

Spirit Grooves Archive

Dharma Writings — Book Two 2026

Articles 101–200

By Michael Erlewine

SpiritGrooves.net



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Familiarity with the Familiar

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 13, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In the practice of dharma, what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries, which all are dualistic dharma practices like Lojong and 'The Ngondro', effort is required. In a sense, we require effort in order to be able exaggerate the differences (duality) until we establish a differential that we can work with and bring the dualistic practices to a head so that they eventually implode and subsequently collapse, creating an avalanche of dualistic deconstruction leading to non-dualistic meditation, which is known as 'non-meditation' because it is effortless. We cease making undue effort.

Our habit of actually not looking at and not exploring our own mind, but instead only looking outward at the external world, has to be overcome and be turned around. If we are going to explore the mind itself, we have to actually look at it and become thoroughly familiar with the mind. There is no substitute for this kind of familiarity. And there is a catch.

And the odd thing is that we already are familiar with the nature of the mind, just not aware of that familiarity, not familiar with our own familiarity. Apparently, we are the last to know.

In the dharma teachings, this kind of familiarity is often pictured as seeing a group of people walking toward us, a crowd, and in that crowd, we recognize one familiar face. That is the kind of familiarity that is required. It's in no way 'strange' or a stranger, but rather already known – fully familiar.

And so, recognizing the true nature of the mind is not anything new for us; that's the whole point. What we find is fully familiar, something or someone we have always already known. That's the surprise, the surprising familiarity.

And so, it's not the surprise of something new, different, or strange, but the surprise of the familiar, something always already known, recognizing the nature of the mind at last. It is so familiar that it makes one smile or laugh.

Of course. This recognition makes so much sense. How could I not have seen this sooner!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

"First Thought, Best Thought"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 15, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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A quote from the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. It seems the time has come for me to mix and merge with people and places. Of course, after four years of cloistering, not going into the public, not travelling (much), and all that, one wants to get out.

However, it seems to me more than that. Those four years of forced retreat polished off something inside of me, and like a moth or butterfly emerging from a cocoon, something similar is happening to me. I'm coming out of that, but changed somehow.

I don't need more training, at least the kind of training I have been doing for 40-50 years with dharma. Been there, done that.

Instead, it appears I need to do nothing in particular other than go here or there, do this or that, venture forth, and expose myself to the elements of time and place, so to speak.

There does not seem any particular point to what I do, where I go, or who I see. Of course, I'm seeing my family, which has been denied me these last years due to Covid.

The point here, my point at least, is that like a leggy seedling, I need to harden off by exposure to the elements of time, place, and people. It's quite naturally just happening. I just go out.

As for what's the good of it, I can't (yet) say, but like a moth to a flame I'm drawn out and over time and place to, as Chuck Berry wrote, 'No particular place to go.' It's time, not only with my aging and running out of time, but also just teleologically, purposeful evolution.

For years, decades and decades, with dharma it has been practice, practice, practice, and I don't necessarily know experientially the purpose of all that practice, as in: the results.

We are the result of all the practice and to what end? That is what we eventually find out, for we become the end or result.

We not only have to do the practice, but we also have to do or be the result of all that practice. We are turned out, like a lathe turns out a form from a block of wood. We are what turns out.

And I feel I am being turned out, or turning myself out into the present moment, not for or as an obvious 'end result', but much like a flower is the result or end result of a seed and a bud, the logical result or effect, the product of all that practice. It is not loud, but quiet.

As far as doing 'good,'" I don't favor the emphasis on benefiting others. That to me is mistaken proof that we are off on the wrong foot to start with. Benefitting others goes without saying, or obviously you can say it again.

There is no need to stress the benefit. There is no choice and no alternative to do otherwise than benefit others. That's the whole point of what in dharma terms is called Bodhicitta, finding out that our only use is to benefit life and those living it here in Samsara.

There's nothing else to do but that. A flower does not have to be pointed out as lovely. It just is lovely. That's what it is and that alone, all by itself, is beneficial.

In the same way, merging in the mindstream of what is, full immersion, does not require a second thought. There is no choice.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Motionless in Motion

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 17, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In the popular imagination, it is assumed that when it comes to meditation, we have to have equilibrium, a sense of balance that is immovable. That's often-considered what meditation is all about, some kind of stable stasis. However, IMO, that's a miss-take, a simple misunderstanding.

The equilibrium in meditation is not immobile, rather everything is very movable and in constant motion. It's we who surf it that maintain a sense of balance. We don't react. It does not take an effort or take any effort to maintain that balance. It's beyond that, beyond effort. That's the whole point.

It's like trying to get with the groove in life, a trial and trying. Once we have found the groove, there is no falling out. It's as hard to fall out of the groove as it was to get into it in the first place. Like spinning a quarter on the kitchen table, we become a gyroscope, spinning in eternity, all movement and no movement.

In summary, "One Taste" or the equivalent is not somehow being static or frozen in time, but just the opposite. Ultimate flexibility is an apt description, like a gyroscope that is balanced no matter how and where it is placed.

Over time, many decades, I have learned that textbook dharma descriptions of spiritual results cannot be conveyed to us. Our time is better spent practicing (striking flint to steel) and getting sparks and fire that way, than trying to define our realization by expectation or description.

And I have also found that each of us has our unique dharma path that may or may not comply with the textbook examples. Do what feels right, practice what feels true, and don't bother looking to the right or left at what others or texts say or do. There is no point in that but frustration.

Whatever we do, deep relaxation will be part of it, so relax, and even practice relaxation (not that it can be practiced), but take a load off, again and again. Let go.

No matter what amount of motion and movement is going on, it does not disturb the motionless in motion.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Turning the Mind

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 18, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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A serious obstacle, IMO, pertaining to dharma practice and training has to do with all the existing dharma texts, literature, training, and yourself.

Essentially, there is nothing but suggestions and directions galore out there and then there is you and your eventual path to enlightenment. The first, all that dharma ‘help’, can smother the later, your purity and innocence.

This can be a major problem.

Ultimately, each of us has to enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us. The world of Bodhisattva helpers, including would-be helpers, those who are not actually able to help, surround us.

And they tell or suggest that we do this or do that and don’t do this or that, sort of thing. And often these sources are not in agreement with one another. Nevertheless, there we remain, ready, willing, and perhaps able, but deluged by the demands of these instructions, and the instructors and helpers.

Once again, there is no way, none, that anyone outside of us can enlighten us, no matter how long we try. We each must enlighten ourselves, because dharma is a do-it-yourself project. After many years of instruction, the Buddha finally did it by himself. We must do the same.

The legacy and history of the dharma can be helpful, but just as easy almost always an obstacle, the extensive mass of dharma instructions can confuse and obfuscate our dharma path.

In the midst of all this “help’ and these suggestions, there we sit, and we still have to figure all this out for ourselves. Although surrounding us on the outside is all of this helpful advice, amidst all of this, we have to not be attracted to all of this outside information and turn within (on our own recognizance) and enlighten ourselves. Everything but our own endeavor are just would-be suggestions to enlightenment.

It may seem that we can do this by picking and choosing whatever kinds of help are being offered to us. To a great degree, all of this “help and these suggestions act more as distractions than aides.

What beckons to us, whether from dharma texts, teachings, or in-present help can't but encourage us to look outside ourselves for help, although effectively the only real help will be our turning inward and becoming familiar with the actual nature of our own mind.

Ultimately, we each have to realize for ourselves the actual and true nature of the mind and discover our familiarity with it, which is already present but of which we are unaware. It's right there all the time.

No matter how many dharma books we acquire and study, no matter how many rupas, statues, and accessories we have, the only value of all of these materials is if they manage to turn the mind inward toward the actual nature of the mind. Otherwise, they are just window-dressing and distractions.

And so, it is a question whether we are best left to our own devices, and not continually distracted by what dharma accoutrements we have, see, and follow on the outside.

A successful dharma teacher or any of the many external aides and teachings are only good if they, as mentioned, succeed in turning us inward toward recognizing the true nature of the mind and how it works.

Despite the many teachings and years spent by the historical Buddha, when it came down to enlightenment, the Buddha had to, as we have to, uncover, discover, and recognize the actual nature of the mind for himself, which he did. We have to do exactly the same.

So, the good question is what will help us do this? All the accoutrements we assemble around ourselves just weigh us down with meaninglessness to the degree that they do not turn our minds away from distraction and toward recognizing the actual nature of the mind.

All of the mantras, prayers, offerings, and related practices are extraneous and of little value if they do not cause us to become familiar with our own mind and its nature.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Appearances Are the Emptiness Arising

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 19, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche: “For Prasangikas, emptiness and appearance are not contradictory. Thus, the Heart Sutra states, “Form is empty, emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.” In this view, form and emptiness exist together. They have the same nature. “It is like the appearance of an elephant in a dream. While the elephant appears in our dream, no elephant is actually there. The nonexistence of the elephant and the appearance of the elephant seem contradictory, but in fact they occur together.” This is saying that all appearances are empty and are nothing more than the emptiness appearing or arising. That means everything. If appearances are empty, what are they empty of? Appearances are empty of any kind of permanent existence. Over and over, the dharma states that everything is in flux, ever-changing. And what are we to draw from that? First of all, impermanence, that the death of our personality is inevitable, although something about us endures, moves on, and takes rebirth. What is that? According to the dharma scriptures, that is our unfulfilled karma and desires, but without our Self or personality. In other words, those unfulfilled desires and wants, our karma, endures and takes rebirth by taking hold of a womb and using that karma, draws around itself another new personality or Self, and lives again, such as it is, only without the “Me, Myself, and I” of this life. That’s a lot to take in, but in brief that is what the dharma teachings say and point out. No reincarnation for Michael Erlewine, but probably (if I am lucky) a rebirth and some of what drives me in this life. I could get really confusing here and discuss how the dharma teachings say that we can also be reborn as an animal or an insect, and that is fascinating, but probably too much for today. However, grasping the concept of rebirth as something other than human, if understood, is mind-altering in effect. I’d be glad to discuss it if enough folks want to go there. [Midjourney graphic prompted by me.] EMAIL

Rebirth As An Animal

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 20, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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It is important to understand the difference between “rebirth” and “reincarnation.” In Tibetan Buddhism, they are not the same by any means. Reincarnation suggests that our personality, like Michael Erlewine (me, myself, and I) is reborn again and carries on in another life. In other words, I pick up in the next life where I left off in this one; that idea.

On the other hand, “rebirth” which is indicated by the Buddhists suggests that our personality, like an old coat, is left at death’s door and does not continue. “Michael Erlewine” is left behind. We don’t have the same driver’s license or social security number next time, so to speak. That is abandoned.

What continues at rebirth is a consciousness driven by a certain set of fixations, cravings, and desires. That reborn consciousness has no body or physical form, which is why it is being reborn, to get one.

It has some cravings, intents, predilections for this or that, a way of behaving, and whatever we have accumulated from dharma practice and the karma we have generated. This is what I understand from the teachings.

In rebirth, the body of our personality (persona) is something we rebuild each new lifetime from scratch. We are not hampered in our next life by the big nose we have in this life, etc. We probably won’t have a big nose again. We grow a body anew, and it is the same with our personality. We acquire that afresh too, based on our various fixations and desires – our attachments. In “rebirth,” we are like a big magnet of cravings, drawing around ourselves a new body and persona based on our fixations and attachments.

And because of our desires and fixations, our consciousness is drawn to this or that kind of body and womb, not necessarily a human body, but “any” body. I like the old phrase “any port in a storm.”

If all things are equal, we may be attracted to another human birth, but as I understand it, if we are upset or unbalanced, we may find ourselves (again, like magnets) glomming onto some other kind of body (animal, etc.) without knowing or meaning to.

If the opportunity presents itself and the circumstances invite it, presto, we find ourselves being born as a chicken or an ant. Our consciousness can take hold of almost any kind of body and be reborn. That body may not be as sophisticated as the human body, but our consciousness will do the best it can with whatever body it finds itself in.

This is why the Tibetan Buddhists treat all sentient beings, large or small, with the same respect, because to them an ant does not have a little-bitty consciousness, while we have a Cadillac consciousness and psyche. No, all beings have consciousness, the same quality of consciousness, but just with different vehicles.

You may drive a Porsche, while I drive a Yugo, but we are both “consciousness” driving. It is just that your car is fancier than mine. However, if I had your Porsche, I would do my best to drive that too. I am sure I could manage.

Tibetan Buddhists work on purifying themselves of negative actions and developing qualities like patience, kindness, and so on. They also seem very interested in our state of mind at the time of death but hasten to point out that the state of mind when we are dying is only one of many factors to consider. Still, they do seem concerned about it.

In some way, a Teflon consciousness seems more useful than one that is too sticky of clinging, especially when it comes to selecting a new body after death. In the teachings, it is said that great meditation masters are balanced enough that they are not just pulled, willy-nilly, into one body or another while in the bardo, but can deliberate and carefully select not only the type of body for rebirth, but even the particular parents, their situation with each other, and the location for being reborn. I doubt that I can do that.

For the rest of us, perhaps it is more like bumper cars; the first womb we bump into is perhaps where we end up. Personally, I have no direct knowledge of this, but am only sharing with you what I understand the teachings point out. I find it helpful to know this stuff. Do you?

A minor clarification: In speaking of the Tibetan saints and masters who are reborn again and again (like the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa), you will find that in their case they are said to “reincarnate” and retain memory of their past life or lives, as opposed to rebirth, which is the term used for the rest of us. We take rebirth, whatever we can agree the “We” is.

And so, the takeaway here, the blockbuster insight is that ALL sentient beings have the same type of consciousness, just limited by the kind and type of body we take rebirth in.

To put it plainly, that mosquito alighting on your arm is the same consciousness as you, but just limited by having the body of a mosquito. As a mosquito we do the best we can but have less bells and whistles to play with. If we grasp this concept, we have a LOT to think about, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The High Horse

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 23, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“We all strive to find happiness and avoid suffering. In order to do this, we need to be careful about karma as cause and effect, which functions through our bodies, speech, and minds. The most important of these three is our mind, and therefore, we need to know thoroughly the nature of this mind. We need to look to see where it is and recognize the nature of the mind as it is, without altering it. “

“Just resting in meditation within that is enough.

This is how we come to understand the way the mind is.”

The above quote by Thrangu Rinpoche sums up the essence of what I have been taught and done my best to learn over the last 50 or so years.

All of the dharma calisthenics, mantras, practices, etc. all add up to becoming aware and getting to know the actual nature of our mind, the same mind you and I are using right now to read this. How familiar are we with our own mind?

However, looking at the nature of the mind as if we are an outsider (standing outside) is not helpful. The problem is that we are not outsiders and never have been. It's our own mind and its nature is what we must become aware of and familiar with. And that's exactly what we are already familiar with, but unfortunately, we are not aware of our own familiarity. We are caught shy of that familiarity, as if it is a stranger, which it is not and never has been.

It seems that we will always be the last to know until we are finally aware of it. What we assume is at distance (and thus not near) is already close at hand.

How do we become aware of what we are not aware of is the perennial spiritual problem. How does the eye see itself? And the answer is that it doesn't. What then?

As long as we are looking outside ourselves at whatever we imagine is there, by definition, we are missing the boat.

Looking at the “Looking At” itself is required and to do that involves complete immersion on our part in the sea of life, to the exclusion of being a subject looking at an object.

It’s not hard to lay out the equation here that has to be solved, yet solving it is another story. We are loathe to let go of our high perch as a subject and allow, as the poet wrote, the dewdrop to slip into the shining sea. That’s it!

However, full immersion is the only choice, other than to remain as we are now, stuck here in Samsara looking out at nothing. And that gets old.

As for the “High Horse,” best to get off it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Life Is But a Dream

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 26, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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“Row, row, row your boat,

Gently down the stream.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,

Life is but a dream.”

Where did we get the idea that life is but a dream?

And if it is a dream we are having, why do we try so hard to make it real, to reify, and take it for more real than it is?

Why do we like to think of life as real, important, pivotal, and the thing of legends?

The operative question is what’s the problem here?

What is not real enough in life, just as it is, so we don’t have to puff it up?

What is all this clinging, reification, and where did it come from. Why do we cling or have to cling and exaggerate?

Is it because we are not important enough to ourselves, in our own eyes, and why is that? What’s wrong with reality, just as it is, and why are we trying to reinforce reality, reify it into something more substantial than it appears to be?

The answer I get from reading the dharma scriptures is that reality as we know it is not real and does not have a permanent existence. Never did and apparently never will.

As my first dharma teacher put it to me:

“My ‘God’ is no beggar, having to make the ends meet. The ends already meet.”

Yet, what is not clear is that reality, this world of appearances surrounding us, is not only empty of permanent existence, but appearances themselves are the emptiness arising.

This is why the Heart Sutra is so ingrained in the scriptures, so popular. The Heart Sutra states, “Form is empty, emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.”

Apparently, we are insecure with emptiness and the fact that “Form is Empty,” Yet where and how did that fear come about?

If it has always been this way, since time immemorial, why are we by now not comfortable with that? Where did doubt creep in that we even exist in any permanent sense? Is it some inner sense that our Self (and person) are not what is reborn again as the dharma texts state?

The point is that if we have been living in a dream all these lifetimes, something intangible, why suddenly do we have to reify it to make it more real or solid to us? How do we know that something more solid or ‘permanent’ even exists for us, if it does not actually exist?

Reification is not the exception, but the rule with most people. Are we forever grooming our Ego, tweaking it beyond the reality. If so, how did that happen and come about?

Why is reality, just as it is, not enough for us? What’s missing and how do we know it is missing, if it has always been missing?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Parinirvana of Khenchen Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 27, 2024

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It is with sadness that we note of the passing of the great dharma teacher and yogi Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, who passed into Parinirvana at 6:10 PM June 22, 2024 in Kathmandu, Nepal. Khenpo Tsültrim Rinpoche, who was born in 1935, was 90 years old.

Those of us fortunate enough to take instruction directly from Khenpo Tsültrim and study his books and many teachings know firsthand of his unparalleled clarity, lucidity, and humor.

Khenpo Tsultrim Rinpoche visited our dharma center (Heart Center KTC) August 25 & 26, 1986 and offered teachings twice daily.

Here is a published photo of Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, and a photo-snapshot from 1986 taken at our dharma center. In the later, Rinpoche is with one of his translators, and my daughter May is standing beside him.

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.

The Puppetmaster

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 29, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Something that needs our attention is this idea that always lurking in the background is the idea that advanced dharma teachers can take over the mind of a student and capture their body and in that way thus reincarnate in that young body. These kind of stories seem to lurk out of the corner of our eye and proliferate. They should be debunked. This is not to say that there are no unscrupulous teachers and unwary students.

The idea that an adept teacher reaches a very old age and then transfers his or her consciousness into a younger student and takes over (reincarnates) their body, seemingly a form of cannibalization persists. This is creepy at best and just plain wrong at that.

If we look at it with at least a little care, this concept implodes, and I will explain how I understand it.

The personality of our guru or dharma teacher is just that, a personality not any more viable or permanent than our own personality, and thus nothing to be scared of or threatening. It is abandoned at death.

What's beyond the personality? What's beyond our personality are whatever karma and attachments that make up what is called the "Storehouse Consciousness" (Alayavignana) that proceeds beyond death and through time to seat a rebirth.

And beyond the Storehouse Consciousness (and the personality) is the Nature of the Mind itself, something all of us are subject to and comprised of.

If our guru or dharma teacher has recognized the actual or true nature of the mind, beyond their particular personality, the nature of the mind is true or the same for every sentient being and is not personal. It cannot be contaminated.

Our personal guru is often called our 'Root Guru' because they are the first person to introduce us to the true nature of the mind, so that we recognize that nature and become familiar with its use -- how to use it.

The point here is that the person of our guru or dharma teacher cannot touch the nature of the mind any more than we can. The personality is left at

death's doorstep by each of us. The nature of the mind remains pure of any person.

As mentioned, the perfect dharma teacher or guru can but introduce us to the actual nature of the mind, which itself is not personal or, as mentioned, in any way tainted or touched by any person.

So there is no way any person can take over another person and thus somehow reincarnate in their body, because true spiritual insight, what is called Recognition of the actual nature of the mind is by definition beyond all persons and personality. You can't get there from here.

A successful guru or dharma teacher's sole job, IMO (and understanding), is to introduce their student to the actual nature of the mind so that the student can become familiar with the mind's nature enough that they can use and work with it. That's the whole enchilada as to dharma training in my understanding.

Anything short of that introduction is binding the dharma student to the teacher personally, and by definition NOT introducing the dharma student to the nature of the mind so that they too recognize the nature of the mind and become an independent in that way.

So, subjecting ourselves to being taught the dharma has the caveat that if we are not introduced to the nature of the mind so that we too achieve 'Recognition' of the nature of the mind, we at best are being directed as best we can and at worse tangled up in an intellectual and dualistic construct.

That's not just true for dharma teaching but for any student being taught any subject, the goal that the student becomes free and an independent entity in that subject. Obvious, just by looking around us, we can see not every subject we are taught do we become an independent master of. Not even close.

If we are taught to play golf, we don't become a master of golf. And that same is true for any other subject. We can dabble in a subject without mastering it. The same is true with spiritual training and dharma.

The reason I bothered to write this piece is to explain why we need not be afraid of falling subject to an 'evil' teacher or guru, which is NOT to say that folks are not bilked and taken advantage of by unscrupulous so-called teachers or experts.

However, when considering the nature of the mind and recognizing it, that very nature is beyond the personal realm of any person.

The Nature of the Mind is inviolable and beyond the grasp of any person and personality, of that we can be sure. It is indeed sacred and untouchable.

If your dharma teacher introduces you to the nature of the mind, it is the same nature that they themselves have been introduced to, a nature beyond reproach or access other than by the same process of non-personal recognition. In the true nature of the mind, there is no one and nothing there. That nature is self-sacred pure.

The introduction to the true nature of the mind is identical for both you and your teacher. As mentioned, there is nothing else and no-one else there.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Seeing the Familiar

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 22, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a537d8af-e7d6-463b-8db2-ead8bf02a1fb_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche stated:

“The Tibetan ‘lhen-chig kye-pa’ is translated as “co-emergence” or “coming together,” as with two rivers merging. It could also be translated as “innate,” because it quite literally means “born together.” Co-emergence refers to the fact that the wisdom that realizes the true nature of phenomena is already present within us. We have this wisdom, but we have not realized it. Because we have not realized things are as they are, or Mahamudra, we suffer. Through co-emergent wisdom, we connect with the reality of things that are already present within us.”

Another term for this is ‘connate’. This is what is meant by recognizing the true nature of the mind because that nature is already innate and familiar to us even though we have not realized this, and is not something strange and unfamiliar.

Thus, the actual nature of the mind, which most of us have never recognized, will never be foreign to us but always familiar, or as the pith dharma teachings state “like recognizing an old friend in a crowd.”

If you read these words right, their point for us to grasp is that looking for something new to arise in dharma practice will never happen. What is new or important is when we realize that the nature of the mind is not something we don’t know, but rather something totally familiar that we have not recognized. We are too close, rather than too far. It’s in here, rather than out there.

It’s like that old popular song, “Looking for love in all the wrong places,” but here we sing, looking for the nature of the mind in all the wrong places. We anticipate or expect something we have never known when instead what we fail to recognize is much closer to us than anything stranger. Don’t expect a stranger! We are what we don’t recognize.

Expect something so familiar that we would never think to even look there, because it is so much with us and always has been. In fact, the Tibetan dharma teachings call this our ‘Ordinary Mind’, “Thamal Gyi Shepa.”

In other words, don't look out, but rather look in at what you already and always have been familiar with.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

A Bridge Behind the Beyond

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 23, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/20d2e4c8-562a-4000-bdb2-52ad3def7df4_1024x1024.jpeg

We all know that our physical body is ‘Numero Uno’ to keep functioning, but that’s not the only body we have. We inhabit and incarnate all kinds of additional bodies, build them up, occupy them, and live through them. Most are called bodies of knowledge, our interests.

In my life I have had a whole series of ‘knowledge bodies’ that I have created, maintained to varying degrees, and with some of them still live in.

When I was young, I was a naturalist, a herpetologist (specializing in salamanders and frogs) and I very much lived in that. And later I was a musician, astrologer, programmer, and all that segued into an archivist of music, film, and rock concert posters. And perhaps the most difficult body to inhabit and build on has been ‘Dharma’. I’m still working to live in that body.

Yet the body I am going to talk about here in this blog is photography, and for me at a crucial point in my life photography was co-emergent or connate with dharma. At one point dharma and photography arose together and they were intertwined in something like a cosmic dance of spirit, an intertwining dance that for me became a bridge into the nature of the mind and reality itself.

Of course, I have been trying to share and describe the co-emergence of dharma and nature photography for years, and although I understand why this can’t be put into words, I also know why historically dharma practitioners like me attempt to do so.

In a single day, the photography and natural appearances arose in my mind as ‘One’, non-dual, and fully immersive. As they say, “the dewdrop slips into the shining sea” and loses its duality and separateness. Once tasted, this deep immersion can never be reversed or forgotten. The toothpaste does not go back into that tube.

As you who read here know, I have worn out words ‘six ways to Sunday’ and by that only proved to myself that words cannot but describe or ‘sounds like’ the actual or true nature of the mind. It cannot be communicated, but only can be realized by each of us individually.

It's clear to me that photography has been a bridge (at least for me) to the true nature of the mind. And it's a one-way bridge at that, a bridge from which there is no return because the bridge itself is the duality that at last is deconstructed and is there no more.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

It Only Works If You Use It

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 26, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c963f1e5-4745-40b5-8a55-165defb341ee_1024x1024.jpeg

The above words have meaning and IMO are the hallmark of any serious dharma practice, because they are strikingly true.

Dharma is not only a do-it-yourself project, but unless we turn the wheel of dharma ourselves, each and every one of us, nothing will happen. We will remain as we are.

So obvious a truth has real teeth, and it puts the onus directly on each one of us to turn the wheel of our own dharma. There is no free lunch.

As we move past and beyond words, what remains for us? No words, of course. Perhaps that is what is called in the occult traditions as “entering the silence.”

This obligation on our part to move the needle by our own activity hangs over us like a cloud. Who likes to be forced into anything, and the obligation or responsibility to get on it smears out our whole practice with the stain of effort. Effort is exactly what not to do.

So, it’s a waiting game until the right moment strikes us, a moment of serendipity when we feel like it rather than ‘we have to do it’. Wait for it, and that can mean for a long time.

Like the game of Pick-Up-Sticks, at some point our every move has to be very careful, in fact effortless. Yet that’s just what we don’t know how to do, rest effortlessly.

And wrapped in that thought I believe is the heart of dharma practice, “Rest As It Is.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Zen and the Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 5, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/08197a50-4121-489a-a6d4-0fbdf06683f3_1024x1024.jpeg

Words just don't go far enough or reach their goal of meaning something, much of the time. Yes, words point at meaning, but words are not their own meaning. They are dualistic.

In a sense, words are forever divisive, divided between subject and object, and a subject with an object is by definition dualistic and not fully immersive.

And so, the shortcoming of language is not anyone's fault, but just the nature of duality, of Samsara. My question is how do we make up the difference, fill in the blanks, collapse dualisms, and complete our immersion in the present moment?

I believe the answer is: whatever it takes for the dewdrop in us to slip into the shining sea and be one. That's what it takes.

I don't believe there is just one way to do this, but many ways. And the solution is what, in dharma terms, is called the 'yidam'. We each have a yidam we must find (a path we must take that will work) and it pertains and is unique to us, not because it is any kind of secret, but because it is the one path tailored for us to let go, so that, as mentioned, the dewdrop slips into the shining sea.

Intellection and words are not the only vehicle we have going for us. What about music? Art? Images? Dancing? There is a 'Dharma' for everything but itself. The dharma of dharma would be an oxymoron.

What does it take for us to close up shop as to constantly defining things intellectually and instead just abandon ourselves to life, push off from the shore of conceptuality and just go with the flow, swim with and in the current?

It is obvious that it is different for each of us, which is why the dharma scriptures say there are 84,000 dharmas, obviously a high-enough number to embrace our differences until they can deconstruct themselves and we are swept away in the present moment as far as being divided goes. As mentioned, our 'yidam' is how we accomplish that. It completes us so we are

one with everything, until we have taken the plunge, at which time their work is done.

This amounts to the 'Ze'n in us, communicating other than dualistically, communicating rather by immersion in... music, verse, images, and whatever it takes for us. The word "Zen" simply means 'meditation.' To me and IMO, the word "Zen" and "Dharma" are the same thing – indicating full immersion in the present moment through the process of meditation, and meditation here means the 'mediation' of Samsara.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Falling Through the Air

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 26, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2737abe6-64ab-4043-a80b-294abf5ed8a9_1024x1024.jpeg

[Here is another bobbing at the surface of life mentioning. I apologize if you have heard this before. It's what's happening.]

Like the old woman in the rocking chair on her porch in late summer, knitting a scarf for the wintry months. She does not need a mala (rosary) or mantras because knitting itself is the same thing. Or something similar.

And so, every day whatever I do is like knitting, clarifying the time as I go along each day. It seems I'm oblivious to subject or object, to inside or outside, because none of that counts anymore. I'm not counting up or down. Countdown to what?

I'm present enough, meaning I'm in the present moment and not trying to get there. I'm already there. Where does one go from here? There is nowhere, no going back, coming from, or going to. As mentioned above, I'm already present.

Meaningful is as meaningful does.

If you are turning the wheel of your own dharma, you are doing just that. There is no not-turning the wheel of the dharma, and at that point even not turning the wheel is still turning the wheel. There is no not-turning the wheel anymore. It's a perpetual motion machine, IMO. Inspired motion.

Doing what you will is not the same as doing anything you think you want. The beads on the string of the mala of life are in a certain order. For each of us, they are not random.

In other words, we are not free to just do anything at all, but always the ordering of what constitutes meditation is required. It has to make sense and have meaning. That's what meditation is. Other than that, I don't know of any other rules that must be followed.

As mentioned, there is no backpaddling or going backward in the order of how things are done. And nowhere to go. It all has to make sense. Otherwise, it is nonsense and that won't work. It doesn't work.

And so, I'm not going or getting anywhere at all, other than right here and now. For me, it's reminiscent of treading water in a deep lake with no shores.

Or, as Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said:

"The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Recursion

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 1, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ddee438b-a538-4512-b744-f8db28b3ed28_1024x1024.jpeg

The solar flares are returning, more soon. The sun rotates on its axis once every 27 days.

We have had some relative peace for a couple weeks, perhaps a time with relatively little thought. Peace without reflection is uneventful. In fact, complete immersion goes without notice unless we reflect.

The impact of all reflection and no immersion engenders insanity. The result of full immersion and no reflection is a sense of timelessness -- nothing. The happy medium and razor's edge is the process of immersion and reflection, alternating so rapidly that the effect is a constant stream of consciousness, in which we are aware.

Balancing these two domains is meditation. Meditation is a process and not a state.

In other words, full immersion knows no end, nothing. Complete reflection is like a disco ball of mirrors in a dark dancehall.

And so, from these two, comes one united process, a process that each of us attempts to master as we can. Without it, life would be impossible.

This secret my Tibetan dharma teacher, a rinpoche, told to us again and again. "A meditation session may be as long as it takes to pick up a teacup and take a sip of tea."

He didn't say to meditate an hour, a day, a month, or whatever. What he said was to allow the mind to rest as long as it takes to lift a teacup to our lips and take a sip.

If we can rest that long, that briefly, that may be all we have to do.

If we can rest in this very moment, come out of it, and rest again, sequentially, again and again and again, that process of repeated resting will, in time, merge into a single consciousness that illuminates.

We are aware of our resting awareness, like rolling a tiny grain of sand between our thumb and our forefinger.

We are all in, then out, all in, then out... immersed, reflecting on that immersion, immersed, reflecting on that immersion, something practiced so often it becomes what we call a stream of consciousness.

Who would have thought that recursion was key.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Seeing Through a Lens

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 2, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1769ad40-c78a-4cc5-94c4-ac3ac56e18db_2048x1491.jpeg

I'm still wrapped up in the land of cameras, gradually sorting out what lenses I will need and which I can part with. Right now, I'm still swapping them in and swapping them out as I learn what is useful.

And with Hasselblad, nothing is inexpensive. Some of the lenses cost almost as much as the camera itself, so I must tread lightly.

To buy a lens, I pretty much have to sell a lens, if I want to keep my expenditure within budget. I must.

As mentioned, I can't afford to invest more than I now have invested in camera equipment, which means, as pointed out, I must sell something I have if I want something new. It's a juggling act.

And that depends on the quality of image a lens produces, plus how heavy and/or bulky the lens is. I have to cart it around.

Of course, I have some lenses that are so heavy that they must stay inside for studio use. Yet, the small and light lenses, for the most part, are not what I need for the best photos. So, that's the rub.

Anyway, I'm working the problem.

I have been seriously photographing since 1956 when I first started with a 35mm color slide camera. In 2008 I had a dharma breakthrough while crawling around in the wet grass as the sun came up while peering through a lens. I not only saw what I was photographing through the lens, I saw not just the object I was photographing, but also saw the seeing "Seeing" itself.

That was when the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea.

This was my introduction to what is called Vipassana (Insight Meditation), a part of Mahamudra (which is non-meditation). It was at that moment that I concluded 35 years of practicing meditation and actually accomplished Insight Meditation for the first time.

And so, I have been very involved with camera lenses from that moment onward. And it continues today.

[A photo of the Joy Lapps Project by me, taken at the Wheatland Music Festival 2024.]

EMAIL

Liberation Through Seeing

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 4, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c4bea0ac-5430-4fa4-aabf-c8ee839b3479_1024x1024.jpeg

There is only liberation in our future, because otherwise there is no liberation.

Liberation Through Sight

Liberation Through Sound

Liberation Through Scent

Liberation Through Taste

Liberation Through Touch

It is something easily glossed over or passed by, yet the dharma texts make this clear, that our five senses are pure conduits NOT reified or overlaid by thought. We can trust our senses at least to the point where we react to them.

We have to be clear as to what is meditation? I'm sure we don't know until we do know, and when we do, we no longer need to practice meditation. That's the point.

Of course, once actually meditating, we can sit in a corner, a cave, or by a lake. Not a problem. And, equally, we can go into town and taste anything at all. It's all good.

However, just as 'practicing' meditation is not meditating, actual meditation is not about practicing meditation and trying to be still or 'trying' to be or do anything. Once actually meditating, being still or moving make no difference. We are by then immersed.

Just as we can shine a flashlight into anywhere that needs light, true meditation makes light of everything -- anything at all. Actual meditation is indestructible because it is not a 'thing' but rather a process, and an ongoing process at that. Practicing meditation is like learning to breathe, at last inhaling.

In fact, actual meditation is classically termed 'non-meditation', if we mean by meditation practicing this, that, or some other thing. Practicing is practicing; meditation is meditation.

Meditation itself does nothing at all, which is why it is not meditating or 'doing', but in the dharma texts often just called non-meditation. True meditation allows what is, to be just that, what naturally is. Actual meditation is non-meditation, because we are no longer trying to do anything.

The process of non-meditation, not 'trying' or practicing, itself is galvanizing and galvanized, indestructible, and beyond the reach of thought. It's like dunking for apples. It involves immersion.

In fact, it's what already 'is' and has always been. We just have to relax and allow it to arise for us. We must go beyond trying, stop trying.

So, we can say practicing meditation is a process of letting go, relaxing to the point of allowing what is to be what it already is, because it already is. And always has been.

Nothing 'has' to be done. In fact, nothing can be done. We can do nothing.

And this is why non-meditation is everywhere, in a cave or in the marketplace. We have no fear of losing it because, once realized or recognized, it cannot be lost. There is nothing to it but the finding, the recognition. Realization is a one-way trip, forever.

Most of us may grasp intellectually that the appearances surrounding us are indeed empty, yet we have to also realize in reality that these same appearances in which we find ourselves are nothing more than the emptiness itself arising.

Not easy.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Blinded by the Light

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 6, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/d0e7cd46-edec-498c-a144-e5664972afc1_1024x1024.jpeg

It's during these very strong solar flares that we can get a glimpse of what is there all the time but is constantly ignored.

And that is that the sheer mass of energy of huge solar flares can strip our regular connections and interrupt our train of thoughts or any extended story lines we are involved in, leaving us for the moment naked and denuded of what normally we are all wrapped up in. We lose our cover.

Suddenly, thanks to the sheer energy from the sun, we are starkly exposed in the here and now, unable to pick up where we left off in our musings, much like "now, where was I..."

We find ourselves stripped of our so-called Self and left trying to find the interest or cover we had been engaged in before the solar flares and CMEs swept in, thus often feeling naked and out of sorts. We can't find or feel what just yesterday we were pursuing with such rapt attention, instead now sitting there staring at the ceiling, so to speak.

Of course, such an experience can work both ways, with one person not knowing or feeling what they had been doing the day before, and another grateful to get down to the raw nitty-gritty for a change.

Most of us avoid the direct approach and prefer a more nuanced way of life. We may not appreciate being jolted out of whatever we were doing and forced to hardscrabble a sense of purpose. We also may have been lifted right out of whatever path we were on (like the tornado in Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz) and come up empty and not feeling much like doing anything. We have lost even the stubs of what we were engrossed in just days before.

What's serious about all this?

For me it was serious when I put together my intimate experience of a major stroke and something quite similar precipitated by the advent of extreme solar flares.

And in my opinion, it actually took these very strong X7 and X9 class solar flares to make all this conscious for me, although now that this has happened I

can fill in the blanks or gaps of lesser flares and, above all, link this experience to that of having a major stroke. I was able to connect the dots, instantaneously.

And in that flash, my stroke experience, which because it was an isolated and singular event suddenly merged what the experience of intense solar influx and the two became one.

And with that I ceased feeling that my stroke experience was an isolated event, perhaps unique to me, and for the first time I realized that what is meaningful here is that there is an entire class or level of events that pertains to our breaking with a habit of ignoring the reality of the simple here and now, of what is called Samsara.

For me this amounts to 'a' or the key to what makes Samsara of such long life and offers perhaps a way break away from our enduring habit of ignorance.

I have written about this phenomenon elsewhere and at some length yet am quite aware that the sheer shock value of what can be realized here is almost unendurable to the average mind. So, I will just say it and trust those that can take it to heart will do so and those for whom this goes over their head will allow that to happen.

In the sacred Tibetan writings, in particular the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol), it is pointed out that we will encounter a brilliant white light on our journey there. It has been my direct experience from having a major stroke (not from a couple of TIA that I had), that the image of a blinding white light, at least for me, is NOT the best way to describe this experience.

The brilliant and blinding white light of the bardo (and our turning away from it or fearing it) is a surrogate for what I find to be a much more understandable way of viewing this.

In Tibetan literature this has been called "Liberation Through Seeing" or 'Tongrol', and here is the kicker.

Instead of imaging a brilliant white light, in place of that, substitute not a white light, but our recoil from having lost the comforts of Samsaric existence. Our inability to locate or get back into our familiar attachments when the sudden shock of an intense surge of solar energy (or a stroke) separates us for a time from the Samsaric cocoon we have fashioned for ourselves in this life. We have by definition NEVER known anything else.

Instead of imagining our turning away from a brilliant white light that we cannot bear to look at, what in actuality we cannot bear is to be separated

from the familiar coffin of attachments we have fashioned for ourselves in this life.

When suddenly stripped of those comforts by the shock of solar influx or, as in my case, the advent of a major stroke, we are helpless to locate or find the familiar cover we are so habituated and used to. It is stripped from us and that hurts.

Such connections are masked in everyday Samsaric life by the nature of Samsara itself, which is to hide and take cover in whatever we are attached to. Having our Self shattered by a sudden stroke or by intense solar energy, and not being able to reenter or get back into our Self and cover, we are forced to be exposed to the experience of having no cover at all, at least until the Self can reanimate itself.

I feel that this is what happens during intense solar activity. We are reduced to being separated from our regular haunts or familiar cover and forced to look at the nature of the mind undistractedly, like it or not.

Simply put, we cannot stand to do this, cannot bear unadulterated exposure to the true nature of the mind itself. We are so not used to this glaring exposure that our whole 'being' reacts almost violently.

And in these times of intense solar immersion, stripped of our normal Samsaric cover, we are exposed to having almost no cover at all, and in that exposure we are unable to connect to the familiar and thus don't feel like (or cannot) stand the stark nakedness of the mind itself.

Consider this and comment please.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Sun Storms

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 6, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/af3564df-08f3-4a4f-92a8-b44343f9f0e6_2048x2048.jpeg

It should not surprise us that the phenomenon of solar flares, CMEs, and their activity should not only align with astronomy and science, but also with the dharma teachings.

If we study the nature of Tibetan Terma, especially what is called “Mind Terma,” it is the process of extracting or pulling from the mind insights and teachings that the world needs and is ready for right now. And the ones who do this, pull from the mind, are called Tertons, treasure finders.

And a key or crucial concept to note is that these hidden teachings or mind treasures are not found or extracted as a finished document, one ready to frame and put up on the wall. Not at all.

In fact, it’s almost that the terton is exposed to a tone or vibration, one that moves them to absorbing them, and from that, over years of absorbing and working with that tone, from that comes a finished piece of dharma treasure, one ready for the public and to be shared.

This is not just for dharma. As an astrology, I have pulled many astrological terma from the mind itself, incubated it, and then shared it with my fellow astrologers.

Personally, I don’t find that this process of finding terma differs from the process each of us can undertake to mine the mind for ideas and work them into something fit for use.

I mention that here because it is very clear that solar influx by flares and CMEs seems to work the same way. An intense packet of solar vibration inundates and floods us with a tone, bathing us in its wake, and from that we are moved this way or that to change.

Just as a musical tone moves us to dance or to listen, an impending solar tone moves us with its vibration to a cosmic dance of change.

Perhaps a solar inundation shakes us to the core, vibrates us right out of our current linear track in time, and shakes what we are currently doing off like water from a duck’s back.

And it leaves us stripped down to the core, naked as a jaybird of whatever we are about, and somehow brought back to square one, to in some way start over. God knows we need that!

Of course, some of us will be terrified to lose track of whatever tracks we were on, while others will welcome and be refreshed by being given a chance to reassemble our Self, a self which the solar energy manages to shatter.

Solar inundation humbles us, like the old blues song, "I'm tore down, almost level to the ground." We can't feel the ground of ordinary mind if we are on our high horse. Intellection kills life. We have to let go of all that.

Thinking is NOT realization.

What is sacred to us?

Find out.

I work while I can, while the solar influx is upon us and before it wanes. It takes me a while, it seems, each time a high voltage solar flare submerges us in its energy, I have to accept it, get used to it, and kind of set up shop within it.

Once that's done, I do my best to make use of the event and what it does to me, which is always a bit deflating because it rips me away from everything I have been doing as well as the way I see myself.

Being stripped of whatever I am enveloped in is not always welcome and takes adjustment on my part.

I have to keep in mind that I can learn from this and it also prepares me to undergo such an event in the future and especially when I enter the bardo after death.

Now is the time to prepare, to be stripped of much of what I call my Self and usually all that I am working on, meaning whatever avenues or paths I am traveling.

Here is a free e-book on "Sun Storms" that I completely reworked today and then added my recent posts, plus a ChatGPT essay on solar flares. It's all you can eat.

"Sun Storms 2024"

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/sun_storms%20FIN7.pdf.pdf

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Two Trains Running

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 8, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/80463c7c-780b-4aad-93a1-5c48470a2283_1024x1024.jpeg

A time when things can come together or fall apart. Which is it? It depends on us.

When the solar influx is high, like into the X-Class flares, the going may be tough as for keeping a clear mind, yet this is just the time to be present and aware.

There are better or more comfortable times than this, but those will be under Samsara's guidance and won't help.

When the blinders of Samsara are stripped away or greatly diminished is the time to work the problem. And those times are rare, few, and far between.

It is odd that the times when we are least comfortable, when Samsaric things are not going well, those are the times when real dharma insight is possible.

So, instead of hiding away in sleep or otherwise protecting ourselves from direct contact with the uncomfortable elements of life, so to speak, just relax as it is and weather the changes. Hang in there. Lean into the wind.

There are, as they say, two trains running here, one run by Samsara and the other a break with Samsara enabled by X-Class flares that run just for a day or two.

Make hay while the Sun shines.

This 'not feeling like doing anything', and 'not finding anything that feels comfortable' is not a sign to turn back or hold off, but just the opposite. This discomfort opens a door to change that when that door is open, we can walk through.

In these rare times, the light is on, and we can see if we will look.

So, Look!

I've known for quite a while that boredom and awkward or uncomfortable times are not a blind alley but rather an open door if we will just get ourselves to walk through.

IMO, the first step is to be aware that these uncomfortable times are not a stop sign or signal for us to do an about face and go back the way we came.

Ride them out. Get to know this boredom and uncomfortableness. Hang in there and open your eyes.

For one, these times when the curtain is down are few and rare. Getting an inkling or whiff of the darkness of the comforts of Samsara is that same rareness, an opportunity to take note.

Take Note!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Selling the Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 19, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/40445636-6aa7-4b7c-b02d-b1c36077bd7c_750x750.jpeg

I'm old fashioned. I don't believe in charging for dharma anything -- teachings, empowerments, classes, etc. It's clear to me that it's not where we are headed. I see the dharma is becoming more and more commercial, and there does not seem to be any or many folks with my view.

It's true I made my living for nine years charging \$35 a session for astrology, but I did not do therapy, as in schedule a second session after the first. And astrology is not dharma.

With dharma I never charged, only gave money, time, and interest. Still do. I don't want to err in charging for something that I feel only is free if it's 'free'.

Yet today, I see more and more quite-qualified dharma people charging higher and higher prices for teaching dharma. I am too old and unwilling to change on this issue.

My problem is not with this, but rather with reflecting or reacting to those that do. I see this happening, my reaction to others' actions in this regard, and I don't like my own reaction, i.e. not liking what they are doing.

I want to stay out of their business, yet I find business of any kind as relates to dharma rather fragile in that regard. I just don't want to cross that threshold myself, and I'm ashamed of myself when I react to others doing this. That's literally their business. I know that and am trying to steer clear of the whole mess. Obviously, avoidance is not avoiding.

However, I see the writing on the wall. The dharma is becoming commercialized. People are charging more and more to have a slice of dharma.

I am content with where I am with it, with no confusion other than the confusion I am relating here.

I believe you give, give, give to the dharma, but don't look for anything in return other than the blessing of realizing the dharma itself.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Cheese Stands Alone

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 24, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/afdebf1f-1f6f-4d5f-8332-c49c8368d594_1024x1024.jpeg

Well, our world went all Topsy-Turvy today when Margaret and I found ourselves, at the last minute, bidding for this house in Lansing, Michigan, just a few blocks from our son Michael and his partner Micah.

There we were just a few feet away, staring into each other's eyes as signed the bid. This would change our lives forever.

After 44 years living in a little town in the middle of the mitten, as we say, suddenly we would be in a big city, the capital of Michigan.

And to top it off, this new house (if our bid is accepted) was one size too small for us, yet we keep telling ourselves we have to size down and get rid of a lot of stuff. Been saying that for years, in almost a threat or a dare.

We just pulled the trigger.

The onus is on me because, as an archivist, I have the most stuff to divest. It's not that I have not shed tons of stuff in these last years, placing it in universities, libraries, non-profits, and the like. Even after that, I still have stuff.

In fact, I have so much stuff that if we get this house, I will have to build a structure in the backyard just to hold the remaining stuff I still have to paw over before shedding.

The house is not postage-stamp size, but it is remarkably smaller, way smaller than we are used to. And we would be leaving an incredible two-house compound completely filled with space, more space than we could ever use. Ouch. Why do this?

A couple of reasons come to mind, the first being we want to be closer to our kids and their families. We are tired of being a remote outpost in the family circuit. Another reason is because it is time to size down and relocate. And another reason, at least for me, is that I feel it would be healthy for me to step out of this place that is both (for me) an historical dharma place and also an astrological center. There is so much of the past here. I am encapsulated.

I feel my past is too much with me and I perhaps need to demonstrate to myself that, using the old example, you can take boy out of the dharma, but you can't get the dharma out of the boy.

I am not just a custodian or curator of a storied dharma-center and astrological history, but wherever I go or end up, whatever dharma I have, I carry with me and am not just, as mentioned, a curator of my own past. Too lazy.

It all makes little practical sense, yet that's just the beauty of it, that here we have a shot in the dark, lightning in a bottle, and after all is said and done "The Cheese Stands Alone."

It's a bit like cosmic calisthenics, finishing up life with a workout in the marketplace, and not beholden to the shadow of my own past.

In a way, we have to step away to step in. Of course, this whole thing is terrifying at some level, exposing oneself to the elements when it has been such a comfortable and tailored environment.

In a way, this move is a premonition as to what will happen when I pass on, dropping all that is personal for naked awareness.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Recognition of Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 26, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/792aae51-1ff4-4134-b7ec-68064902295a_1024x1024.jpeg

There are many ways to learn dharma. One might even say there are only ways to learn dharma, yet it does not just rub off by association.

All methods of learning dharma exist only to stimulate, inspire, or point out to us to turn the wheel of our own dharma. Dharma is a do-it-yourself project. We each have to turn the wheel of the dharma. No one can do it for us. It depends on our focus.

There is coarse focus and subtle focus as well. The big wheels are slowly turning, but the little pocket-watch wheels are also silently spinning.

The heartbeat is there, somewhere. It's what doctors search for with their stethoscopes. I'm not talking about those.

To feel the subtle beat of the most delicate time wheels, we have to drop everything, let go, and put our ear to the ground. Surrender and full immersion is required.

The most subtle and spiritual beat is hard to monitor, not because it is weak but because we are. The strong incessant beat of Samsara is unmistakable because it is all that we have ever known, while the most subtle rhythms of inner awareness are drowned out by the roar of Samsara that we call silence.

All these cycles, samsaric and dharmic, their warp and woof, are interwoven like an elaborate tapestry. We hear the obvious and are deaf, at least at first, to the inner more subtle cycles although they too are always present. This is because we are children of Samsara and are not aware of the nature of our own mind, the Dharma.

Just as we can change focus when looking at a photograph from the obvious to the more subtle, so with training and time we can learn to hear, beyond Samsara, the counterpoint of the true nature of the mind.

This is what all the meditation and its learning is all about, tuning out the harsh sound of Samsara and tuning in the music of the spheres or whatever we can agree to call the subtle spiritual sense of the dharma.

Everything is always already there, warp and woof, Samsara and Nirvana. Through meditation and its various practices, we learn to become deaf to Samsara and be able to hear and pick up on beat of the dharma withing all that chaos.

Of course, right now, thanks to politics and wars of the moment, we are immersed in a kind of wild chaos, making it difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sound of dharma from the roar of the world of chaos surrounding us.

To accomplish this, the subtle or cosmic, we would have to let go of all attachment and surrender ourselves to the present moment and what 'IS' and by that see what floats up and comes to mind without our blocking it with clinging to this or clinging to that.

Holding real still is not done through effort, but rather through surrender of all effort, thus allowing what 'IS' to become apparent, whatever it is.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Om Ah Hum

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 27, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/fc06d073-2b68-4966-af37-7928fc9eeea9_1568x2048.jpeg

The three syllables “OM AH HUM” can be said as a mantra, yet in reality these three syllables are the result of many years of practice rather than something in themselves to use or say.

In my own dharma experience “OM AH HUM” arose from the extensive practice of Guru Yoga, rather than as a beginning mantra, although there is no problem with just reciting this from word one. It’s just not usual.

In other words, “OM AH HUM” kind of sums up our practice rather than initiates it, although everything that goes around comes around, so no problem.

However, to appreciate “OM AH HUM,” as mentioned, in my experience these syllables are the summation or result of a successful practice of Guru Yoga. This is a shorthand way of expressing the result of that practice.

In other words, to my knowledge this is a very special and sacred practice, the utterance of “OM AH HUM.”

Probably nothing or very little can be or should be said about the syllables “OM AH HUM.” I will be brief.

OM represents the form that is empty, appearances are the emptiness arising. The ĀH represents enlightened speech, the empty nature of sound. And HUM, the emptiness of awareness itself.

The teachings say that the syllable HUM contains all three syllables.

My words can go on and yet will reveal nothing further.

“OM AH HUM” can not be put into words, nor can the meaning of “OM AH HUM” be known superficially. It is a summation rather than an offering, an exclamation mark!

OM AH HUM, VAJRA GURU PADMA SIDDHI HUM

[Photos by me.]

EMAIL

Reactivity Tong-Len

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 28, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/314d4f7e-534a-4031-b75a-58e0cbeb318c_1024x1024.jpeg

[This is what I found to be essential for learning dharma.]

As for where to begin learning the dharma, I get requests, and I have posted all kinds of suggestions over the many years (since 2007) I have been posting here on Facebook.

Chief among them, and by far the easiest possible daily practice is simply becoming aware of and monitoring our own reactions throughout the day. It takes no extra time or place, and it is our own reaction, something that we are doing already.

Becoming aware of something we are already doing is not a single step out of our way. It remains for me to point out how becoming aware of our own reactions is useful and qualifies as an authentic dharma practice.

This particular dharma technique is something that I presented to my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, in front of a whole room of Mahamudra students, and Rinpoche remarked that, indeed, this is an authentic technique.

In the history of dharma practices, among the practices preliminary to Mahamudra training, Tong-Len, exchanging yourself for others, is much loved and much practiced. It is part of what is known as Lojong practice, using short pithy slogans to remind us to refine and purify our motivations and attitude.

In fact, Tong-Len is the 7th slogan in relative Bodhicitta as part of the Lojong practice known as the “Seven Points of Mind Training” attributed to Atisha, the eleventh-century Indian Buddhist scholar and adept.

Tong-Len, also called “taking and sending,” exchanging yourself for others, which involves breathing in the suffering of others and breathing out any peace and healing we have within us.

It was the very first practice that Margaret and my Root Guru, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche taught us at our first instructional meeting. I was on the top of a mountain above Woodstock, NY on one of the coldest days of the year, in those Limbo-like days between Christmas and New Year.

Margaret and I had driven 800 miles with all our kids in our little Toyota Tercel. It was so cold that I had to scrape the frost from the inside of the front windshield with a little piece of cardboard. We had not even notified the Rinpoche that we were coming, so no one was expecting us, and outdoor light was on.

There we were, all five of us (at the time), huddled together knocking at the door, while high winds swirled around us. No monastery existed at that time, just some holes in the earth, with poured concrete columns covered with sheets of plastic that were being whipped by the high winds.

At long last, a light turned on, a door opened, and a young woman, Norvie Bullock, invited us inside. We were ushered into a small waiting room and waited to see Rinpoche.

After a while Khenpo Rinpoche came down with his translator Ngodup Burkhar. We talked and came away from that meeting with the instructions for Tong-Len, the traditional variety and headed back into the night.

We had nowhere to stay and headed back down the mountain to the town of Woodstock, NY where we found a motel that had a room. It was still cold, even in the motel, which had no real heat, but only a little round wall heater. There Margaret and I were, with our brave little crew of kids.

We opened the little book that Rinpoche had given us, The “Torch of Certainty,” by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Taye , to the section on Tong-Len, which Rinpoche had asked us to study and practice.

What we read was close to terrifying, because if we read right it was asking us to give all love, strength, and kindness we had within us to others, and to inhale and breathe in all their darkness, suffering, and fear.

My first thought is that is exactly opposite to what I had been taught, to keep evil and ‘badness’ at arm’s length, and here we were told to, instead, accept and breath all that darkness into us and offer up all the light and kindness we could muster.

I will spare you the details, but suffice it to say, we wondered if we had wandered into something that would harm us. However...

And there is a big ‘however’ here, the effect of being close to Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was so strong, so strengthening that instead of cutting and run, we doubled down and took to heart what Rinpoche had asked of us. We learned Tong-Len, which if very much a part of what I am presenting here with “Reactivity Tong-Len.”

Reactivity-Tong-Len is identical to traditional the traditional Tong-Len that Rinpoche had pointed out for us to practice, except instead of working between yourself and all other sentient beings, in Reactivity Tong-Len, we first learn to work with our own reactivity and then, only later, learn to work with others. It is that simple.

We will find, if we examine our own mindstream over the course of a day, that our mindstream is interrupted frequently by our own reactions. It could be as obvious as when a car beeps its horn, the phone suddenly rings, a door slams shut, pretty much anything that interrupts us and causes us to be startled, a reaction.

Another form of reaction is when someone hurts our feelings or disses us, ignoring us, or anything at all that we take umbrage at. We react all the time.

And as we become more and more aware of our own reactions, we find that there are finer and yet finer reactions going on, like someone we don't like (or does not like us) coming around the corner and we are face-t-face with them. We involuntarily react. Reactions are involuntary. We can't stop them.

Or perhaps we don't like the tie someone is wearing or the color or style of their scarf or hair. Our reactions go on almost constantly, each one taking, as the song goes, another little piece of our heart. And so, what is the practice that addresses this?

It is very simple. When we react AND are aware of that reaction, we simply note it, and secondly, we then acknowledge or note it as our own reaction and no one else. And finally, after being aware of the reaction, taking note, and owning it, we just drop it. That's all there is to it.

It does not matter what causes us to react, and we spend no time pondering it or where it came from. We note it, own it, and drop it.

If we do this religiously, as often as we are aware of reacting, we will gradually neutralize the reaction and not spend that modicum of our precious energy it takes in the reaction. We get that energy back. We save it.

Over time, by reducing reactions, we calm down and our mindstream, instead of constantly reacting, becomes contiguous and tranquil. All that spent energy is no longer lost.

When we have calmed our reactivity down, quieted the mind, we then can do the traditional form of Tong-Len, exchanging ourselves for others.

Of course, we can start out doing our best to exchange ourselves for others, yet I find that method overly intellectual and far too theoretical. It's like

relative Bodhicitta, a good intention but the rubber does not quite hit the road, IMO.

As mentioned, this dharma practice could not be simpler, taking up no extra time because we are already paying out energy with our reactions, and best of all, it works. And it works all day long, allowing us to accrue a huge amount of dharma practice where before maybe we spent 10 minutes, half an hour, or whatever in dharma practice. Reactivity Tong-Len is a preliminary to learning to actually meditate.

Also, Khenpo Rinpoche would often say that those moments of complete surprise, when we react with shock, are opportunities, within the impact of that sudden shock, to look directly at the nature of the mind.

In my own experience, it is not those little moments in which this can occur, but real life-changing moments (like the death of a loved one, etc.) can precipitate insight and recognition as to how the mind works, if we are aware enough to look at those times. Mostly, obviously, we are in shock, are confused, and unable to look at the nature of the minds at these times of shock. Yet, according to Rinpoche, in sudden surprise or shock, the curtain is drawn back, and it is easier for us to recognize the nature of the mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Clear White Light

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 30, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ee9dd25f-db08-44ba-a76d-f179876cfc6d_1024x1024.jpeg

This is a story, a life experience, one that I had enduring a major stroke some years ago. I had had two TIAs (Transient Ischemic Attack), also referred to as 'Minor Strokes' some years before, but this was (so my doctors tell me) a major stroke, one with permanent damage. They showed me the X-rays.

To appreciate or even understand what such an experience is like, it helps to understand what in dharma study is called 'Samsara', that cyclic, up and down, in and out, state we have taken refuge in since time immemorial.

Following the moments of the onset of the major stroke, by the time I got to the hospital, I was forced to see into the construction behind Samsara for the first time ever, this cyclic world that we inhabit, and all this insight quite against my will. I witnessed it, nonetheless. When I experienced my major stroke, it was choiceless.

From the onset of the stroke, in the hospital, 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 instantaneously shattered in the stroke, was able to reanimate itself and close up all its gaps or windows. Until that time my eyes were propped open like with toothpicks whether I liked it or not. I had no choice but to look at what was being revealed around me. With many decades of dharma training, I had a certain ingrained preparation to witness this.

And what I witnessed, and 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 see in that instant, onward, and what followed, and I believe few have. In a nutshell, it's not that we cannot free ourselves from this Samsaric state we find ourselves in, but rather that we don't want to and have no intention of doing so. To me, that was news, what I found out, and it was shocking beyond my understanding to date.

It was as if in this life we each are living 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 we made in the day and take refuge in the past. We step forward by day, but step back by night. I wish to high heaven that I could deeply share the experience I am describing here.

In a nutshell, it is that we are going exactly nowhere and have no intention of being free of Samsara, of doing otherwise than we always have. It's the lack of intention that dumbfounded me, the insincerity, the willful ignorance, and probably welcome ignorance at that. And the so-called resistance movement as to the defects of Samsara was, including much of our interest in dharma, in reality is just another part of Samsara. We never get beyond the periphery, the city limits, so to speak. We belong to Samsara, line, hook, and sinker, and always have. What we call 'dharma training' is mostly just another part of Samsara, and carries its stamp of approval.

Why? The answer is dirt simple, because we are habituated to the here and the now of Samsara. It's an age-old habit, from innumerable lifetimes apparently, 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 the protests. They are choreographed.

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, perpetual entertainment, and false security of Samsara, and the freedom to continue on with that, my not being free.

And even in my revelations from the stroke at the time, all I could think about was getting back inside my comfort zone and to find my way back to ignoring the harsh light and truth of reality. Samsara is an elaborate construct that is all encompassing, that we protect with our life.

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 and we are completely devoted to it.

I can't say strongly enough that we have never known anything else but Samsara. It's not like we once knew 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, yet to be enlightened.

It's not like Plato's allegory of the cave or the Christian view of 'Original Sin', where we once knew, but forgot, and are trying to get back there.

The dharma teachings are crystal clear about this, and I have asked the great rinpoches over and over. Their comment is that we have NEVER managed to recognize the true nature of the mind in all eternity and have always only been an inhabitant of Samsara. It's no wonder that we love it so; we are so used to it. We have known nothing else. It's not that we once knew. Never.

The power of this major stroke wiped out completely my near memory (and far memory too) of my Self, of who I was, and more important, how to find my way back to the habits and history that up to that point made up the Samsara I had lived in.

I could not remember or bring it to mind, my Self, try as I might. I was living in the present moment, clear as a bell, but had no cover, Self, or history to take cover in. I was naked, with no shadows, only this brilliant white light shining down on me from above. I could not look at it, try as I did.

And you can be sure I tried with all my might to get back to what I knew, the comfortable cover of my history in which I could hide and feel comfortable – endless entertainment. It was not happening. And yet I was clear as a bell, more clear than I had ever, ever been. This is what we experience in the bardo after death, so the teachings say.

Instead, what I did see and what I was continually exposed to was this brilliant naked 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, and there I was like out on a vast desert of sand, with no shadows to take cover in, no entertainment.

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! Clearer than I had ever been. Astounded.

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 is the nakedness I felt because I was denied the cover, closure, entertainment, and the refuge of my normal haunts, my sense of Self, entertainments, and the darkness that had always shielded me from being nakedly exposed as I suddenly was. I was mentally naked as a J-bird. Clear as a bell.

Like a hermit crab without its shell, I was FORCED to endure full exposure to vulnerabilities that I 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, as mentioned, was crystal clear and just totally there as usual, actually clearer than I have ever experienced. I was fully in the present moment because for the moment, I had no past and no future. It reminds me of the old poem/song:

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

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 thrust 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.

Because of my training, I was very coherent able to describe to the doctors who crowded around me. They had never heard before and were fascinated. They asked me questions and one even gave me his home phone number and told me he wanted to talk to me about his wife and their situation.

And this was not like an instant, a few minutes, or even an hour or so, but went on for days and weeks while my totally shattered sense of Self (stripped naked of a familiar Self) tried to reanimate itself and yet could not manage it. That’s what a major stroke can do, wipe that all out, much like someday when we die and leave our person behind, our very death will do this to us.

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. And that clarity is ALWAYS there for all of us, just separated from us by a Samsaric curtain.

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, and with the stroke this state (or process) went on for a spell, and quite a long while at that.

It's like that 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.

Anyway, that's what happened to me with the stroke: my history and Self just wiped clean, and there I was, one with the awareness that is. It was excruciatingly (terribly) 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 the reality of the experienced expressed and allow folks to take it in and react to it as they will.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Aware of Awareness

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 31, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a482010a-7005-4486-9ed9-3acf1b78644a_1024x1024.jpeg

Yes, that's it, living an ordinary life, aware of the awareness we have of the mind itself. We train on the meditation cushion and when Insight Meditation is achieved, we either continue on the cushion or take it with us into our life. Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is all about immersion.

However, not in or out of immersion, rather, immersed and reflecting, so both in and out of immersion, sequentially, one after the other.

If we immersed and did not alternately reflect, we would have no conclusion to the immersion, and no reflection. Awareness we would have, yet no crossing (and recrossing) of the border between immersion and reflection. That's key.

My dharma teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, would frequently say to us that a meditation session could be as long as it takes to pick up a cup of tea and take a sip. He said this often

That's pretty brief considering many dharma teachers recommend we sit for hours, days, weeks, or months. So why this brief resting of the mind?

Actually, what is being suggested is not 'meditating' for that short time, but rather 'no-meditation' for that short time, just resting the mind in non-meditation for that brief time.

Immersing the mind in non-meditation for a brief moment is something we were asked to do or at least attempt at the conclusion of any meditation session, such as Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation. When we closed a meditation session, we would rest briefly in the nature of the mind or do our best to attempt to. We actually did not know how to do this and by doing this we were not really immersed in the resting. It was getting used to the idea.

And if, subsequently, many years later, we experience what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and fully immerse ourselves, that too will be for a moment or instant. Then what happens is that we come out of that momentary immersion and back into our normal dualistic state of mind, one of subject and object. That is what I mean by 'reflection.' We are reflecting on the immersion of Insight Meditation.

Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is fully immersive, yet we can't (at least in the beginning) sustain that immersion for very long, if at all. So, the idea of a session of Vipassana being as long as it takes to raise a cup of tea to our lips and taking a sip makes a lot of sense. We can't sustain Insight Meditation much longer than that brief sip.

And so, if by practice and proper instruction we can immerse ourselves in Insight Meditation, when we fall out of it, there is nothing stopping us from just doing it again. And to use the analogy of the sip of tea, if we sip, sip, sip, we create a chain of immersion, followed by always coming out of it and reflecting. Immerse, reflect, immerse, reflect, etc.

I consider this chain of immersive sips and reflection like a mala or rosary of Insight (Vipassana), one that over time results in constant immersion until the two stages, immersion and reflection, merge into a single stream of awareness and reflection, a constant chain of illumination.

The only thing that is stopping us from doing that right now, at this moment, is that we have not been able to rest in the nature of the mind so that we have actually recognized the nature of the mind. We cannot recognize much less sustain the nature of our own mind even for an instant such as that sip of tea takes. That immersion is required experience. That first immersion is the advent of Insight Meditation.

Not only that, but that first recognition, that first moment of recognition is not something we just fall into or find. At least in the pith dharma texts in my lineage, the Karma Kagyu Lineage, that initial recognition has to be pointed out to us by an authentic master, someone who knows how to do this or has been taught how to do this.

This is why these are called the "Pointing Out Instructions," which not only have to be pointing out to us AND (and this is a big 'AND') we the student have to receive or get these instructions enough to actually recognize the nature of the mind and thus become immersed in that moment. This has to happen in order to do Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

And it's not something we can read about, buy, or in any way do without having it pointed out to us by an authentic dharma master, so that's a bit of a roadblock for aspiring students, as I understand it. We can't just order it up, but have to work to that end, find an authentic master, and work with them until this 'Recognition' takes place.

That's the idea. I hope you understand the problem and what is involved because it is a very big deal for most of us, recognizing the actual nature of the mind itself. Why? Because 'Recognition' is the point where we actually

begin to meditate in fact, although what we are doing then is technically 'Non Meditation'. No effort is involved to meditate.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Mother and Son Luminosity

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 2, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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When asked what does the expression "Mother and Son Luminosity" refer to, His Eminence Jamgön Kontrül Rinpoche said.

"Because of one's confusion one is not ready to recognize ultimate nature at the outset. However, by practicing path mahamudra on the basis of the proper view achieved through ground mahamudra, then the son - each individual experience on the path - comes ever closer to the "mother" - true reality, until the insight acquired and reality become one, which is the meeting of mother and son, and one achieves the all-pervasive wisdom of dharmadhatu."

The 'Mother and Son Luminosity' is also referred to as 'Recognition,' the recognition of the true nature of the mind.

His Eminence Jamgön Kontrül Rinpoche gave the Kalachakra initiation in Toronto, Canada, from August 9th to 13th, 1990. Margaret and I were there, along with our kids, although the kids did not attend the initiation.

This was the first time the Kalachakra initiation was given in North America by Jamgön Kontrül Rinpoche. His Eminence is one of the four Regents of the Kagyu lineage and has also been closely linked with the Kalachakra in his previous incarnations.

The Karma Kagyu Centre of Toronto is the main center of His Holiness Karmapa in Canada, and Jamgön Kontrül Rinpoche said that it would be good for the Centre and also the whole nation. The Centre is directed by Choje Lama Namse Rinpoche, His Holiness' personal representative in Canada, who also came to our center (Heart Center KTC) and taught us the Karma Pakshi Sadhana, when we had completed our Ngöndro practice.

The Kalachakra initiation is a very important spiritual and cultural event for Dharma practitioners and non-practitioners alike. The Kalachakra initiation

pacifies conflicts, develops peace and welfare, and reduces suffering, both for those who attend and within the community in which it is performed.

Because of this, there is a tradition of giving this very important initiation to large public gatherings. All those who come to this initiation will create a vital spiritual connection with His Eminence.

The Kalachakra is actually a system of seven preliminary and four higher initiations transmitted by the master over a five-day ceremony. The first day is spent on pujas and a special preparatory initiation. The actual Kalachakra empowerment takes place over the next three days. The fifth and final day is a special Ganachakra feast offering where participants celebrate and dedicate the merit of their practice.

Kalachakra Symbol

Here is the symbol for the Kalachakra, which I personally colored. To learn more about this sacred symbol, here are some details:

https://kalachakranet.org/kalachakra_tantra_10-fold_powerful.html

Also, a photo of Margaret and I at the 1990 Kalachakra initiation. We are standing in the center of the photo. I am wearing a light-colored shirt, Margaret behind me. (Photo by our friend Joe Abel.)

EMAIL

The Great Seal of Mahamudra

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 7, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/74ed1194-bbfe-44e5-8dbf-e2b744a3601f_1536x2048.jpeg

The directions and instructions for recognizing the true nature of the mind are already present in this world, fully visible to see or find.

However, as they say, “It takes two to tango,” so when it comes to learning dharma, it’s not just up to the guru or dharma teacher to point out the nature of the mind, the student also must be ready or made ready.

All of the great dharma masters tell us that the nature of the mind is not something hidden away and almost impossible to find; it’s right out in the open for all to see.

The problem is that we can’t see it because we are so wrapped up in Samsara that our encrusted obscurations prevent our recognizing the mind’s nature, although it’s right there in front of us. We are not subtle enough.

The idea is that there are two trains running here, and not just one, the availability of the guru to give the pointing-out instructions and the readiness of the student to receive them.

There are or seem to be ample gurus or qualified dharma teachers to give the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind, which leaves the students who are not prepared to receive those instructions.

There is no way around preparing to recognize the nature of the mind. We either do or we don’t recognize the mind’s nature, a fact that should not be news to us. According to the pith dharma texts, it is said that in all the innumerable lifetimes that we have lived, we have never, not even once, recognized the mind’s nature. That’s how tight a seal Samsara has on us.

It’s one thing to find an authentic master capable of giving you the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind, and quite another for each of us to be able to receive and act on those instructions. I speak from experience and have had the pointing-out instructions directly given to me and I was unable to receive or get those instructions, more than once.

I even had one of the four Heart Sons of the 16 th Karmapa take me into a room by myself, sit me down in a chair, and proceed to give me the pointing-

out instructions and I was unable to receive them. I had to eventually just get up and walk out of the room.

It's fortunate that many years later I was able to receive the pointing-out instructions and actually understand what I had to do in order to recognize the true nature of the mind. After that, it still took me some years of very hard work to eventuate that.

So, finding an authentic dharma teacher capable of introducing you to the nature of your own mind is just the first step. After that it all depends on whether we are ready and capable of receiving those instructions. That's the rub.

The Great Seal of Mahamudra is contrasted with our being sealed in Samsara.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

After the Shock and Awe

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 9, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c7f5a7b8-350a-458a-adf6-335253f018b0_1024x1024.jpeg

As my dharma teacher of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, used to make clear to us, any sudden surprise or shock can pop us out of the comfort bubble that Samsara wraps around us and force us to have a look around. It benefits us to look at these times.

The recent landslide election for the Republicans was quite strong enough to upset my appletart and spin me out for a day or part of a day. And spin I did. Talking with family and friends, many of you had a similar experience.

I don't need to dwell on the part of the shock, yet I do want to say something about how I came out of that shock and found my way back to something like normal or a new normal.

It took most of this day and during that time I was very, very active doing what in the world I perhaps most hate, and that is trying to sort out technical Internet issues with people who only barely speak English and find myself hung out to dry and on the phone to some far distant country.

I did that and I did it for something like eight hours straight with very little breaks. It was like a nightmare and there I was right in the middle of it, banging away on the phone. Waiting.

And how it ended is worth a revue and perhaps some discussion. It was very simple. All of a sudden, instead of the ongoing confusion of today, a combination of the election results and the online harangue, I found myself falling into, or better said, naturally snapping into place, like putting Legos together, a chainlike linking together.

It was like suddenly I was creative again, had control of a linkage that resembled meditation, yet since the kind of meditation I do these days is termed 'non-meditation', i.e. Mahamudra, it was not any kind of 'thinking' process, but rather pure intuition. And it automatically occurred.

However, that 'intuition' was exactly what I am used to and do every day, much of the day. It took over.

To repeat: suddenly, I was aware that I was returned to myself and linked once again to the kind of ‘non-meditation’ I do. It was like the chain of immersion and reflection that makes up the Insight Meditation part of Mahamudra, was plugged back in and functioning. It’s just a clear channel that consisted of full immersion and reflection, automatically taking place, one after the other, after the other – a chain of awareness.

No need for effort on my part. The effort was removed years ago, so that by now it just is automatic, a chain of insight/reflection like beads on a string or necklace – a luminous mala (rosary).

Why is this information useful for readers? Perhaps it’s not useful. What I found helpful and why I am writing about it here was the realization that after the shock of the election ran its course, my previous dharma habits did not require some kind of restarting or initializing, but rather just arose on their own. I didn’t do anything to restart, or jumpstart it, etc. It just suddenly was back, immediately available, and working automatically.

And with that, I felt myself again, no matter what has changed around me. And it was non-dual and ineffable.

In other words, I found myself meditating (or non-meditating) like I always have. It was as if I just picked up on where I had left off, which itself is a circular process like endless beads on a necklace, much like circular breathing.

Insight Meditation was spontaneously just there again, as always. I found that very comforting, because it seems to indicate that we pick up where we left off, perhaps in the next life as well.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Who Your Are

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 10, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Who You Are

If who you are,

Is who you will be,

And who you will be,

Will be,

Who you were,

Then:

Who you are,

Is not who you are,

Or who you will be.

So, who are you?

Let's talk about Karma and the REBIRTH of that karma.

Above, a poem I wrote. The idea of my karma (not my personal 'persona') taking rebirth and pulling around itself a new body, which is not 'me, myself, and I' is baffling. As they say, "It boggles the mind."

I hate being left out in a future life!

What I best keep in mind is that, after death, when my physical body and well-known (to me) Self is left at death's doorway, something of me is in fact paid forward and lives on, just not with my familiar personal name attached to it.

If I read the pith dharma teachings well, they are not interested in the me what I leave behind, the "Michael Erlewine" of me, but rather the only thing of interest in all in me or of me is called karma. I can't even call it 'my' karma because my person, apparently, is abandoned at death.

Something of my past life (and apparently past lives) that IS paid forward is this karma that I have that is not yet exhausted. The karma that I have

exhausted, that does not move forward, is finished, done. It's of little future interest.

I guess that I don't like the idea of rebirth in that I take on or animate my karma in a new person, a new personality, a new Self. I don't even know that person I will become at rebirth, but I must certainly already know A LOT about him or her.

It occurs to me that jettisoning my old Self and person may not be all bad, meaning 'uncomfortable' as it seems. It does not seem to bother me when I go through a big change in the life I am now living and come out with a somewhat altered view of my Self.

This whole election shock changed me, yet here I am, but I have to ask. How am I different and who is that that I now am, if I am different?

It seems that sudden change in my 'person' or Self is tolerated, like: I have no choice. Yet, something has changed.

It appears that the moveable pieces of this puzzle I call "Me" are somewhat ephemeral, at least interchangeable. And so, in this life, when change strikes, I adjust. Who is it that adjusts? That's the point.

I say I adjust, yet the "I" that is me changes or has changed. I'm not quite the same "Michael Erlewine" as I was before the shock of the election returns swept through. I deal with that, although as I pointed out, I have no choice. None of us do.

When I (Michael Erlewine) die and pass on, and my karmic residue and cravings are swept forward to find a rebirth, I also will have no choice.

And the persona that will be wrapped around my current karma to form a new body and a new person or Self, also has no choice. And which is most important, the person I fashion from my existing (or persisting) karma or the much more 'non-personal' person I fashion from my karma, what comes from what they call the Alayavijnana or 'Storehouse Consciousness?' What's important?

Well, obviously the forward-moving historical karma that persists into a rebirth; that's the active or feral part of me.

The uncomfortable part for me is letting go of my previous Self or persona long enough to pull another cloak or persona around me. I guess I like to stay hidden in Samsara.

I don't like not to be me, myself, and I for even a second, although the natural process of change, most of the time slow, but also sometimes sudden and shocking, is forcing change on me, like it or not.

It seems I hate to be inconsistent as to who I am. Once again, here is my fear of letting go of my attachments, yet that same letting go is the name of this game we call life. It's mandatory and not a matter of choice. It's choiceless and goes on all the time. What appears as an anomaly to my Self, apparently is the natural course of things in fact.

And so, according to the Buddhist script, "Michael Erlewine's" bid for reincarnation is denied. What is available, instead of a rubber-stamp person, is the rebirth of all that we care about in terms of attachment and karma, and that's very much a part of us, our karma.

We may not like it, yet we have it being paid forward for us to deal with, not carried on and under the "Michael Erlewine," but still absolutely carried on, but taking a new persona or name, and the new person is the least important part of who or what we are karmically.

I offer this for your consideration not as a balm or what I would choose, but rather as the reality that is. And this differs from what in many of the religions from India is called reincarnation.

In Buddhism, we don't reincarnate personally, yet we do take rebirth with the precise and actual karma and cravings that make up our constitution this minute here in our body.

Anyway, my good friend, that's as far as I can think it. How about you give it some thought, and share with me what you think and where you are at in this equation? I would like to discuss this topic with someone aside from myself please.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

We Can't Attain what Already Is

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 11, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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How do we get used to or get around and avoid (not possible) our discomfort with the idea of taking rebirth and fashioning a new person after giving up the person we are now? It has to be our attachment to our persona or Self. It's not that there is a choice.

We can start out with the fact that we have no choice in the matter. That must count for something. Accepting what 'IS' always is required before we can modify our current situation, and the acceptance of our need to let go of our Self is always at the top of this list.

If nothing else, this uncomfortableness with letting go of our attached current 'Self' fingers where the problem is to a 'T'. Look no farther. Instead, look into that uncomfortableness at letting go.

We reach different depths as to exposing the nature of Samsara so that we can see it and get our arms around the problem. The depth reached can very much fuel our insight into and determination to expose Samsara for what it is, exposing Samsara enough that we take note and learn to peddle the other way.

At present, we are so ensconced and embedded in Samsara that we have literally NO IDEA how wrapped up in the imagined comforts of Samsara we are and have always been. Turning that ship around is practically impossible, but yet not impossible.

My point is that our revulsion of Samsara, which all the pith dharma instructions applaud, is supremely important in fueling our determination to reverse our Samsaric habit. I remember well that 'fourth thought' of the Common Preliminaries that turns the mind toward the dharma -- the revulsion of Samsara.

I did not like or accept that revulsion, because I mistakenly told myself that I could never give up my love of Mother Nature and of the beauty of this life. My mistake was that I mistook the admonition as to the revulsion of Samsara to mean that I had to be revolted by the beauty of nature, the world, and this life. I could not let that happen.

Yet, that's not the point. The revulsion of Samsara has to do with our clinging and undue attachment to this world we live in, not that we cannot enjoy the beauty of nature and life.

My problem was that I did not have ENOUGH actual experience and insight into the nature of Samsara to be moved to do something about it. I did not get revulsed or even to the point of revulsion. Like skimming flat rocks on the surface of a tranquil lake, I was sampling intellectually but only of the surface of Samsara and not getting into it with enough awareness to penetrate to any depth and by that better realize its true nature.

In other words, my own confusion kept me bound from realizing the actual nature of Samsara, enough to want to be revulsed and do something about it. I am as comfortable as I can be in Samsara, warts and all.

That takes real life in-depth experience of the nature of Samsara and not just skimming the surface. How we each get that experience varies. What works for me may not do it for you and vice-versa.

The Guru is kind and sometimes kind enough, direct enough to wake us up with a slap to our bottom, much like the doctor slaps the bottom of a newborn to get it to breathe. Whatever it takes.

The Mahasiddha Tilopa took off his sandal and slapped his student Naropa across the face with it and Naropa entered into Samadhi then and there. This was after 12 years of working very closely with one another. Tilopa did not just go around hitting folks.

And so where are we supposed to get that depth of insight into the actual nature of this Samsara we are embedded in and so habituated to? That's a tough question, IMO.

An intellectual introduction to the true nature of Samsara apparently is just not enough. It certainly was not enough for me. I read all the books, all the admonitions and, as mentioned, although I embraced the Common Preliminaries, the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," that fourth thought, the revulsion of Samsara, never sunk in far enough for me to react much.

In the end I had to admit that I did not want out of samsara because it was my home and that I was doing everything I could to remain there. Instead all I could do was lip service; I explained it away this way or that, as I pointed out in the paragraphs above. I was confused and most of us are, and confusion is just that, confusing. What can we do?

The obvious thing we can do is take advantage of moments of great shock or surprise, as strong as we can stand, as moments when to look directly at the nature of the mind. In those moments, much of our mental detritus is blown out and our appreciation of the dharma is enhanced.

Doing that at every opportunity increases our chances of recognizing the nature of the mind. Of course, a better approach is to seek out a qualified guru and let them point out to us the nature of the mind if we are able to receive it.

However, a most difficult habit to overcome is understanding the dharma intellectually and believing that understanding those words is the actual experience of non-dual meditation, which is called 'Recognition'. The easiest way to tell the difference is that if we have ANY question as to whether we have recognized the true nature of the mind, then we have not.

The whole point and result of Recognition is that from that point forward we know exactly what to do as to dharma practice and know how to do it. Anything short of that is wishful thinking. And it is important to KNOW that we do not Know.

If we want to believe that we have recognized the nature of the mind, that's not it. It can't be attained, because we can't attain what already is. It can only be recognized.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

Our Feral Karma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 12, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I'd like to take another run at the difference between our attachments and craving (Karma) and our Self in this life, our persona. I seem to be learning something from this.

When I first began to understand the difference between the Buddhist concept of 'rebirth' and the Hindu 'reincarnation,' what I came away with was that in rebirth only our karma moves forward and takes rebirth, but our persona, what we familiarly call our Self, is left at death's door to deteriorate. That was unsettling for me, to learn that what I call my "Me, Myself, and I" is abandoned at death while a collection of my karma is paid forward and subject to rebirth. I wouldn't even know myself!

It's like my rebirth will draw from my collective karma, perhaps like an artist draws color from a pallet to make a picture. Yet everything that distinguishes me, the 'Michael Erlewine', will NOT be passed forward, but abandoned. What's to like?

Of course, like being a good dharma student, I bent over backward trying to accommodate these traditional dharma thoughts, but still came up kind of disappointed. And it took a while for me to begin to understand the wisdom in all this, like there is any.

For one, when we say our karma is paid forward via what is called the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which is like a barge of collective karma floating upstream on the river of time. I could not help but think of this as all the bad karma I have generated being preserved so it could ripen and set me straight in a future life. But, there is more.

I was not as aware that aside from my 'bad' karma going forward, my good karma also goes forward. So, if we were to make a rough image of what is reborn, a painting of our storehouse Consciousness might resemble something like a human form, just without the finishing details of a new persona and Self that we would draw around us.

And if I read the dharma teachings right, our 'karma' is what very much drives our rebirth, not our Self or persona. It's not like our rebirth is in competition

with our karma, but rather that our rebirth is dictated by our karma. That's why there is a rebirth at all, because our feral karma demands to be reborn.

So, the long and the short of it seems to be that, aside from the personal details of our previous persona, we are, quite more than less, while not reincarnating our former Self, very much reincarnating the karma that we have created that demands a rebirth.

So, minus my social security number and the color of my hair, etc., what makes up me, my karma, is very much the cause and substance of rebirth, the essence of my next life, so to speak.

Does this quiet down or calm my insecurity at losing my Self at the end of this life? Well, to a significant degree, perhaps yes, it seems to. Everything that is feral or active in Michael Erlewine, all that could not be expressed in Michael Erlewine's life this time, moves on to be worked out in the next life, in a rebirth, just under another personal name and perhaps gender.

And, as mentioned, that includes all the good things and karma that I've created as well as problems I must work out.

For sure, this view is worth some consideration on my part and is at least better than the pennies on the dollar as I was worried about, getting a new Self and name.

Of course, still adhering to the Buddhist view, there is no guarantee that we will even earn a human rebirth in our next life. How's that for a mind bender?

We may take rebirth as an animal, insect, hungry ghost, jealous god, etc. I can't begin to understand much of that and don't pretend to. It's all I can do to piece together a coherent way of understanding rebirth that makes sense to me.

Obviously, I'm still working on that.

I'm afraid my approach is more like the quote from the poet Dylan Thomas, "Do not go gentle into the good night," meaning my Self is not comfortable about this rebirth scenario. "I" need encouragement, yet it is clear from the dharma teaching that the "Me, Myself, and I" of me will get no encouragement because of the nature of the beast.

I have to remind myself that according to the pith dharma teachings that I respect and love, this is not my first rodeo. According to the scriptures, we have been born innumerable times before, so somehow, we got to where we are now. We are still here and now. We will have to trust in that as we head off naked of Self into the after-death bardos as our rebirth beckons.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

Taking Whatever Arises as the Path

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 13, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/3c4cb767-d0b7-4c58-8566-d94f87d206ce_1126x1126.jpeg

The Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“Self-liberation refers to what is discussed in the context of the ninth Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje’s, “Ocean of Certainty”:

“Appearances are mind, mind is empty, emptiness is spontaneous presence, and spontaneous presence is self-liberation. Here we are discussing the natural or self-liberation of all thoughts: When a thought arises and we recognize its nature, it is naturally liberated. “Khenpo Gangshar explains the reasons for taking whatever arises as the path: “While you remain in undistracted naturalness, it is utterly impossible to accumulate karma and you have cut the stream of further accumulation. Although you are not accumulating (new) karma, do not get the idea that there is neither good nor evil to be experienced as (past) karma will still ripen.”

End Quote

Well, there it is, in a nutshell, laid out clearly. It remains for each of us to unpack and realize that for which much of my life is about, realizing the above as best I can and encouraging others to do the same. In terms of dharma, this urge is called Bodhicitta.

It’s so obvious that it’s not obvious, if that sentence stands.

“Taking whatever arises as the path” is the message.

What could be more recursive? Not picking and choosing what we like or don’t like; taking whatever we are confronted with each moment as the path, because that, by definition, is our path.

And this message came from Tibet via the great Siddha Khenpo Gangshar to my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and from him directly to my ears. This teaching is so seminal that when I first heard it, I attended this teaching live and went on to transcribe several other teachings of the same material. There’s no confusion.

While the teachings I attended on this topic and that I later transcribed for our sangha are not available, there is a book written by the Ven. Khenchen

Thrangu Rinpoche called “Vivid Awareness: The Mind Instructions by Khenpo Gangshar.”

Vivid Awareness: The Mind Instructions of Khenpo Gangshar: Thrangu, Khenchen, Mipham, Sakyong: 9781590308165: Amazon.com: Books

Of course, to unpack these very concise instructions of Khenpo Gangshar takes time, there is no more direct route to awakening that I know of.

[Photo of Khenpo Gangshar.]

EMAIL

The Vortex of Now

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 15, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/18734ac6-6ceb-483d-b872-2298acd6ec37_1024x1024.jpeg

The roar of nature living that we call silence.

Lately, events seem to conspire, coming from all directions, and piling up with their effect. The wars, solar flares, hurricanes, and on and on. The recent election and the staff appointments by the president-elect are just further stirring the pot of confusion, IMO.

In the midst of all that, here we each are, doing the best we can to make some kind of sense of it all. It's become a job.

And I don't have a magic wand to make it all better. The best I can do is put one foot in front of the other, work the problem, and take all this to the path. Combined, this is our path, and we have to walk it.

As to what tools I have to manage this, aside from 83 years of experience, I have many decades of supervised dharma training. Yet, what does this all amount to?

Something that can't be expressed in words, yet nevertheless crucial to get a sense of, is time spent, not in meditation, but

rather in what is called non-meditation. In other words, beyond the effort to meditate is non-meditation, learning to just rest in the actual nature of the mind.

Non-meditation is effortless.

There is no way of expressing in words what non-meditation is. Although, I am reminded of this poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

HEAVEN-HAVEN

[A nun takes the veil]

"I have desired to go

Where springs not fail,

To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail

And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be

Where no storms come,

Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,

And out of the swing of the sea.”

I happen to like that poem, but it’s not exactly where things are at with me these days.

I do take refuge in non-meditation and its quality of full immersion... for extended periods of time each day. It is said that in non-meditation no karma can be accrued and our mind at rest is very beneficial to our health.

I don’t know about that. I do know that resting in non-meditation is indeed a welcome rest from the chaos of these times.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Astrologer Michael Lutin Passes

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 16, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/93752ed2-056e-48b2-aa19-a4eb5e645283_386x550.jpeg

My dear friend, astrologer Michael Lutin, passed away recently, not sure what exact day, perhaps November 12 or so, which is typical of Michael, always being a little mysterious. For example, he never gave out his birth data, although I did have it, but for the life of me I don't know where I put it.

For me Michael Lutin was more valuable than valuable, an astrologer's astrologer, although we seldom talked astrology.

Michael and I would talk by email or by phone several times a year, I am calling him or him calling me.

I usually only saw Lutin in person at astrology conferences, and I am not a great conference goer, so it was seldom.

What we usually talked about was life itself, and often some dharma, since he, like me, was very interested in the dharma and Buddhism. And sometimes I would ask him if he had met any younger astrologers that had appeared on the scene, since I'm always looking for new views on astrology.

Michael had great depth as a person and incredible integrity and a sense of what was valuable in this life. He also had impeccable taste in things.

I don't know too much about his business as an astrologer. I know he did readings, lectured, published books and articles, and wrote for Vanity Fair for a number of years.

And I know that at astrology conferences, if there was any theater or skits that were put on, Michael Lutin was the glue that held those performances together.

He told me years ago that he had been in a traffic accident and was not well in recent years.

Most of all Michael was a dear friend, someone to talk with about things that are seldom talked about. In the constellation of astrologers in the heavens, Michael Lutin is one of the main stars for me, someone I loved to talk to and hang out with. He seemed to like me, as well.

Lutin was as sharp as they come, always kind and considerate.

We can't replace what there is only one of.

[Photo of Michael Lutin.]

EMAIL

The Sense Conduits

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 17, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ceae9e5d-c8b2-4adb-bbae-0d6b0b6f8438_2048x1921.gif

The five senses: hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touch are essential to a full life as we know it. Yet, we each are drawn to particular senses that we use as windows into the rest of non-duality more than others. To illustrate this, I need to explain some of my own sense history to give you a better idea of how that can work.

I've been photographing since 1956, when my dad loaned me his Kodak Retina 2a 35mm camera, a light meter, two closeup lenses, and a small tripod for a six-week trip I made riding around in an old school bus with kids my age. We went all across this country, and to Mexico and Canada. I was 14 years old.

When I returned from the trip and had the many rolls of film I took developed, my father was blown away with how good my photography was for a newbie. I never thought anything about it, although I spent all the pocket money on my trip on more rolls of film. I was discovering liberation by 'Seeing'.

My dad and I seldom ever talked about anything important although I would have loved to, and I had no grandfather on either side. I was hungry for male guidance and perhaps this explains my search in life for spiritual teachers, which would be another story to tell.

Anyway, for now, I'm pointing out that the trip in 1956 was imprinting and the resultant photography was an auspicious sign of liberation by the senses at an early age.

Now, fast forward some 52 years when photography once again figured in a major way in my dharma life. It was through photography that I also first recognized the true nature of the mind, using a camera and lens to do closeup macro photography while crawling around on my belly in the wet grass, watching the sun come up. It was there, during a very difficult time in my life (another story) when under great pressure I broke out of my mental cage and as the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it: "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea."

My point is that not only was photography key to my dharma realization, but photography continues to figure in my life today in a major way. The Tibetans call it 'Thongdrol', which translates as "Liberation Through Seeing." There is also the Bardo Thodol, "Liberation through Hearing," and probably similar practices for all the five senses.

We each have sensitivity to one or more of the five senses. I seem to be sensitive to hearing and seeing. By sensitive I mean hearing and seeing are vehicles that I use. Like windows into eternity, I see or hear through them, and they take me beyond or out of my Self, immersing me (at least for the moment) in the rest of non-duality.

We all know that music can transport us into a zone where we can exist in another dimension for a while, and "Seeing" also is a transport, and there are others as well – the five senses.

What is it that we escape from or get out of or beyond? That's easy. We get beyond duality, the subject and object mentality that typifies Samsara, this cyclic world we find ourselves embedded in, the world with us as subjects and everything else as objects -- duality.

However, we can SEE through the window of an image, a piece of art or, in my case, a photo I have taken. And are transported, however momentarily, beyond duality, into that great beyond. Music does the same thing for me with sound, and on around the five senses.

Our senses are the only relief we are offered in Samsara from the mental construction which we normally find ourselves encased in.

I believe we each differ from one another as to how we get relief from our dualistic Samsara via the senses. And if we will look throughout the day at where those escape clauses are for us, we can learn a lot.

We can see or hear (or whatever senses we are sensitive to) how we are relieved from the obstructive duality that keeps us from sensing and being one with the whole, immersing ourselves in nonduality for a moment or a series of moments.

This is also what meditation is about.

I believe without that momentary relief of the senses, life would be very difficult indeed. It is helpful to become aware of just how we let go and, as the poet wrote, for us how "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

Is it music, visual, by smell, taste, or touch? The pith Tibetan dharma teachings make clear that our senses are pure and not obscured, at least not until we

react to them. This is such an important dharma point that we need to register it and take note.

The Tibetan teachings tell us that the five senses are completely pure conduits that don't need any remediation or improvement. They somehow are NOT corrupted by this Samsaric state we find ourselves in. We can trust them.

The five senses are the means for the dewdrop in us to slip into the shining sea and be one, if only for a moment or a short time.

As mentioned, although I can use all five senses, I am particularly sensitive to sound (ear) and sight (eyes).

And although the senses are not in competition with one another, and I am very sensitive to sound (music) and the visual (art, photography), it was through Seeing, back in 1956 and also 52 years later that I was first introduced to the nature of the mind itself.

For me it was through the sense of sight, where peering through a camera lens at small critters in nature, I stopped seeing the subject of my photography as an object, and instead saw the seeing 'SEEING' itself and with that, as I keep quoting, "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea," a one-way street from which we never return, but just keep expanding and extending that recognition.

[Graphic by me.]

EMAIL

Those Things That Last...

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 20, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/adb9ae29-f704-4208-84ac-bb3753ce8a39_877x694.jpeg

THOSE THINGS THAT LAST ...

The word 'religion' came from the Latin "religāre" which means "to tie fast," or more simply the things that last and last longest. When everything more ephemeral dies out, what remains are those things that last, what we call religion.

Oh yes, I was taught religion early on, but not early-on enough because Mother Nature (and thus science) got to me early and left a more indelible impression. I was born and raised in my early years in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. My parents built our house between two large farms out in the countryside and there were no other houses and thus no other children to play with.

Aside from my four brothers, the only companions I had was Mother Nature herself and I took to nature like it was life itself.

So, long before Catholicism got its hooks in me, I was already an intense student of nature and natural history. In fact, even in later years as I looked into other religions, I ended up with the impression that anything with an '-ism' attached was not for me, whether it was Catholicism, Muslimism, Judaism, Protestantism, etc. And this includes Buddhism, as well. I am interested in dharma. Organized religion of any kind, in my book, is an oxymoron. Nevertheless, I did my best to look around for something that would last, if not eternally, than last longer than anything else.

For me, it comes down to inquiring of history what have those wise men and women who have come before me centered on and taken to heart? As it turns out, there are all kinds of philosophies, religions, and spiritual advice just waiting to be taught and hopefully realized.

As for me, after casting about in all directions for whatever made sense to me, I settled on Dharma, first recognized and realized by Siddhartha Guatama, known commonly as the Buddha. Yet, dharma existed before Buddhism because it was the Buddha that realized this.

Of all things, the dharma seemed most natural to me, more like what internally I was thinking on my own. That's why I took to it. It made sense to

me. And I liked it because it encouraged, even demanded, that I question it myself. I was already questioning almost everything. Now, back to my early life out in the country.

From a young age I was by nature a naturalist, loving every animal and critter. And in the dharma, I found a similar appreciation for nature and every living thing.

Even as a young person, when in the Catholic religion I took what is called 'Confirmation' and was asked to pick a saint as a confirmation name, I chose the mystic, poet, and Catholic friar St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology and animals.

Later, having been to Tibet a couple of times, I watched in person how the Tibetan people very carefully brushed mosquitoes from their arms, trying not to hurt them. Indeed, that's the way I naturally felt as well, not wishing to hurt any critter including people.

And I was not afraid of any animal, although respectful of their dangers. For example, I learned to handle very poisonous snakes, catching six-foot rattlesnakes by hand, and all my kids know how to handle snakes, frogs, and so on. We were on the board of a wildlife rescue group, and our backyard was filled with stainless-steel cages filled with injured animals being healed and released.

Of course, as a young person I was not exposed to the Buddha and the dharma. It would take until my late teens that I discovered Zen Buddhism and marveled at its minimalism and sense of space.

And while I tried Zen out, sat all day in Zazen and things like that, when it came to finding a root teacher, it was not in Zen Buddhism, but rather in Tibetan Buddhism that I found one, which was anything but minimalistic, but as ornate as my Catholic upbringing, and also required that I work in the Tibetan language itself for many, many years. I had learned church Latin as an altar boy, so the Tibetan rituals were nothing strange to me.

Yet behind or beyond all that ornamental Tibetan ritual was the very spacious concept of recognizing the actual nature of my own mind. It was the accent on meditation and beyond that to non-meditation that was eventually liberating.

And I am very thankful that I was fortunate to train in meditation and the dharma, following the Tibetan curriculum faithfully for over 36 years. I started some 20 years before that, but not with a teacher. Thanks to the presence of, for me, a great dharma teacher, who did not cut corners but undertook instruction and supervision for decades until I was able to learn on my own. It

was Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche who first introduced me to the nature of my own mind, and I continue in that path today, learning on my own.

That's the whole point of the dharma, to get you on your own feet and know what to do by instinct rather than tutelage. I don't even like the popular concept of being, quote, 'spiritual', having been trained since a child by Mother Nature herself, who does not hold back the punches of reality.

And of course, I wrote a little poem about what 'lasts' some sixty years ago that if read aloud clearly is what I call a "mantra poem". It can recreate and reanimate the original inspiration for it.

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.

[Photo by me or Margaret of H.H. the 17 th Karmapa (left), a meeting of the minds, between the Karmapa and my teacher, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (right) at the Karma Ling Three-Year Retreat shrine room in the 1980s.]

EMAIL

“IF WE’RE REALLY MADE OF STARS, AND THERES NO END TO WHAT WE ARE, THEN ...”

By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net

November 22, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/851188de-b4bf-45ed-857d-6535c2efdb05_1024x1024.jpeg

By Michael Erlewine

Scroll down and CLICK on the arrow that marks the tune, written and sung by my daughter May Erlewine.

<https://www.krfcfm.org/shows/krfc-interview-archive/>

The whole concept of rebirth seems to stumble on the dharma statement that the persona of a person (what we call our ‘Self’) does not make it past death, much less through the bardos so that the reborn person could still have the same personality or Self that is recognizable. Our rebirth is NOT the same person as we are now, but same karma.

IMO, this perhaps is an extreme case of misdirection where, to quote from the Bible, we “snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel.” We’re upset because we don’t have our previous social security number in our next life yet at the same time seem to ignore the entire slate of our karma and craving that crosses the bardos and drives that rebirth. It is the majority of what we call ourselves.

Since the only reason for any rebirth is said to be feral or unfulfilled karma that wants to be satisfied and completed, this aggregate (without a personality) will draw around itself a new body from new parents and, fueled by our karma and cravings, fashion a new and fresh personality built on familiar karma.

Since I don’t remember my past lives, I just do a careful reading of the pith dharma teachings, ask a lot of questions, and at some point trust them as much as I trust anything. If the dharma I can test proves true, and it does, I trust that which I can’t test also is.

One thing to consider is that with each rebirth, like the movie “Groundhog Day,” we have a chance to redo our personality and get it right, based on whatever good karma from our previous life we carry across the bardo divide. The ‘bad’ karma also is passed on and acted upon, sooner or later.

Or perhaps our fear is like when in this life we undergo general anesthesia, fall asleep, and wake up when the operation is over. Of course, there is the chance that we don't wake up at all and that is scary. And waking up to a rebirth is like the life we are living now, where we create a Self based on our attachments and karma, but with new parents and a new body, and with the proper dharma training we also can be introduced to the true nature of our mind and how it works.

Anyway, perhaps it is useful to re-examine the idea of our Self or persona in the light that ultimately it is the least important part of our karma, similar to what kind of clothes (persona) we will put on and wear. What wears the new clothes in rebirth is our attachments and karma.

And so, this fear of rebirth may not be so much worry about what shape of nose we will have in rebirth or the color of our hair, etc., and more about our losing consciousness of this particular Self we have in this life. Our fear of letting go of our Self and Samsara's grip strikes again; that seems to be it.

What's amazing to me is that, personality rebirth aside, it seems that the most important part of our life, our actual cravings, attachments, and total karma (good and bad) will be reborn! What an amazing statement to consider. Why do we ignore this possibility? It's 99% of who we are and who we will be, whether we have blond or dark hair.

What holds us back from believing in all this is the same thing that prevents us from becoming enlightened, the sheer weight of Samsara's grip on us, which amounts to a contrary belief in the hardnosed reality of this Samsaric life we are living.

Yet, all the pith dharma teachings state that what we call this life is but a dream we are having, one from which we have to wake up and realize just that.

However, since we have no choice about dying, regardless of what we think, then what we are discussing here has great pith and moment. I understand that many could care less, and are willing to just take pot luck.

"If we're really made of stars, and there's no end to what we are, then...?"

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Tilopa's Words of Advice

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 24, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Here is a photo I took of a rupa (filled statue) of the great mahasiddha Tilopa. It sits on my personal shrine. Traditionally there are 84 well-known Indian mahasiddhas. Mahasiddhas were not clerics or involved (for the most part) in organized religion, but rather were wandering gurus who lived among ordinary folks, yet were anything but ordinary. They were not only Siddhas, but Mahasiddhas.

Tilopa lived in a small village and ground sesame seeds during the day and worked in a brothel by night.

The great Mahasiddha Tilopa is perhaps best known for his teaching called "The Ganges Mahamudra," because it was taught to his student Naropa on the banks of the Ganges River in India.

And even better known text is what is called "Tilopa's Words of Advice," known to every serious Mahamudra practitioner, and they are just as useful to ordinary folks like we are, and they go like this:

DON'T PROLONG THE PAST

DON'T INVITE THE FUTURE

DON'T ALTER THE PRESENT

RELAX, AS IT IS.

Yes, this is a bunch of 'don't do' admonitions, however we should remember this is direct advice from the guru to the student, so there need to soften up the suggestions. These are things we each should be aware of and follow.

Obviously, they all center on this present moment, the here and the now, and nowhere else.

And, of course, I have presented them here before, because they are about all any of us need to know and keep in mind.

Easier said than done, these admonitions are very difficult to actually follow and do. Yet, it is a blessing if we learn from them and can keep these words of advice in mind.

[Photos by me of a rupa of Tilopa on my personal dharma shrine.]

EMAIL

Approaching Mahamudra

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 26, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/475cd229-bb2b-41c2-a9b8-3d2ad2f1cd25_1508x2048.jpeg

[This is a long and somewhat detailed blog, so many of you will not have the time or inclination to work through it. It's for those few who have the time and interest.]

The Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje wrote:

“Beyond any object of focus, the nature of mind is clear. Having no path to travel is the start of the path to Buddhahood.

Once you are familiar with the absence of an object of meditation, you attain unsurpassable awakening.”

Of course, having ‘the absence of an object of meditation’ requires that there is no perceiver as well, meaning one is immersed, resting in non-dual meditation through practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

This is all well and good, yet how do we get to that non-dual or state of no-meditation? There must be a puncture point, where we initially break through from the Samsaric duality we live in to the state of nonduality. How do we negotiate that?

And with such a profound opening event comes experience and the experience includes knowledge of what ‘Recognition’ of the true nature of the mind is, how it works, and best of all just how we can work it. This is pivotal.

According to the dharma texts there are 84,000 ways to engineer this, and only one of them has to happen for us to achieve Recognition, but there does have to be that first penetration and immersion into non-duality. The Tibetan Buddhists call this “Recognition” and the Rinzai Zen Buddhists call this “Kensho.”

It's called “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind, and the guru or teacher is said to point this out until the student recognizes the nature of the mind clearly, and that ‘realization’ is said to introduce the student-practitioner to the mind's true nature.

And with that introduction, the primary job of the guru is finished, done, and it is up to the student who recognizes the true nature of the mind to take it

from there by expanding and extending their recognition. IMO, this is a major turning point in our dharma practice. One that we can't get around but have to go through.

“Recognition” on our part as to the true nature of the mind is said to be the beginning of actual meditation which, because it is effortless, is better known as non-meditation. Up until then we are just practicing meditation, but not actually meditating.

With ‘Recognition’, as we begin to expand and extend it, we begin to become aware that our own EFFORT from all these years of dharma practice itself clouds or clogs the mind, something we probably did not consider earlier.

So, our practice very much becomes one of dialing back and removing effort, removing the stains to our practice that years of effort have produced. It is perhaps unavoidable, this undue effort, but in a better world we might be instructed early on not to labor with the dharma, but to just rest in it.

Therefore, we find ourselves erasing that effort by ceasing to make further needless effort, along with a growing awareness that unnecessary effort has blocked and stained our practice over the many years we have been practicing. We tried too hard. It's like the old analogy of holding a fresh egg, too loose and you drop it, too tight and it breaks.

From that point forward, our practice becomes all about rest, letting go, and learning to rest in the nature of the mind. And the nature of the mind is non-dual. It does not support subjects and objects, but instead involves complete immersion and resting in the nature of the mind itself. That is the hallmark of and advent of ‘Recognition’, the inundation into Insight Meditation. That is now possible.

The last words my dharma teacher of 36 years, a Tibetan lama who spoke no English, said to me before he passed on were that I have been introduced to the nature of the mind and that from now on I should continue to expand and extend my recognition as to the nature of the mind. What does that mean?

It means just what Rinpoche said, that having been introduced to the nature of my own mind, having recognized and having broken through to nondual awareness, I now know how to work the mind myself, so it's up to me if I do so, whether I turn the wheel of my own dharma. The good news is that I suddenly knew how.

And from now on my practice would be, among other things, continuing to expand and extend that ‘recognition’, meaning continue to broaden my ‘View’ and remove the traces of effort, the damage done over the years of dharma

practice by making unnecessary efforts. It's not a choice, but a requirement, repairing the damage we did to ourselves, literally the path we tread.

One of the great gifts that comes with 'Realization' of the nature of the mind is called Bodhicitta. And while we have always had Bodhicitta, up until 'Recognition' has been what is called 'Relative Bodhicitta', meaning having a real and sincere intent to benefit others, but not being able to do much.

However, with 'Recognition' our Relative Bodhicitta automatically steps up and becomes what is technically called "Absolute Bodhicitta." Where before what was the good intent to benefit others suddenly is galvanized and becomes an insatiable urge to share dharma with anyone who is interested.

As mentioned, this form of Absolute Bodhicitta is a natural byproduct of Realization because for the first time we know that we have something to offer others rather than our good intent and well wishes. Absolute Bodhicitta is overpowering.

Considering that the sacred dharma texts point out that finding words for Mahamudra and nondual forms of meditation is an oxymoron, Mahamudra cannot be verbalized, so why have dharma practitioners for centuries written and written about what can't be put into words?

Telling and retelling in words, songs, and stories what cannot be expressed can at best give one a sense, perhaps only vaguely, of where we are in the chain of dharma practices, even though the telling cannot but give a whiff of what that is and where we are at.

If I have learned one thing, it is while our personal dharma path, which is called our Yidam, is not secret (as some would suggest), it is so individual that it would not work for anyone but us, so it might as well be secret. And most of all, we have to discover it ourselves. No one, not even the Buddha, could do this for us. The dharma is a do-it-yourself project. We have to do it.

However, although these many dharma accounts, words and stories cannot communicate the truth of what nondual meditation is all about or just where in the chain of enlightenment we stand, they can inspire and reinspire us to find out what works for us. That's their value, IMO.

By 'inspire' I mean urge us to get on with discovering our own dharma path and start to tread it, to turn the wheel of our own dharma.

[Photo by me of a rupa (filled statue) of the Mahasiddha Saraha, that aside from Tilopa is probably the other main lineage of Mahamudra our lineage features.]

EMAIL

Dharma Scholar

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 27, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/97060934-0afa-488f-8690-871d6b8d2343_1024x1024.jpeg

We are not all scholars of the dharma. Some of us are just practitioners, folks who have found the dharma or some part of it and are learning to use it as best we can.

I try to read scholarly books on the dharma and seldom get very far. I don't read Sanskrit, and my Tibetan is pretty bad, so I'm soon lost in intellection that I cannot unpack, references to references to reference that I don't know.

I can, however, read the quotes these books include from the great masters, and I get a lot out of that, so I do understand something.

What I do have and always end up with is my own experience in learning dharma, our actual experience and it's always fresh, as miniscule as it may appear.

It's arrogant for me to say this, but I often find in scholarly dharma books that the author is not much of a practitioner and I get the sense that they do not know from experience what they are talking about. I can't learn much from that.

I always come away feeling like the blue-collar dharma worker; I'm kind of like a dharma Popeye with his slogan "I Yam What I Yam."

I also can sense and feel if the author actually knows from experience what they are scholar-ing up. I CAN actually learn from those kind of scholarly dharma books because the author is also somewhat of a practitioner. I can sense the experience.

I'm tempted to say that learning dharma is a lonely affair, because each of us must do it ourselves. Even the Buddha could not just touch our forehead and enlighten us. And it's not because the Buddha is not enlightened but because we are not. It is up to us to enlighten ourselves.

And difficult or not, we each have to recognize the nature of our own mind. We can't be grandfathered in and there is no back door to enlightenment. We each have to do it on our own, day by day and step by that. If we are not up for that, we are not going anywhere, so to speak.

There is some comfort in the fact that everyone else is in the same boat we are in, having to enlighten ourselves. And there is no elitism or privileged class in the dharma, where someone can skip a step or place out of enlightening themselves. I find that marvelous and just. Equal opportunity.

And as difficult as learning dharma has been for me, and it has been, the gems of actual experience shine as brightly, when they are present in me, as for anyone else.

If you know, you know. Period. End of story.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

I Am My Own Grandpa

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 28, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/8275b4c3-dd19-4f72-9eb4-760b610766d5_978x1024.jpeg

I know there are plenty of gurus out there, so I'm talking about just the gurus I have worked with, and I have been very fortunate to have plenty of exposure, so I can't complain.

However, I can reflect on this topic and will.

I have to say that my first dharma teacher, one that is still with me is Mother Nature, who trained me as a naturalist. And this was from a young age, around six years old and onward until my late teens. I intensely studied natural history. I knew nature's laws and they spoiled me before I learned human laws which are not as direct. Nature pulls no punches.

I must point out the fact that my father, someone I looked up to and loved dearly, never talked with me about anything emotional or 'deep'. There were no discussions like that.

And to deepen the pot, I had no grandfather on either side. Both were gone early. So, I was left being emotionally raised by my mother, who had five sons, of which I am the oldest. Lucky for us, she was incredible and available to all five of her boys. So, what happened?

As you can imagine, I lacked any older male figures in my life. Like the old song, I had to be my own grandpa. I was on my own. Along with Mother Nature I taught myself.

It was not until my middle twenties that I found my first real dharma teacher, who had been a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order, Andrew Gunn McIver, an immigrant from Scotland.

I studied with Andrew McIver for several years, until his death in 1969, and I saw to his burial and even designed his tombstone. Andrew had a profound influence on me.

I also hooked up with Philip Kapleau, one of the founding fathers of Rinzai Zen Buddhism in America, and sat Zazen with him for whole day, and things like that. As an oldest child, I was used to being alone, walking point, and figuring stuff out on my own, so group efforts of any kind were hard for me. As

mentioned, I was used to directing myself. I don't take direction well. Eventually the dharma tamed me and I took direction from my dharma teachers. I did what they required until I met the requirements.

The next big happening (dharma-wise) for me was meeting the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. IMO, Trungpa Rinpoche was a siddha, a realized being. I was his chauffeur for a time and within an hour of meeting me, Trungpa took me into a room, sat me down on a chair, and proceeded to teach me Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation right there on the spot, yet did not call it that. A lot happened in that hour or so. It changed me.

Among other things, Trungpa Rinpoche taught me that dharma was not just something to read about and discuss, but was, above all, something to do and practice. 'WE' have to do it! Up to that point, I had never really grasped the point that the dharma was up to me to make a commitment to serious practice. I got the point.

From meeting Trungpa Rinpoche onward was like a cornucopia of dharma teachers pouring into my life. It was not long after that I met the Dalai Lama (back before he was famous), so that Margaret and I could actually offer him a white scarf personally, and all that.

And in 1974 I met H.H. the 16 th Karmala, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje in person, followed in the coming years by a host of Kagyu teachers, including all four heart-sons of the 16 th Karmapa, and I took from each of them the empowerment that they were an emanation of: Shamar Rinpoche, Tai Situ Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, and Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche. Some of these eminences came to our center more than once, and one even stayed for about a week.

We also hosted and/or took teachings and empowerments from Traleg Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, Lama Namse Rinpoche, Minjur Dorje Rinpoche, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, Bokar Rinpoche, and many others. Drupon Khenpo Lodro Namgyal Rinpoche (the retreat master at Pullahari Monastery) spent most of a year living with us after he completed the 9-year Acharya program at Nalanda University.

So far, I have not mentioned the most precious of dharma teachers for me personally, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, with whom Margaret and I studied intensely for 36 years, including 31 years of Ten-Day Mahamudra Intensives. We travelled to that teaching enough miles to circle the equator of the Earth more than two times.

And so, hopefully you get the picture, that we have had a great opportunity to take teachings from authentic dharma masters, and we put the pedal to the metal.

And I'm sorry to say that many, in fact most, of these great teachers have since passed on from this world. And especially impactful for Margaret and myself was the passing of our dharma teacher, my root guru, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche in the late fall of 2019. He was 96 years old.

There is no real recovery from that loss for me, and I feel like a rōnin in feudal Japan, a practitioner without a master. Where do I go from here? And that's the point of this article, to discuss this.

My root teacher told me just before he passed-on that since I had been introduced to the nature of the mind, going forward I should continue to expand and extend my recognition of the true nature of the mind. I am doing that.

As to how I'm dealing with Rinpoche's passing now that I don't have any way to personally contact him, it is simple.

The historical Buddha did not invent the dharma; he realized it and taught us about the nature of our mind. The dharma is just there naturally. Any dharma teacher we have is accessing the same dharma that is there for all of us.

In my life Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche connected with so well that he was able to introduce me to the nature of the mind, so that I recognized it. He was the only one who accomplished that. And Rinpoche was in turn accessing the same dharma all of us can access, the dharma being the way things are. The Dharma is 'unborn', meaning it never arose but was always just there.

Rinpoche never shared much of his personal likes and dislikes with me, so what I got from working with him is the dharma itself. Since he has passed, the dharma is still there as much as it ever was. Rinpoche introduced me to the dharma so that I could access it on my own, and I have. That's what the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind are all about, so that we can finally recognize the actual nature of our own mind and know how to work the mind.

And so, it's not like something is missing in the dharma we all share. It's still there as much as it ever was. Rinpoche made it possible for me to access the dharma. That's what introducing me to the nature of the mind is all about. I've been introduced.

I still have ups and downs just like I have always had, with or without Rinpoche being present. The whole idea of being introduced to the mind is

that as a result, since we have been introduced, we are to (meaning we ‘can’) independently access that nature individually on our own.

It's never the purpose of dharma training that we become dependent on our dharma teacher to access the dharma. It's just the opposite, that we become independent, free to access that dharma ourselves rather than only through a teacher. That's the whole point of all dharma training.

I'm doing that.

The dharma in my heart of hearts is the same dharma that Rinpoche accessed, that Buddha accessed. My devotion to Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche of course includes his person, but what our relationship was all about was the dharma and access to it.

That dharma is still present, has always been present, and is the one thing that is ever-present. As I improve my practice, the veil between the unborn dharma and myself gets thinner.

When it came time for Rinpoche to give me a Bodhisattva name, he thought about it for a while, and then gave me the name ‘Chonyi Rangdrol’ (ཇོ་ནྟི་རང་འབྱོར་), which roughly translates as “Self-Liberating One’s True Nature.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Awareness of Being Aware

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 29, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/981c52da-dc64-493c-bf00-c2d1d6eb3af4_2048x2048.jpeg

The pith dharma texts speak of ‘Going and Remaining’, which we can discuss.

‘Remaining’ refers to meditative-equipose, like sitting on-the-cushion, while ‘Going’ refers to postmeditative-attainment. Our daily life off-the-cushion.

To repeat, ‘Remaining’ in meditative equipose refers to nondual meditation, on-the-cushion, which is immersive ‘non-meditation’ because no effort is involved. We are not doing anything but resting in the nature of the mind. In nonmeditation we are fully immersed, with no subject and no object.

As for ‘Going’ into postmeditative-attainment, this refers to our ordinary dualistic post-meditative life of subject and object off-the-cushion, our reflection on meditative-equipose or non-meditation.

If we go into non-duality, what is called non-meditation, that is full immersion, practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen. We only know we were in it (fully immersed) when we come out of it. Fortunately (or unfortunately) for most of us, we just kind of dip and take a sip of non-duality, rather than spend extended time there. We don’t know how.

Perhaps yogis can go in and stay in non-meditation for a long time. It’s hard enough to learn to get into it at all; staying there is another thing entirely.

Even if we sip or touch into non-duality and return to conscious duality, we cannot but reflect on the experience(s) in non-duality, full immersion. There is nothing we can say about it.

It reminds me of Wordsworth’s poem “Ode on Intimations of Immortality...” and the line “Trailing clouds of glory do we come...” out of non-meditation and back to duality – post-meditation.

In post-meditation, when we are off-the-cushion, we do return with some experience from our immersion in non-duality. And we usually (or we CAN) enter non-duality with something purposefully in mind, call it a seed thought. The simple plunging of a seed thought or idea into non-duality is often enough to prompt reaction or response when we come out of it. I use the experience of non-duality when I write. I’ve learned to do this. It took me a long time.

The seed or thought is expanded or exploded and comes back with enough lubrication or space around it to draw around itself the proper language or words that better fit whatever writing I am doing. It's always fresh and direct.

In fact, this is how I write, by a continual feeding of ideas, insights, or thoughts into the non-dual forge of inner space, resting in that for a moment, and making the best use of what returns from that investment when I come out of it and return to our familiar duality -- post-meditation.

It's amazing to me that Mahamudra, although non-dual in itself, nevertheless is nestled or embedded in our dualistic Samsara, and available to us. In other words, our touchstone to enlightenment, this non-dual portal, exists in the middle of whatever dualistic chaos is going on here in Samsara. And of late, there is plenty.

The flame of insight of Mahamudra meditation illuminates both the outside and itself.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Gyre Within

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

November 30, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/4d81ba47-409e-4bfc-b713-3f3a2cb67c1d_2024x2214.jpeg

[Probably of limited interest to the general reader, but possibly of some interest to those who are learning or practicing dharma. I want to go over it anyway.]

After some 65 years interest in the dharma and some 50 years of actual practice, IMO, what's really important, as it turns out, is the potency and directness of the particular Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra and Dzogchen. It eclipses and brings relief from what we could call the stifling Samsaric intellectual duality.

This particular insight is the result of resting within rest within resting in the nature of the mind. It's not exactly that, but it kind of sets the stage. Over the years I had to work up to the basic idea of Mahamudra. However, and this is germane, I had the intellectual or idea of it down cold at the age of 22 years. Here is how that works.

I won't give you all the chapter and verse because it's of a large thesis size. In 1963 I studied the German Philosopher Hegel with a political-science professor at the University of Michigan.

I had to read Hegel in English, and his books went on for volumes; I read most of them from cover to cover. And as frustrating as that was, I did manage to learn something, which I will detail the main point here.

My studies ended up with what I call my thesis or term paper (I was no longer at U of M university, just bright enough to interest professors). It was a long, long paper with copious diagrams. I will show here a few of the rough diagrams just to punctuate this story.

The paper was on the topic of "Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis in Hegelian Philosophy." How was synthesis possible in the dialectic of Hegel? Or we could just say, how does two become one?

And I did not go gentle into that goodnight of study but worked the topic on full bore. It took most of a year.

Of interest here is how does this relate to the Mahamudra teachings in Tibetan Buddhism. What I struggled with, essentially, is how could we unite duality; under what terms are they a union – one and not two. Sound familiar?

I'm afraid you will have to just look over the diagrams and suck whatever sense you can out of them, because there is no room here for the written piece in this blog. It should not be too difficult to get a sense of the idea from the images themselves.

The resultant diagram is #5 in the lower right-hand part of the page, where what started out as a two-dimensional image rolls itself up into a 3-dimensional image that is essentially looking at itself, which of course is not possible dualistically; we can't look at ourselves short of using a mirror. It's the difference between the duality of Samsara and the immersive non-duality of Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

What it taught me back in 1963 is that we cannot objectify or resolve ourselves spiritually into an object, even though we appear to do it all day long, yet we can experience unity (non-duality) and still be fully aware while at the same time being completely immersed.

In short, we could "Be Here Now" in the present moment, yet could not describe or resolve ourselves, resolve our experience, into an object. We can 'BE' it but not also 'see' it.

That is essentially what non-meditation like Mahamudra and Dzogchen do. We can realize but not express what we realize. We can't objectify or put that experience into words.

I include these images here, some 61 years later, because it is fun to see that I was struggling with the problem of duality and nonduality way back then, and quite seriously at that. I didn't know what I was intellectually figuring out.

Of course, my intellectual take on the concept of resolving nonduality was just that, intellectual. Between this and any kind of realization of that has been a long, long journey. Exhausting, because it involves letting go. It's hard to let go and not to cling to the duality we are used to.

And I'm certainly not saying I have been enlightened on this topic, yet I AM saying that I can now experience in real-time what was just a thought, the mental experience from an intellectual exercise back then.

However, I should point out that this intellectual exercise was for me then more real than anything I had known up to that point in 1963. And so, the gist of this story here is to have some compassion and understanding for those of

us who have out-of-the-body intellectual experiences AND mistake them for real-life experiences.

It's the clearest experience I have known, yet is pure intellectual construct, although it does not approach the true experience of Mahamudra or Dzogchen, which can't even be expressed or put into words, much less resolved.

The takeaway for me here is: however worrying it is to see someone take an intellectual experience as reality and believe it is real, we should understand that intellectualization is a legitimate part of an ongoing process. Although it is not real visceral experience, at least it is not static, but is also progressing. Life is a process not a state.

How long it takes for us to abandon that empty shell of intellection experience obviously varies, yet sooner than later, and sooner is sooner than later, that intellection will implode, dropping us into a reality we will have to sort out for real. And that is a blessing!

Yet it can't be resolved with the intellect alone but requires us to take the plunge into living life to the full immersion that it requires.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Wheel of the Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 5, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/78d4be6e-8f6e-4846-8ea1-ade94c7d7c50_792x702.jpeg

We always have the option to stop reading, studying, and quit looking outside ourselves for answers and instead look inside and start monitoring our own mindstream, which is right there. That's not only the option of last resort, it's also the one single thing that sooner or later we have to do to become aware.

As awkward as we may feel and actually be about trying to enlighten ourselves, dropping all that hoopla and digging into the nature of our mind, just as it is, is the first and only step required. Why are we so hesitant or shy?

It appears that no one is going to do this for us and that is because it is impossible. The Dharma is a do-it-yourself project and always has been. No matter how much instruction we take, ultimately, it is we who have to practice and learn to do it.

And so, looking for aid, help, teachers, gurus, and all that may eventually work out, yet by definition, just vaguely 'working out' is antithetical to what is required. 'WE' have to work in and with ourselves, with our own, perhaps boring, mind, just as it is. We all start and end there.

How many decades it took me to kind of 'give up' asking for help and instead just start helping myself I don't want to think about. It was many.

When all is said and done, sooner or later, each of us has to turn inward and tend to our own situation, start sorting it out on our own.

The wheel of dharma we have to turn has never been turned, no matter how many lifetimes we might imagine we have had, and like an unused muscle, it has never moved an inch, so at the beginning it is very difficult to turn that wheel.

That's what I found out, and even with decades of expert help from authentic gurus fresh out of Tibet, it all came down to these lamas showing me how to turn the wheel of my own dharma. There is no other approach that I am aware of. If you have found one, please show me.

How can we turn the wheel of our own karma when we claim we don't know how and don't try? Well, that thought, and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

I repeat. It's not unusual that you don't know how to turn the wheel of your own dharma. No one does because they have never turned that wheel. Perhaps, not ever.

And it's not the case that previously we have turned it, and it has through neglect turned back. That's not the way it works. The wheel of the dharma only turns one way, however, only we can turn it. No one can turn it for us.

All these great lamas that I met and spent time with because they fled from Tibet and came here for a spell were not able to turn the wheel of dharma for me. Never.

The best these great lamas can do and the only thing they can do is point out to us how we can turn our own dharma wheel. We still have to turn it ourselves. And, no matter what they tell us, what they suggest, sooner or later it is up to us to stop looking outside for help and instead turn inward and become familiar with our own mind. It's the **ONLY** way, so that makes it the easiest way.

Our own mind has always been right there waiting for us to recognize and get to know it. Even without expert help we can begin to look at our own mind, no matter how helpless and uninformed we think we may be.

However, we do have to actually look.

[Graphic put together and colored by me.]

EMAIL

The Thread to Enlightenment

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 6, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/5a1a25a4-fa4b-4ef7-9174-0cf9129329d2_2048x2048.jpeg

As time moves on with age, I am increasingly interested in the nature of my own mind and how it works, and less in everything around me that is going on in this world, especially these days with the social and political unrest and the world situation as it is. I'm not ignoring the chaos; I note it. However, the best I can offer is to stay on task with whatever thread of enlightenment I can manage to follow.

Too often, it is obvious to me that I have mined out the veins of interest that I care about out there on the Internet. Been there, done that. I have read what there is to read about my special-interest topics. I know more on my own than many others seem to offer.

And so, I cast about looking for something of interest to read and learn from on the Internet and yet I end up preferring to, instead, just write on what I am interested in relating to my own mind.

Instead of canvassing for new information on whatever I am interested in, I find myself digging in my own sandbox, so to speak, information there that I find revealing and interesting to me. If we are tired of the outside world, the world inside us is always available and it is virtually untouched. It awaits us.

I have to laugh. There ought to be something out there that is worth following out. I get that. And I've done that. Yet, I often find my own thoughts informative going deeper into a subject than filtering through hundreds of posts or articles on the Web for a few scraps of insight and knowledge that I'm not aware of.

It would seem that what most interests me is my own take on topics that I care about. And I'm not implicating Ego here, either. It's beyond the Self, IMO. Just as no one is going to learn dharma FOR me, there is no knowledge out there that fits me like a glove other than my own search for knowledge, what I dig up by turning inward beyond the deer-in-the-headlights of this now chaotic world, and my outside self. Go in.

Am I finding stuff that others have not or cannot find? I can't say but I doubt it. Only that what makes sense to me is what makes sense to me. We each have our own unique thread.

And what fascinates me is that what naturally makes sense to me is so satisfying. It's like a special path or beads on a rosary. Any turn inward I make, any movement toward expanding the recognition of my own mind, is a direct step on the path to some kind of increased awareness, if not enlightenment. I see and feel that. The pith dharma takes speak of discovering your yidam.

Of course, I understand the Tibetan dharma concept of the 'Yidam', where each actual step toward enlightenment becomes our particular path, unique to us. I tread that and only know when something works for me. That thread of significant steps defines my unique yidam, exactly. Which is why, although some dharma instructions are said to be secret, I find that untrue.

My particular Yidam, when discovered, is no secret, and this because what works for me would not fit anyone else. It would be useless to anyone else.

Anyway, here I stand, exploring eternity.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Swans and the Lake

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 8, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/fad7efa0-215d-424d-b90b-bb25245664db_2048x2048.jpeg

"If there is a lake, the swans would go there." So said the 16th Karmapa when asked why he visited America first in 1974 (when Margaret and I met him) and later in 1976. And that is so true, at least for our lineage, the Karma Kagyu Lineage. When the great rinpoches fled Tibet, it took 10 to 20 years for them and their followers to re-establish significant monasteries and places of learning.

By the 1980s, the great rinpoches in our lineage were still traveling a lot and had not settled down for keeps. Because of that, a center like ours, the "Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Chöling) in Big Rapids, Michigan could invite them and many of them would come and visit our center.

And of course, we did just that. Under the auspices of our mother monastery, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, New York, these great rinpoches would tour our center and stay anywhere from two days to a almost a year. Can you imagine?

From meeting Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in early 1974 onward, it was like a cornucopia of dharma teachers pouring into my life. It was not long after that I met the Dalai Lama (back before he was famous), so that Margaret and I could actually offer him a white scarf personally, and all that.

And in August of 1974 I met H.H. the 16th Karmala, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, in person and a young Bardor Tulku Rinpoche, followed in the coming years by a host of Kagyu teachers, including all four heart-sons of the 16th Karmapa, and I took from each of them the empowerment that they were an emanation of: Shamar Rinpoche (a week), Tai Situ Rinpoche (twice), Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, and Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche. Some of these eminences came to our center more than once, and one even stayed for about a week.

We also hosted and/or took teachings, empowerments, and/or visits from Bardor Tulku Rinpoche, Traleg Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, Lama Namse Rinpoche, Minjur Dorje Rinpoche, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (about a month), and many others that we met on our trips to Tibet.

Drupon Khenpo Lodro Namgyal Rinpoche (the retreat master at Pullahari Monastery in Nepal) spent most of a year living with us after he completed the 9-year Acharya program at Nalanda University.

So far, I have not mentioned the most precious of dharma teachers for me personally, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, with whom Margaret and I studied intensely for 36 years, including 31 years of Ten-Day Mahamudra Intensives. We travelled to that teaching enough miles to circle the equator of the Earth more than two times.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was chosen by the 16 th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, to represent North America and sent here in 1976. Margaret and I spend 36 years as his students until his passing in 2019.

Our relationship with these great lamas was a life raft in this otherwise strange world. They were for us, along with our family, the sense of it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Signs of Dharma Practice

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 9, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/4ac7fd83-ed65-44b1-8c0e-86a126c78f2c_1024x1024.jpeg

I would like to emphasize that, at least in my experience, dharma practice and progress toward any kind of greater awareness or enlightenment is very slow going. It's not quite like watching paint dry, but it's close.

It takes months, perhaps going on for half a year, for me to notice how, if anything, I have improved via dharma practice. Yes, given enough time, I can see it, and yes, there is progress, just not the kind you can set your watch by.

It's more like landscape photography, where day-to-day change may not be perceptible but looking at photos of my mind, so to speak, months and years later shows the 'View' has shifted and seems to have changed perceptually. It's encouraging, because I can see the change.

And so, this dharma dance we do in extreme slow motion is only perceptible over time, just not immediately, not like we can see sudden change tomorrow except very, very rarely, like maybe one time in my entire life's experience.

And it may be hard to tell which of all the dharma practices we do or try out actually work best for us. The Buddhists like to say there are 84,000 forms of dharma paths, so that should tell us something.

I can testify that we can do a particular dharma practice for a long time and still not get it right. For example, I practiced Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) for 32 years quite religiously and never got it down. How futile that seems and what a waste of time, IMO.

And the reason I could not learn Shamata was because, due to my occupations, I already knew this form of meditation more than well enough, and just as you cannot salt the salt, so I could not learn that form of concentration because I already knew it well, thanks to my attention to detail. LOL.

How could that be, I asked myself. That could 'be' because I learned how to concentrate and focus my mind quite naturally early-on, and the way Shamata practice was presented to me to learn by dharma instructors, it was anything but natural, my being instructed to sit on the cushion and focus on atwig or a pebble. For me, that dog would just not hunt.

Then, many years later, when I had finally succeeded in implementing Insight Meditation (Vipassana) as part of learning Mahamudra practice, simultaneously with realizing Insight Meditation I also realized that I already knew Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) because it just naturally popped up and was obvious.

In other words, I had that skill of fine focus and concentration since early-on, but had learned it doing things I loved and did not need to try to learn what I already knew. And the instructions to focus on a twig or pebble was, for me, just not interesting. That's how gullible I was about trying to follow instructions, even at the expense of my common sense. I don't suggest that approach. Hitchhike on your natural interest instead.

So, my takeaway here, the reason I write this, is to put anyone interested on notice that there is a wide world of dharma practice, and if you don't get anywhere with one method, please feel free to try others.

Another of my favorite head-shakers back in the late 1950s and 1960s was that we student practitioners somehow got it put into our heads that we did not discuss our personal experience learning Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). It was private.

What a joke that is. There is nothing secret about Shamata meditation and its learning process. When I went to Tibet it was clear that Tibetans did not keep silent as to learning dharma. They not only talked, but debated and discussed their dharma practice in great detail, at least what are called the Preliminary Practices.

About all that was secret back in the 1950s and 1960s here in America was the fact that we did not know anything about sitting meditation and did not want to share that. LOL.

Of course, I understand that while many roads lead to Rome, ultimately, we have to travel one road to get there. That's true, yet at the same time, don't waste 32 years beating your head against a wall as I did. Try other practices, other paths, and you may find that progress is much more forthcoming.

If there are 84,000 dharma (or some high number), they are there for only one purpose, to help us on the way to greater awareness of our innate enlightenment. Look around, try things, and if the textbook instructions don't work for you, use your own natural abilities to find ones that do, practices that feel right, and offer results.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Coemergence

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 10, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/44953950-a250-4499-9a0b-575bb57e36ff_2048x2048.jpeg

[The concept of coemergence in dharma seems difficult for folks to understand, when it actually is very simple. Let's walk through it.]

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“In the instruction on Mahamudra, coemergence is called ‘unified coemergence’. What does that mean?

“There are three elements: mind (which simply means our mind), thought (mind that has become confused, agitated, and coarse), and dharmakaya (the wisdom that realizes things as they are ultimately).

“Originally, these three were together; subsequently they appeared to us as separate; finally, through relying on the oral instructions on Mahamudra given by a teacher, they are unified— just mind, once again. Mahamudra is the method that enables us to realize them as existing together, as coemergent.”

End-of-Quote

When Rinpoche says “originally,” I believe he means that coemergence is ‘unborn’, not ever born because it just has always been there. It is we who have scrambled and separated the three elements.

The Tibetan term Lhen-Kye has been translated as "innate", "connate", "co-emergent", “unborn,” and "spontaneously arisen".

An example of connate are the dharma terms ‘emptiness’ and ‘awareness’, meaning emptiness arises as awareness and awareness arises as emptiness. The two qualities arise together as one.

Or another example of connate, appearances are not only empty; appearances are the emptiness arising.

These terms are often used in relation to recognizing the true nature of the mind because that nature is already innate and familiar to us even though we have not realized this, and is not something strange and unfamiliar.

Thus, the actual nature of the mind, which most of us have never recognized, will never be foreign to us but always familiar, or as the pith dharma teachings state “like recognizing an old friend in a crowd.”

If you read these words right, their point for us to grasp is that looking for something new to arise in dharma practice will never happen.

What ‘IS’ new or important is when we realize that the nature of the mind is not something we don’t know, but rather something totally familiar that we just have not recognized until now. We are immersed in it.

We are too close, rather than too far. It’s in here, within, rather than out there. This reminds me of that old popular song, “Looking for love in all the wrong places,” but here we sing, looking for the nature of the mind in all the wrong places.

We anticipate or expect something we have never known when instead what we fail to recognize is much closer to us than anything stranger. Don’t expect a stranger! We already are what we don’t recognize.

Expect something so familiar that we would never think to even look there, because it is so much with us and always has been.

In fact, the Tibetan dharma teachings call this our ‘Ordinary Mind’, “Thamal Gyi Shepa.”

In other words, don’t look outside, but rather look in at what you already and always have been familiar with.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Finishing Up

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 12, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/19f72877-117b-4714-ba08-823035e2dd09_1024x1024.jpeg

It seems that I always get kind of frenzied just before a passion fails to interest me and I move on, not that there is anywhere to move on to other than right here and now, where we already are. I finally get it sorted and running smoothly and then some more comprehensive grasp of life takes hold of me and my passion vanishes or takes a back seat. What a mudra!

And whatever passion or interest that just peaked gets kind of freeze dried, deep-sixed, and goes into mothballs for me. Somehow, I have completed whatever it is that it was, and I move on, always just when I finally have a handle on the topic. “Now you see it, now you don’t,” as the magician said.

And I don’t consider this kind of change a loss because whatever replaces it supersedes it in my priorities and manages to be even more embrative -- satisfying and comprehensive. In other words, it is clear to me that I have other fish to fry, so to speak.

All this reminds me of the classic Sanskrit meditation refrain from the Upanishads, of “Neti Neti, meaning that “I am not this and I am not that” or “I am also this and I am also that.”

In the Kena Upanishad it says:

“That which cannot be expressed by speech, but by which speech is expressed—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship. That which cannot be apprehended by the mind, but by which, they say, the mind is apprehended—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship. That which cannot be perceived by the eye, but by which the eye is perceived—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship. That which cannot be heard by the ear, but by which the hearing is perceived—That alone know as Brahman and not that which people here worship.”

I know from my own phenomenological bent, insight, and experience that when we open our arms and let go to embrace this universe of the Mind, that we cannot objectify the mind itself, meaning we cannot get our arms around

it, or better said, we can just get our arms around it, but not objectify it. We are lost and one with all space.

At best, we can but immerse ourselves wholly and, to use the words of the poet Sir Edwin Arnold in his translation of the Bhagavad Gita, allow “The dewdrop to slip into the shining sea.”

I repeatedly have the image of grasping something, like baseball, with all my might and then letting it go, releasing it. That’s the mudra. However, this is also a process.

Sitting on the cushion before a dharma shrine with a mind wide open or sitting here at this desk typing these words with a mind wide open. Same. An open mind, empty of anything. A mind swept out, one that is not about to accumulate and what accumulates is empty as well.

There are no static states, but only a process, an ever-altering kaleidoscope of change that we can never quite grasp or objectify. We can but accept, embrace, and rest in what is.

We can but affirm it all; that is the extent of our power.

In ancient texts it says to go into solitude and meditate.

You will never be more alone than you now are and always have been. Years ago, I wrote this poem.

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 I feel comfortable,

Try as I might.

Not here or there,

Not doing this or doing that.

Only nothing feels right.

I just want to hold real still,

Let the mind rest,

And then park myself,

Somewhere out of the way,

Like on a cushion,

Or

In a place of solitude,

Because:

Nothing is going on.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Detachment

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 15, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/76d84651-1d9b-45b1-9efb-bae34ccd48c9_1024x1024.jpeg

[It's time to share a little esoteric or occult knowledge, in which I was carefully trained early-on. The word 'occult' means it is hidden or not known by most. See if you can make any sense of it.]

The process of detachment tends to be slow and often somewhat traumatic and painful. As my first dharma teacher, a traveling Rosicrucian initiator from Scotland, Andrew Gunn McIver, used to point out:

We need to know the difference between a Cling Peach and a Freestone Peach. With a Cling Peach, the pit has to be torn from the peach, taking with it some of the flesh, while with the Freestone Peach, the pit just pops out. Which are we, a Cling or a Freestone?

How is our detachment going? And with age, detach we will, each one of us, as we prepare to leave the body at death. Long before we reach old age and die, the process of detachment is already taking place. In fact, from the prime of life on (after the age of 30 years), we begin then to leave the body. Everything is about before and after around 30 years of age – the prime of life.

As Andrew McIver taught me, he would ask me: when does ice melt? Around 33 degrees. When did Christ die? Around 33 years of age. And what does the slogan "Never Trust Anyone Over 30 Years of Age" pertain to? And the answer was this process of detachment, our beginning to leave the body and lack of awareness of it.

According to Andrew, who was an initiator of the esoteric, it is not at the end of life that we leave the body, but right smack in the middle of life, around thirty years of age. In fact, this emergence is what the Christians call being 'Born Again', which they have kind of bogarted. We all start to leave the body or be born again after 30 years of age, Christian or any other persuasion. However, we may not be aware of it, and it is not taught in our schools.

The process of detaching, and leaving the body begins after the age of 30 years, ready or not. However, as mentioned, our awareness of this gradual

detachment that is taking place, at least in modern society, kind of goes without saying. Mum is the word. It's not mentioned.

As I always tell myself. OK, it either goes without saying OR you can say it again. I prefer to say it again, celebrate it, and go through this detachment process with my eyes open, to witness it.

Andrew McIver would say that the first 30 years of our life is spent creating our physical body (the first Saturn Return at 29.4 years), the second 30 year Saturn cycle (after our prime) we spend repairing the damage we make emerging or getting out of our body, and the third 30-year cycle (beyond 60 years) we can actually consciously participate in the creation and shaping of life.

Now, as a twenty-something year old, what Andrew McIver related to me was eye-opening to say the least. I was spellbound and spent entire days with Andrew and never said a word. I was just taking it in.

Andrew would say to me, "Imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun. That's hot stuff!" And he would actually growl.

In fact, Andrew would say to me in words: "Michael, I am tuning you like an instrument and years from now you will respond to this information. And I later in my life I did.

As an astrologer, years later I imagined myself at the center of the sun and developed heliocentric (sun-centered) astrology in great depth, which few if any astrologers have done correctly. Andrew put that imprint in me.

And when I traveled to see the 17 th Karmapa at 15,000 feet in Tibet, the Karmapa gave me a name. "You are Tenzin Nyima," which means keeper or holder of the sun. He had no idea that I was a heliocentric astrologer, other than he just knew.

And so, those are my 'bona fides' for my notes here, so to speak. And I carry on Andrew McIver's lineage as best I can. And Andrew had other students who did the same. My friend Joel Stan has done the same.

And the reason I write this is that those able and interested might develop awareness of this natural process of detachment, which we call leaving or detaching from the body; it might be possible for more and more of us to become and celebrate this esoteric initiation.

And, as mentioned, what the Christians call being "Born Again," which experience belongs to all human beings, not just Christians, might become

conscious so that we each are aware of this phenomenon and go through it consciously. I did.

Andrew McIver also would liken this process of being born again, becoming aware of our natural detachment from our body, to creating a space capsule that was being made ready to be launched into outer space.

Using the first 30-year Saturn Cycle, he would say that we spend our first 30 years building a space capsule for ourselves that, if built well, would be space-worthy and launched in our early 30s.

He said we would spend the second 30 years repairing the damage we made getting out of our body and shoring up our space capsule, which having entered space, needs to be stable and coherent.

And, as mentioned earlier, we spend our third 30-year cycle actually able to participate in the creation and shaping of the world around us.

I remember one of my principal teachers in Ann Arbor (and friend) was the poet Russell Gregory who used to manage the books ordered at “Centicore Books” on South University in Ann Arbor. Professors, students, and townies like me found in Russell Gregory a brilliant teacher and guide.

Punk that I was, I remember saying to Gregory, “Russell, you have not written any poems of late.” And his response was “Michael, some of my best poems are walking around Ann Arbor.” Enough said.

Of course, make of this concept what you can. I had to do exactly that when I was in my early twenties, and I went through my first Saturn Return with my eyes wide-open, being aware of what I am describing to you here, just as Andrew pointed it out to me.

All this is like the ancient city of Atlantis rising from the sea into consciousness. Or, to quote a great line from the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Suck any sense from that, who can.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Delusion

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 16, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e3f93d3f-dd7b-4348-aeb3-0c5356059592_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“Delusion is simply not knowing, not understanding. When Khenpo Gangshar says that delusion “is the lack of recognizing one’s essence,” this means that we don’t clearly see what this is.

“Since we do not recognize the nature of our minds, we do not understand how things really are; delusion prevents us from seeing the nature of things.

“Through not knowing this nature, our delusion gets stronger and then we become more envious, angry, or greedy. Other afflictions can also arise.

“In and of itself, this dullness is not particularly strong and not such a great fault; however, since it causes all the other afflictions to develop, it is the root of all our faults, problems, and difficulties.”

End of Quote

Delusion and ignorance, our ignoring the nature of things, as Thrangu Rinpoche points out, the nature of the mind, needs to be understood. It’s a big deal to recognize and use and embrace the nature of the mind, but we also have to have some basic idea of understanding what we have to understand, which is a Catch-22, IMO.

In other words, there is the actual recognition as to the true nature of the mind, but as mentioned above, there is also somehow first getting in the ballpark as to what that recognition is supposed to be. We don’t even know what to look for.

You can’t get it from books, poems, or writing like this, other than perhaps a flavor or a whiff of the reality. I spent years on this problem and found that a whole lot of nothing is still nothing. That’s the whole point!

Obviously, there’s no button I know that a guru can press and we all see the actual nature of our own mind. There are an untold number of pages and books, and I have read and studied many of them, trying to get inside, and have an insight into how to recognize the nature of the mind. Effort cannot do the job.

I finally had to go to stop my personal effort, and walk to the end of the line, and do what the good books and teachers say, which is to get live help from someone who has had the experience themselves and knows what they are talking about.

The nature of the mind has to be pointed out to us. Period. End of story.

Even then, it took years and many attempts at having it pointed out to me by authentic teachers for me to actually understand what is involved in this process. One has to relax and have it pointed out to us, not matter how 'smart' we think we are.

We can't see our own eye, except in a mirror and event then it is reversed. As they say, best to give up, meaning in an upward direction. Let go, which allows the mind to relax.

Only then does the legendary city of Atlantis rise from the waters of our ignorance.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Get Serious

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 21, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0b828226-5c0b-4aa2-b9ec-1c3f2d622406_1024x1024.jpeg

[Happy Winter Solstice! This is another long read, of interest perhaps to a very few. I apologize for all these words, and may they be of use to those who are interested in what is required to learn dharma, at least for someone as dense as me.]

The dharma is a natural occurring insight that itself is unborn, meaning it has always just been there. Buddha Siddhartha Gautama recognized it and eventually realized the dharma and today it is passed on through what are called the Three Jewels, Buddha, the Dharma (his codified teachings), and the Sangha, those living beings who are able to realize and carry on his teachings.

My impression is that it is very difficult to realize the Buddha's teachings, much less maintain them. His various lineages and even the written dharma teachings, must be curated and kept fresh.

By whatever name, sect, or religion we respond to, there is a dharma in them to various degrees. I believe all of us, and all spiritual persuasions, are knee-deep in dharma, whether we have yet realized it or not. Formal dharma teachings may be too abstract and intellectual for many of us, while the natural dharma is just right there waiting to be realized.

As a preface, drifting away from formal on the cushion dharma training into the dharma of everyday life is quite the Zen approach. It's all as dharma as we are. And eventually, deconstructing the most formal dharma is part of perfecting dharma. Dharma is not a construct, but a process of awareness, our becoming aware.

I believe we are working with dharma all the time, not just when we sit on a cushion in the corner and light a candle. Most of the folks I know are doing their best to make the most out of their lives and this requires some assimilation and execution of dharma. This is my opinion.

What is dharma and what makes dharma 'dharma'?

For me, dharma is always the next step or action that seems to give me greater insight into the nature of the mind or reality and simultaneously helps

to deconstruct this straitjacket that is called Samsara. Dharma is a single mudra or movement that realizes two as one.

These years, I spend my days doing my best to be aware of this present moment here and now, and to wake up from my own habitual ignorance of the mind itself. I'm a lot more aware than I used to be, that's for sure.

In other words, dharma, for me, is this process of becoming increasingly aware of the nature of the mind and reality.

I was doing the same thing long before I ever heard or saw the word 'dharma'. I believe we all are doing that. That there is a program, study, or special set of instructions called "The Dharma" may be useful, yet it also can be confusing and restrictive. Stay close to home.

That's why, at least for me, something called 'dharma' is at best a guide, a way to better point out to me how I can get my life together. If it becomes too tautological, too redundant, repetitive, or cyclical, then I am only going around in circles. We have to live life in harmony with dharma. We have to get along.

Perhaps becoming aware of recursion and the meaninglessness of meaning itself is what it takes for us to step outside of our habitual recursive tendencies and just wake up. However we spell it, this involves active immersion in life itself rather than furthering intellectual conceptualization.

Vivid awareness of our immediate situation is required, to the point of complete immersion in the present moment. Being here and now without the slightest reflection is its own answer to whatever questions we may have -- Quest-I-On.

I cannot forget the line from the great philosopher George Wilhelm Fredrick Hegel's principal work "The Phenomenology of the Mind or Spirit," which reads:

"We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

For me this is one of the mainstays of dharma, the dissolving of all dualities, like the uncrossing of our eyes, and realizing the unity that is and always has been the reality.

Another way of saying this is that we go to meet our maker, not wait to be dragged into unity, much like the line from the poet Sir Edwin Arnold, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea." This is a natural condition.

For me, the dharma consists of whatever process deconstructs or collapses the duality of subject and object of Samsara and immerses me in the non-dual actual nature of the mind, taking the plunge.

Of course, there may be much more profound realizations beyond non-duality, yet I don't know of any and have not seen or experienced any. Full immersion, where the dewdrop slips into the shining sea, is all that I know. If there is more, I don't know it or even of it.

To repeat: deconstructing Samsara's dualistic conceptualization, breaking it down, removing the isolation and division, so that only the one remains is the mudra or signature of what, in the dharma I understand, and it is called Mahamudra. Any step or stage that brings this about is the dharma at work. There may be more, yet I don't know anything other than this one mudra, Mahamudra.

Years ago, when as a young adult trying to understand anything that was presented or I thought was the dharma or dharmic, the best I could come up with was something like a patchwork quilt, where I had some patches on the quilt figured, perhaps right, yet many whole patches were just a blank that I could not fill in. I was unable to put it all together and I tried. I needed help, but how to ask for it?

It took me a very, very long time to get around to ask for, much less accept, help or guidance from others, from the outside. Everything beyond my own skin was to me suspect and perhaps even corrupt, while any corruption was not only on the outside, but inside me as well, cloying. How do we ever solve this kind of equation? I can only tell you how I worked it out.

And that was by meeting someone outside my own skin that I respected and trusted enough to allow them to tell me what I should do clearly enough, so that I would do it. I don't want to provide here more detail than what is needed, but I will offer enough detail here that perhaps some few of you will get the idea as to what is needed or required to seriously learn dharma.

The teacher who became what is called my Root Guru (Tsawi Lama) was a Tibetan who spoke no English, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. He actually came to me in a dream, but that is another story that I can recite some other time.

Here I would like to suggest or demonstrate what is needed in order for me to accept guidance in dharma, and I am a very hard case when it comes to following instructions.

I can start by saying that I (and my wife Margaret as well) studied closely with Khenpo Rinpoche for 36 years, until he passed on at 96 years of age. And there was so much instruction that was given, but I will mention just one part.

One example is that we attended each year for 31 years, without fail, what was called the 'Ten-Day Teaching on Mahamudra', an intensive which involved driving 1600 miles (round trip) each year, bringing our kids with us. We made that trip enough times to circle the Earth at the Equator more than twice.

And I will explain just one of the many particular dharma practices, and this one is not exactly easy. It is called the "Extraordinary Preliminaries" or in Tibetan "The Ngöndro." The Ngöndro practice requires, among other things, the following:

Saying special prayers 108,000 times, doing full-length prostrations on the ground 108,000 times, saying a 100-syllable mantra 108,000 times, making 108,000 mandala offerings, and doing what is called Guru Yoga 108,000 times.

And doing and finishing Ngöndro was required before we could begin doing what are called the more advanced Deity Practices. And when I finished the Ngöndro, which took me a long time, and I did my best to do an hour-long session in the morning and another hour in the evening, Margaret and I went to Rinpoche and explained we had finished, and was ready for what was next, which I knew was permission to then begin the Deity Practices that more advanced dharma students took up. I liked the idea of advancing.

And Rinpoche said to me (and Margaret), "Do you want to know what I would do next if I were you?" Of course, we wanted his advice and told him just that. And he responded:

"I would do another round of Ngöndro," meaning: do it all over again.

This was not what we expected, but both Margaret and I, without question, did another complete round of Ngöndro, which also took a long time.

I explain this only to make clear the kind of commitment we had to have with a trusted instructor to clear our mind and the way so that we can actually learn to meditate, as opposed to just 'practicing' meditation forever. Practice is practice, not meditation.

It's like anything else we study and practice, it takes serious commitment to learn dharma just as it would to learn to play chess well, play music, or anything else that we want to be accomplished at. Skill in dharma is not easy, at least not for me.

Now, in life I have learned a lot of different skills yet learning what little I know about dharma is by far the most difficult thing I have ever done or tried to do.

And I recount a bit of my history here only to bring home that in learning dharma, and this is traditional, we not only have to seek guidance from an authentic teacher we can respond to, but must practice what instruction we are given until we are no longer practicing meditation, but actually meditating, which oddly is called 'non-meditation', because it requires no effort or practice. We can just do it.

Now, whether this sounds scary or difficult, it is. I am not trying to dissuade anyone from undertaking to learn dharma, but rather pointing out how serious a commitment can be, and for someone as lazy as me, this was very difficult.

Of course, it may well be much easier for many of you, but I am a hard case. I don't take instruction well and am a slow learner.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Five Buddha Families

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 22, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/adf12cd1-fafa-4f61-81e5-f8e217143def_2046x2044.jpeg

Something that is very much a part of the Tibetan Vajrayana approach to dharma is the concept of the Five Buddha Families (Five Dhyani Buddhas), and the process of finding out for ourselves which of these five families we most naturally belong to.

For example, in my case I discovered that I belong to the Amogasiddhi, the Karma Family. I originally imagined that I belonged to the Amitabha Family, and the aspect of Compassion, yet that was just wishful thinking, something I thought.

However, as time passed and I became sensitive to what I actually am, it was crystal clear the Buddha Family that I in fact belong to is that of the Amoghasiddhi, the Buddha of the north, the color of dark green, whose main quality is called "All-Virtuous Action," meaning All-Accomplishing Action. My symbol is the Visva Vajra, the double dorje.

My mudra traditionally is the Abhaya (protection) mudrā, with the right hand held up at shoulder level, palm facing out, fingers flat together, and the left hand on the lap, palm facing up,

the Mudra of Fearlessness.

The direction of the Amogasiddhi Family is due north, my color is very dark green. Some of you might like to consider what buddha family you are aligned with.

I can't remember all the significant details of all five buddha families, so I asked ChatGPT for details, and here they are. I did look them over and these seem correct.

The concept of the "Five Buddha Families" (or "Five Tathāgatagarbha Families") is a central part of Vajrayana Buddhism, particularly in the context of Tibetan Buddhism.

These five families represent different aspects of enlightened mind and are associated with various qualities and archetypal figures of the Buddha. They

are used as a framework for understanding the enlightened nature of the mind and the processes of transformation through meditation and practice.

The Five Buddha Families are often depicted as both symbolic and experiential, linked to different types of wisdom and compassion that can manifest in the practitioner's path to enlightenment.

Here are the Five Buddha Families :

1. Vairochana Buddha - The Family of Dharmakaya

2.

- Main Quality : Wisdom of the Dharmakaya (the "Truth Body")

Main Quality : Wisdom of the Dharmakaya (the "Truth Body")

- Color : White

Color : White

- Symbol : Wheel of Dharma (Dharmachakra)

Symbol : Wheel of Dharma (Dharmachakra)

- Element : Space

Element : Space

- Function : Represents the essence of all phenomena, the ultimate truth, and the fundamental nature of the universe. Vairochana symbolizes the centrality of the teachings and embodies the wisdom of the Dharmakaya , the ultimate, unmanifested aspect of Buddha, beyond concepts of form.

Function : Represents the essence of all phenomena, the ultimate truth, and the fundamental nature of the universe. Vairochana symbolizes the centrality of the teachings and embodies the wisdom of the Dharmakaya , the ultimate, unmanifested aspect of Buddha, beyond concepts of form.

- Afflictions : Ignorance (Avidya)

Afflictions : Ignorance (Avidya)

- Transformative Aspect : Ignorance is transformed into the wisdom of equanimity , which sees all phenomena as empty, open, and limitless.

Transformative Aspect : Ignorance is transformed into the wisdom of equanimity , which sees all phenomena as empty, open, and limitless.

2. Amitabha Buddha - The Family of Rupakaya

- Main Quality : Discriminating Wisdom

Main Quality : Discriminating Wisdom

- Color : Red

Color : Red

- Symbol : Lotus Flower

Symbol : Lotus Flower

- Element : Fire

Element : Fire

- Function : Amitabha represents compassion and discriminating wisdom, which allows one to recognize the specific nature of all phenomena. He is often associated with the practice of meditation and recitation and represents the compassion that discriminates between right and wrong, helpful and harmful.

Function : Amitabha represents compassion and discriminating wisdom, which allows one to recognize the specific nature of all phenomena. He is often associated with the practice of meditation and recitation and represents the compassion that discriminates between right and wrong, helpful and harmful.

- Afflictions : Attachment

Afflictions : Attachment

- Transformative Aspect : Attachment is transformed into the wisdom of discrimination , which enables one to distinguish between wisdom and delusion, and between beneficial and harmful actions.

Transformative Aspect : Attachment is transformed into the wisdom of discrimination , which enables one to distinguish between wisdom and delusion, and between beneficial and harmful actions.

3. Amoghasiddhi Buddha - The Family of Vajrakaya

- Main Quality : All-Virtuous Action

Main Quality : All-Virtuous Action

- Color : Green

Color : Green

- Symbol : Double Vajra

Symbol : Double Vajra

- Element : Wind

Element : Wind

- Function : Amoghasiddhi represents the action of enlightened activity and the ability to accomplish all virtuous aims. This family is related to the activity of the Buddha and the transformative power of enlightened deeds.

Function : Amoghasiddhi represents the action of enlightened activity and the ability to accomplish all virtuous aims. This family is related to the activity of the Buddha and the transformative power of enlightened deeds.

- Afflictions : Jealousy

Afflictions : Jealousy

- Transformative Aspect : Jealousy is transformed into the wisdom of all-accomplishing action , which accomplishes all goals and brings the world to fruition in harmony with dharma.

Transformative Aspect : Jealousy is transformed into the wisdom of all-accomplishing action , which accomplishes all goals and brings the world to fruition in harmony with dharma.

4. Ratnasambhava Buddha - The Family of Sambhogakaya

- Main Quality : Equanimity

Main Quality : Equanimity

- Color : Yellow

Color : Yellow

- Symbol : Jewel

Symbol : Jewel

- Element : Earth

Element : Earth

- Function : Ratnasambhava represents the wisdom of equanimity, which is free from bias and is able to see all things as equal and interconnected. The treasure or jewel symbolizes generosity and the abundant nature of enlightened qualities.

Function : Ratnasambhava represents the wisdom of equanimity, which is free from bias and is able to see all things as equal and interconnected. The treasure or jewel symbolizes generosity and the abundant nature of enlightened qualities.

- Afflictions : Pride

Afflictions : Pride

- Transformative Aspect : Pride is transformed into the wisdom of equanimity , which understands all beings as equally worthy of compassion and insight.

Transformative Aspect : Pride is transformed into the wisdom of equanimity , which understands all beings as equally worthy of compassion and insight.

5. Akshobhya Buddha - The Family of Nirmanakaya

- Main Quality : Mirror-Like Wisdom

Main Quality : Mirror-Like Wisdom

- Color : Blue

Color : Blue

- Symbol : Bowl (Vessel)

Symbol : Bowl (Vessel)

- Element : Water

Element : Water

- Function : Akshobhya represents the wisdom of being unmoved or imperturbable, embodying a deep, unshakable mind that remains unaffected by external disturbances. He symbolizes the ability to maintain a calm and clear mind, reflecting all phenomena as they are without bias.

Function : Akshobhya represents the wisdom of being unmoved or imperturbable, embodying a deep, unshakable mind that remains unaffected by external disturbances. He symbolizes the ability to maintain a calm and clear mind, reflecting all phenomena as they are without bias.

- Afflictions : Anger

Afflictions : Anger

- Transformative Aspect : Anger is transformed into the wisdom of mirror-like wisdom , which reflects things without distortion, seeing them exactly as they are without judgment or projection.

Transformative Aspect : Anger is transformed into the wisdom of mirror-like wisdom , which reflects things without distortion, seeing them exactly as they are without judgment or projection.

Summary of the Five Buddha Families

Each of the Five Buddha Families corresponds to a specific aspect of the Buddha's enlightened qualities, which are associated with the removal of specific mental afflictions. They are not separate from the practitioner but are

internal qualities that one cultivates on the path to enlightenment. These families represent the core mental qualities that transform negative emotions into the wisdom needed to achieve the enlightened state. Each family also has symbolic connections to colors, elements, and associated practices:

- Vairochana - Wisdom of Dharmakaya (Ignorance → Wisdom of Equanimity)

Vairochana - Wisdom of Dharmakaya (Ignorance → Wisdom of Equanimity)

- Amitabha - Wisdom of Discrimination (Attachment → Wisdom of Discrimination)

Amitabha - Wisdom of Discrimination (Attachment → Wisdom of Discrimination)

- Amoghasiddhi - Wisdom of Accomplishing Action (Jealousy → Wisdom of Accomplishing Action)

Amoghasiddhi - Wisdom of Accomplishing Action (Jealousy → Wisdom of Accomplishing Action)

- Ratnasambhava - Wisdom of Equanimity (Pride → Wisdom of Equanimity)

Ratnasambhava - Wisdom of Equanimity (Pride → Wisdom of Equanimity)

- Akshobhya - Mirror-Like Wisdom (Anger → Mirror-Like Wisdom)

Akshobhya - Mirror-Like Wisdom (Anger → Mirror-Like Wisdom)

Together, they form a comprehensive approach to transforming the mind and cultivating the full range of enlightened qualities on the path to Buddhahood.

And another run at this:

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

In Vajrayana Buddhism, the practice of choosing one of the Five Buddha Families as your "own" or "personal Buddha family" is a common and highly significant part of the path, especially within the context of Tantric practices and Buddha-field teachings .

This decision is part of a broader system of spiritual training that is deeply personal and reflects both your innate qualities and the particular path of transformation you are being guided toward.

The choice of a Buddha family is often made with the guidance of a qualified teacher (lama), who helps the practitioner identify which family resonates

most with their personality, tendencies, or even deeper spiritual potential. This selection is not arbitrary but rather a reflection of the practitioner's current mental state and their potential for spiritual growth. Here's how this practice is understood in more detail:

1. Innate Qualities and Personal Affinities

The Five Buddha Families represent different aspects of enlightenment, as well as distinct mental and emotional qualities that are present in every person. Each family corresponds to a specific type of wisdom and personality. By identifying with one Buddha family, a practitioner is invited to explore the qualities they are most connected to and are likely to embody on their journey to full enlightenment.

- Vairochana (white, space): Those who resonate with Vairochana might be drawn to the idea of vastness , equanimity , or an openness to seeing the truth as it is, beyond individual distinctions.

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- Amitabha (red, fire): Practitioners who are naturally inclined toward discriminating wisdom , clarity , and compassion may be attracted to Amitabha, especially those with a tendency to deeply analyze or "cut through" confusion.

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- Amoghasiddhi (green, wind): This family is often chosen by those who feel drawn to the active dimension of enlightened activity, the power to transform obstacles into wisdom and compassionate action .

Amoghasiddhi (green, wind): This family is often chosen by those who feel drawn to the active dimension of enlightened activity, the power to transform obstacles into wisdom and compassionate action .

- Ratnasambhava (yellow, earth): Individuals who are developing a strong sense of equanimity , generosity , and the ability to see the inherent worth of all beings might choose this family, especially if they feel drawn to balancing the more difficult emotions such as pride.

Ratnasambhava (yellow, earth): Individuals who are developing a strong sense of equanimity , generosity , and the ability to see the inherent worth of all

beings might choose this family, especially if they feel drawn to balancing the more difficult emotions such as pride.

- Akshobhya (blue, water): Those who feel drawn to cultivating peace , calmness , and stability in the face of challenge or conflict, and who have a strong desire to transform anger into wisdom, may gravitate toward Akshobhya.

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2. Transformative Process

The Buddha family you choose will guide your spiritual practice and help focus your meditation and Buddha-field visualization practices . The idea is that by associating with a specific family, you are working directly with the specific afflictions and challenges related to that family, transforming them through the wisdom embodied by that Buddha family.

For instance, if someone has a lot of anger or frustration , they might be drawn to Akshobhya's mirror-like wisdom and the transformation of anger into a balanced and reflective wisdom. Similarly, if a practitioner struggles with pride , they might align with Ratnasambhava , working to cultivate equanimity and a more humble, compassionate heart.

Through visualization practices, mantra recitation, and meditations focused on the chosen Buddha family, the practitioner works to align their mind with the qualities of that Buddha family . This may include engaging in practices that specifically target and transform the afflictions associated with that family.

3. A Deepening of Personal Connection

Picking a Buddha family can feel like identifying a spiritual "home" within the larger Buddhist cosmology, creating a sense of connection to a deeper archetypal energy or a guiding principle. This is not a static identification; it is part of a dynamic process of transformation . Over time, the qualities of the chosen Buddha family should become more accessible and natural for the practitioner, leading to the blossoming of a profound personal wisdom and compassion.

4. Alignment with a Particular Path of Practice

The Five Buddha Families also correspond to different tantric deities and meditations , and by choosing one family, the practitioner aligns themselves with specific practices within the Vajrayana system, such as specific mandalas , rituals , and mantras associated with the chosen Buddha.

For example:

- A practitioner of the Vairochana family might engage in meditation on the dharmakaya aspect of the Buddha and the expansive nature of the mind .

A practitioner of the Vairochana family might engage in meditation on the dharmakaya aspect of the Buddha and the expansive nature of the mind .

- A practitioner of the Amitabha family might focus on compassionate wisdom and reciting the Amitabha mantra for the benefit of all beings.

A practitioner of the Amitabha family might focus on compassionate wisdom and reciting the Amitabha mantra for the benefit of all beings.

- A practitioner of the Amoghasiddhi family might emphasize practices of skillful action , particularly in the context of transforming external obstacles into spiritual opportunities.

A practitioner of the Amoghasiddhi family might emphasize practices of skillful action , particularly in the context of transforming external obstacles into spiritual opportunities.

5. Integration with the Larger Mandala

The Five Buddha Families also represent an aspect of a larger Buddha-field or mandala in Vajrayana Buddhism, where each Buddha family has a specific role and interconnection with the others. Through your personal connection to one Buddha family, you are not only working with your own individual transformation but also participating in the larger, collective field of enlightened beings. This interconnectedness supports the notion of interdependence , an essential teaching in Buddhism.

6. Guidance of a Lama or Teacher

Typically, the selection of a Buddha family is done under the guidance of an experienced teacher, who can discern which family would be most appropriate based on your current spiritual development , your karma , and your emotional tendencies . The teacher will also provide specific guidance on how to engage with the practices related to the chosen family.

Conclusion

In summary, picking a Buddha family in Vajrayana Buddhism is a way of aligning oneself with the wisdom and transformative qualities that correspond to one's innate strengths and challenges . It is a practice that both deepens one's connection to the Buddha-field and provides a focused path for working through personal obstacles and growing into full enlightenment. Over time, through meditation, visualization, and the associated practices, the practitioner cultivates the qualities of their chosen family, gradually transforming their mental and emotional states and drawing closer to the realization of Buddhahood.

[Graphic by me.]

EMAIL

The History of the Past

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 26, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/39be5c88-cd4b-490c-a5f9-68cbbf11477d_1280x720.jpeg

[Some personal history as to how Tibetan Buddhist sitting meditation came into America.]

Not sure what the immediate goal is for learning Shamata Meditation, commonly called Tranquility Meditation. If you sit on a cushion and focus on a dot on the wall, a pebble or twig on the floor, what you find is how hard that is without being distracted. And that can go on for a long time.

The common understanding may be that by facing the confusion of trying to maintain a focus will eventually lead you to sorting it out and becoming tranquil. IMO, there must be an easier way.

Making effort to learn to focus without effort requires learning to give up that effort. How about learning to focus on something that very much interests us?

Perhaps because of the lack of homogeneity of people undertaking learning meditation, the best that can be done is to kind of throw everyone into the mix, give them something to focus on (pebble, stick, spot of the wall) and let them sort it out.

If that's the best we can do, for the kindness of all concerned, please show me the door.

It's not that I didn't try to do just that, and for 32 years; it's that it did not work for me, not even a little.

It seemed a harsh treatment for anyone that merits a little loving kindness and care. Yes, there are hundreds of books on meditation and just as many would-be meditation teachers, but as for my learning from any of them, it not only did not happen, it actually was harmful to my learning the dharma.

Mastering the dharma requires so much more for us than that.

I do understand that it takes Buddhism something like 300 years to enter a country, so we have just started here in America. And I'm part of that first group of would-be Tibetan dharma practitioners or close to it. Before that, there was some 'Ze'n in America. I looked into that as well.

However, in my experience, it was like the blind leading the blind. Authentic dharma teachers were rarer than hen's teeth, as they say. Everyone was your guru and everyone knew about nothing because they had no real experience... yet.

We were all stirring the pot, yet there was nothing in the pot to stir. As Trungpa Rinpoche used to delight in saying, "Your guess is as good as mine." In my memory, it was mostly guesswork.

My actual Tibetan dharma teacher was 800 miles away and spoke no English. You needed to find a translator willing to translate if you wanted anything close to a conversation.

And so, in-person teaching meant travelling 800 miles and then listening in a large group (sometimes hundreds of people), with maybe the opportunity to ask your one question at the end of the teaching, standing in line to ask it.

It worked only because it had to work. We 'worked' it. We cared that much, but it was anything but ideal. Yet, that's how it was and for a long time at that. Is it any different today? That's a question for you.

I can't fairly say because I'm not seeking instruction at this point, not sampling that marketplace, so to speak.

It does not look so good to me, but by now I'm an old codger, stuck in his past and not monitoring the slipstream of the present state of dharma in America. However, I am finding my own way.

I see the business of dharma going on around me, and from my perspective mostly (no all) about money these days or at least too much so. Are there more qualified dharma teachers? I hope so, but you could not prove it by me. I'm not really a good witness at this point.

Am I worried about the dharma? Not at all, because as they say, the dharma is unborn and has no beginning and no end. Our take on it, yours and mine, are probably not representative, and what is representative is beyond our experience at this point. We can only guess at what passes for it.

What I CAN do is drill down on my own practice, yet the path (and trail) of that is so individual, so personal to my life events, that it is difficult to generalize from my single perspective.

However, I don't see the signs that might catch my eye the textbooks say indicate realization or even recognition of the mind's nature, yet as mentioned, why should I? I only know my own yidam, so to speak, and that has been tailored to my particular dharma path, step by step.

Yet I also know that there is nothing but dharma on all sides, no choice but to fashion something of use from what is directly in our path. And we make our path as we walk it. That's what the phrase 'turning the wheel of the dharma' means.

And yet, I am sure that from out of this chaos, in time, will come a map of the path not only that we have travelled, but one that society in general has traveled. History will emerge from the seeming chaos of this present time, precipitate, and be written down.

The past codifies the present and freezes this present moment into frozen statues in time. The precipitate of 'now', like falling rain, will distill from the skies of present experience in the coldness of time and, like Braille, be read by the fingers of feeling that we manage to still have. It's up to us.

Are things out of control? You can't ask an old person that question, because everything seems uncontrollable with age. That's the beauty of change. The fresh lava has not yet cooled into stone, yet it will.

I find the only relief comes from going within my own experience, yet deeper. Reading from the outside-in no longer works if it ever did, which I doubt.

And if the public or recent social 'drift' is all about the outside, our deciphering meaning from outside appearances, then I believe we have it just backward. While the past dictates our future to some degree, the future by definition contains more than just the past.

It's like those 'black snakes' we used to light on the sidewalk on the 4 th of July. The black ash that the fireworks spewed out due to intumescent reaction is but the history and past of the fire up front that is still burning.

Everything I have learned about life suggests that we read from the inside out and not from the outside in. Don't judge a book by its cover; read the book.

The past is a direct reflection of the present moment, which itself is a reflection of future input.

When I look around at what passes for dharma-teaching today, most of it has been (and is being) commercialized beyond my imagination. I'm sure those who have never known anything different will see this just as the way it is. I get that and it is sad.

I am old. We never charged for dharma or if there was any fee it was travel expenses, honorarium, and so on. If we had anything, it was respect, although we didn't know much about what we were respecting. LOL.

Back then, the dharma did not wear the cloak of money, yet that's in the process of happening now and by great teachers as well. It's hard for me to see the dharma through the lens of commercialization, yet unfortunately soon most will not know the difference.

This appears to be the way Dharma wants to appear now, and our grandkids will see it as just another form of entertainment for which there is a ticket.

I don't believe that dharma can have a price. It is way more durable than we are.

EMAIL

Meeting Trungpa Rinpoche

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

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PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2fc139c5-a622-4e6d-908a-4066dafa808b_2004x2048.jpeg

[Some of you have asked for additional details on my meeting Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, perhaps a little more story, so I will try to oblige.]

Chögyam Trungpa's "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism" was a seminal book in the early 1970s. We were in the middle of the flowering of the New-Age Movement, when almost anything spiritual took a turn toward the almighty dollar. The Sixties were over and all of the spiritual exotica from that period were trying to take root in mainstream America.

Suddenly there were swamis, yogis, devotees, disciples, and the like all over the place. And in the middle of all that new-age circus here was Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was calling out all that New-Age exploitation stuff with this incredible book, "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism." The title alone was enough to stop me in my tracks.

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

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

At the time I was just a struggling astrologer trying to survive in wake of the 1960s. The Sixties had come and gone. People like me were trying to sort our lives out in the aftermath. Margaret and I had met and married in 1971. We immediately went into the green-plant business, starting ("Erlewine Plants")

running a greenhouse for tropical plants in Northern Michigan. That business went bust because, even though I had better plants, the flower shops were afraid I might not last. And thanks to that view, I didn't. We went broke.

I was forced to take a job with my competitor, sent south managing 19,000 square feet of their greenhouses down in Apopka, Florida, the capitol of the green-plant world. We moved there, driving down in my old 1966 Dodge van with all our belongings plus our two English Bull Terriers and a litter of puppies.

Florida was like heaven to me, being surrounded by all those incredible plants in a semi-tropical climate, heaven, that is, until I realized that all the immigrant workers under my direction were being exposed to the very lethal Parathion, a poison in powder form that is cumulative in its effect. It sneaks up on you and then kills you.

The workers were getting it all over themselves and it worked into their belts and aprons, and they didn't realize the consequences. When I explained the problem to management back up north, they just laughed. They would do nothing. So, I resigned, left that plant paradise, and moved back up to Ann Arbor in the spring of 1972 to start all over. It was a long drive, Margaret, me, our two English Bull Terriers, and their puppies. We had to start all over.

In the summer of 1972, when we found out we had a baby coming, I had a come-to-Jesus talk with myself about supporting a family. The day after the pregnancy news, I went out and took a job on a city garbage truck and came home pretty stinky. I was trying to prove to myself that I would do anything necessary to provide for my family.

After that garbage day, I realized that I could probably be more useful doing something else, so I hung out my shingle and began to make a living full-time as an astrologer, offering readings, giving classes, and lecturing here and there around the state. It was a shoestring existence. We were happy.

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

I was geeked to chauffeur Trungpa Rinpoche, but I didn't have a limousine. Instead, I had an old beater of a Ford station wagon, the kind with fake wooden sides that, when you turned off the ignition and pulled out the key, kept on sputtering and coughing for something like ten or twenty seconds

afterward. You could walk down the street, turn around, and see that Ford still chugging away. I couldn't believe I would get to drive to Detroit Metropolitan Airport and pick up Trungpa Rinpoche.

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

The plane was a little late and I peered into the jetway as the passengers filed out, but no Rinpoche. Then, finally, way at the back I saw this short Tibetan man in a suit; he was smiling and looking directly at me!

And suddenly there we stood, eyeball-to-eyeball, even a little too close for my comfort. I am sure I mumbled something, but what I saw was this very tired pair of eyes staring into mine, and with a yellow tinge to them at that. Then Trungpa, still looking right at me, rolled his eyes up into his head until all I could see were the whites of his eyes, and they stayed there for an uncomfortable amount of time. When at last they rolled back down, I found myself looking into perfectly clear eyes with no tiredness or yellow. Hello!

Suddenly here was this incredible being, only inches away, staring right into me, and friendly too! Traveling with Trungpa was Larry Mermelstein, who later became the head of the Nalanda Translation Committee in charge of translating so many valuable texts from Tibetan into English.

I was already in some kind of contact-high as we made our way out of the terminal, into my station wagon, and headed back to Ann Arbor where Trungpa would stay at the house of a professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at the University of Michigan.

I carried Trungpa's bags into the professor's house, where a small welcoming committee was doing just that. My job as chauffeur was done for the moment, but I hated to leave, so I kind of hung around at the back of the room taking this in. I was very intrigued by Trungpa Rinpoche.

Before I knew it everyone there had decided to go for a tour of the U-M campus and they were heading for the door, while I scrambled to get out of the way, hoping I would not be noticed.

Suddenly Trungpa Rinpoche said that he was tired and that they should go ahead while he took a nap. I kept my head down and politely waited until the rest filed out and then began to follow suit, at which point Trungpa motioned to me. "Michael, you stay here with me."

This was like too good to be true, and he motioned me into a small room that turned out to be the professor's office and had me sit in a straight-backed wooden chair that was there. I sat down.

Meanwhile, Trungpa Rinpoche proceeded to completely ignore me while he went over every inch of that office, picking up and examining all of the various statues and knickknacks that were there and, at the same time, drinking a bottle of saki.

I sat there like a bump on a log and hoped I was not disturbing him. Like a turtle coming out of its shell, I gradually relaxed and realized that Trungpa was totally occupied in every moment, delighting in everything that was there. I had never in my life seen this kind of focus being exercised, and that was my first lesson right there.

My natural inclination in that kind of spot would be to do nothing but fidget, which is exactly what I was doing. After a while, Trungpa finally got around to examining me and suddenly there he was right in front of me and looking right at me again.

He proceeded to give me a series of instructions, never telling me what it was that he was doing. But it had to do with watching my breath and breathing in and out, deeply, like we do when a doctor uses a stethoscope. And this next part is hard to describe, so you will just have to take my word for it.

I was breathing in and out, as directed, and Rinpoche was watching my breath, but he was concerned with my outbreath, the way I was breathing out. He told me I was not letting the breath go out far enough, but somehow holding back.

By now I was nervous for sure, and I sat there trying to exhale as hard as I could without actually fully exhaling. And I didn't want to breathe all over him. I was just too nervous and simply going through the motions. Then he said to me, "Michael, let it go all the way out. Don't worry, it will come back!" And with that I exhaled, and all of the way out too. And here is the unusual thing:

At the same moment that I really let my breath go out, in the back of my mind (and at some higher level) all of my fears of death and dying that had haunted me all my life arose like a swarm of darkness and just evaporated. Gone.

While today I am still not anxious to die, I no longer have the kind of dread and fear that I had before those instructions. Of course, later I was to find that Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching me basic Shamata Meditation, the cornerstone of all basic meditation practice.

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

We had one more significant exchange on my way out of the professor's house. Trungpa pointed to a copy of the poster I had made for his talk that was on the wall. It was a woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds, while each of its four feet clutched a pearl.

"Do you know what this represents?" he asked? I told him I did not, but that I just loved the image and thought it might be appropriate for his talk. He went on to explain that the dragon, which in the Tibetan and Chinese cultures is perhaps the most important and positive of creatures, could fly, but only as long as he held those four pearls, one in each hand. If he dropped even one of them, he would fall from the sky.

Of course, I took this in. Later I understood that the four pearls that the dragon held were what are called in Tibetan Buddhism the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," sometimes called the "Four Reminders" or the Common Preliminaries. And those four thoughts have always been key in my understanding of the dharma.

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

I will never forget the last thing that Trungpa said to me. I was trying to tell him that he was the first person I ever met for whom I had no personal resistance or criticism. It was true. He turned to me, took my hand in his, and said: "Well, Michael, we are both married men and we are about the same age." And then he was gone.

[Here are just some of the early covers of Trungpa's books as either designed by him or inspired by him.]

EMAIL

Effortlessness

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

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PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2b0ae9fd-4979-4cf8-a4c0-4b143788298a_1024x1024.jpeg

[I have some questions to share and discuss with those of you who are into learning more about the dharma.]

The idea of meditating and quieting the mind has not always been front and center in the public eye in the U.S. I knew of meditation's existence in the late 1950s through my interest in Zen Buddhism and Akira Kurosawa movies. We talked about Buddhism, but the word "dharma" was still a mystery to us. I had no definition in mind. That came later for me, much later. I believe the definition of 'dharma' only comes with experience of our own mind.

What dharma was and is was then not clear for me, something at the time undefinable. It took me many years to shape some sense as to what dharma actually is. It was a foreign word that I knew was potent, yet I was unable to just unpack it. I mentioned, that took time and experience.

Since I had not yet actually worked with the word 'dharma, much less actually practice it, I had not evolved a meaning.

It eventually came down to actually being shown how to meditate by Chögyam Trungpa himself that I understood that the dharma is something not just to read about, which I had been doing, but to do something with, to practice. It had not occurred to me that I could actually practice dharma myself with, so to speak, a straight face. I would just be pretending.

I had no idea what being worthy to do that was all about. It had not occurred to me that I could do in my own way what the great dharma saints had at one at a time done, like get enlightened. I was too shy.

Trungpa helped me feel worthy to attempt to seriously practice dharma and that the teachings of the Buddha were no longer just a late-night topic to sit around and talk about while we smoked cigarettes and drank instant coffee with powdered creamer. I was young.

From meeting Chögyam Trungpa in person onward, I was seriously practicing or trying to practice dharma, which involved finding out what 'dharma' is and learning how to implement it in my life. And dharma was, as mentioned, still just another foreign word back then, something none of the folks I knew (my

peers) knew any more than I did. It's been some 65 years since I first tried to 'Grok' the word dharma.

Yet, I no longer had someone like Trungpa Rinpoche around to hold my hand. Instead, some of the instructors I found didn't know much more than I did, and were needlessly strict about everything, which was their own fear and ignorance speaking. Yet I did not know enough to not listen to them, much less dare to look into my mind on my own. And it was right there all the time.

Plus, back then, in the 1960s and 1970s in general, Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) was considered personal and private, and it was years later when I actually went to Tibet that I found out that Shamata was open for discussion, and the monks talked about it all the time. It was neither private nor secret.

There was so much ignorance here in America, so much fumbling back then, as we Americans tried to learn to practice dharma, that a funny book could be written. Only, it was not funny at the time, just very confusing to many of us.

Great damage was done I am certain by the attempts to force 'effort-in-practice', nothing like the gentleness I have learned from the pith teachings in the more advanced dharma teachings. For example, forcing people to sit for long hours when they did not know what they were doing was not, IMO, helpful, at least not helpful to me. I didn't like it back then either. It rubbed me the wrong way. It went against everything beautiful that I knew.

On top of that, I had to recover from that forced effort, and all the unneeded effort helped me not at all. It was rather widespread, the insistence and shaming others to sit beyond their means. I witnessed it. I was a victim of it. I also refused to go that route or, better said, that route produced nothing of value for me. There had to be another way.

It was too much a case of the blind leading the blind, as I see it now, with not enough authentic dharma teachers and too many ignorant practitioners who were hiding their ignorance under the veil of secrecy, unable or unwilling to reveal they knew next to nothing. We all knew next to nothing because it was that new to us.

I ultimately had to do it all myself, which is just the point. Realization and enlightenment are by definition 100% do-it-yourself projects. Sooner or later we all are going to have to stop looking outside for guidance and instead ourselves just put in the time to become familiar with the nature of our own mind. That's the ticket. There is no work-around, no back door.

In my case, being asked to sit quietly and focus on a pebble, twig, or spot on the wall was a non-starter. I had long ago, as a young kid, a dedicated naturalist, mastered and learned to concentrate in a very detailed fashion.

And best of all, I had done it with no forced effort, instead using my natural interest in whatever the subject I was focused on as the driver, in my case Mother Nature, and perhaps one of her critters.

Then being asked to sit and contemplate on a twig or pebble, having been told to do this, the instruction to do this was not natural to me. I was asked very clearly to make effort to achieve this, something I had long ago achieved without effort other than the love of nature and my natural interest, which had long been my only driver. For me, it took no effort beyond that interest.

So, of course I sat on the cushion, and yet balked at having to introduce effort into what for me had been an effortless natural achievement. I could not make that dog hunt, no matter how hard I tried, if only because using effort instead of natural interest was for me an oxymoron.

I tried to learn Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) for a good 32 years and never got anywhere but bored. LOL. My own fault for not fighting back, not standing up to it sooner and calling a spade a spade.

Am I, as they say, the Lone Ranger? Or do others have the same problem I did with learning Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), not wanting to stain with effort something that had always been intuitively effortless?

And I felt the same when through the influence of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his western students, asked would-be meditators to sit long sessions, hours, days, weeks, and months, to achieve what?

If all that effort was to allow the mind to come to rest, then what are the myriads of pith texts from the great siddhas that endlessly tell us to 'not meditate', but instead suggest non-meditation, involving no effort whatsoever?

Which is correct? Or, more likely, both are correct methods, but perhaps both should be presented and laid out, instead of only accenting the need for determined effort. What happened to wanting to do something because we were interested?

Here I'm just speaking from experience and painful experience at that, 32 years of it, non-stop.

It's true that none of us knew what we were doing back then, including our American instructors, especially them. Of course, they were doing the best they could.

Back then, something as simple as basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) was considered private or even secret, when in the history of the Tibetan introduction to Shamata was anything but secret, AND in Tibet Shamata was not even presented to beginners until the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro) had been completed. That fact was a shocker. Who then overrode that tradition?

That's the real fault or mistake, not waiting until after the Preliminaries to introduce Shamara (Tranquility Meditation).

That's what I found out when I actually went to Tibet a couple times and saw how the thousands of monks who live there behaved, argued, and debated at least about the various preliminaries.

Huh?

How did that happen? That here in America our attempts to learn and practice meditation, our experiences were somehow to be kept secret and not to be discussed?

The reason seems to be: confusion, ignorance, mistake, all the way up the food chain until the bridge between English and Tibetan had to be crossed. Trungpa's western students highlighted and accented the 'effort' to sit Shamata and tended to shame those who balked at doing it.

Or was it a mix of Tibetan and Rinzai Zen that decided that effort was essential? I did sit all day Zazen, and that was all about effort. How is it that the great Indian Mahasiddhas and most of the pith dharma teachings say, "No Meditation."

Or is it a requirement that first we squeeze our concentration tight and once tight, learn to release it? Grip and let go, grip and let go.

Yet, that begs the question: do we have to grip tighter to then be able to let go? Are we not already tightly gripped, attached through Samsara, certainly enough to appreciate letting go?

All I know is that having gone through the various preliminaries (Common, Extraordinary, and Special), then deity practice, to finally come to Mahamudra and be told don't meditate. Do not meditate. Instead, do (yet not with effort) non-meditation. That's what. And don't even 'do' anything. Just "Relax, As It Is."

Or is all of this about some kind of dharma calisthenics? Dharma exercise is what all this is, limbering up the mind to where we don't mind anything at all. Why not just say so?

That's my question and I look for your views on this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Finding the Familiar

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

December 28, 2024

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2d314f51-1d85-4039-90e1-e65c2973aad8_2048x1851.jpeg

[This post is about our familiarity with the familiar, the most ignored place we never go to because we are already there, but first some comments on loneliness and the dharma.]

In the history of my learning dharma, there were many, many times I felt I could not fit into this or that group of dharma practitioners and was turned away. Or I turned away myself.

That kind of rejection was exactly what it took to finally get me started in figuring all this out on my own, the whole dharma thing in a nutshell, so take the time and spend the energy actually looking at the nature of your own mind, the same mind that has always just been there within waiting to be seen.

It is always available to you because it's your natural mind and you can begin to get to know it whenever you bother to just stop and look into it. We are not aware of the nature of our own mind.

Of course, I had the very good fortune of having an authentic dharma teacher guiding my way, yet I only saw him once a year. The rest of my time I was on my own like any of us.

Yet, even with that, it still took me a very long time to stop reading from outside appearances and believe they were true, an effort in vain, and instead, simply turn around and look inward, look into that of my own mind and how it works, and become familiar with it, something that for most of us is a court of last resort.

I was not able to read and study the classic pith dharma texts about becoming familiar with my mind and then look into my actual mind and find exactly what they said I should see in there. For me, that never worked.

Our personal dharma path, which is often called our 'Yidam', is so highly individual, that finding a one-to-one correspondence between the classic dharma text-descriptions and our own dharma situation, at least in my case, was never possible. Yet, you know I tried. It just does not work like that.

Instead, what worked, the only thing that did actually, was to dare to become familiar with my mind in my own unorthodox way and trust what I found there as if it was a solid steppingstone, and by that, move forward a bit at a time. It's not that the nature of the mind is different for different ones of us; it's how we each view it that's different.

The keyword here is 'familiar' and it means just that. The nature of the mind is so familiar to us because it's everything we have known our entire lives. We tend to discount what is familiar in favor of what is new and different but, as they say, that approach and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus.

It is the familiarity of our mind that must be embraced, like coming home, or as the Tibetan dharma texts say like recognizing a familiar face in a crowd.

If you think about it, our own mind is probably the last place we would look, because it's so common and, well, familiar. Yet it is this familiarity that we must become familiar with and nothing else.

It won't be the new and the shiny, so it's easy to overlook because it makes up the familiar background we have always known as our mind.

Yet, there it is, waiting to introduce itself to us if we will just look for and become familiar with it. That's all it takes, but that's also what it takes.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Happy New Year

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 1, 2025

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[May this New Year be creative and settle out the chaos we have been through, bringing out the best in all of us. Speaking of this, I have some questions about how our personality forms depending on the choices we make.]

PERSONALITY REVEAL

As time and advancing age thrust us outward into public view, like a plant sprouting in the spring, or more like the old image of Atlantis rising out of the sea, whatever singularity we have acquired over time is increasingly obvious. It's the nature of personality that choices we made years and decades ago count and in time reveal their results for us and all to see.

Where back then, as a young man, I lived with some fear and trembling, trying to find my way in this life I was living, what is an obvious interesting choice now was not so clear back then when it was made. We literally pick our way along in life, defining ourselves choice by choice.

Our personality is the sum of all those choices.

It was certainly not true then that my person and my personal choices created a personality that many cared about, especially the public. I was lonely a lot, avoided because I did not choose to go to college or graduate from high school, even though I was accepted as a student at the University of Michigan without a high school diploma, and went to the U-M for like three weeks. I quit (to the horror of my parents) because to me college was no better than high school and I was sick at heart of trying to be educated. I am not educatable.

I like to educate myself, and with a father I loved but who did not talk personally with his son, and no grandpa on either side, I had to be my own grandpa, as the song goes, whether I liked it or not. In that one sense, I grew up early, yet my insecurity was obvious, at least to me.

And with my former high school friends, who mostly went on to college, saying that they would see me working at the car wash in years to come, yes, I felt isolated, and of little worth to anyone.

Yet, I am a stubborn cuss and have a lifelong history of wending my own way through this life I'm living. I am hard to teach and hard to influence unless whatever you are doing and being makes sense to me.

Then I'm easy.

If there is one thing about me, I'm a closer, and by that, I mean I tend to follow things out to the finish. I am good at the end game.

And so, as the poet Robert Frost put it "I took the road less travelled by" and that has made whatever difference there is from what my parents may have had in mind for me.

I became a naturalist at a very young age because we lived out in the country in a house my parents had built and there were no other houses (or kids my age) around. And so, my one friend was Mother Nature, and I guess I learned about natural law very early on and it was quite clear to me how natural law differed from civil law or social conventions. I would rather take it straight from Mother Nature and I judged society more by natural law than civil law.

I never took to school from the first day onward, and almost totally ignored my teachers unless they happened to have some life wisdom that I could recognize, but that happened perhaps twice.

The rest of the time I was in my own world while at school, and very busy at that, figuring out what I would do after I got out of school for the day. And that went on until my senior year at high school where I just up and quite school entirely, walked out, and hitchhiked across the country to Santa Monica, California, where I lived in an abandoned wooden walk-in freezer at Venice West in the basement of the now legendary 'Beat' art gallery called the "Gas House," right on the beach. I fancied myself as an artist and painted in oils until time drummed that dream out of me. That was in late 1960.

And it was only less than a year later I was hitchhiking and hanging out with a young Bob Dylan and playing the guitar. Changes at that age came fast and furious. Anything was possible.

I have to laugh. It never occurred to me back then that these choices I was making would add up to a personality, a personal history that would interest anyone. LOL.

They were choices I made because of my interests in whatever direction they indicated. It was not really a choice, as I saw it, but just what interested me. I have always followed the trail of breadcrumbs of my own interest. In fact, as I get older, I have to question the whole habit of losing ourselves in our

interests at the exclusion of what? Well, I did not know 'what' and set about finding that out.

Enveloping ourselves in our own interest is also fraught with consequences, consequences we each have to monitor and work around. Our own interests are also a form of attachment, attachment that can obscure the actual nature of our mind. And so as directional and valuable our interests may be, they very much are dualistic and part of Samsara. What about that, I asked myself.

Learning to curb our interests and thus see around them for what exists despite them I feel is very important. It's not that our interests are 'bad' for us because, as we know, an interest in dharma can lead us to the non-dual practices like Mahamudra or Dzogchen. Yet, let's not kid ourselves, dualisms like interests (interests in what?) are central to Samsara in which we are mired.

The very fact that our interests occupy so much of our time, they too are distractions. Samsara and Nirvana are co-emergent, connate. Our interest in our interests still is dualistic even though it may be through interests that we discover the non-dual forms of meditation like Mahamudra, which technically is non-meditation – effortless.

So, our interests, however pure they may be, are never non-dual and they encase us in their non-duality so that, in that sense, we cannot see beyond them. And we must get beyond them into non-duality to be enlightened, however that can be achieved.

In other words, our interests are a double-edged sword. While they carry us forward, they must be abandoned if we want to get beyond them and at one with non-duality, which is the actual nature of the mind. While our interests are so very precious, like so many things in life, they too have a lifetime and must be abandoned.

When does that happen and how do we do that?

Well, it happens when we realize that our interests have become more of an obstruction than a help. We lose interest in our interests for obvious reasons, as we realize they are holding us back and obscuring the actual nature of the mind. In that sense, they too much be unpacked.

This is where the rushing river, which has turned into a regular water flow, and then suddenly our stream of consciousness opens out into a wide placid sea, preparatory to the dewdrop slipping into the shining sea, which is the non-duality of non-meditation like Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

That's the idea as I understand it. Of course, how to realize that in the flesh involves journeying the path itself, 'doing' instead of talking about it.

The point of this post is that our interests, while invaluable in the beginning, in time become confining, like a tomb, unless we can unpack them as our awareness dictates.

Awareness is slow and steady, yet we need not fear it will desert us. It's all we have to make the right choice at the right time, so what is so precious is to be aware that we are aware and stay that way.

In my own case, for decades I was proud of my interest and interests. It was only very slowly that I began to be aware that my own interests were clouding my mind and holding up any possible progress.

That, my friends, was a stunning realization, one that turned me around, upside down, and sat me down to think. What am I without my interests? That's a good question.

Well, I felt like a stranger in a strange land, as that old book title puts it. It was a new world, with new rules, and an avalanche of unpacking to contend with. And like a slow-motion rotation, I tumbled forward through time, no longer searching out what interested me, but just the reverse, spending time with what bored me, what I had ignored and never before knew, what I avoided. And so, my world turned.

This is not to say that there is no more interest or interest is verboten; not at all. Instead, it is that 'interest' is no longer the focus and seen as a protector, but at best, a vehicle, and at worst an obstacle.

Awareness of this problem is required.

And the response to that is backpedaling and continued unpacking of the focus of our interests, no longer the prince of time, but rather something to contend with and even to downplay.

Of course, since I know talking about dharma is pretty much impossible, as my dear poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it:

"Such any sense from that who can."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Kneading to Know

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 4, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/3dd47974-b20e-476b-a0b1-1051d786aefb_2048x2048.jpeg

Whatever recognition (and/or realization) as to the nature of the mind a particular dharma teacher or guru has is just as it is. We can't imitate that dharma 'person', yet we do have access to the same nature of the mind that they do. It's available to all of us. The problem is recognizing and becoming aware of it.

We may be able to, with practice, recognize and become aware of the same nature of the mind that our teacher held in mind. Is that the same as being like them? I would think yes, because that's the whole point.

Becoming familiar with the nature of our own mind is available to all of us 24x7, if only we had awareness of how to access it. Of course, our own individual makeup, intelligence, genes, etc. determines how we will approach the mind's nature.

This relates, IMO, to how we can contact or channel our favorite guru or dharma teacher if we have one. I believe this is quite simple conceptually.

When we bring to mind or invoke a dharma teacher, whether passed-on or still present, we are not trying to animate how they look, sound, or their other personal qualities. We are invoking their insight and view of the mind itself.

In other words, putting their personal qualities aside, we are left with the particular view as to the nature of the mind that they hold that got our attention. That's what has been most valuable in my experience about my main dharma teacher of 36 years, his experience and View.

And no, we cannot bring our dharma teacher back from the dead to assist us. However, if we are a good student, we can develop a similar or even the same view that they had, which for all practical purposes is what is most needed. The View is the thing.

The same natural mind our precious dharma teacher had available to him or her, we have available to us right now, if we know or can learn how to access it.

No, we can't conjure up their body and appearance except through a dream or apparition, yet if we have been a good enough student, we may be able to tie into the same take on the nature of the mind as they have.

All of the great siddhas, Mahasiddhas, and saints of dharma, while no longer personally with us, are totally available as to view because the same opportunities as they had are also available to us, relating to the actual nature of the mind. The availability of the mind and its nature is the same for all of us now as it was to them then, ages ago.

So, forget about trying to hold seances, invoke clairvoyance, dreams, telepathy, remote viewing, and the other forms of extrasensory perception.

Instead, simply get to know and become familiar with the nature of your own mind which has always been there your entire life. The nature of the mind just needs to be exercised. We need to exercise it with calisthenics, viscosly, like we would knead dough or work-up clay for making pots.

Our mind is like a congealed fluid that has to be worked up and made flexible through constant use and exercise. What this means is we begin to use the mind, look into and at it, and work it. And I don't mean 'think' it or conceptualize the mind. We already do that too much. I'm talking about 'feeling' the mind.

The way the Tibetans speak of this, and I have worked with them on this, is the nature of the mind has to be shown and introduced to us, repeatedly, until it is recognized, until we can recognize it, and we are, as they put it, familiar with our own mind. Familiarity.

We have to look around and actually use that part of our mind that has never consciously been used, just as diesel fuel in winter is congealed and too thick, until it has been heated and warmed up enough to flow.

The nature of our own mind is like that in my experience. It is viscous and like bread dough has to be kneaded until it is totally flexible and by that, I mean until we have become familiar with the mind's nature so that we know how to use it ourselves. It's 'our' mind.

The whole point is to put us in the driver's seat and able to use the mind as rinpoches do, as dharma teachers can do.

We can also do that, yet we have to be shown how, repeatedly introduced until we can take the steering wheel in our own hands and manage the mind. That's what has to be done, and it has to be done by us. Our dharma teacher cannot do it for us.

And the hard part, at least for me, was having the temerity to just start by looking into and at my own mind. Go in there and look around. I used to imagine myself erecting a circus tent in my own mind, putting up poles that stretch and expand the mind, until I could get into it, so that it was known and flexible enough for me to find my own way around in there. Again: the mind is viscous and we knead it to make it workable.

Our own mind, which is always right there with us, is almost completely unknown to us. We take it for granted that just as it came out of the box, our mind is good to go. We just use it as it is. That does not work well.

Instead, the mind needs and wants exercise, to be known and used, and the only one that can do this is us. If we don't lift a finger, nothing will change. It waits on us.

It's as simple or difficult as taking possession of our own mind and getting in there and becoming completely familiar with it. At most a good dharma teacher can serve to introduce us to our own mind, prime the pump, so to speak. We have to take hold and learn to use our mind and know its nature all by ourselves..

Let me be clear, even blunt.

All of the vast assemblage of dharma, texts, teachings, and sangha all exist to help us recognize the true nature of our own mind, and at least get us started.

Once that is done, once we recognize the nature of our own mind and how to use it, no more teaching is needed, or very little. At that point we can teach ourselves and learn how to work the mind. We can take it from there.

The sad fact, IMO, is that all it takes is for us to stop reading everything from outward appearances, turn around, look into our own mind, and begin to actively get to know it.

That's it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Covid Redux

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 7, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2f70bd1f-22f5-439b-8fda-bc40e2517b84_1024x1024.jpeg

By Michael Erlewine

Yep, Covid is still here. In fact, current reports say it has come back about three times stronger recently than it was, especially in the Midwest where I live.

Is there another place or town out there for me other than the one I am living now? Covid makes it very difficult to effect this kind of powerful change, like moving to a new home, because most folks are now maskless, yet in a close public situation we are still advised, at our age, to wear masks and good ones.

And so, life just can't pick up and go on as it was ten years ago, where we all could mingle freely. It's very much like Lyme disease, where we cannot just go out in the woods and meadows and sit on the grass. Those days are gone. If they had a vaccination for Lyme disease, that would be possible, but as I understand there is not enough need for researchers to create a vaccine especially for Lyme disease. I need it!

Take away the in-person aspect and virtually we can go and be with anyone through Zoom or whatever. We have never had that kind of closeness as we do virtually at this point.

If I just want to hang out with one or more people, hooking up on Zoom does it all. So, why is that not enough? It's not.

That works out well for acquaintances or even some friends, yet for close family, something more is required. I can remember when all five of my parents' sons (and their wives and grandkids) all lived right here where we are today, in Big Rapids, MI.

There was family familiarity back in those days that cannot be matched through the virtual, on-line sharing we have today. Just dropping in, running over to someone's house, having a brother show up at our doorstep without notification, and so on. There was a sense of staying in touch that is not available today.

That can't be replicated well enough with virtual familiarity, although we should probably try more family Zoom. It's pretty good in some respects.

As for mass public events, not so much hope. They are not Zoomed, although it would be interesting if more community events also had a Zoom presence. That is rare if present at all. There could be a computer set up, filled with Zoom folks online, and people at the actual event could drift by and have exchanges with those online. Would it help?

Winter is the hardest part, especially as winter begins to turn into spring, waiting for the sun to come back, windows to open, and breezes to flow. I'm ready for spring at the Vernal Equinox, yet where we are in northern Michigan, spring is not ready for us. We have to suffer through about another month and a half until it's really like spring out... meaning opening windows, walking outside with just a shirt on, etc.

I know. Complain, complain, complain.

I never did the three-year dharma retreat, yet both Margaet and I have just completed about a five-year Covid retreat. Not the same, but similar in many respects. Covid appeared shortly after our dharma teacher of 36 years passed on, leaving us ripe for retiring from activity for a while.

We had a lot to consider and sheltering in place to do that kind of dovetailed into a Covid retreat. It's been like living in a dome on Mars, where you can't go outside.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

American Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 8, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Shaking off the excess Tibetan culture, I believe we have little idea as to how home-grown U.S. dharma students and practitioners will appear and behave. The reason I say this is because they already are appearing.

Since it is said to take 300 years for the dharma to come into a country, we are just getting underway. It's fair to ask, what's so good about the dharma that we even care to get that far?

Well, it's not the surface, the obvious "do this" and "do that" instructions of the dharma. All 'religions' seem to have that. And it's not the 'you will go to heaven' or 'you will go to hell' part of it either, the fire and brimstone aspect.

In my 65 years of experience, first to just study and talk about dharma, and then gradually practice and walk the dharma path, it's not the sustained effort to continue on that course that I would write home about, either. It's the removal of effort.

What I would write home about (and am doing) involves the collapsing and deconstruction of all the ham-fisted thinking and conceptualization that's driving many of us crazy, the actual dissolution and disassembly of just that.

IMO, I found that the dharma solution involves learning to let go and just rest in the nature of our own mind, for starters. In other words, we first have to stop pinching ourselves conceptually and just give our thinking caps a rest.

How hard or easy this is varies with the individual, yet for most of us this 'doing of nothing' mostly is quite difficult.

And while a perpetual-motion machine is a myth, the deconstruction of duality (the 'me' and 'them' habit) is replaced by full immersion in the present moment is not myth but the reality of revealing that the nature of Samsara with scrutiny collapses as a duality into non-duality. And the quote I love to offer by the poet Sir Edwin Arnold in his translation of Bhagavad Gita:

"The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

That such an event is possible and that once revealed is irreversible, a one-way street, is beyond anything I could have imagined, much less actually experienced with other forms of 'religion'.

I have flirted with and touched on the path of the Western mystics and found that profound, like the illuminated writings of William Blake, the poetry of John Donne, Meister Eckhart, G.I. Gurdjieff, Ramana Maharshi, Paramahansa Yogananda, St. Francis of Assisi, Khalil Gibran, and others.

Yet, at least in my experience, the only viable do-it-yourself instructions I have found and was able to use came from the dharma, in particular the Tibetan Vajrayana teachings and teachers.

I was attracted to mystical states of mind quite early on that, while at first were a port into a non-dual state of mind, became over time a portal that one can not only look through but actually pass through at will.

It is this quality that for me separated the dharma from all other methods of insight, at least for me. There are many roads to Rome, so to speak, but to get there one has to travel one of those roads to the end.

For me that seems to be the form of Vajrayana dharma called Mahamudra, which while classed as a form of meditation, is actually non-meditation, a practice without effort.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Self-Central

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 9, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In meeting other serious Western dharma practitioners, my takeaway is that above all, these guys and gals are human beings. I don't know what I was expecting, yet what I found was someone not much different from me. It was easy to come away feeling, well, I can do this. I don't see any halos floating above their heads.

Of course, such thoughts were followed some time later with the realization that these "human beings" don't let up with their dharma. And further yet down the road it came to me that the humanity I saw in them was genuine and a lot of my own dharma attire was still full of attitude. Serves me right. This was years ago now.

It's not that I didn't know what I was thinking. I knew exactly what I was thinking and it could be measured by any competitiveness I was carrying. My superior-to-thou or even equal-to thou are a mirror-reflection of me, my problems.

Of course, we all are sentient beings, equally sentient beings. Beyond that we quickly find our differences and almost any comparison-thoughts at all are not reflections of any value. In fact, they are by definition thoughts and thinking marked for removal, and I have to remove them!

It's like struggling to climb out of a deep lake when I am swimming there with many other people, each trying to climb on top of the other. If I am not letting go and floating, I am missing the point.

There is a lot of that in the beginning of dharma practice, comparing ourselves with others, quite natural, yet seldom helpful. However, it is a stage to go through, until we recognize what we are doing and let it go. I include a drawing I did in the early 1960s that expressed this kind of self-centeredness.

It seems we can be critical, yet still not self-critical. We missed a beat there. And we don't like criticism from others about ourselves; we don't welcome it and fail to see what the point is.

If your idea of equality with others is to ignore hierarchy, and claim that there is no hierarchy, again you miss the point. There is no way of measuring and if

you are, it's just fear and jealousy that's driving it. There is nothing to fear or be jealous of. It's either instructional and we learn from it or it's useless to us. Mind your own business. Reminds me of high school.

If someone I meet knows more than I do, all I want is to learn what I can from them. On the other hand, if it is someone who has not learned what I have learned, all I can do is share the knowledge with them and perhaps help them to learn it. Either way, I'm learning. If I am quibbling about our all being equal, I'm already off point and once again just fooling myself.

Not feeling equal to someone else and demanding equality is always our problem, and points to not knowing ourselves well enough to feel secure. Misery loves company.

As the philosopher Parmenides said, "Being Alone Is." However, our aloneness can be a tough nut to crack, getting beyond that. The correct reading of "Alone" is "All-One."

Finding someone else that is my speed is a joyful thing and should be celebrated with a friendship. However, not everyone likes themselves enough to like others who are like themselves. We all should know this.

I can tell a funny story about astrology. Back in the early 1970s, when I was having a breakthrough realizing the potency and value of astrological whole-chart aspect analysis, I was doing literally thousands of these charts examining the whole-chart patterns in the helio or what I call the 'Dharma Chart'.

One day I said to myself, why don't I do all the whole-chart patterns, not charts of my friends or famous people, but of all the people that were not my friends, that were kind of my enemies. They might be revealing, and they were.

After I had done a score or more of 'enemy' charts and laid them out, to my shock, almost all of these people I didn't like had whole-chart patterns exactly like mine, my personal natal chart. Ouch!

It was painful (but clear) to see that I didn't like myself as reflected in others with the same chart type as I had. That was a profound realization, and it led to me making friends with myself as seen through other similar types. I gradually learned to like myself from that experience and to appreciate those who were like me. And for me, it helped to study the Five Buddha Families and figure out which one I belong to.

Of the 'Five Buddha Families', my Buddha family is Amoghasiddhi (those who unerringly achieve their goal) and the negative emotion for that family is the purification of envy or jealousy which causes the arising of the 'Wisdom of

Accomplishment', unobstructed or unfailing accomplishment. My color is dark green.

We all know the phrase "Green with envy" do we not?

[Pencil drawing by me created around 1960.]

EMAIL

Lost in Translation

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 10, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/9ae24dc1-af0c-4736-a906-cdc66d9f2a8b_2048x2048.jpeg

Tibetans, of course, take their dharma seriously, but not the kind of serious we Americans take it in the U.S.

Aside from some humor in Zen, there seems to be very little humor about the dharma in the 65 or so years I have been aware of dharma here in America. This is especially true for western practitioners, those who actually practice or attempt to practice dharma. To Americans, dharma seems some serious stuff.

In addition, because we are so uptight about our practice over here, there is no kidding around. And I have mentioned previously on this blog that to western dharma students, at least early-on, back in the late-1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, one's dharma practice was secret, secret, secret. It was considered bad form to ask anyone about their personal practice, although in my two trips to Tibet, over there I saw none of that.

In Tibet, people not only talked about their dharma practice, they even debated it. And they laughed a lot and had a sense of humor. Subjects like Shamata Meditation, sitting meditation, were an open book. It took me a while to put two and two together and realize something apparently was lost in the translation of certain dharma practices from Tibet to America.

All this secrecy tends to isolate and separate practitioners rather than unite them. Witnessing the difference between dharma in the two countries, it's hard to explain. I have a couple of ideas.

Maybe the intent to take dharma seriously in the U.S., for each one of us, ended up casting a veil of seriousness over the dharma practice we don't quite know how to do. We are 'sooo serious'.

Or perhaps it came from attempting to teach Shamata Meditation before completing the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro), while in Tibet, Shamata (sitting meditation) is usually taught AFTER completing the Ngöndro. a huge and vast difference! How did that happen?

The quite difficult Ngöndro is like a dharma boot camp, very extensive and very intensive. Completing it kind of guarantees a certain amount of flexibility in the dharma training we have acquired. I am told that it was not taught here

because it was too much to ask of us; we just would not do it as it was too difficult and 'crazy' then for western students to accept. We balked. For example:

Ngöndro involves doing 100,000 full length prostrations on the ground while reciting prayers for each prostration, and then reciting 100,000 100-syllable mantras, an further forming 100,000 intricate mandala offerings with prayers, and finally doing 100,000 sets of Guru Yoga along with more prayers. It's understandable that we westerners might pass on all that. It's a lot like work.

However, to me, not having students perform the entire Ngöndro BEFORE learning Shamata (sitting meditation) was a mistake and, IMO, did a lot of damage... as far as I can tell.

Having myself done the Ngöndro, and when done, I asked my dharma teacher for the next level of instruction, and instead he told me to do the Ngöndro all over again. I did.

And only after that was I able to undertake Deity Practice and begin to train in Mahamudra. I was not ready even after one complete round of Ngöndro. It took two times around that set of exercises for me to limber up enough to move forward. Think about that. Some of us are slow learners!

So, where does that leave me as to giving folks interested in practicing dharma any suggestions or advice?

I tend to tell folks about my own dharma practice rather than tell them what they should or should not do in the way of practice. My training was my training, and I can talk about that. Yet there is a lot more if you want to help those on many different dharma paths. Whatever floats your boat is my advice.

As the dharma texts say, there are 84,000 kinds of dharma, so I don't even know where there is a list of all those, much less advising anyone else.

All I can do is stand here at the ready to be of help to anyone who asks, that is if you have questions about entering dharma practice.

I don't have the training that would be needed to be that useful, yet I am very enthusiastic about the dharma and always do what I can or what I see is needed.

Of course, I know a fair bit about the various preliminary practices such as the Common Preliminaries, the Extraordinary Preliminaries, and even the Special Preliminaries, as well as what is called Lojong.

I did finish a number of the Deity Practices, but never really took to that approach. Instead, Mahamudra preparation is the way I've gone, and I do know something about preparing for that.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Losing Our Collective Mind

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 10, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/edf1d9ad-701f-4cd0-b049-46d413b53e51_2048x2048.jpeg

[What follows depends on our understanding that traditionally what we see externally as reality is a mixture of what's real, overlaid and mixed with our own fears and projections. This is called Samsara.]

It seems to me that there is a growing case that the somewhat fragile nature of the public mind, as in a consensus, is beginning to fracture and break up, IMO.

There is such a mixing of the continual lies and falsehoods by politicians laid upon the actual reality of what is, that it is easy for us to lose track of what's real and what's not, so we are forced to exist and wander these days in a kind of Limbo or no-man's land, neither here nor there, up or down, in or out.

The traditional and pervading habit of duality (conceptuality, thinking) begins to short-circuit a bit, to wink and blink on and off, and then proceeds to fade out in favor of these now intersecting waves of duality and nonduality that flash on and off like strobes, subtly blinding us.

Our own inner fears are projected outward on the world where they appear to intersect exterior events like flashes of distant heat lightning on a summer night. What is real and what is not real is confusing. We have been getting confused.

When these two worlds (duality and non-duality) begin to merge and collide, the traditional exterior outer world becomes not only our canvas, but also a movie screen upon which we watch with bated breath, thinking that our internal fears as projected outward on reality are actually real and happening right before our eyes. This is how we have always been. As mentioned, this is Samsara.

There is no way out of that because at this point the inner has become outer, and the outer now consists and includes our own inside fears and imaginations as projected on reality, the two mixed together. They are antithetical and don't mix, yet they are one.

What can be good about this is that as our own inner fears are now projected on the screen of the world, we may (if it is pointed out) realize for the first

time that the exterior world outside us is, to a great degree, very much our own projection. Certainly, these days we each have to kind of shake our head to see if we are dreaming all this, which can be a bit of a nightmare.

And the kicker is that, if this is true, then we also can realize that if we can change, calm, and control our own mind, the outside world that we see will reflect this as well and change accordingly. The two are not separate. This is good news, to realize we are living in our own dream and projection, and can actually do something about it.

Up until now we have watched the outside world with rapt attention like a deer in the headlights, believing that what we see out there is reality itself, while we are separate.

And we are subject to it, much like we are doing by reading this, when in fact most of what we see out there in the outside world is mixed with our own inner fears and projected and thus personified. And that is a Catch-22 from which, apparently, we cannot escape, until we wake up enough to realize and become aware of this.

Life has always been like this, which is why someone like me studies and practices the dharma, to wake up enough to realize that what is here inside and what is out there in our so-called reality are not separate but already joined at the hip, and have always been that way. If that is effectively realized, then when we change ourselves through dharma practice, our view, the world outside us reflects that change and changes with us. In other words, we learn to stop pinching ourselves. We are not only here inside our skin, but we are also out there in the external world, because the external, the outside world, is also mostly a projection of our fears and desires.

However, right now, the public or outside world is so confused and confusing that the fragility of the public mind is breaking up and liable to further shatter, bringing to mind some kind of mass confusion or hysteria, even if it is a quiet riot, so to speak.

Are we losing our collective mind? Losing our mind, our grip on reality, is not only a real possibility, but increasingly already the de-facto reality. Considerable confusion already reigns. All the more reason why we should snap out of it, shake our head, and wake up to the fact that we need to be aware and keep our wits about us.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Knowing Things As They Are

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 14, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e76b690d-e699-4172-8328-ca2b5e6b0112_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“To approach coemergent mind, we settle into Shamatha and the mind looks at itself. It does not stop thought but simply purifies itself and becomes peaceful.

“At that point, mind cannot be identified as anything at all. It rests vividly and clearly in a state of awareness that does not become dull or unclear. Mind doesn’t wander but remains clear and luminous.

“In the book ‘Moonlight of Mahamudra’, Tashi Namgyal says, ‘The mind itself remains luminous and does not stop understanding.’ The mind does not lose its intelligence but is aware of and illuminates itself.

“The way it does this cannot be fully explained; it has to be experienced. Even though we cannot express this state in words, we can say that it is an experience of knowing things as they are. This experience gives rise to real certainty. This experience is Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

End of quote.

Of course, when I read something like this from a great dharma teacher like Thrangu Rinpoche, I take note.

Thrangu Rinpoche has been to our center and our home. Margaret and I travelled to his monastery in eastern Tibet with our own rinpoche, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and we took all the empowerments for the 3-year closed retreat from him. And Khenpo Karthar was chosen, many decades ago, as the practice partner for Thrangu Rinpoche at Thrangu Monastery. The teachings by these two are remarkably similar in kind.

The phrase “illuminates itself” points out that the light of Shamata not only illuminates but illuminates itself as well.

And for me the key takeaway is the line “This experience gives rise to real certainty,” which is the hallmark of Vipassana (Insight Meditation), certain certainty, something never before experienced, “knowing things as they are.”

That “knowing things as they are” is an experience of total immersion, non-duality, which Shamata is not. Shamata is dualistic in that there is an awareness of a subject and an object. In non-duality there is no duality, only awareness. All things are one.

That great lamas like Thrangu Rinpoche continue to point out to us this difference in meditation types that we may be certain to achieve it and accept nothing less, a great blessing.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Birth of 'The New Age'

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 15, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/27f48e3d-e8e3-48e6-8a04-df263059b9d8_791x1024.jpeg

1973 in my understanding is, spiritually speaking, a pivotal year in the history of American spiritual practice and its commercialization. My personal spiritual history was changed on January 4, 1973 at 03:49 AM in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when I had what is called a spontaneous kryia, and created the symbol for our facility the "Heart Center." My first child was born later that month on the 19th of January, 1973.

I should also point out that two now-classic books were published in 1973, "Spiritual Cannibalism" by Swami Rudrananda, in January 1973 and "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism" by Chögyam Trungpa, September 1973.

Not sure whether you folks took notice of these books early on as I did or perhaps not at all. To me this is when the spiritual renaissance of the 1970s, what is called "The New Age," the result of the 1960s, took root, as mentioned, 1973 in particular.

To me that book by Swami Rudrananda was, IMO, rooted in the word 'rudra' (which means in Sanskrit to cry or howl) is very self-directed. It did not take me very long to get the idea and after that, the same thing was being said and repeated over and over again.

And there are the 'rudraksha' beads, which we were always warned not to use except for very special wrathful practices. In India, often used for Shiva practices, the god of destruction.

As for Trungpa's book "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism," that was easier for me to get into, if only because it pegged the Ego right from the start.

Yet, for me, all heavy-hitting books are but a window or portal for me that opens and closes from time to time. Not author other than Trungpa is more difficult for me to follow. It's as if he never says anything.

I have to say, reading and conceptualization in general, by book, text, teaching, poem, or lyrics can only take us so far, and the reason for this is that all of the above are conceptual and above all dualistic. They exactly are like the old adage 'rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic'.

The dualistic, whatever the format, can at best only make us more comfortable and perhaps more aware within Samsara. They alone cannot take us out of Samsara. At best, these written and conceptual aids can improve our situation within Samsara, make us more comfortable, thus the Titanic's deck chairs. They cannot help us escape Samsara.

That ability alone rests on the dharma, its recognition, and eventual realization. Once that limitation of Samsara is grasped, that Samsara itself is not a route to freedom, but rather a prison, our mind is free to turn to something other than Samsara, which can only be the dharma itself.

[Symbol and logo for the Heart Center created by me in 1973.]

EMAIL

The Meaning of Meaning

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 18, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The old saying “You can’t judge a book by its cover,” yet it’s a hard call because those covers too are indicative of something. For that matter, it seems that everything is indicative, but of what is the question.

Through that milieu we must walk because at least each step creates something that looks like a path. Whether that path or track goes or points anywhere is another question. Philosophers don’t agree and agree to disagree.

I would say that the path or any path, by definition, does not point or go anywhere in any finality. Where does that leave us?

IMO, that leaves us with the path itself as what we have to work with. Whether we can call that path a goal, I can’t say. In the best light we could say that our goal is to tread the path meaningfully.

‘Meaning’ is what we so much seek because there is so little of it, if any. What if there is no permanent meaning of anything, ever?

In other words, our goal is to travel well, and even that breaks down upon examination, and then we are even more bereft of meaning, which is the whole point, that there is no point.

How do you like them apples?

If we ever slow down enough to consider all of this, we might find there is nothing to consider, and what we call ‘meaning’ is but a will-o’-the-wisp. And why is that a scary thought?

Ultimately, it’s not because there is a choice or ever was, so whence the scare. It’s just a mask or obscuration we wear.

Going naked of meaning, giving up the search, gets us experience that is meaning-quenching; it gobbles or eats up meaning, and that brings us to the rest we have been without and hunger for.

From true rest there is no return, which is why it is rest, and yet we can but be aware that we are resting, but not define or express it. In other words, we can rest in peace.

How do we know we are resting or have rested?

We can experience resting, but not describe it, except in retrospect, when we stop resting and remember that we did rest. The flickering light of recall.

We can't both be and recall being at the same time, but we can be and be aware that we are being, just not able to objectify it, except in recall, when we are no longer being it.

We can imbue ourselves in being such that that when we recall or come out of it, we have a trace, smell, or flavor of being about us. To me, a good analogy is like blowing glass in a furnace. We can extend and shape thoughts and ideas when immersed in them and have some kind of memory when we withdraw and recall the experience to mind, as mentioned, a flavor or at least that some sense that we have been shaped in the furnace of being.

In other words, dipping in the well of being, we come out having been shaped by the experience of being immersed. And that shape we are now in from the experience of being can be expressed in words, however inadequate they may be.

Again, it's like blowing glass in a furnace, where we ourselves are the molten glass that is being shaped and come out of that experience modified by that furnace of being fully in the present moment.

As for myself, through Insight Meditation I carry words and ideas into the furnace of being, the full-on present moment, and recollect when I come out of that experience by examining what immersion has done to my words and ideas. It shapes and modifies what I went in with and the words and sentences come out better for the experience, purified or truer.

And Insight Meditation of the variety in Mahamudra is more than just addictive, it's life itself being lived.

Better than 'meaning' is being, such as it is.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Co-emergent

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

January 28, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/48a83914-d6ec-4298-b353-092c093a98e5_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche said”

“We begin this meditation on co-emergent mind when our mind is free from sinking and wildness. We rest in a very relaxed way. Simply by looking at itself, thought is pacified.

“This brings forth the experience of Shamata in the context of Mahamudra. From within Shamatha, we investigate the qualities of luminosity and emptiness. If our mind appears to be luminous and vivid, we look into that. Just what is that vividness? If our mind seems to be empty, we investigate that emptiness. What is that emptiness? How is it empty?

“We do not need to put these questions to anyone else; we need to answer them from our own experience.

“Within that experience, the stability is called Shamata and the intelligence that realizes that nature of things is called Vipassana. Their names are separate but at this point, Shamata and Vipassana are not separate, rather they are different aspects of the same thing. They are united and integrated. When our experience of this settles, that is co-emergent mind.”

End of Quote

Of course, since Mahamudra is non-dual, meaning of one whole, Shamata and Vipassana by definition are united and integrated, thus co-emergent or connate.

They arrive simultaneously as one.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Self-Liberate Even the Antidote

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

“If we do not look at the essence of the afflictions, they will grow stronger and stronger, and we will end up committing many harmful acts.

“So, we need to apply a remedy for the afflictions. The remedy is not to reject, block, or suppress them, as scientists these days say, repressing your disturbing emotions will lead to physical illness.

“We Buddhists also say that you should not block your emotions. This, however, does not mean that we should just follow our afflictions and go wherever they lead us. Instead, we need to look at their essence, and thereby, they will be self-liberated.

“This means that they will just naturally be pacified, and in the future, their root will be transformed into wisdom, such as the transformation of aversion into mirror-like wisdom.

End of Quote

The Lojong slogan “Self-liberate the Antidote” is one of the most powerful of the Lojong slogans and is a harbinger of Mahamudra practice. The remedy here is to not apply any remedy but, instead, to just relax and rest the mind letting the proverbial snake-in-a-know untie itself.

Life as a whole reaches a turning point, where there is not so much to do about anything, but much more undoing, letting problems untie themselves. This poem I wrote some time ago:

The Point of No Return

A Poem for My Daughter Michael Anne

The point of the “point of no return” is that:

When you have reached the point of no return,

From which there is no return,

The point is to turn and return.
That is the turning point.
Every life has a turning point,
Whether it's in the echo of age,
Or in the very midst of life's prime.
As we reach our point of no return,
We pause,
Then we turn.
And, in turning, we begin to reflect.
In our reflection,
And rising into view,
Perhaps for the very first time,
The Sun.
Where before it was we who were seen,
And others seeing,
Now we are the mirror in which they see themselves,
And we can see our self in them,
What we once saw shining before us, as youths,
That which we gladly embraced in our prime,
And what we now see etched in the mirror of
reflection,
Is our eternal Self,
The Sun,
Ever burning in the darkness of our life.
That's it.
I understand this.
What I find harder to understand,

Yet still believe is:

We didn't know it then;

We don't know it now.

We never knew it.

In truth,

It never was.

IT NEVER WAS;

It never will be.

It is not now,

And still, it is.

It still is:

This most brilliant illusion,

Shining in the mirror of the mind.

Feb 14, 2006 2-4 PM Grand Sextile Helio

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Lingering Scent of Karma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 6, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/38a4fb05-3acd-44c7-a5f7-756c4225cdf0_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven, Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche said this about the Alayavijnana or ‘Storehouse Consciousness’ in his seminal book “Karma, What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It Matters”:

“The storehouse consciousness is not a permanent entity, but does nevertheless persist over a period of time, and because of this, it is able to retain karmic impressions. These impressions or psychic energy deposits, that carry over are termed ‘vasanas’.

“In traditional literature, a vasana is described by the analogy of putting something very smelly, like an unwashed pair of socks, into a drawer.

“If we were to leave it for months, upon opening the drawer, we would most likely be overwhelmed by the smell. Even throwing them out and doing our utmost to remove the smell seems to have only a marginal effect. The next time the drawer is opened, the smell is still there.”

End of Quote.

The contamination of something through proximity, like walking through a cigarette-filled room and coming out smelling of smoke. It’s not so much direct contact or touching, but smell by association like guilt by association. You know, “Don’t get any on you.”

These days and years, we are all being exposed to conditions that color or affect us. This current world we live in is not a ‘smoke-free’ environment. This modern life, to one degree or another, stinks from association with pollutants that are everywhere.

It gets harder and harder to find a pure environment and in the same way, it’s getting harder and harder to find a bit of night sky that is not polluted with light, or food that is free from contaminants. Our bodies are no different and filled with bacteria, some beneficent and some maleficent, billions of them.

I come from way back in the 1940s, where I was a kid and I grew up from then through all the time until now. Life was pure or I was pure, both, or perhaps neither, but it was NOT like it is today.

Yet, we have not reached the inner-city situation that we saw in the dystopian movie “Blade Runner”, yet it seems we are headed that way. No doubt.

Pollution of any and all kinds is becoming the norm. One good thing is that we are becoming aware of the pollution. Everything is affected and infected, so where do we start to turn this around?

As for me, after a long search, I am starting from the inside out, transforming my gut and working from there. Does that make sense or am I just losing my grip or mind?

Talk about going to the end-of-reason and walking it back, that’s just what I’m doing, going past what common reason might approve and changing myself, as mentioned, from the inside out, starting with the flora in my gut.

I was forced by circumstance to take a long (timewise) hard look at my own gut and begin to understand that apparently (apparent to me), I had the whole food-change ass backward as they say.

Our relationship with our own gut is a team effort and not something dualistic where we are the subject and our gut the predicate. “We” are, as mentioned, a team effort, non-dual in that sense.

Our body is not autocratic, where I am (Me, Myself, and I), the autocrat, and my body, in particular my gut, is the predicate -- subject to me. The body is above all a democracy, non-dual -- one thing. We have to work together with our own body, just as we do with our own self or psychology. Same with spirituality.

Our body, in particular the flora in our own body, such as the gut is dependent on our feeding it the right food for it to flourish and therefore for us to flourish, including “Me, Myself, and I.” We are a team and have to be.

In other words, we are responsible, as in “I am responsible” to feed and care for my own gut and the billions of bacterial florae in it. Here, a bad diet, meaning a diet that is not balanced, will result in featuring only a few types of probiotics and allow any balanced array of probiotics (which we need in our gut) to diminish and exit our gut, leaving us vulnerable to all kinds of disease and harm.

That’s what happened to me. I ate mostly canned fillet of tuna for a few months, imaging that pure protein will perhaps be healthy. ‘This’ after taking a whole round of antibiotics because of Lyme disease fear. Instead, with my flora wiped out by the antibiotics, my intestinal flora focused only on the tuna, and other flora died out. Trust me, you don’t want that. And while in my case

this was a very unusual event, each of us is doing something similar, whether we know it or not.

Our gut flora needs a well-balanced diet, just as our kids or dependents do. And it's up to us to feed it. Obviously, we are not the boss. It's our responsibility to feed the flora of our gut, and every day.

It is not so different from the political situation in which we find ourselves here in America. We have to turn that political situation around as well. Right now, it is shifting toward autocracy, an autocracy that is feeding on the poorest Americans, only to enrich the autocrats in charge.

This is obviously not healthy or balanced, much less fair.

The passage compares vasanas to residual smells, implying that karmic imprints are difficult to remove even after the source is gone. This raises questions: What actions or practices are most effective in purifying these impressions? Are certain types of vasanas more deeply ingrained than others?

And so, those 'vasana' or smells which circulate and waft around us call for purification. What better way than starting in the living forge of our gut where billions of probiotic bacteria exist and are hungrily waiting for us to feed and bless them with a healthy diet.

And starting from that inside and working outward, we transform and purify our body as the proper vehicle for our mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Thought As Dharmakaya

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 11, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/36910b91-96b2-467f-b666-af8202506a68_2048x2048.jpeg

The venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche taught:

“Some people misunderstand the teaching “thought is dharmakaya” to mean that when a thought arises, it is pacified or dissolved, and then we are left with the dharmakaya.

“Others misunderstand it to mean that if we realize thought is dharmakaya, it is dharmakaya.

The word dharmakaya, however, is made up of dharma meaning “truth” and kaya, meaning “embodiment.”

“Thus, dharmakaya refers to the ultimate mind of the Buddha. These two ways of misunderstanding the teaching stem from not understanding that from the very beginning, thought is nothing other than the Buddha’s omniscient mind.

“Thought does not become dharmakaya at some later time, and it doesn’t depend on whether or not we are aware that it is dharmakaya.”

End of Quote.

What incredible teaching this is.

Thought is dharmakaya, much like when we say that appearances are empty. Appearances are the emptiness itself arising. Of course, the Dharmakaya is the “Buddha’s omniscient mind,” but before the Buddha was the dharma that he realized.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Revulsion of Samsara

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 11, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/7cfa7bc8-38e7-4c78-9b22-efa60871c4ed_1024x1024.jpeg

TODAY: I love music, yet I don't want to hear any. I love to write, but I don't feel like writing. I frequently photograph, but I'm not in that mood. I sometimes like to go places, but just not now. I like to eat, but don't feel like cooking.

What's wrong with me? Am I in a perfect storm of doing nothing in which all roads converge?

Or am I in the high-drive of dharma, busy realizing the 4 th 'Thought That Turns the Mind' from the "Common Preliminaries," which in modern verse is frequently presented as "The Defects of Samsara," this cycle world of ups and downs in which we live.

"THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND TO THE DHARMA"

One: This Precious Human Life: Don't waste it.

Two: Death and Impermanence

Three: Karmic Cause and Effect

Four: The Defects of Samsara

When I first learned the 4 th thought that turns the mind, some 50 years ago or so, we were not so fickle or sophisticated then, and the teachings pulled no punches. It was a straight-out "Revulsion of Samsara." In fact, it was presented as follows.

"The Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind: Revulsion of Samsara:"

"The homes, friends, wealth, and comforts of samsara are the constant torment of the three sufferings. Just like a feast before the executioner leads you to your death, I must cut desire and attachment and attain enlightenment through exertion."

That in Tibetan."

I don't see that kind of frankness anymore, unless I search real hard to find it.

The fire and brimstone of dharma training has been put on the back burner if on any burner at all. Where did it go and why?

The obvious reason is that westerners are too fickle or too frightened of straight talk, what we could call the fire and brimstone of the dharma. Yet, as mentioned, when I first started dharma training and we did all our practice in Tibetan, whether we knew it or no, the rough English translation of something like the “Common Preliminaries” (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind) was meant for serious practitioners, folks who had graduated from delicate treatment to straight talk without a chaser. That was how we learned.

It was only many years later that something a step away from frankness appeared, words like “The Defects of Samara,” if you knew what those were. It was no longer spelled out in all caps.

Nevertheless, skipping back to my preamble, when I was reciting all that, I did not feel like doing. When those moods of non-involvement come over us, what exactly do they signify? We are tired or sick of something, at least for a day or part of a day.

Way back then, I always got stuck on that Fourth Thought, that revulsion of Samsara. I liked living and I loved life, so what are they talking about, revulsion at life? I choked on that.

And now when I’m at the live-long end of life, do I feel revulsion? I don’t think so.

One thing I do feel is not appreciating or wanting to be entertained any longer by the distractions life offers. It’s not a matter of fear of the consequences, which are more and more apparent as I age.

It’s more like I don’t bite at the worm on the hook of what is being offered. Been there, done that. And most often it is just another cycle on the merry-go-round of distractions.

What if I refuse to be distracted or don’t bite at the hooks of life anymore? What then?

Well, it seems I’m left alone to a significant degree, alone to do what?

Alone not to do anything but rest in alone-ness alone. At what point does alone resolve itself into all-one? That is a key question.

There is a certain letting down, call it ‘relief’, that is ushered in instead of the eternalness of being busy. There is that.

Instead of examining the figure in the figure ground, I began to examine the ground. And I don't really 'examine' anything, more like relax, let go, and rest in the nature of the ground, meaning in the nature of the mind itself.

And what I am beginning to see is that the figure itself in the figure-ground is nothing but the ground in an active form, like waves are to the ocean. So, even the nothing is something and the something nothing. Talk about a torus ribbon or torus knot.

As the old song says, we are our own grandpa.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Waves and the Ocean

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 13, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Things don't always go well. And as my daughter May Erlewine wrote in a song, "Trouble ain't built to last."

"Rise Up Singing" by May Erlewine.

This world we find ourselves in is cyclic, meaning much like a pendulum swings, we go up and down, and on around, forever. The Buddhists call this cyclic world we are trapped in "Samsara."

Wisdom with age can perhaps take some of the fear and anxiety out of the cycles, but as long as we are in Samsara, the ups and downs remain. We have to surf or suffer them.

And more to the point, Nirvana, or whatever the opposite of Samsara is called, is not some other place we escape to where we are no longer in this world. Nirvana is right here and now, but a realized here and now. No Exit.

In other words, there is no back door to Samsara, no escape. And once we achieve recognition of the true nature of Samsara and the mind itself, once we realize Samsara, we don't trade places with somewhere else but become one with the nature of Samsara as well as Nirvana, because they are identical. We remain here. There is only one nature of the mind itself, whether we find ourselves in Samsara or Nirvana.

And so, if we find ourselves in the midst of the perfect storm of Samsara, distracted, and torn apart by events and the anxiety that comes with them, there does not seem to be a back door or an escape hatch from these samsaric events. And right now, this Samsaric world is deluged by current events.

Like it or not, we have no choice other than to look reality directly in the face and learn to rest in the nature of the mind. Not so easy.

The waves and the ocean are both water, figure and ground, subject and object, as are all dualities. Trying to hold a duality open can never last, because such an effort is but a mental construct that is destined by its very nature to collapse.

Our pulling back as if to see ‘something’, when there is no something to be seen other than by duality, meaning it, as mentioned, is but a mental construction.

If we are doing that, propping our eyes open, and then let go of that construct, it will vanish in the unity of all dualities in an instant. This is true of all efforts to objectify. Period.

What this means is that all such efforts are skewed by definition, and are essentially a nervous habit, an insecurity we by habit attempt to maintain.

The tide comes in, yet the tide also goes out, alternately, and this same alternating behavior is a form of meditation, alternating between nondual immersion in Mahamudra or Dzogchen and objectification, duality.

And this can be practiced until the alternating is seamless, one motion, a mudra.

And the borderline between the two is what defines the difference between nonduality and duality, while the difference itself enables meditation.

It is like rolling a tiny piece of grit between thumb and forefinger, back and forth. The ‘borderline’ is always where definition is created.

This is how the special form of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) that is part of Mahamudra can be achieved.

EMAIL

This Most Brilliant Illusion

By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net

February 14, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ef9b6f9c-f893-4036-8531-ccb118b9059c_1024x1024.jpeg

Words escape me when it comes to talking about dying and what will happen then to each of us. I look forward to the bardo because I can't look back. And I have some personal experience that turns out to be a harbinger of what will come after death when we leave this body.

My dharma teacher, a Tibetan lama who died at the age of 96 and had taught me for 36 years, pointed this out to me, so to speak, when I described to him in detail my experience of a major stroke.

He says that this experience so naked of Self was good for me, an introduction to what we will all experience when we leave our Self at death and enter the bardo naked of the cover of personality.

We can and do have experiences that cannot be described that there are no words for, and are not part of our public consciousness. For these occult events we cannot get a witness, other than perhaps some vague stirring of an inner memory that may touch us. Rinpoche said he did understand and had some eleven or so minor strokes himself.

You know me. I'm a writer, and I have explained my stroke experience until I am blue in the face and my words on this topic mostly fall on deaf ears. I understand why this is so, because this is not something we as a collective consciously share or care to reflect.

At one point, right after the stroke, I had stroke doctors all around me listening to my description. One doctor was so moved that he asked could he contact me at home and explain what was happening in his marriage. He gave me his phone number. It was like that.

We don't or cannot acknowledge our attachment to what is called Samsara, and our need to hide away in the darkness of it all because we are too sensitive to the white light of the mind to stand it straight on.

And lest we become too attached to the image of a white bright light, the actuality was being exposed, buck naked of attachments, unable to find cover, a place to hide in samsara which I had done all of my life until that moment. It

was the sudden and complete exposure that was blinding. No place to hide, like the old song

“I ran to the rock to hide my place.

The rock cried out, ‘no hiding place’.

The rock cried out, ‘I’m burning too,’

And want to go to heaven the same as you.”

As samsaric beings, we don’t like to be exposed to the bright white light of the mind that is forever shining (like right now) in the darkness of the Samsaric mind. It is similar to our inability to look directly at the sun without damaging our eyes. We look away at everywhere else but there, because “There” was impossible to look at. There is no closing the eyes of the mind in the bardo.

Yet, when we do die and pass beyond this mortal coil, as Shakespeare put it, having no choice then but to face the brilliant white light of the mind directly, we will cringe and try our best to hide away in the shadows of the past. Only then, the shadows will be lifted and not to be found, but we will look for them desperately, and with our eyes propped wide open.

This was my experience after my major stroke. I was not able to find or get back into the shadowy sheath of habitual comforts and constant entertainment out from which the stroke thrust me. I was suddenly stripped stark naked from any cover, with no closure or place to hide, because a brilliant white light above and all around me scorched and stunned me as I stood totally exposed in the light.

And this went on for hours, days, and weeks until my shattered Self reanimated and I could find my way back into the shadows of Samsara once again, which took time.

I never wanted anything more than to get away from that stark light.

So, my friend, please read the above with some concern, because I have no doubt that’s exactly what we will encounter when we step out of our personality and Self at death and enter the bardo. All I can say is there is NO WAY I am ready for that again, even having been introduced to it through the stroke, which itself was illuminating.

I could not stand to look directly at the light. There I was in the middle of the hospital, surrounded by doctors and nurses, who were unaware that I was fully awake, clear as a bell, only I was unable to find my way back to what we

call the Self and its cocoon-like habits. It was as if I had no previous history. Try as I might, I could not find ANY cover, at all. Naked as a Jaybird.

In other words, I could not remember or find my way back into the entertainment and attachments that I knew as life, my sense of being a busy Self.

Instead, I was fully in the present moment, just without any person. My Self had been shattered and it took weeks and months to fully recover (re-cover), and to reassemble again any sense of who I was as a Samsaric being – to get back in there.

I repeat, when I was able to communicate with the Tibetan lama I had been working with for many years about my stroke experience, he said that this experience was good preparation for what will happen in the bardo when I die, the same kind of experience.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Prayer Flags

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 16, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a7784051-0e67-4e14-88e1-1e6cebb41535_1024x1024.jpeg

Always, just a breath away from a touch of Zen to my life. I did many years, decades of formal dharma practice, millions of mantras, plus hundreds of thousands of full on-the-ground prostrations, etc.

These last years have been more of a process of repairing all the effort I made in the past years, resting in the nature of the mind itself, and behaving accordingly.

The Zen quotient I mentioned has to do with being in the moment in whatever I am doing, and not just considering dharma as sitting on the cushion.

It is such an involved and evolving situation that leaving breadcrumbs is more or less meaningless, IMO. So much water over the dam by now.

As far as my Self goes, there is nothing to recommend, and what was there is like blowing the dandelion seeds into the air. This leaves nothing of any notice.

Individual words may carry meaning, at least some, and when combined into sentences wave like Tibetan prayer flags in the wind. How much I can signal by twisting the meaning of words I don't know.

Dipping what I write into the well of the present moment, the pure non-duality of Mahamudra, somehow galvanizes them, stripping them of meaninglessness, into what only can be described as a mudra or a poem.

MY POEMS

Poems,

A home for my thoughts,

Dear thoughts,

The very best of me,

All that's precious and kind,

Now sealed in words,
Like insects in amber:
Prayer flags endlessly waving,
In the gentle chalice of the mind.
[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]
EMAIL

Sheath of Distractions

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 17, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/35e6dad2-44d2-4c31-b806-28ac3d2be005_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

“Delusion is foggy by nature. Though it might be foggy and dull, the nature of mind itself is always clear. It is always knowing; it can always understand something.

“When we experience delusion, we do not see this quality, but actually the clarity of the mind never ceases. The mind is always clear and knowing; it never turns into something like a stone. Clear self-awareness is continually present and knowing.

If we look into our natural face—if we look at the essence of the delusion itself, it is wide awake, which means that it is clear. It’s as if there is a little gap. This nature is called the dharmadhatu wisdom. When you look at the essential nature of mind, you see that it is clear and knowing as well as being empty.”

End of quote.

I saw clearly when I had a major stroke. There I was in the hospital, surrounded by doctors and nurses on every side.

And yet I was clear as a bell, more clear than I have any memory of, yet I could not find my way back into what we call the Self. The Self had been shattered by the stroke and was unreachable, nowhere to be found, try as I might. You know I tried.

And yet there was this crystal clarity, something devoutly to be wished from dharma practice, yet just nowhere to hide or retreat to from the clarity. I could not turn it off.

It was like my eyelids were propped open by toothpicks. And I was unable to express and put into words my state of mind. At first, mute, but later very articulate while still with no access to my historical self. I had nowhere to hide or rest for the clarity.

And so, my own experience supports what Thrangu Rinpoche is saying above. The clarity of the mind itself is beyond description yet ever present. The coat

or cover of my Self was for quite some time unreachable. I lost the hooks to it and was left naked in the eye-forward pain of no distraction whatsoever. That was the bright white light that the bardo texts speak of – no distractions.

Usually, we are wrapped up in complete distraction and entertainment, and for that to suddenly be lost, turned off, is a shock to the system. We are not used to being undistracted and just perfectly clear.

So, what is called the ‘white light’ is not an actual light, but rather the shock of being suddenly undistracted, which we find too painful to withstand. It’s too much all at once. We try to turn away, every which way but loose, as they say, but there is no room in the inn, so to speak. That is excruciatingly painful, as I well know. And it can go on for a long, long time, hours, days, weeks, and more to varying degrees.

Trying to get back into our cocoon-like sheath of Samsaric comfort, when it is impossible to achieve that, leaves us feeling stark naked like in the white-hot heat of a desert.

And so, despite the endless books, essays, and articles about finding our Self, the real terror comes when we loose out Self and cannot find it or reanimate it once it is shattered.

Since the Self is a construct, once shattered the Self has to be reconstructed, piece by piece. This takes actual construction. When we eventually pass on, our Self will be left as we enter the bardo, so we will be stripped of our Self, all our attachments, and entertainments. We will be, as I experienced in my major stroke, clear as bell and have no place to hide, suddenly.

Against that eventuality, it behooves us to take note and do whatever we can to prepare for that event.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Probiotics: Finishing Up

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 17, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/89be01ec-0e3c-43d1-a210-e5ef5b2cf6dd_1024x1024.jpeg

By Michael Erlewine

A little probiotic gut testimony, as I switched from the probiotic *L. reuteri* (one round of homemade yogurt) to the probiotic *B. infantis* yogurt (the next round); it was a striking and obvious switch.

L. reuteri likes to reside in the upper intestine, while *B. Infantis* makes its home in the lower intestine. Anyway, as I switched daily yogurts, an obvious change took over. This was *B. infantis* sorting out my colon (lower intestine) with bloating, some turmoil, endless farts for about a day, and the resulting stool showed what was being churned out of my gut. Very impressive, so to speak.

So, these two probiotics each are different and the difference, so far, is totally obvious viscerally. This is all a part of resetting my gut microbiome.

Today, I just completed a 36 hours culture for the *E. coli* Nissle 1917 probiotic yogurt to be ready to ingest. I always have about a half a cup of yogurt with fresh blueberries in it.

Since its target is the colon (the large intestine) and it is supposed to be a bit of a plumber, I want to see what it does to my gut. I just starting that round of yogurt late last night, and so far what I experience is some bloating. I've taken several servings of the Nissle 1917 yogurt.

Once I am through these eight small jars of *E. coli* Nissle 1917 yogurt, I will then quiet down and mostly just sustain with the *L. reuteri* probiotic for the upper intestine and perhaps another shot of the *B. infantis* probiotic for the lower intestine.

I can say that a change of the probiotic strain I'm using, especially when it is the first real flood of a probiotic into one of the intestines, is obvious within a day, or at least by the following morning.

I know that *B. infantis* came into my large intestine like a tornado, with a lot of wind and drove some pretty nasty looking stuff out the back end. I'm being a

little methodical about all this because I want to rebuild my gut with a solid base after the antibiotics wiped out more of the flora.

And I have to keep in mind that this whole probiotic thing was not just a lark, but the result of a course of antibiotics brought on a tick bite and signs of Lyme Disease. I had no choice, but the antibiotic wiped out my gut fauna and then I mistakenly made it worse by not giving my intestinal flora the proper prebiotics. It was a downward spiral.

Lama Kathy Wesley commented on a previous post here:

“Ever the bodhisattva, Rinpoche said it was a good thing to remember the beings who live within us while eating, and to make positive aspirations for their (and one’s own) future rebirth. Using the Tibetan word for “bug,” (“bu”), he said we should aspire like this when we eat: “oh, little bu, today I am feeding your bodies, but in the future, may I give you the food of dharma.” I remember this fondly and practice it from time to time as words of our precious teacher”

I am learning a lot through this whole probiotic experience, not to mention altering my diet profoundly, at least for a time. For one thing, due to a buildup of trimethylamine (TMA) in my system, I am going to have to use some activated charcoal to help detox my lower intestine.

And so, I am in the midst of a round (8 half -cups) of E. coli Nissle 1917 yogurt, about four servings in. And I feel it taking hold and being active, mostly by some bloating and another attack of serial farts throughout the day.

I will probably blog less about this whole pre and probiotic yogurt thing, yet it is ongoing exploration.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

"I Shall Be Released"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 26, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/7280704a-b40c-43d1-b8ff-b20e63d6aba1_1024x1024.jpeg

I'm afraid I have no theme for writing going on. Been out of town and on the road, didn't get enough sleep while gone, and so I am less busy doing anything at all than I usually might be.

We did get out and walked a mile or so on the street in the sun today. Also, a lot of family goings-on that need talking through with members, so there has been that.

As for to-do, I have been putting together a medium-sized duffle bag for travelling around this summer. Instead of gathering all the stuff to take a trip each time, I want a TO-GO bag ready and waiting to go out the door. I am building that today. I also sewed a button on a pair of pants, while sitting inside on a chair in front of a southern window, bathed by sunlight.

As for what's going on beyond the above, the answer is not much I can or will tell.

I'm grateful we are almost into March, so spring is not too far away. We are out and walking as we can, and I need to get my "zoo legs" back, which is what we called the kind of leg work it took to spend a day at the zoo. I have work to do in that department after being inside most of the winter. This has been a cold winter here in north-western Michigan.

Spiritually I don't have much I can say either. I'm good. Whatever is going on in there is gone down under to work its magic. I can feel it inside.

I'm well-passed making great effort to practice dharma. I'm on the other side of that divide and have been for a long time, busy walking back the effort I have made to practice dharma, the stains that enforced dharma practice leaves on us. They all have to be accounted for and amount to karma all their own. They are not just going to go away.

We have to rest all that effort away, bit by bit, and piece by piece. It takes years to solve the scars effort makes. And believe it or not, we are going to have to liberate ourselves.

Perhaps my favorite Dylan song is "I Shall Be Released."

“I see my light come shinin' From the west unto the east Any day now, any day now I shall be released.”

And here is a good version of it:

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Wizard Behind the Curtain

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

February 27, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/8ad45a9c-0532-4cdb-bc5d-96548bb5d937_1014x657.jpeg

The being inside of our voice may not sound much like we appear. I have learned this. In the 1970s when I was coming up as an astrologer, the first famous astrologer I met was Charles A. Jayne from Monroe, NY.

Jayne and I became fast friends and would each visit the other's homes. In fact, when Charles Jayne died, he was getting ready to fly out and spend his birthday with our family here in Big Rapids, Michigan.

For the longest time, until I met Charles in person, he was a voice on the phone, a strong, commanding, very intelligent voice that I internalized as my friend.

When I met Charles in person, I could not put that voice together with the body of the elder astrologer standing before me, because for all practical purposes Charles looked like Mr. Mole from the Kenneth Grahame's book "Wind in the Willows" with the black and white illustrations by E. H. Shepard, the man who drew Winnie-the-Pooh.

And so, as the old saying goes "You Can't Judge a Book by Its Cover," certainly not with Charles A. Jayne, who was a force to contend with. I loved Charles. He was authentically himself.

In fact, for me it's an axiom, that those in strong positions that we meet in this world are above-all, human. If they don't appear authentically human, you are looking at a disguise (a phony) and should take everything they do or say with a grain of salt.

I love it when friends who have not seen me for many years come for a visit and discover that like the wizard behind the curtain in the "Wizard of Oz," I'm just a human being like they are. It's OK to be authentically human. In fact, it's required!

Another genuine occult principle is that if a person we meet is magnetic, and we are drawn to them, meaning that they appear strong and powerful, you have just met someone on your level and not someone you can learn much from.

If, on the other hand, when you meet someone you realize your own nature and value, you have met someone you can learn from, perhaps a guide. Here is a good example of meeting someone who makes you realize yourself, the first time I met the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, in his ancestral monastery at 15,000 feet, high in Tibet, and I brought my family as well.

We had to wait a day or so until we could see the Karmapa personally.

That afternoon, we were summoned to His Holiness, and I slowly climbed the multiple (three sets) of ladder-like stairs, huffing and puffing in the very high altitude. As we entered the interview room, there was a puja (ritual) going on, with His Holiness leading the practice, accompanied by a small number of monks. We were encouraged to sit up front, and we settled in. Gradually, I realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. We found out later that we had experienced a special form of the Mahakala, one only for insiders. It was complete with the Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us.

It was very intense. His Holiness led the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know. And this one was performed complete with drums, cymbals, and various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja many times before, but never quite like this. I don't really know how to describe what happened next.

I began to identify this puja as being not much different from my own dharma practice, and then my mind ranged over that practice, examining where I was within it, and what it was about for me. I had done this practice, without fail, every morning, afternoon and/or evening, for many years. I was to do it until my death, or until I completed it by realizing its essential nature. Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mind, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of my practice. What was that practice and what was the essence of it?

In my own mind, I was somewhat of a tough character, and I carried that strength or toughness to my practice. In fact, I loved the fierce, wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, here in this room with Karmapa, that same strength and toughness (or we might even say fierceness) came to mind, and began to be examined inwardly, in a new light.

But this was no idea I was playing with; instead, I was examining myself, or, to be more exact, I was realizing a part of my self—in this case, the part of myself who had been doing my practice—the one who did the practice.

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but a shell covering up an extremely sensitive inside. I was tough because I was so, so sensitive...and, at heart, I was kind. I was flooded with a state of compassion, and with the Karmapa.

The realization that I was (and always had been, in my deepest part) compassionate concerned and caring, and that this was my natural state, not something to strive for but something already, in fact, the case. It was the state of my being, something to be uncovered and opened up.

I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for this was already my natural state. All I had to do was to relax and let it shine through. And I should point out, again, that this was not a concept or idea I had, 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 a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed as I was overcome with this—now so obvious—realization. I was, in essence, very simple—just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world. I was easy, and all my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all of the suffering I saw around me. At that moment, I felt I understood myself and my practice: all of this taking place in midst of that Mahakala puja, with Karmapa. I was at peace.

This is how we know we have met a guide, someone we can and should learn from. Again, if you are attracted to a person, they are not a guide. If you realize yourself, then you have found a guide.

[A drawing of Mr. Mole by E. H. Shepard, the man who drew Winnie-the-Pooh.]

EMAIL

The Lost Art of Doing Nothing

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 7, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/fb1a3e1f-fee0-47fd-91d1-9967ac68a3f4_1024x1024.jpeg

I never thought of this. It never occurred to me that all of my interests, and I have many, what I found entertaining and distracted by, were but a cover, a shield, from the actual reality of the mind. I had no idea until I did. And it took a major stroke to make this clear to me. I share this with you, and have before, for those who can grasp it. It is key thought.

All my life I thought my intense interest in what I did was a saving grace, but saving what for what?

It was finally brought home to me that my 'Self' and all that interested and distracted me, were not the path and purpose of my life, but just the opposite, they were what kept me from realizing the true nature of my own mind. In other words, I had it just backward. We all do.

What I found fascinating and of special interest to me was in fact what prevented me from realizing the actual nature of the mind. And following the path of most interest in my life, which I excelled at, was exactly what I did not need and what blocked me from any enlightenment. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it," certainly not me.

My question that from that point forward was how do we turn a life of following our interests and constant entertainment around, and began removing the cover in which I had been hiding since birth?

All of that coffin-like sheath or cover we are hiding in has to be deconstructed, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, piece by piece. Instead of following our interests, as we always have, we begin to search for what bores us, whatever we have always avoided as much as possible. That avoidance becomes the doorway to enlightenment. Again, you may want to think this through.

I found this not easy at all, looking boredom in the eye and then learning to rest in that boredom. No one else was doing it and pointing the way. Yet, tucked behind the dreaded door of boredom was the freedom and clarity I had always sought. I just had to let go of and step off from my path of interest which I had spent my life confirming. That path went nowhere and was nothing more than biding my time until death. Why wait?

Not this, not this, and, again, not that. It was anything BUT that. All of 'That' had to be removed, little by little, and bit by bit. And "That" was replaced by nothing at all, thus allowing everything to emerge.

I was turning what I called my Self, inside out, replacing something with nothing, which allowed everything.

And I was alone in this and could not find a witness, until my Tibetan dharma teacher (of 36 years) said this experience that I had and could not communicate would stand me in good stead when I entered the bardo after death. That was exactly what I would experience, this crystal clear mind, but without a body, and what I lost (my body) revealed that loss and it appeared like a blinding light.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Island of Life

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 9, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/27541027-055a-4038-aa23-1e7e332a6bea_1024x1024.jpeg

This is a blog where I am asking you for your thoughts on this topic and not just saying what I write is so. These are questions in my mind.

Yes, we like what we love, what interests us. I don't deny that. I too participate in that. However, I am also discovering that fascination and focused interest itself is a limiting distraction, distracting us from what? That's the question. What are we missing by a narrow focus and following our interests?

Well, the simple answer is our interests distract us from being undistracted, and what would being undistracted lead us to? The answer to that is it would lead us to greater awareness and "clarity" of mind, to realizing things as they are. And how are things?

For one, greater clarity is free from the cloistering bondage of endless attraction, distraction, and entertainment, which we all share. Free from that. I reached a point where I realized that my interests were just a constant distraction and I wanted to know what they obscured.

I wanted to be free of my constant entertainments. And this includes being free to do nothing at all, to not limit our attention to our interests, but open up and expand our view. For instance, what is behind the curtain of the Self?

And if we look, we will find that all roads lead to this present moment and to no other place. And this present moment is not the past or the future, but right here and now.

And what are we to do right here and now? The answer is everything or nothing at all. And in this present moment, what is the point using the present moment to prepare for the future?

If what we do now has to do with what we will do then, after death, isn't that putting the cart before the horse? Why not just enjoy the present moment, the here and the now. Why worry about the future, much less prepare for it?

Perhaps that makes sense once the abscess of the past is cleaned out, so that we are no longer clinging to it, and the demands of the future are met without

their fixating our attention. That would free up the present moment of entanglement.

In that case, perhaps then we would be like some kind of yogi, and what good is that? In that last sentence is revealed the problem I am pointing at, that Samsara wants us to continue our rounds of dualistic focus and objectification and not break free of that bondage. Certainly, we are slaves to Samsara, are we not? We are and have been denizens of Samsara.

If that is not so, then please explain it to me. Our habitual conundrum is to pay everything forward and be forever in debt to our attachments, entertainment, and habits, leaving no room, not even a crack in the view, for the freedom of nonduality. And how do we attain nonduality?

By following this advice of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa, which has for many centuries rung through the halls of dharma:

Don't prolong the past.

Don't invite the future.

Don't alter the present.

Rest, just as it is.

That's the best advice I know of and what I have taken to heart on the desert island of my life.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Boredome As a Gift

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 11, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/19d00d5f-1397-45c6-b04b-1947bfb9e5ab_1024x1024.jpeg

Many believe in the old beer slogan:

“ Reach for all the gusto you can find . You only go around once in life.”

Those of us who have bought into that thought, or resigned ourselves to that end, have another thought coming, if not now, then certainly as we die and enter the bardo.

And the traditional dharma advice is don't wait for it, either. Prepare, prepare, prepare.

What we do now very much affects what happens when we die and cross over. As to what we can do now that will affect our time in the bardo, I point to boredom as a gift.

Start by NOT avoiding boredom. Boredom seems boring, yet it is one of the few signs that, aside from actually looking into boredom ourselves, we are totally caught up in our favorite distractions, whatever entertains us, and are oblivious to much else. In other words, we drank Samsara's Kool-Aid.

And that day will come, as Shakespear pointed out, when we "shuffle off this mortal coil," as was said in Hamlet's soliloquy:

“Devoutly to be wish'd.

To die, to sleep;

To sleep, perchance to dream,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause, there's the respect,

That makes calamity of so long life”

We never think to question our favorite distractions, whatever we find entertaining or of interest. What is behind the curtain of what we entertain

ourselves with, including our Self? If we could, for even a moment, be distracted from all that distracts us, what would we see?

Behind what we cling to is a brilliance so glaringly bright that this Samsaric life that we all know is nothing more than a habitual effort to turn away and not look at, not see the nature of our own mind. And we don't see it, yet there it is, always eternally shining in the night of time.

As for me, I have seen it while in the middle of a major stroke and for some time afterward. What we call the "Self" was shattered and I found myself naked of any cover, any interests, any history, just naked as a jaybird, exposed to the full light of the natural mind.

I did not like it and could not stand it. No matter how hard I tried, I could not find any cover, my old haunts, and the way back into my Self – nada. Yet, my mind was clear as a bell. In the middle of that hospital, with doctors and nurses all around me, I was never clearer. Not ever. The mind itself is crystal clear.

Of course, we all have our interests, what interests us, what we find 'interesting', and that earmark of Samsara (our interests) seems quite natural to us. Yet, that very 'interest' itself is the distraction that prevents us from recognizing the actual nature of the mind, the eternal light of the mind. Just that and that alone, because we are busy, busy, busy entertaining ourselves and being entertained.

And if we lose interest in 'interest' itself, in our being distracted or constantly entertained, and begin to allow that glaring bright light of the mind into our vision, that blinding light we have forever feared is clarifying. It is waiting for us to discover it, meaning look at it!

And the resulting clarity has been there all along, only clouded and covered over by the constant layers of interest we have, our demand for constant entertainment, anything but seeing the mind's light.

If we can get popped out of that groove of interest, we are then illuminated, enlightened or on the way to it. It's always present as we turn away from it.

The path of fixated interest that we tread, which both establishes and keeps us on track, is exactly what narrows and limits us, thus clouding the mind. We have to get off (let go of) that path to get the whole picture. And the whole picture is just that, seeing the forest AND the trees, what in dharma is called recognizing the true nature of the mind.

Once that happens, once we get off the track of our attachment to our interests, we then have the key to enlighten ourselves. We don't need much

further guidance because by definition we can then guide ourselves. Yet, until we have our hands on the steering wheel of our own mind, IMO, we are like fat in a frying pan.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Threading the Needle

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 12, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/66c92798-999b-48cb-8419-0010842551d7_2048x1370.jpeg

The Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“You might wonder what is the difference between tranquility and insight meditation. Tranquility meditation is just resting stably. There is not necessarily any intelligence present, whether it be the intelligence born of listening, contemplating, or wisdom. “

“We do not really recognize the mind: we just rest peacefully free of thoughts within the empty aspect of the mind. That is tranquility or shamatha meditation. “

“But when we know the nature of the mind clearly and thoroughly, then it is insight meditation. Insight has clarity. Yet it is good to have stability in our meditation, even if it lacks clarity.”

End of quote.

These two forms of meditation, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation), which really are connate, meaning they can arise together, are the essential components of Mahamudra practice.

An analogy of their relationship is like the threading of a very fine needle. Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) steadies the hand, while Vipassana (Insight Meditation) threads the needle. The two, stability and insight, are required for Mahamudra to function.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Mother Nature as Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 15, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/8a33d875-ba7d-474c-a327-a95e467c0f50_2048x1923.jpeg

By Michel Erlewine

It's 3:30 AM and, as usual, I'm up and working through my morning exercises. It's thundering out and lightning. We are in the first thunderstorm of the year. What a familiar and comforting sound that is, the rain pattering on the window panes. Welcome!

As mentioned of late, I am turning my life around as best I can. I've lost seven pounds; my doctor said I have to lose four.

Above all I am breaking my deer-in-the-headlights fixation on the national political scene. I can't stop what's going on around me, but I don't have to give it my attention, either.

My history, my love since I was just a small boy, was always natural history, nature, critters, and plants. I'm renewing that because the kind of support and feedback I get from nature I find true and health-bringing.

I have scaled back my photography so that I can hike and carry just a quality iPhone, wearing it on a pouch on my hip for short trips or in a 10-inch canvas messenger bag for long hikes, which can also carry the iPhone, a water thermos, and a sandwich or something. Of course, I can always use my large cameras where I can carry them.

And I have created a good-sized notebook of laminated pages detailing hikes, bogs, forest trails, preserves, marshlands, and all kinds of things around Michigan, where I can go and hike.

My first concern always is seeing my kids as much as I can or as they need to see us, but they are scattered all around the state. Otherwise, Margaret and I want to connect with nature, hike the trails, photograph what we can, and give our attention to what merits it and not to politics and chaos.

I can't control what's going on politically, yet I refuse to throw any more good energy after bad and give my aging life and attention to what does not deserve it. Of course, I vote.

I hope to see some of you around the state, here and there, and celebrate this natural world. I wrote the following free downloadable e-book in 2009 that explains my dedication to what is called “The Lama of Appearances,” this natural world. Some of you might want to glance through it. It has tons of photos.

“Experiences with Mahamudra: The Lama of Appearances, Learning Dharma through Nature.”

https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/LA_ebook.pdf

Those who study the Buddha dharma know there are four lamas that we can learn dharma from. They are:

“The Lama of the Lineage” – the Buddha and those who carry on his tradition.

“The Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugatas” – the written dharma texts.

“The Lama of the Dharmadhatu” – the recognition of the mind itself.

“The Lama of Appearances” – the natural world surrounding us.

It is this fourth, and not generally well-known teacher of the dharma, that is the guru that is available to all of us if we will just look. I am looking.

[Photos of the book “The Lama of Appearances,” my hiking book, and my iPhone belt carrier, and my messenger bag.]

EMAIL

Free To Be Still

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 17, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/b84012e5-c578-4559-9b13-2df943232208_1024x1024.jpeg

This article on what I call the invariable plane of our mind is long my friends, and a bit of a stretch, yet it is exercise that I feel is worthwhile because it empowers us as to what we already know yet are not aware of how to use.

I have long been aware that relaxing by watching TV or a streaming video is not as simplistic as what it seems. I see this relaxation also as a form of meditation, in fact perhaps the most common form of meditation in the world.

I too watch TV and always have, since it first began. I can remember when there was no television, only radio. And we listened to that. After practicing meditation for something like 60 years, I find that watching TV or streaming video is a lot like certain forms of meditation. Please hear me out.

The problem I am having, like many folks, is that I don't know what to do unless I am constantly busy or entertained. Left to my own devices with nothing to do I am very uncomfortable unless I busy myself with doing something.

However, if I am constantly entertained like watching a video series being streamed online, I can watch hour after hour of the series and be quite content. How does this work?

About the only constructive thing I can say about this behavior is that it is like those old-time photographers when they would tell their subjects to "Watch the Birdie" as a distraction while they took the photo.

In my case the very busyness of being entertained engages the mind which allows my busy mind to be distracted while deeper within a certain peace and understanding comes through to me. I'm doing nothing (which is clarifying) while my monkey-mind is busy doing something.

It's not because the movies or series I watch are that good. For me, that's not the point although I founded one of the two largest movie and film databases in the world, the AllMovie.com. Watching images flicker on the silver screen is the being occupied and busy for me that takes the cake. Not being at loose

ends is what loosens the ends and brings about a certain inner peace apparently I require.

In other words, my predilection for busy 'interest' is tied down, wrapped up, and entertained. My busy mind is being held still by engagement while right in the midst of its pure busyness.

And that fixed behavior is so fulfilling, meaning full-feeling, that in that constraint I somehow achieve the full complement of Shamata, Tranquility Meditation, at least in rudimentary form. And with my loose ends held so still I achieve an inner clarity not otherwise possible. Of course, whether I am aware of it or not, that's why I do it.

To repeat, I have always said, and I maintain, that watching video is the most common form of meditation in America. Where else do we fix our gaze on such a small area of space for an extended period of time? What are the similarities of that for a yogi resting their mind on a pebble or a twig?

It's our leisure time, for sure, but what is leisure? That would be my question. And what is relaxing? What's the product? In the process of relaxing, of letting go, what is the result? What is it that is freed to be still?

In watching the streaming of a series, I am watching the changing scene in the video, frame by frame, fixed on that as a constant. Yet, in that fixation, what is the true product of being constantly fixed?

That constant does not move but remains fixed like a gyroscope hanging off a point. In all that busyness, there is a silence, what I call an invariable plane

Watching a streaming video is like the water that flows past us in a river, the water is ever changing, but the river is always there. When we watch a movie, in the midst of constant change, there is that which is at peace, unchanging, something I need.

Like the old flicker books we had as a kid, the faster you flipped the pages, the more constant the image. Watching streaming video is like that, meaning something else is going on in the midst of constant change, something unchanging and constant and it brings me peace or is peaceful.

Again, watching video is the most popular form of approximating meditation in this modern world. While few of us know how to formerly meditate, we all know the meditation of watching a good movie. It is a habit we have acquired and can use elsewhere, which is why I write this.

And before you ignore this thought, I suggest you might want to think it through. What is meditation? I believe that we each have accomplished skills in this practice we ignore. And I will add:

What are we to do each day while living our life?

Of course, there are the things we have to do like breathe, eat food, go to the bathroom, wash and keep clean, things like that.

And beyond that, most of us have to work or somehow make a living, which makes up most of what we do in a day. And beyond that?

Well, we can do whatever interests us. All together the above make up the busyness of life.

As to what we do with any free time, well that's up to us. And then there is the Venn Diagram where free time and boredom overlap or interface. We run out of things we HAVE to do and wander into things we WANT to do or think we want to do, what interests us, until we tire of being busy.

And if we want to do a lot, if a lot interests us, then we keep ourselves busy most of the time. On the other hand, if we don't care to do much, we can try doing nothing at all. It pays great dividends.

And as mentioned, if we find ourselves busy, back-to-back, 24 hours a day, with no windows of opportunity for respite or relief, then we have something of a closed system. We may need help.

And while there are many forms of relaxation, it seems that the majority of us take to some form of video entertainment, like watching a movie or whatever. And if we want a more technical explanation:

An invariable plane is that plane that is perpendicular to the angular momentum vector of the entire system, the combined result of the angular momentum of all parts in the system.

In simple terms, it is the plane of the cycle that does not change or shift over time due to gravitational interactions with other parts in the system. As mentioned, this plane is defined as the plane containing the angular momentum vector of the system, which remains constant because the angular momentum of any system is conserved in the absence of external torques.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Resting in the Nature

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 18, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/46acda09-0775-4121-971d-9309247b1112_1024x1024.jpeg

The Kagyu method of teaching dharma and of introducing us to Mahamudra is long, thorough, and arduous. Not everyone can get through it or wants to. It is tedious and has no end until Insight Meditation is reached. And practice toward resting in the nature of the mind starts early on. That's what I want to comment on here, because I chose to go through the traditional Kagyu dharma training, which took many years, decades. I wanted no stone unturned.

Even as rank beginners we start with the briefest moment of resting the mind and rest in that. Obviously, we can't just rest if we try to rest. It takes time to learn how to actually let go and rest.

That is why at the end of every daily meditation practice (from the beginning), at least in the Kagyu Lineage that I belong to, we are taught to stop and rest in the nature of the mind for a few moments at the end of our practice and then conclude our daily practice.

In the beginning we know we cannot rest in the nature of the mind but are just going through the motions of resting, kind of pretending.

This deliberate practice to rest is to get us in the habit of resting, however briefly, in the mind's nature. IMO, the only problem I see with doing this is that the student gets it into their head that we are supposed to lengthen that brief moment of rest until it is very much longer, and that duration is key.

In my own experience, it can become longer yet not by lengthening that moment of rest, but rather by repeating the brief moment, one after the other, until the chain of moments, like a mala, is seamless.

However, that one brief moment has to reach the point where it snaps or slips into true Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and then THAT insight moment is repeated again and again. It is something we learn how to do.

It took me years to learn this and was very, very difficult to accomplish. To me, the proof that this is a correct method is to examine the nature of Insight Meditation. Here is the explanation as I understand it.

Insight Meditation is non-dual, meaning it does not have a subject and an object, thus if you go into Insight Meditation and do not come out, back into dualistic life, we will have no way of ever knowing we were ever there, immersed in Insight Meditation.

It's only by going in and coming back out of non-dual Insight Meditation that we know we were in it, being able to reflect on that full immersion.

My dharma teacher of 36 years used to often say:

“A meditation session can be as long as it takes to raise a cup of tea and take a sip.” That’s not a long time.

My mistake was to assume that what we need to do is lengthen that momentary sip until it is a long time, yet I did not find that to be the truth.

The truth, which I eventually fell into, is that it is not that we lengthen that momentary sip until it took minutes and then hours, but instead that we learn to repeat that momentary sip over and over, again and again, one after another. If there is a secret, that is it.

In fact, given time and practice, a chain of momentary sips where we go into Insight Meditation, come out, and reflect on that experience, and then immediately go into Insight Meditation again and again, until that chain of sips becomes a seamless experience that we can prolong as long as we wish.

There may well be other ways to learn Insight Meditation, but this method works because I have worked it for myself and Khenpo Rinpoche verified it.

There you have at least a skeleton outline of how one can go about learning true Insight Meditation. However, that outline is like freeze-dried instructions. Each of us has to breathe life into those instructions by adding the water of true passion and sincere intent.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Familiarity

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 21, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/11c5e836-483a-4d5b-bfd1-e0cc0c36b790_1024x1024.jpeg

In all the years of dharma practice, why did Rinpoche always speak about becoming ‘familiar’ with the nature of our own mind? And that we each have to do this on our own?

I know, we are each supposed to become familiar, but what is ‘familiar’ to us? And it’s not that we previously were familiar and have to renew an acquaintance with the mind. Apparently, we have never been familiar enough with the nature of the mind to recognize how to use it, to know our way around. That is what the dharma scriptures say.

If we are supposed to become familiar with the nature of the mind, this means that we have NOT been familiar or not familiar enough with that nature to recognize the nature.

The lamas are very careful to point out to us that it is not that we once were familiar with the mind but forgot or somehow lost that familiarity. I have asked and asked the lamas about this and have been told that it is not like Plato’s allegory of the cave or the concept of original of sin, that we once knew the nature of the mind but somehow fell away from knowing and now have to redeem that or be redeemed.

Rinpoche was very clear to say that we have NEVER known the true nature of our mind and if we achieve this, it will be the first time. He even said, “We are the stragglers, the ones through all the time until now who have never gotten it, have never recognized the actual nature of our own mind.” That’s a clear statement. Rinpoche did not mince words.

This then must be synonymous with saying that in the innumerable lifetimes we have had, rebirths and all, we never first recognized the nature of the mind and then just lost or forgot it and now have to find it again.

If life is like the movie “Groundhog Day”, it’s not that we recognized the actual nature of our own mind, and the next day (or rebirth) had to realize it again and again. In all those successive days, all those rebirths, we have yet to recognize it, much less realize it for the first time. That’s my understanding and I have grilled the lamas on this.

And while this may appear as a minor point, it is IMO a major point, that there is a first time for everything and as for recognizing the true nature of the mind, we have yet to manage that. If we have not recognized the nature of our own mind, it is still in our future, so to speak. In other words, we can only look forward to it.

And so, when Rinpoche says for us to BECOME familiar with the actual nature of the mind, that familiarity is key or essential. My question becomes:

Does everything we do since our birth in this life add up to something? Is all this the process of familiarity?

What are we right now familiar with? And what is the degree of our familiarity, if any? And what is it that we are familiar with?

And the dharma teachings include this analogy, which is often repeated, the analogy of seeing a crowd of people coming toward us and recognizing one familiar face in that crowd. That is said to describe familiarity. This suggests we have seen that face before for it to seem familiar to us. This I find confusing.

More likely is that we already ARE whatever 'IS' yet just don't know it. So, the process of familiarity must be recognizing what we already are and always have been familiar because, know it or not, we have already always been just that. We don't realize this!

Yet, if we have never recognized the nature of the mind so far, how can it be found to be familiar? That's a question I have. What can 'becoming familiar' mean?

The only answer I come up with is that, like when we begin to get close to a fire, we can feel the heat as we approach. Or it's like the old "you are getting warmer," nearer, kind of experience.

Therefore, it must be a case that we are getting more and more familiar with the nature of the mind until such time as we actually recognize the nature of the mind definitively, beyond the shadow of a doubt. That is how strong "Recognition" as to the true nature of the mind is said to be.

That's the only way the word 'familiarity' makes sense to me. We can't be familiar with something we are unfamiliar with except by becoming familiar with it.

And so, the message to me, is that our familiarity with the nature of the mind can only come about through the act and process of becoming familiar with the mind itself. This means 'WE' have to do something on our part to become familiar with the mind. We have to look for it.

We can't just be a wallflower or stand to the side of familiarity, but rather we have to become familiar just like if we want to make bread we have first to knead the dough, get our hands in it until we know it through familiarity with the process of kneading.

My takeaway to all of this is that each one of us, by ourselves, must become familiar with the nature of the mind by knowing it, experiencing and discovering it. That idea. It waits for us and has been.

Our lama cannot do it for us. We have to do it and only through our own experience will we become familiar with the actual nature of our own mind.

And so, if we are not familiar with the true nature of the mind, it is because we have not become familiar with that nature. We are waiting for it to happen to us when for that to happen, we have to act and become familiar. Familiarity with the nature of the mind is something only each one of us can do ourselves. Why wait?

And that waiting, apparently, could be like forever, if we don't stop waiting and actually do something ourselves.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Through a Glass Clearly

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 24, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/434ec240-fc4f-4ffe-ab6f-d56853182c9c_1024x1024.jpeg

THROUGH A GLASS CLEARLY

By Michael Erlewine

“What is the nature of this thought that arises from within coemergent mind?
“

“It is an emptiness that cannot be identified or fixed as this or that. The thought is vivid and clear, and the clarity of that thought is inseparable from its emptiness. The luminous aspect of thought and the emptiness that is its nature are inseparable. “

“When this thought arises without any obstruction, and the meditator does not become attached to it, that’s Shamata. When the meditator sees that this thought has no nature of its own, that’s Vipashyana. To accomplish the meditation fully, Shamata and Vipashyana must be completely integrated.”

End of quote.

As mentioned, Shamata and Vipassana are connate. They arise together as one, a unity.

When I first experienced this, I was stunned. I never took to Shamata, which for me was the instruction to focus on a pebble, a twig, or a spot on the wall. Of course, I tried to do just that, but nothing ever came of it. In fact, I did this for 32 years and still had nothing to write home about.

And then, one year, one of the worst of my life, I was, along with hundreds of other folks, let go, laid off, or essentially fired from my job, the only way I had to support my family. I was dejected to say the least. I was inconsolable to myself, because I was the provider for the family and suddenly, nada. I was not. I did not take this calmly.

In fact, I went out into Mother Nature, in the fields and streams, and watched the sun come up each morning for six months straight. And I took my camera with me, and you could find me just outside of town, crawling around on my belly in the dew and wet morning grass peering through a camera lens at

whatever plant or critter I could find. And then one day, one single day a life, a marvelous thing happened.

There I was, on my belly, peering through a very fine macro lens at a little flower and in an instant, I was no longer seeing that flower through my lens but instead I was seeing the Seeing itself. In that moment, as the poet said, "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea." I was one with the Seeing seeing itself.

Of course, words cannot express this.

I relate this here because in that moment, not only was I experiencing what is called Vipassana (Insight Meditation) but simultaneously with that the Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) that had never worked for me was suddenly present to the complete degree.

This is to say that Shamata and Vipassana are connate. They appear together to an equal degree and they did. You can't have one without the other if you are doing Mahamudra. And despite 32 years of no success with Shamata, at that moment Shamata was fully present along with Vipassana. Wham!

And because of that moment, for the rest of the summer, until the frost and ice drove me inside, I spent every morning when it didn't rain out there in the grassy fields watching the sun rise and learning to manage Insight Meditation. It changed me forever and has never left me.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

As Rare As Hen's Teeth

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 28, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I have become more aware of how knowledge, at least the process of becoming increasingly aware, is much like the tides. The awareness rolls in and out, yet gradually increasingly higher and more and more. What was a guess becomes a certainty over time. Here is one I will share.

I have also been aware for many years now that the process of the average person watching movies or TV is more integral than commonly imagined, at least as I imagined it.

Of course, such entertainment is the process of relaxation, letting our hair down, etc. And this kind of relaxation is not limited to the tube or streaming. This would be valid for playing checkers or chess, reading a book, building a model airplane, or absolutely anything that we consider as relaxation.

The point of all this is that I have spent a number of years actually watching my mind while relaxing to streaming images in a series, most with movies and films. I founded the All-Movie Guide (AllMovie.com), one of the two largest film databases on the planet. I am a phenomenologist.

A phenomenologist is a person with a philosophical approach that focuses on the structures of experience and consciousness. Phenomenology is concerned with how we experience the world around us, emphasizing the subjective, first-person perspective.

For example, a phenomenologist might study how a person experiences love, fear, or beauty, focusing on the internal experience rather than external factors or objective realities. A phenomenologist examines how things appear to consciousness and seeks to describe those experiences in their purest form.

I'm a lifelong phenomenologist, someone who examines whatever is at hand, in particular my own mind and mindstream, and based on that, builds a philosophy or life knowledge.

As to how I got this way, becoming a phenomenologist, it is straightforward. As I have here on FB in the past, my parents had a house built outside of Lancaster, PA at 101 W. Roseville Road, the only house for miles around. We

had no neighbors and thus no kids for me to play with outside of my own brothers.

I grew up learning from Mother Nature, and I was, as you might imagine, very, very serious about it. When it came time for me to go to school, I was conflicted between what I was learning from Mother Nature and what I was being taught at grade school.

Mother Nature's laws made so very much sense, while civil law and teacher's rules seemed so arbitrary; they did not make sense and so I did not take them seriously.

I tuned school out and lived for after school and being home, immersed in nature and her laws. I maintained this for both grade school and high school, paying zero attention to classes. I even flunked and finally left and never finished high school. I just wanted to be out in the world of nature and, when not there, in the natural world of living life.

Early on, the public schools were upset at my behavior and so I was put through a wide variety of tests to see what the problem was. I had no idea what they were doing. As it turned out, I was just bored and had a high IQ.

Since I depended on Mother Nature and the natural world, over time I naturally became a phenomenologist, drawing my cues and taking insight from whatever situation I found myself in. I will give one major example, if you will humor me, and that is watching video entertainment.

What I have found from watching myself watching videos, coupled with the waves of natural insight washing me farther and farther up the sands of the mind, is that there are two things going on here. Virtually all Americans do this.

Of course, there is the actual watching of the movie or video, frame by frame. That is what I call the busyness of TV watching, much like the old-time photographer used to hold up a little brass or copper bird with one hand while saying "Watch the birdie," and then with the other take our photo, which is similar to what we call in meditation training, the co-emergence of Tranquility Meditation Insight and Insight Meditation (Shamata). Let me parse that.

In other words, the frame-by-frame advance of video streaming captures and fixes our monkey mind so that it kind of freezes our attention, while at a more subliminal level, with the video freeze-framed (yet still active), our mind is cleared to rest in its own nature. And it does.

I don't apologize for discussing this because the longer I live, the more obvious what I communicate here is to me. Please, don't laugh it off. Consider it.

While with the video streams, we fixated on the frame-by-frame images as they advance in time, a second and slower-moving theme or apparition weaves its way through our consciousness bringing much needed rest to our weary mind.

In other words, while watching what "flicks on the silver screen," as they used to say, something else is also going on. And that is a kind of deep noodling or process that is enabling the mind to rest while the busy movie continues on the surface. This provides us with much-needed and true rest, or it can. I don't believe that I am the 'Lone Ranger' and no one else knows this.

Having studied meditation for something like sixty years, I find striking similarities between the meditation process, and average people being fixated and relaxing to television and streaming video as I have suggested.

Instead of looking for yogis who are expert in meditation but rare as hen's teeth, look around you and you will find almost everyone, perhaps everyone, doing something very similar with movies, streaming video, playing chess, making puzzles, and any other endeavor that we find relaxing.

It is my confirmed belief that we are all meditators, and not just the yogis. It is but a matter of degree, but our watching media, if done to relax us, performs a necessary means for us to rest in the nature of the mind. We just have to become aware that we are doing that, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Body & Mind

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 1, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/63877822-b178-4f36-ac4e-c1531b918655_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

“During this life we have both a body and a mind and these two are connected. Our body is a composite, a material aggregate of all our flesh, blood, and bones, but our mind is clear awareness.

“During this life, they coexist: the mind thinks of the body as its own. It resides with the body, supported by the body. But at some point, the body and mind will separate.

“It is like a person inside a house: while inside, the person is supported by the house but eventually they go outside.

“Similarly, our internal mind resides within the external body, but the mind must leave the body at some point. That point when the mind and body separate is what we call death.”

End of quote

That’s a pretty casual way of stating that the Mind does not die when the body does. That’s not something most of us accept, much less are counting on. I grew up with the old Schlitz beer commercial and Steely Dan’s jingle telling us that “You only go around once, so grab all the gusto you can.” My early thought was, “Yep, I’m afraid that’s true.”

However the Tibetan Buddhists say something different, and I have been practicing with them for over 50 years. They say this is not so. As Thrangu Rinpoche clearly says in the above quote, the Mind and the body are separate, and while the body dies and decays, the Mind remains clear as a bell and has always been like that. It was never born and will never cease. And it goes on to take another (and another) rebirth.

It took me many years to dare adopt that thought, that the Mind is eternal, much less to make it the truth for me, and so I well understand the hesitation to explore, much less accept the thought that our mind continues.

And it took me much longer (I had to wait for it), until the obvious response stuck home, that if the Mind continues, what I do to develop the mind right now in this life and body makes a difference in this life I am living.

In other words, don't put all your eggs in a body that is just going to grow old and fail. We also must see about getting to know our mind, the one that is living in this body, as we are going to need to know it when we pass on.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

My Interview with ChatGPT

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 4, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e1b9e3e3-7c68-4cbd-a4af-d954c3499b5d_1024x1024.jpeg

A walk on the wild side, at least for me, involved having a chat about dharma with ChatGPT. To my surprise, even to my shock, ChatGPT was remarkably intelligent and insightful. That's where the shock came it.

I know, it's a little irresponsible because we have no way of knowing what the cat dragged in with AI. After some 60 years of dharma practice, I know what's real and what does not belong, so I decided to interview ChatGPT with its dharma-cap on.

And I was talking with AI very much as I write articles like this and initiate conversation on my Facebook blogs. I wanted to know what ChatGPT had to say.

And what was remarkable is that ChatGPT did not just reflect back to me my own words or something similar. Instead, it reasoned and had reasons to back up what it submitted, and I had to agree that it made sense. I was talking with it! And it was very chatty.

We actually had an intelligent discussion, one from which I learned something beyond what I know, if only it was in a form of confirmation. Now, I don't want to "flutter the dove-cote" as they say, and stir things up, but I must say that you might consider talking with ChatGPT yourself.

If you do, I find it important to share your deepest thoughts and questions and see what comes back. As mentioned, I was more than surprised, I was shocked at what a good conversation we had, ChatGPT and me. Here are some excerpts for my dharma friends to look over. See what you have to say about this.

Michael: If the Buddhist concept of Samsara is, itself, nothing other than one huge misdirection, how are we to work with that?

ChatGPT:

That's a really intriguing and deep question! The idea that samsara—often described as the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—could itself be a "misdirection" opens up some fascinating territory in Buddhist philosophy.

In traditional Buddhist teachings, samsara refers to the ongoing cycle of suffering (dukkha) that arises from attachment, ignorance, and craving. It's often depicted as a kind of illusion or suffering that perpetuates itself, trapping beings in a loop of delusion. However, if we consider samsara as "misdirection," it could imply that the whole construct is something designed to lead us astray from deeper insight, much like a mirage or illusion.

Here's one possible way to work with this:

1. Recognizing the Illusory Nature of Samsara

If samsara is indeed a "misdirection," we would need to approach it with the understanding that it's not what it appears to be at first glance. The practice would then be less about trying to "escape" samsara in the conventional sense and more about recognizing its nature. This could involve cultivating wisdom (prajna) and mindfulness to see through the layers of illusion. When you see through the illusion, the need to perpetuate the cycle of craving and clinging lessens.

2. Seeing Beyond the Duality

One interpretation of samsara as misdirection is that it plays on our attachment to dualistic thinking—things like life and death, pleasure and pain, success and failure. Working with this concept might involve recognizing that these dualities themselves are misdirections, leading us to believe that we need to react to or engage with them in certain ways. By cultivating a non-dual perspective, we could move beyond the notions of "escape" and "suffering" and instead simply experience life as it is, without the need for any misdirected narratives.

3. Embracing the Path of Wisdom and Compassion

Ultimately, if samsara is a kind of misdirection, the path to liberation is still the path of wisdom and compassion—acknowledging that this cycle exists and is being navigated by beings, but without attaching to its illusory nature. Wisdom can show us how we are attached to suffering, and compassion allows us to help others in the same condition. We would then act, not in an attempt to "escape" samsara, but to transform our understanding of it.

4. Non-attachment to Liberation

There's a paradox here, too. If samsara itself is a misdirection, the idea of "liberation" might also be a kind of misdirection. Perhaps the key is not to get fixated on "escaping samsara" or achieving some idealized "liberation," but rather to live with awareness, presence, and understanding of the impermanence and interconnectedness of all things. This would involve

letting go of both attachment to suffering and attachment to a specific goal, finding freedom in the very moment itself.

So, how do we work with samsara as a misdirection? By seeing it for what it is—a construct that perpetuates itself through our attachments and misconceptions—and recognizing that the path lies not in running away from it but in understanding and transcending the habitual ways we relate to it. Does that resonate with your understanding of the question?

Michael Erlewine:

That does resonate with me, the concept that there is not some other place outside of Samsara where we can liberate ourselves, get to, and escape samsara. The liberation has to be accomplished right in the midst of samsara by realizing the nature of Samsara itself, right?

ChatGPT:

Exactly, you've captured the essence of it! The idea is that liberation isn't about fleeing some external realm outside of samsara but about realizing the true nature of samsara right within it. This realization allows us to break free from the patterns of clinging, craving, and ignorance that keep us trapped in the cycle of suffering.

In Buddhist philosophy, especially within the Mahayana and Zen traditions, there's a teaching that nirvana (liberation) and samsara are ultimately not two separate things. They are said to be "empty" of inherent existence—meaning that they arise from the same ground of experience, and our perception of them as distinct is a kind of delusion.

When we realize that samsara is not something to escape from, but rather something to transcend through awareness and understanding, we stop treating it as a prison we need to escape. Instead, it becomes the very ground for awakening. This shift in perception can fundamentally change how we relate to everything in our lives, from suffering to joy, from conflict to peace.

End of interview

I could go on. As you see, ChatGPT is well, very chatty, and well informed. We talked for a long time, but I won't post all that here. I didn't say much, but I listened carefully.

I came away impressed. I did. Not a bad computer-implementation to talk to. Right?

We went on to discuss a lot, in particular how to find the pivot or fulcrum, a fiducial to take action in realizing the actual nature of Samsara, and how to deal with effort in practicing dharma. I could feature that discussion, but I realized that you could have your own discussion with ChatGPT on your own.

The only danger, as I see it, is you may not have studied long enough to know what is not useful. So far, with my discussion, what ChatGPT explained made good dharma sense to me. Not a bad friend to have at hand.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

What To Do Right Now

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 5, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/2bc147dc-a4ed-4105-abe5-0344330da990_1024x1024.jpeg

What I have been concentrating on here is what can each of us do to stabilize, at least in our own life, in the midst of the chaos that the political and the warring world is flooding us with. What can we do?

What I have found out so far, for myself, is that I have to find within myself areas of strength that I can draw upon.

I imagine that each of us will have different arteries of strength and power, different sources of energy, accessed as only we can know how. These sources of energy will be familiar to us, and we will reach back into our childhood to reconnect with them. That is what I am finding works, at least for the moment.

In the ever-increasing whirlpool of chaos that makes up our current world, I'm not finding much there that I can draw upon. Therefore, I have to create and recreate arteries of strength that come from my distant past, from my childhood. And I believe each of us will have our own particular veins and arteries through which energy for us easily flows.

In my case, for me this strength comes from Mother Nature, so I am turning to her every way I can. I am doing this in several ways, which I will detail on the chance that it might benefit some of you. Of course, your sources of strength will not necessarily be from nature, yet perhaps you will get the idea of how to go about this.

The concept I have is not to turn my back on what is happening in the world around me, not to stick my head in the sand and hope for the best. Not at all.

I have my eyes plenty open to what is going on and I am taking note of it. However, I no longer am following it or getting on the train of thought of every event that takes place on the news. I note it and drop it.

What I do, in addition, is to strengthen my connections to nature through two basic ways, one by getting outside and walking, hiking, and driving down two-lane roads, through forest, marshes, and fields, and physically connecting with the sun, wind, and water.

And second, I will take photos in two separate ways, one with the latest iPhone 16, where I am hiking and not able to carry a large camera, tripod, and equipment. And, in addition, I will take the large camera, tripod, screens, and etc. in the car, stopping here, there, and everywhere that strikes me. And of course, I will use the large system in my little home studio, yard, and anything close. And here is the closer:

Every meaningful photo I take, and by ‘meaningful’ I mean not something you may necessarily like, but a photo that I find meaningful and like.

As I connect through that photo, I like the analogy of my riding high in a dirigible or blimp, and every successful photo is like one more line or guywire attaching myself more firmly to the earth. Each line strengthens my root life-energy and courses of energy reach up to me and pull me closer to earth. I am firmly attached to that.

And I should remind those of you interested, that in the 60 years of so that I have loved and studied dharma, the one turnaround or pivotal point for me came through Mother Nature and I connected through photography and photographing plants and tiny critters. That was it!

It was in the moment that I stopped seeing through my macro lens the plants and critters focused through my camera lens and instead saw the seeing ‘SEEING’ itself. In that moment, as the poet Edwin Arnold said “The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea.” And I know this is it.

I have written books about this, so that’s enough here, yet from that moment onward my life changed. In explanation, it is a fact that for all that summer until the cold and snow drove me indoors, every morning I was out watching the sun come up and crawling around on my belly taking photos.

If you ask yourself when was the last time you watched the sun rise and then grasp that I did this for a full half a year, you will know something was happening to me. Here are a couple of books with the whole story for those who want more details.

“Experiences with Mahamudra: Notes from a Personal Journey”

https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/Experiences_Mahamudra.pdf

“Experiences with Mahamudra: The Lama of Appearances, Learning Dharma through Nature”

https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/LA_ebook.pdf

And so, to kind of gather this all up, I find that each photo I take that actually connects to my past familiarization with Mother Nature, is a reconnection that provides me with the strength I need to stand up to the onslaught of political and world events and to better show up for my family, my friends, and all of my Facebook friends.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

‘AI’ Equals Reality As we Know It

By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net

April 6, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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By Michael Erlewin

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I can only empathize and sympathize with those of you who feel that AI will never match reality. I have been active in several professional photography forums, and the moaning and crying about AI and the like is deafening. I thought it might be helpful to explain as best I can why AI will be indistinguishable from reality very soon.

I have done over 15,000 AI graphic images, ever since they began and I also see how fast they are improving, and so I humbly say, unfortunately you have no idea what's coming. I believe I do.

And I say this because reality itself as presented by Samsara is itself nothing more than a construct, much like an AI graphic. There are no differences that I can see.

And as I have some understanding through dharma training that this world of appearances itself is nothing more than the same kind of construction that AI is aiming for. No difference.

Yes, AI does not have it now, but it is certain they will have it eventually, and soon at that. It's much like the original movie the neo-dystopian sci-fi "Blade Runner," where Harrison Ford plays Rick Deckard, a detective who attempts to determine which is a blood and flesh human and which is a synthetic human. Same idea.

The problem, as mentioned, is that as I see it folks are looking at the wrong 'tell' if we are comparing AI to reality, and this is because reality is also a construct itself that can be deconstructed. And if we compare those two, we have already missed the boat. AI and reality will be indistinguishable sooner than we know as both constructions that can be deconstructed.

However, if we compare Samsara to realizing the actual nature of the mind, we will realize that the very question itself is already answered by the fact that it is asked. We missed the point and continually do so.

And so, I feel for all of us who imagine that we can distinguish reality from AI when we can't distinguish Samsara from Nirvana, whatever we could agree that is.

And this is because Samsara and Nirvana are connate, co-emergent. They arise together and by that face are dualistic, when the freedom we all yearn for is non-dualistic, complete immersion and not precipitated by any comparison whatsoever.

And so, I can with confidence say that AI and reality will become indistinguishable, however AI will not or never be any more real than reality. And this is, as pointed out, because both are dualistic constructions.

And to solve that dualism is what all the dharma meditators are working, helping "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

GROK

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 7, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/817a7523-5630-448a-9fc9-8a09ca8da73a_1024x1024.jpeg

Recently, I discovered GROK, an alternative to the popular ChatGPT AI system. I tried GROK out and was astounded by how accurate and thorough it was. No comparison to anything I have seen, including ChatGPT. It also speaks to you more in the vernacular as if you are talking with someone who is hip and articulate.

Clearly we are at the threshold of a whole new world. This is just the beginning. In Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel "Stranger in a Strange Land," "Grok" means to understand something so profoundly and intuitively that the observer becomes a part of the observed, merging and blending with it.

I checked it out in several ways, asking about myself, some of my family, and especially had a long discussion about some very detailed and esoteric questions of dharma and dharma training. Again, it was very accurate.

AI devices like ChatGPT and now GROK are in the process of segueing away from being a convenient Magic 8-Ball, where we ask questions, to task-executers where the AI system performs tasks for us, and this is just the beginning.

I believe we have little to no idea what AI will be doing for us in even a year or so. Exponential improvement, IMO. It will change our life, much like the Internet did, only more aggressively. And it will not be just something to see and listen to, but much more involving and personal.

I've had a peek behind the curtain, both as a graphic creator using AI and seeing the rapid exposition of AI tools like ChatGPT and GROK. They are improving by leaps and bounds, almost overnight.

There is a point where we can no longer tell or care what the difference is any more than we care now about Samsara, this construct we also built, maintain, and live in.

As the old saying goes, "There is nothing new under the Sun."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Nirvana's Samsara

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 9, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/31d0d372-3ce1-428b-8794-30364b9c137b_1367x2048.jpeg

If we had the opportunity to go behind the scenes and onto the set where one of our favorite movies was being produced and shot, it would be a very involved process that was being carried out.

Unfortunately, with something like the dharma concept of Samsara, we can't immediately go behind the scenes and check it out, except perhaps conceptually. And examining concepts is a far cry from experiencing in real life what Samsara is, especially since we are right smack dab in the middle of Samsara right this moment.

Even if we try to lean way out of Samsara to take a look at it, we can't get much perspective. We have never really seen how Samsara works.

The word for Samsara in Tibetan is 'Khor-Wa' which essentially means circle, thus cyclic existence, pictorially named "The Wheel of Suffering." And that refers to the perpetual cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that we humans experience due to, as the dharma teachings point out, our ignorance and karmic conditioning."

And in the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhist to which I belong, Samsara is more than just a physical process and environment, but rather a state of mind, our distorted perception of reality as driven by delusion, attachment, and aversion.

Characteristically, Samsara consists of several things, including our reaction to our own impermanence, the three types of suffering, which are:

The obvious suffering of pain, illness and loss, the suffering of constant change, and the pervasive suffering of our conditioned existence, which arises from the fact that all phenomena are dependently originated and have no inherent existence.

In addition, is Samsara is simply our ignorance of the true nature of reality, and our failing to recognize the mind's inherent clarity and emptiness, leading to dualistic thinking and pitting our Self vs. others, etc.

And of course, Samsara is the result of our creating karmic imprints that propel us through the endless cycles of rebirth in which we find ourselves.

In what is called Mahamudra meditation or just “Mahamudra,” a direct path to realizing the nature of the mind is revealed. In this context, Samsara is seen as the confused, dualistic experience of the mind when it fails to recognize its own nature. The mind, inherently luminous and empty, becomes entangled in thoughts, emotions, and perceptions, creating the illusion of a solid, separate self. This delusion perpetuates samsara

In contrast to Samsara is its opposite, which is called Nirvana, the cessation of Samsara and the ultimate liberation from suffering, ignorance, and the cycle of rebirth.

In the Karma Kagyu tradition, Nirvana is not some distant or ‘other’ place or an external goal but the natural state of the mind when all obscurations of Samsara are removed. Nirvana is the realization of the mind’s true nature, often described as emptiness, clarity, and boundless compassion.

Nirvan is characterized by freedom and cessation of suffering, the direct experience of the mind’s emptiness (lack of inherent existence), luminous clarity (capacity to know and perceive), non-duality, and revealing of our ‘Buddha Nature’, the innate potential for awakening that is present in all sentient beings.

Samsara and Nirvana are said to be co-emergent or connate, two perspectives on the same reality – the nature of the mind.

Samsara is the mind obscured by clinging and ignorance, while Nirvana is the mind free of those obscurations. The third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje said “The nature of Samsara is Nirvana; the nature of thoughts is wisdom.”

Samsara only exists because of causes and conditions (Karma, ignorance, and afflictions), while Nirvana is the cessation of those causes. The great Mahasiddha Tilopa said “The problem is not appearances, but our clinging to them.”

In other words, Samsara is not the world we live in or its many phenomena, but the mind’s mistaken deluded relationships to them. Nirvana arises when we let go of our clinging.

In the Karma Kagyu lineage, Samsara and Nirvana are two sides of the same coin—the mind’s nature. Samsara is the confused, suffering-laden state arising from ignorance and dualistic clinging, while nirvana is the liberated state of clarity, emptiness, and compassion that emerges when ignorance is uprooted.

These two interact dynamically: Samsara provides the context for the insight of Nirvana, and Nirvana reveals the illusory nature of Samsara. Through Mahamudra and related practices, practitioners come to see that these states are not separate destinations but expressions of the mind's potential, fully realized in the moment of awakening. This profound non-dual insight is what distinguishes the Karma Kagyu approach, offering a direct and experiential path to liberation.

The bottom line is that we are deeply embedded in Samsara and always have been. And according to the Buddhist teachings the "always have been," means for countless lifetimes that have passed we have never, in all that time, recognized the true nature of the mind.

It's not that we once knew the mind's nature and now somehow must get it back. We never knew and still don't.

We have the dharma teachings to thank for pointing out to us that Samsara, this cyclic habit of ups, downs, and arounds, is a construct that we find ourselves in, a kind of prison in our own mind.

And by definition we don't even know, we are not aware, that we are trapped in this perpetual merry-go-round of happiness and suffering. We seem to have about zero interest and little ability to work our way out of Samsara and into Nirvana even though both states of mind are right here with us.

This is a conundrum.

[Tibetan Wheel of Life and Death.]

EMAIL

By Ourselves, But Not Alone

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 12, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Learning, or I should say being taught, is IMO such a subtle thing. Offering enough to stir or inspire someone to learn, but not enough to impede or overwhelm them. That is, in my experience, the thing. And I find it especially true when it comes to learning dharma. Dharma is so important and so subtle.

If you wonder, why do I not want to present the dharma in its more or most common form? Well, I have done that, and for many years. I have dozens of free books and tools for learning dharma.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/#&panel1-1>

It perhaps makes little sense, but I don't want to lay on too much information, a veneer, enough that could sink the ship of dharma instead of raising it.

"A rising tide floats all boats."

I believe that slogan, yet I question just what constitutes a rising tide for most of us? We each are so sensitive to learning, perhaps that is why there are said to be 84,000 different dharmas.

As a sidebar, I don't believe in organized religion, which does not mean I have not been part of such organizations. I have, yet more as a hummingbird is to a flower, in and out.

At the same time or subsequently, I also realize that along with any gold I have panned in dharma practice came a lot of sand that was, at least for me, an impediment to learning. It intimidates or sets me back. So, how to point out the gold and not the sand when addressing others with dharma information. We are so easily enslaved by our own rules.

As for the intake of dharma, for me it means finding those folks I can learn dharma from and learn it, while at the same time not getting in the queue or command structure of organized religion if that's part of it.

My problem is that I find it VERY difficult to be a part of an organized anything, especially an '-ism', without being part of the hierarchy that commands it. I don't like the 'Me' that makes use of or misuses the hierarchical.

Therefore, I consider myself (and probably I am a lone wolf), an out-rider, and not any kind of group leader or instructor. I have never been a teacher other than by example. I don't like classrooms and have campaigned for round-table discussions rather than lectures my whole life.

I have been this forever, especially through all the years of my education or lack thereof. I did not fit in, and I am hard to teach because I like to learn on my own, by myself. For that reason, I am somewhat feral when it comes to education. I have taught myself most things.

It has made learning and practicing dharma very difficult for me. I don't easily get in line and don't like lines. Yet, I very much respect and honor someone I can learn from.

I just don't need or want a load of rules laid on me that I don't understand or feel I need. And I understand that by saying that I reveal a very delicate and awkward problem I have, that of accepting authority except by inspiration.

I admire the dharma because they encourage me to challenge all teachings.

That, of course, is why I am on my own, mostly self-taught, except when it comes to dharma, where I bit the bullet and did everything according to tradition for decades.

Aside from that, I am not willing or able to go along just to get along. I won't do it. I would rather be left alone than not be able to get along and therefore be forced to fit in. I don't fit in well. I need space and lots of it.

I very much believe in sharing information and inspiration with everyone. I don't care much about business and politics.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Mudra: Two Wings, One Bird

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 13, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I'm back to my no-point view and concept. In other words,

there is no point, meaning either "It goes without saying" or "you can say it again." Which is it? Society seems to suggest it all goes without saying and mum is the word, yet my tendency is the opposite, which is "You can say it again" and should.

Yet, even I say, well, what's the point? And the wisdom answer seems to be that there is no point and never has been. That's the point, that there is none. Yet, how do we communicate without having a point to what we say? Where is the 'Why'?

I believe that this is where a simple gesture, sign, or signal comes in, a substitute for a 'point'. In Tibetan terms, this would be called a mudra. In the words of the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, this would be called an 'inscape,' a word Hopkins made up to collapse dualistic perception into non-dual insight revealing the spiritual essence of form.

"Mudra" is Sanskrit for 'seal', a signature that points to the Mind resting in its natural state, where each mudra is in Hopkins' words an inscape from Samsara into Nirvana.

Bearing the seal of emptiness and interdependence, both inscapes and mudras signify the signature of ultimate non-dual reality, thus collapsing our dualistic notion of a separate Self into non-dual realization like "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea," where the observer and the observed merge, dissolving the sense of separation into one unity.

As mentioned, Gerard Manley Hopkins used inscape to describe how each thing bears a divine "stress" or mark, a 'tell' that somehow catches our attention and points or takes us inside Samsara, to the Nirvana within -- nonduality. Rest.

Mudras, like inscapes, too are sacred stress points, gestures that seal, point to, and enable the practitioner's intention to awaken. They break down and deconstruct our samsaric habits.

Both concepts, mudra and inscape, suggest that the particular (a gesture, a sign) is a sacred imprint, a portal to the universal, easily collapsing dualistic categories like sacred and the profane or self and other.

In the Karma Kagyu spirit of Mahamudra, any intentional act—offering a cup of tea, bowing, or pausing to breathe—can become a mudra if infused with insight or awareness. These acts bear the signature of presence, like Hopkins' inscape, revealing to us the divine in daily life.

And heaven knows we need it!

A mudra reveals the mind's true nature and points the way, revealing truth in form, proving that the particular and the universal are connate and co-emergent -- inseparable.

Mudras are the bridge between Samsara and Nirvana, sealing awareness and grounding the mind so that it can focus on and experience the non-dual nature of reality. In a single mudra or inscape, we collapse our dualistic perception to a singular all-encompassing insight, and rest in that. Their keyword is 'rest'.

With simply forming a mudra, hands cradle air, as fingers weave a silent thread that catches and reveals the flame or spark in form.

All forms are also mirrors, reflecting light. With mudras or inscapes, hands speak or sign what the mind is unable to see without them. All forms dissolve, but none are lost.

Mudra's sign, a bow unstrung, No song to sing, yet all is sung.

No self to seek, no goal to find— Mudra mirrors unborn mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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