting, we can be aware of reacting, so that is an appropriate time to NOTE our own reaction, acknowledge it as ONLY our own reaction, and then drop it and continue on.

By reacting involuntarily, we already just paid the price and had the reaction, so what better time to acknowledge it as ours, confirm that it is no one else's and then continue on with life… until the next involuntary reaction.

We start with the obvious (big) reactions, as we are aware of them, and over time become aware of smaller and smaller reactions, always going through the same routine:

React, acknowledge the reaction as our own, note it, and drop it.

Over time, these involuntary reactions get noted and neutralized by growing weaker and weaker until they are not existent or not important and smoothed over, and/or turn into what we could call appropriate responses on our part. We take them in our stride.

And so, we are not going out of our way to do this, because we are involuntarily doing each one. It fits into our day perfectly and amounts to almost continual dharma practice, allowing the average person to accumulate the length of practice they just can never seem to manage otherwise.

When I first received and finally understood something from the pointing-out instructions from KKR in 2005, I understood what I had been missing and set out to remedy this.

And the way I did that was, during my entire day, especially my 'work' day, whenever I was interrupted, like the phone rang, a kid came into my office, a car honked, or whatever, I would:

Stop what I was doing, as I was already interrupted, go through the standard prayers for offering the merit, whatever merit I had accumulated up to that moment, and then proceed to invoke with prayers as if starting a sit-down dharma meditation practice again…. and only then go back to work.

If I was interrupted one minute later, I did the whole thing all over again. I did this for something like three years. Of course, I told KKR, my dharma teacher, of this, and he laughed and said it couldn't hurt to do this.

It was during these three years that I was once again studying the Common Preliminaries, the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma, that is prescribed when approaching Mahamudra training.

There is a time for effort and a time to remove the effects of undue effort from our mindstream.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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