

Spirit Grooves Archive

Dharma Writings — Book Three 2026

Articles 201–300

By Michael Erlewine

SpiritGrooves.net



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Bodhicitta

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 14, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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It is pronounced: BEAU-DEE-CHEAT- AH

The Sanskrit word “Bodhicitta” means ‘Awakened Heart and Mind, not only embodies the aspiration to attain enlightenment but to help bring all other beings with you.

In other words, Bodhicitta is a profound intention and an active practice, the very cornerstone of the Bodhisattva path of not only personal liberation but working tirelessly for the liberation of others.

The great Gampopa, founder of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, said:

“The root of the Mahayana path is Bodhicitta, Without it, all practices are like a tree without roots.”

Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa

“Bodhicitta is the jewel that illuminates the darkness of samsara. Hold it firmly, and all beings will find the path.”

Milarepa

“If your heart is filled with Bodhicitta, every step you take is a dance of liberation for others.”

16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje

“Bodhicitta is not just a wish; it is the courage to act for others, even when the mind is clouded by doubt.”

17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje

“Bodhicitta begins with a single thought of kindness, but it grows to embrace the universe. Start small, but dream vast.”

It does not take much to set a tone or trigger an insight, however it takes just the right touch to inspire ourselves or sometimes other folks.

Behind all that I do, be it through photography, essay writing, or any other stories I might tell, is a will and desire to share information with others. This should not be underestimated.

For myself, I find the dharma the most efficient vehicle to do this sharing. Yet, even that takes, at least for me, years of work learning to write what I write and the way I write it.

And of course, I have been told many times over that I write too much and should be more succinct. It's not that I don't hear that suggestion, just that for me writing is being written until I run out of gas, so to speak, until I naturally stop.

And I am a confirmed believer that having certain information and ideas run past us, over and over, and from many different directions is grist for the mill of understanding.

What drives all this and where do we find it? There is a Sanskrit word that describes this, "Bodhicitta," yet it has no English verbal equivalent. In Tibetan it is 'Jang-Chub'. It is pronounced:

BEAU-DEE-CHEAT- AH

However, Bodhicitta is not easily defined. As mentioned, there is no English word that is equivalent, so in that sense it is inexpressible. Nevertheless, it is important to communicate the meaning because so much in dharma depends on it.

Those who study and practice the dharma the Buddha left us, his scriptures, early on learn about compassion and learning to be compassionate. In the beginning, much of what we practice as compassion is kind of drummed up, manufactured. We try to be kind and compassionate, but this is not the same as naturally being compassionate.

It is the same with Bodhicitta. There is Aspirational Bodhicitta (we aspire) and then there is what is called Absolute Bodhicitta.

In a word, Absolute Bodhicitta, is an unquenchable and untiring desire to share the dharma with others, with all comers. That urge is there when you go to sleep and it is there when you wake up. It never goes away and cannot be satisfied.

And while it is easy to aspire to want to benefit others with the dharma, that untiring urge to do so is not something we can pick up from a book or order on the Internet.

Absolute Bodhicitta is a byproduct of what is called 'Recognition', and by that is meant by recognition on our part of the actual or true nature of the mind.

And this "Recognition" is not a construct or concept that we have to understand, although that helps, but rather a non-conceptual and non-dualistic experience, a byproduct of our letting go and immersion in the present moment.

When we finally recognize how our own mind works, with that realization comes 'Absolute Bodhicitta', the intense will and desire to share that recognition with others. It's that important that we cannot 'not share' it with others.

And, as mentioned, Absolute Bodhicitta is not simply aspirational, meaning that we intellectually wish it on others. Instead, it is an unstoppable urge and dedication to share the essence of dharma with other beings, however we can.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Winds of Samsara

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 16, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The only tool I know to manage the sometime vicious winds of this life, Samsara, is with dharma.

And for me 'Dharma' amounts to how best to live life, how to exist and persist, plain and simple. It's not like there is a single book of dharma rules to buy, although I understand that there is more literature about dharma by an order of magnitude than any other religion, if the dharma is a religion. I don't consider dharma a religion, but just common sense.

If anything, dharma is a kind of aerodynamic shaping-tool as to how we take the winds of change, so that we can balance and control our flow in the wind-tunnels of this life. Dharma serves to help trim me down to a 'flying-weight' where I can better survive the winds of change. Life is a constant challenge.

With dharma as I know it, we were taught to test everything, asking questions as we go. The questions I put to the dharma are the questions that come up in my life, and if I ask them seriously and long enough, I always come up with the answers. That's dharma as I know and use it.

I first learned about dharma in the late 1950s and then a little later I actually began to practice dharma starting with Zen Buddhism. What was at first only a conceptual understanding gradually came closer and closer until the dharma pointed out to me the 'Now', this immediate moment. We don't go beyond the present moment because there is nothing beyond it. This moment is eternal, unborn. it never was not present.

And the dharma is how we deal with it. We can learn to immerse ourselves in the present moment and begin to shake off our dualistic habit of looking at life from a distance. This present moment is nondual; it can absorb out conceptual constructs lock, stock, and barrel, as they say, as scary as that can seem to us at first.

Working with that kind of equation, the conversion of the dualistic into the nondual, is dharma as I know it, front and center. And I don't mean just sticking my toe in the water but rather immersing myself completely in it. That

is what is known as ‘nonduality’, and for me the classic line that describes this is “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” How can we do that?

As Samsaric beings, we are by habit divided, dualistic, and those of us invoking dharma are perhaps poised at the brink of non-duality and leaning toward it as best we can. Yet we are not there.

How do we go from being solely dualistic beings (subject and object) to losing that separation between subject and object and by that loss become fully immersed in non-duality where there are no subjects and no objects. That is the standstill at which so many folks are stuck pending, “To Be or Not to Be.” Our choice.

The secret or method to do this is to learn to rest in the non-dual nature of the mind for a single moment, and although this sounds easy, it is not.

However, if we can learn to rest in the true nature of the mind for even a moment, fully, we can invoke that moment again, and again, and again, creating a seamless stream of clarity and luminosity to rest in.

In my case, doing something as simple as this took me many years of practice, yet it is very simple. Being that simple and resting that simply for me was very difficult. I had to learn to let go and just allow the mind to rest, something I did not know how to do.

Give it a rest!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Going All Out

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 17, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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There are only a set number of ways or ‘talents’ that each of us have to express ourselves. These may be our vocations or hobbies, yet chances are that those of us who are older have in recent years added very few new ways or interests to share. The norm is to settle into our ways with age and retire from the scene.

So, when things get tough, I find myself going to whatever I consider a favorite, familiar, and comfortable mode of expression. That seems to be what I do.

And for me these options are few, like the fingers I can count on one hand, a few modes of expression, not many. And I seek them out. Each is a language I speak.

Of course, for me there is photography. I am up to speed on that. The same goes for AI graphics, I’m in line with the curve there too. And writing blogs like these, yes, every day. But my history in music, other than listening, is decades old. I can’t just pick up an instrument other than my ears and produce much.

Yes, I’m a little bit handy around the house, but nothing to write home about and certainly not something I can do with ease. And I am by now years away from computer programming and that field changes so fast that I would be helpless if I tried to pick it up again.

A principal interest, one I have no choice about, is trying to take care of my health and body, which is, by definition, a declining asset. I can always do that. I have to.

And I have been trying to get out more, to hike and explore areas nearby where I live and that should be fun. Is it?

So far, I am still trying to get back what in my family we used to call our ‘zoo legs’, the ability to walk or hike for any real distance, like taking the kids to the zoo. It’s painful, yet it has to be done or I won’t be doing much of any kind of hiking.

The confinement of a northern Michigan winter is a challenge for anyone living in this climate and spring each year is an ordeal, as T.S. Elliot put it:

"April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain..."

Well, it's April here in Michigan and I am working to recover from all those months shut up indoors. It's necessary, but so far, I cannot say it is fun, other than to feel the sun on my face again and the frozen ground softening into something walkable. I know it is spring when the ground softens and makes my tennis shoes on the softening earth feel like they are moccasins.

And this leaves the dharma and my practicing it. That urge or drive, which is called Bodhicitta, never goes away, and is always on my mind. Dharma is just a way of life, the way I live my life. It is nothing extra but is absolutely essential.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Mind and Meditation

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 21, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche taught:

“Sometimes we look at the nature of mind, recognize it, and rest within it. That is called awareness. But sometimes we forget what we’re doing and many different thoughts arise.

“They well up due to the imprints of habituation from beginningless time. When we are unable to rest in equipoise and there is some confusion or when we forget what we are doing—that is ‘mind’. “These are the two aspects we need to differentiate—awareness and mind. If we confuse them, there is a danger that we will mistake not-meditating for meditating and our practice will not go well. We need to clearly distinguish what is meditation and what is not meditation. Are we distracted and not meditating? Are we undistracted and meditating? Clearly knowing the difference between these two is very important

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

End of quote

Meditating of the kind we are speaking of here is based on being aware of the nature of mind. That is meditation. Anything short of that is mind but not meditation.

Without awareness we do not know the nature of mind. We are not meditating unless we are aware that we are meditating.

EMAIL

Karma Mirror

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 22, 2025

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According to the Dharma,
The world just as I see it is my reflection,
A perfect mirror of the mind,
Reflecting karma --
My every thought and action.
Karma is pure result,
The outer reflection,
Of an inner reality,
That once ripened,
Cannot be altered.
No matter how carefully
I choose my words,
No matter how right I get my mind,
No matter how close I hold my tongue,
No matter how slyly I take a peek,
I always only see myself peeking.
The world looks back whenever I look.
And clever as I am,
Even I can't sneak up on a mirror
[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

A Child in it's Mother's Lap

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 30, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Thrangu Rinpoche taught:

“There is also a very practical use for the realization of co-emergent thought. When we experience great joy and pleasure and become strongly attached to it, or when we experience strong pain and are quite miserable, we give birth to disturbing emotions. These are painful and cause hardship and our minds become very unbalanced. At times like this, the teaching on co-emergent thought is particularly valuable. If we look directly at the pain we are experiencing and at the disturbing emotions, they will be pacified. And if we look directly at strong attachment, it will diminish. This is the real purpose of understanding and being able to practice this co-emergence of thought.”

End of Quote.

According to Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, co-emergent thought refers to the inseparable unity of thought and the nature of mind itself in the context of Mahamudra and Vajrayana Buddhist practice.

This concept points out that thoughts are not inherently separate from or incompatible with the mind’s true nature, which has been described as the indivisible unity of emptiness and clarity. Instead, thoughts are connate, and arise co-emergently, with this fundamental nature, meaning they are expressions of the mind’s inherent luminosity and emptiness.

Thrangu Rinpoche explains that when one looks directly at the nature of a thought in meditation, as taught in Mahamudra, a non-dual practice, one discovers that there is no substantial “thinker” (Me, Myself, and I) or separate entity behind the thought.

The thought itself is empty of inherent existence, yet it appears vividly within the mind’s clarity. If we can recognize this, thoughts cease to be obstacles to meditation and instead become part of the meditative state.

Rinpoche emphasizes that the ‘root’ of meditation consists in recognizing the nature of thought, rather than suppressing or eliminating it – trying to not-think. Once a thought’s nature is seen as empty yet cognizant or clear,

thought itself reveals the mind's true essence, often described as the "unity of empty cognizance" or "indivisible emptiness and clarity."

Rinpoche has given elsewhere a metaphor of a child searching for their mother while already in her lap, which illustrates how the nature of mind (and thoughts) is always present, yet unrecognized until directly perceived through meditative insight.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Post-Meditation

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 1, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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POST-MEDITATION

By Michael Erlewine

“Mahamudra is not just a practice to be done on a cushion; it is a way of being that can permeate every moment of our lives. Whether we are walking, eating, or working, we can maintain an awareness of the mind’s natural state, free from grasping or aversion. This does not mean we suppress thoughts or emotions but rather that we see them as expressions of the mind’s clarity, arising and dissolving without leaving a trace.”

There are hundreds of forms of meditation, not all of them coming from Asia – Tibet, India, China, and Japan. In my case, I have been interested in studying, and eventually practicing dharma for over sixty years.

And this includes some 50 years of working with Tibetan Rinpoches, teachers of the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan dharma, having met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and the 16 th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje in 1974, and subsequently working with the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, Abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery for 36 years, explicitly training in the Common, Extraordinary, and Special Preliminaries, Deity practices, and Mahamudra practice, including 31 years of 10-day yearly intensives in Mahamudra, plus other forms of training. I wanted to be sure I strictly followed the standard curriculum of the Karma Kagyu Lineage.

My Root Guru passed on a few years ago and I continue to work with Mahamudra practice, filled with the many teachings he placed in my mind, not just sitting on the cushion, but to the best of my ability in every moment and everything I do each day.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Light of Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 4, 2025

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Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

"Through hearing the Dharma, you come to a very basic idea or understanding of what it means. You come to think, "Things are like this, this is how things are." This understanding is the first level of prajna, or knowledge—knowledge that comes from hearing. But it is only the first level.

"In general there are two kinds of practitioners. One kind is called a "follower of faith," which means someone who basically believes what they are told simply because they have been told it. The other kind is a "follower of Dharma," or someone who does not take anything on authority, no matter who was supposed to have said it, but tries to discern why they said it, what it really means. Taking this second approach—looking for the real meaning of a statement—you go beyond the knowledge of hearing.

"Whether you study the Buddha's teachings or the commentaries upon them, the texts of instruction or the dohas, you are concerned with the question, "What does this really mean? What is this really trying to say to me? Why did the person who wrote or sang this express it in this way?" Through that type of analysis, you generate much greater certainty and understanding than you would by simply taking the statement at face value. This greater certainty is called the "knowledge (prajna) of thinking."

"If you meditate after having generated this knowledge of thinking, then your practice will go much better, because you will actually know how to meditate. You will also understand why you are meditating, why it is beneficial, and why it will work, which will give you much more confidence to go on with the practice. It is principally for this reason that the practice of meditation needs to be preceded by the practice of hearing and thinking."

End of quote.

When there is no exposure to dharma, whatsoever, and then there is some. And perhaps there is more, until more becomes many.

These contacts may appear meaningless because we do not yet know the meaning, but it is anything but meaningless. It is meaningful.

How rare is the touch of dharma in this Samsaric world we live in. When there is near to none, even the slightest taste of dharma makes all the difference in the world to us. This alone is a blessing.

It takes the longest time to realize we are blessed with the dharma, however rare the touch, blessed beyond measure. And so, a regular diet of dharma is like an avalanche, engulfing us with its blessings.

A taste for dharma is itself a blessing, and if it becomes a confirmed habit, so much the better.

Of course, dharma is in the world, all around us, but unless read and understood by each of us, taken to heart, and made a habit, a miss is as good as a mile.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Give It a Rest!

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 9, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Shang Rinpoche:

“Meditate in a great number of short sessions.

When sessions are short, there can be no faults.

When they are numerous, faults cannot continue.”

“Merge and deeply, totally relax the body and the mind.

Relax loosely and rest completely. Do not meditate on anything. Do not pollute the naturally pure mind with the stains of meditation.”

End of quote.

The dharma instructions of Shang Rinpoche are, at least for me, very pithy and succinct. I don’t need too much subtlety; I need frank direction.

I don’t know how many years it took for me to take the first quote literally, that a complete session can be as long as it takes to raise a teacup to the lips and take a sip, although Rinpoche said this many times.

Somehow, I assumed that the longer a meditation session the better it was. Resting in the nature of the mind for a second or even a millisecond was possible for me, yet sitting for an hour allowed-in all kinds of mental interlopers to muck it up.

And even more important was pointing out that stringing very short sessions together can create a chain of clarity as long as you want, while trying to sit for an hour was kind of self-defeating if only because so many extraneous thoughts crept in polluting the mind.

And as Shang Rinpoche points out, any attempt to meditate is itself a mistake because trial and effort are a stain by definition.

I am ashamed to say how many years it took me to understand that ‘resting’ in dharma terms is the same thing as resting in colloquial language. Rest is rest. Give it a rest!

The Rest of the Mind

You cannot rest the mind,
but you can let the mind rest.

Just let go,

And don't mind the rest.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Without Effort

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 10, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Great Lama Shang wrote:

“When you rest loosely in that way, if the mind is unstable and has strong thoughts, it means you are not free of the wish to meditate. Therefore, free yourself from a sense of purpose. Whether the mind is still or not, do not stop anything or create anything.

“A swift mountain river is made pure through flowing. A silver mirror is made clear through being polished. A yogin’s meditation is made blissful through being destroyed.

Thus:

“Rest, relaxed, without meditation.

If you rest relaxed, the turbidity of this ocean of cognition will become clear.

[From “the Mind of Mahamudra, translated by Peter Alan Roberts]

These are pith instructions, and the message is that trying to meditate, trying to do anything with effort, by definition, is wrought with failure. Attempting or trying is not the same as just doing. Do something. Don’t “try” to do something.

It’s the same with meditation. Don’t try to meditate, so in that sense, don’t meditate. Just rest in the nature of the mind without effort. That is what is meant by “meditate.” No effort.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Liberation Through Sight and Seeing

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 14, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In the long run, there are only ways of liberation, and this is because we are not yet liberated! The dharma texts are very clear that our senses, sight, hearing, etc. are the most pure conduits that we have in this world of experience, and they alone can liberate us. Let's discuss here what in Tibetan dharma is called 'Thongdrol', liberation through 'Seeing'.

As a young boy, continued exposure to Mother Nature at an early age taught me the rules of natural appearances and commanded my respect, meaning I became aligned with natural law. And later, as I went to grade school, my sense of natural law collided with civil or social law and this was confusing.

Of course, I stuck with natural law, Mother Nature's rules, because they made sense and were perfectly consistent. And it was at this juncture that my life pivoted or turned. I followed nature's laws and perhaps appeared somewhat feral compared to social laws, not fully compliant. This did not endear me to society. I ignored social laws when nature's laws conflicted.

And later in life, at the time of a perfect storm of profound disappointment, I reached a point where I stopped seeing the world of Mother Nature in a dualistic fashion, meaning I stopped seeing the world as me the subject looking out at the world as object.

Instead, my habitual sense of duality collapsed into nonduality, and I saw the 'Seeing' itself (the Awareness) that was doing the seeing. The duality of my seeing objects collapsed and what remained was full immersion, non-duality, no longer "Me, Myself, and I" seeing the nature outside, a plant or critter, but instead complete immersion in the awareness of Seeing, what was doing the "Seeing."

There was no longer "Me" seeing something "out there," but instead the "Seeing" itself, that pure Awareness was experienced as one. Once that happened, there was no more me seeing objects, but only the "Seeing" seeing itself – recursive awareness. "Seeing objects, duality of all types, was then beside the point. Instead, the full immersion of non-duality was the reality, and nothing short of that became meaningless. It meant less.

In Tibetan dharma, this is called 'Thongdrol', "Liberation through Seeing." Not liberation through seeing 'something', but liberation through becoming one with the 'Seeing' itself. As the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it: "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

Now that's what happened. As to how that came about is more difficult to express, yet let's look at it.

THONGDROL: LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING

In the profound dharma, co-emergence or being connate', is the inseparability of form and emptiness.

Sacred images because they catch the eye are not simply depictions but actual embodiments of the nature of the mind. In other words, Samsara and Nirvana are not separate. Deep insight can be accessed in a single moment of pure perception through complete immersion.

Mother Nature and all appearances are also a reflection of the true nature of the mind. Whatever catches our eye and acts as an inscape, a way within to non-duality, collapsing subject and object, is what works for us. Here I am referring to Sight and Seeing, but all of the senses work.

A prayer may not require words but can be a simple intention offered with two hands placed together in a prayer mudra, and an upward intention. And this said with pure intent toward all that is sacred. This is prayer as I know it.

A glimpse, inviting anyone to encounter the sacred in the world around us. When 'inscape' occurs, it collapses subject and object, the 'me and them', immersing us into a unity that includes both.

Elide or elision omits duality by 'Liberation through Seeing', 'Liberation through Hearing', or liberation through any of the senses and is pure dharma, whatever floats your boat.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Point Beyond Effort

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 20, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0b34ba49-eb52-4b1d-9b78-0b8efa2978cc_1024x1024.jpeg

If we examine, study, and practice any Vajrayana Buddhist lineage, we will find a very clear and detailed curriculum to follow. The question for me was will I follow such a difficult set of practices. I looked at the practice curriculum for the Karma Kagyu Lineage, which is the one I train in, for a number of years before daring to actually do the practices.

It was only thanks to my root guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dhamrachakra Monastery located in the mountains above Woodstock, NY that I bit the bullet and finally dove in.

Before that, I had years of toying around with the dharma. In the very beginning, in the late 1950s and on into the 1960s, I mostly talked about dharma. I did not consider actually practicing it myself. As fascinated as I was with the dharma, I was not about to actually take up the practice. I saw myself as a bystander, not a dedicated practitioner. After all, dedicated practice was for dharma saints like Tibet's Jetsun Milarepa, not someone like me.

It was my meeting and spending a weekend serving as a chauffeur for the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche that galvanized me into seriously practicing meditation. Trungpa didn't even ask me if I wanted to learn or explain what he was doing; he just took me into a room, sat me down in a wooden chair, and began to teach me Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) for a couple of hours, nor did he even give it a name. He never told me what he was doing.

Nevertheless, I loved being in the proximity of Trungpa and his caring to instruct me.

Be that as it may, after a weekend with Trungpa Rinpoche, I had taken the Kool-Aid and entered the stream of intentional dharma practitioners. This continues to this day, some 51 years later. Never mind that I toyed with dharma some 15 years before meeting Trungpa but was not yet serious about it.

And I'm not about to discuss or describe the standard curriculum for the Karma Kagyu Lineage, other than to say, the typical flow is:

The Common Preliminaries

Lojong

The Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro)

Deity Practice

The Special Preliminaries

Mahamudra

I spent 36 years working with my root guru, who spoke no English, did my practice in Tibetan, and learned to read Tibetan, a little.

For those interested, the curriculum of dharma practice is straight forward, with no special serendipity required until one reaches Mahamudra training. That's where some additional blessing or instruction is required. And so, I will talk a little about that because that is the point where serious practitioners tend to pile up and not easily find their way forward.

I am reminded of when I was a young man and driving up the very dangerous logging roads along the Klamath River in northern California. Dangerous because fully loaded logging trucks cannot always use their brakes when they are hurtling down a mountain road; they don't dare, and cars have to get off the road or get run over. It happens.

Anyway, I parked my car off the road by a good sized mountain stream. The salmon were climbing up that stream. You could see their backs cresting as they drove forward. I left the road and followed the creek on foot upstream until it came to a deep pool where the salmon could go no farther. And there, in that deep pool, were dozens of huge salmon suspended almost motionless at different depths in the pool. They could not go on.

My point is that in dharma training, students who have completed all the preliminaries reach a point where sheer effort alone is no longer rewarded. This is where what is called the "Pointing-Out Instructions" as to recognizing the nature of the Mind from a qualified teacher or guru are required.

We can't do it ourselves, at least according to the many pith instructions about the pointing-out instructions I have read, and I have read hundreds. These instructions have to be pointed out to us by an authentic guru for recognition on our part to occur. Period.

And so, like the pool filled with large salmon I described, these student practitioners are gathered at the edge of what is called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind, but unable to proceed farther without having the

actual nature of the mind pointed out to them by an authentic guru, someone who has had the experience and knows how to point it out. And we as students have to be prepared to experience that recognition.

In my own case I had the pointing-out instructions given me by more than one Tibetan Rinpoche and nothing happened. I was unable to recognize the nature of the mind. That was fun. LOL. Years later, it did take place.

Perhaps we can be grandfathered in pursuing some of the different dharma curriculum levels, but “Recognition” is a hard-stop. We can’t fake it because ‘Recognition’ is not something we can show to anyone else but ourselves. We have to recognize the true nature of the mind on our own. And it has to be pointed out to us, until we get it, but the proof of the pudding is that we alone have to recognize how the mind works. We either do or we don’t. Even if we say we did, but didn’t, nothing will happen because nothing happened. I have seen this.

And to make it even more difficult, “Recognition” is NOT something dualistic, with a subject and an object, like Michael sees the nature of the mind. No. Recognition requires, perhaps for the first time for each of us consciously, that we experience non-duality, like this quote by the poet Sir Edwin Arnold:

“The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

That HAS to happen and we don’t just press a button or do so many prostrations, mantras, of what-nots.

In Rinzai Zen Buddhism, “Recognition” is called “Kensho,” and in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, as mentioned, “Recognition” of the actual nature of the mind. Same experience, yet one that we must each ourselves go through. It can’t be faked because without it, we are without it, without full immersion in this present moment. We would only be fooling ourselves. As I like to say:

“No matter how clever I am, even I cannot sneak up on a mirror.”

And so, that’s the holdup, the bind, or what separates each of us from full immersion in non-duality or accomplishing the Recognition of the Nature of the Mind. I have more on this event, some very less understood, but to come in another Article.

[Photo by Elko Jones, used by permission.]

EMAIL

Brightness is the Lack of Darkness

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 22, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/fb89fc60-335b-4e01-8186-aa4341c8318e_1024x1024.jpeg

By Michael Erlewine

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

Lingrepa said, “The mind itself, which is groundless and useless, is well understood by thinking about last night’s dreams. They are an excellent teacher for pointing out appearances as just mind.” When we dream, all kinds of things appear, but when we awaken, we realize that these appearances were nothing other than mind itself. Dreams are a wonderful teacher, for they help us to understand that the appearances in waking life are also nothing other than mind.”

End of quote.

Well, there you have it. What else could we want? It’s all in black and white, and what are we going to do about it? What can we do about it?

I can’t say for you. I can barely say for myself. Like the old round we sang as kids:

“Row, row, row your boat,

Gently down the stream,

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,

Life is but a dream.”

If life is a dream, then the operative point is our waking up. Perhaps we may have some idea as to what we are waking up from, but what are we waking up to? That’s what interests me.

Well, it’s not this cyclic world we find ourselves in, what is called ‘Samsara’. We are already in Samsara. And Nirvana is the flip side of Samsara. For most of us, or so it seems, it’s hard to ignore that we are not realizing Samsara for what it is, but instead waking up to rebirth after rebirth down the line, and the teachings say that it’s just ‘rinse and repeat.’ It’s “Groundhog Day” all over again.

In other words, we have not been able to wake up as to what keeps us asleep in Samsara. That would be a start.

Waking up would be waking up to realizing the whole enchilada. Perhaps it's easier waking up when we are older, because we are getting closer and closer to that waterfall we call death. And it's hard to live life, when life just points beyond itself to repeating itself over and over.

The poets say that we should celebrate life, life as it is right now for us, in this present moment. I try, so be my guest. As they say, "I'm dancing as fast as I can."

However, when everything, at least the obvious, is little more than an 'attempt' to celebrate what in us ignores reality (the actual way things are), it can be tough.

Again, the word 'authentic' pops up. What exactly makes something authentic? And what does it mean? An answer to that question I believe is hard to find.

Waking up to our own ignorance, to what we ignore, all that we are ignoring, chapter and verse, since time immemorable is a start. Not easy to do or we would have already done it.

And this means turning away from our habitual distractions and doing what? That we don't know because we insist on ignoring just that. All I can say is that beyond ignorance there is no ignoring the obvious, yet what is that? What is obvious?

IMO, that's where the hall of mirrors rush in on us, the recursive stuck- record of not being able to turn away from our riveted gaze of ignoring the clarity of clarity itself. We are ignorant. We ignore.

I've been there and about the only thing I learned was that the lack of comfort (and being shielded) is just what we can't stand, even a little of. We want to stay hidden. We choose to ignore.

I'm no different, just that I am aware that I can't stand to be aware of what I can't stand. I still can't look directly at the truth. That's what I mean by recursive, by a stuck record.

Not that the truth is not right here in front of us. It is. It's just that I won't or can't bear to take it straight with no chaser. I persist in ignoring it. The truth is bare beyond belief, at least bare beyond my ability to face it straight, my being eyeball to eyeball with the truth.

So, I can but talk about it here, point to it, but I'm not willing myself to turn in that direction and even look directly at it. I tried that. Too much light. It's just too bright. Harsh.

And brightness, what they call in the bardo after death the "White Light," is but the lack of darkness, the lack of cover. We hide in familiar darkness. It is all we know.

And we scurry for the shelter of darkness like a hermit crab does for an empty shell. That's Samsara.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Mind Over Mind

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 22, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/018fa874-c127-4c43-89e4-e007d330c39b_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

“Sometimes our awareness is very strong and clear, and at such times there is no danger of mixing up karma, cause and effect. But sometimes when we do not clearly distinguish the confusion of mind from awareness, we might think that the distracted aspect of mind is meditation. Many thoughts will arise, and we will not deal with them, thinking that this is Dzogchen.

“If that happens, the afflictions will arise and by following them, we will engage in wrong doing. We will have turned away from the path, in which view and conduct are united. We will disregard the working of karma, cause and effect. We will not give up non-virtue and will not cultivate virtue. We will confuse cause and effect and make many mistakes.

“When we have the right view and understand the difference between mind and awareness, this leads us to good behavior—proper view and proper conduct are united. But if we do not distinguish between mind and awareness and do not behave well, both our view and conduct will not be good.”

End of quote.

My dear Facebook friends. This is a long article, not meant for many. I Write it because the topic fascinates me and I would love to have a discussion with any of you. However, I know it’s a tough read, hard to work through. I salute anyone who can make the journey.

This differentiation as to what is the ordinary Mind that we all know and what is Awareness of that ordinary Mind is important, even key. And the pivotal event in our dharma practice called in the texts “Recognition,” being our recognizing the true nature of the Mind is not something like a merit badge that we can just earn and wear. It’s not something to “get.” We can’t just get it.

It’s more like those old figure-ground illustrations, where there is a picture and within that picture is another hidden picture that you can’t see until someone points it out. Recognition is like that., You can’t see it until it is pointed out.

Recognition involves, with the help of an authentic guru or teacher, our experience consciously for the first time, of non-duality – full immersion. Instead of our habitual dualistic experience (subject and object), with the guidance of an authentic guru or instructor we learn to immerse ourselves in this present moment in the exclusion of our being the subject and the rest of the world our object. As the poet said, at such a moment:

“The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

With that said, I would now like to put a little finer point on this topic of ‘Recognition’ and introduce those of you curious as to what ‘Recognition’ actually entails for the dharma practitioner who hovers on the edge of experiencing Mahamudra, and Mahamudra is not a form of meditation, but rather a form of non-meditation.

Appearances or ordinary Mind (Sem) and the awareness of these same appearances (Rigpa) are two different parts of this whole thing called Consciousness. The dharma associates Mind with appearances as separate from our Awareness of that Mind (and its appearances).

The whole world of appearances, which surrounds us and in which we live is or can be distracting and it takes up a lot (or most) of our attention, which is markedly different from “Awareness” itself, which is our being AWARE of the attention being taken by our endless distractions.

Our being aware of the nature of Mind, what Mind is and how it works, this Awareness of the nature of Mind is just that, an awareness of what is, and this is not saying that the nature of mind is any different from its appearances.

Awareness (and ultimately realization) of the nature of Mind is what we are after. In other words, the nature of Mind is just that, how the mind works, and this is not to say the Mind is good, bad, or indifferent. The Mind is the ordinary Mind. Period, end of story.

It is the awareness of that Mind and its nature, which allows us to behave accordingly. It’s this awareness that is important here. Eventually, we have to be aware of the nature of mind and just how the mind works before we can know best how to use and work the Mind. We have this ordinary Mind but don’t know how to use it well.

To do that we have to go for full immersion in this present moment –non-dual awareness.

It kind of throws a damper on the idea that the ordinary Mind is just fine and not a problem. Apparently, it is a problem or at least something we have to be aware of in order to properly deal and work with it. In other words, it is our

awareness (or lack thereof) that comprises our attention or ought to. Simply put we are not aware of the Mind and how it works.

Awareness and clarity are what are operative and the Mind becomes the object of this awareness, creating a duality by definition.

The traditional scriptures and pith dharma texts offer what is called the “Pointing Out Instructions” enabling our recognition of the actual or true nature of the Mind and how it works. This is a big deal in the dharma literature.

It is easy and usual for beginners to fall into and assume that the nature of the Mind is a ‘something’, a benign or ‘good’ thing, when that may not be the case. The Mind is neither good, bad, nor indifferent. It just is what it is, our Samsaric or ordinary mind. The important thing here is the Recognition of and continuing ‘Awareness’ of the nature of that Mind, not the Mind itself. This is where we trip up.

The nature of the Mind and how it works must be recognized for what it is. The whole reason for the Pointing-Out Instructions is awareness and the recognition of the Mind’s nature, i.e. that we finally see and recognize it.

We learn to distinguish between ordinary Mind (Sem) and the Awareness of that Mind (Rigpa). We distinguish between the mind’s nature (Sem) and our awareness of the mind’s nature (Rigpa). We are not the Mind, but rather we are aligned with the Awareness of the mind’s nature. Of course, ultimately the two are one and the same. Some definitions:

AWARENESS (Rigpa)

This is the direct recognition of the essence of the mind, beyond any thoughts, emotions, or mental activity. This is the pristine, non-dual, self-knowing of our true nature. Awareness is clear, stable, and not moved by the arising of thoughts or afflictions, the very ground of being, the nature of the mind and not the Mind itself.

THE MIND (Sem)

The Mind (Sem) refers to ordinary mind, meaning the mind you and I are using right now, the conceptual, discursive and dualistic mental activity, including emotions, distractions and our habitual patterns. This is the ever-changing, distracted aspect of our consciousness, where we grasp at objects, fall into dualities (subject and object), get caught in confusion and/or delusion, anger, desire, or simply ignorance, mistaking its own activity for reality.

THE NATURE OF THE MIND

The nature of the mind typically refers to the nature of our Samsaric mind, how Samsara or our ordinary mind works. And that nature is not something precious or special in itself. What is precious is for us to understand is how the ordinary mind works, our awareness of that. Why? So, we can work it successfully and not continue to fall into Samsaric duality and entrapment. This means our awareness of our own distractions, how we are distracted and how we bleed our life energy away through being contained and entertained by Samsara.

We lose so much energy by compiling words into a group and then attempt to breathe life into that constructed group of words. A good example of this is the term "Nature of Mind." Over time, in studying dharma, we come to believe that the nature of our mind (how it works) is sacred, is a 'thing' in itself, a nature that we have not even yet recognized.

We believe we are searching for the 'nature of our mind' as if that nature is special, when that is not the case. What IS special is our awareness of the nature of the mind (Rigpa), 'pure awareness', not the actual nature of the confused mind itself (Sem). The confused mind is just that, confused, emotional, dualistic, etc.

What is true is that we are talking about 'Sem', the ordinary mind that each of us have and not the Awareness of 'Sem', awareness of the confused mind. Sem represents the ordinary, dualistic mind, caught up in Samsara, while "Rigpa" is the pristine, non-dual awareness.

That is why we as sentient beings are called "Sempa," a human being with a mind (sem).

Breathe.

And so, in practicing Mahamudra or Dzogchen, the common mistake is to consider that recognizing the "mind's nature" is finding a hidden treasure, as if our ordinary confused mind contains or holds some ultimate truth, when it does not. Instead, it contains our confused thoughts, emotions, dualistic perceptions, intellection, etc. Take those out and we have Nirvana rather than Samsara. We know we are not there yet.

The truth is that 'Rigpa' or awareness of the confusion in our ordinary mind is what is key, recognition of the nature of the mind through purifying our awareness. That so-called nature of the Mind is flawed by our own distractions, not in itself.

Any "specialness" resides not in our confused mind (Sem) itself but in the recognition of its nature through Rigpa. The confused mind or 'Sem' is

ordinary, impermanent, and bound by samsara. What's extraordinary is Rigpa—the direct, non-conceptual awareness that reveals the mind's true nature as empty, luminous, and free. This insight is at the heart of Mahamudra and Dzogchen and other non-dual traditions, where liberation comes from resting in this pure awareness rather than tinkering with the confused mind's endless fluctuations. We have been there, done that, and are there now.

In common parlance, dharma students are encouraged to recognize the true nature of the mind. The problem is that, without knowing it, the term “true nature of the mind” is mistakenly taken for something in itself, meaning that the nature of the mind is something in itself that we believe can be appropriated or is sacred, something we can ‘get’ if we try. Never will happen. It's not something we can ‘get’, but instead the nature of the mind is something we can recognize and THEN use that information.

It's not that the “true nature of the mind” in itself is precious, but rather the awareness of the true nature of the mind, how the mind works, is what is precious. That awareness is an awareness of all the distractions, confusions, etc. that ordinary mind (Sem) is heir to. That awareness of all the problems that ordinary mind contains is what is precious, our recognition and awareness of all these problems.

That is what “recognizing the true nature of the mind” is all about, the awareness of the distractions and problems of the ordinary mind. These make up the nature of the ordinary mind or Sem.

Rigpa or the ‘Awareness’ of the nature of the ordinary mind allows us to recognize the nature of how the ordinary mind works so that we can no longer be caught up in samsara and the ordinary mind.

There you have it. The Mind is the whole kit and caboodle, everything that is, so we have to discriminate what we mean by Mind. In this article I have pointed out that there is the Tibetan term “Sem” meaning our ordinary mind, complete with the various confusions, desires, attachments, and all of that. On the other hand “Rigpa” or Awareness is the element of Mind that is aware of just how the ordinary mind works and how to deal with it.

And finally, “Recognition of the true nature of the mind” is not itself anything other than understanding how the ordinary mind works. What is special is that being able to work the mind includes the ability to rest in non-duality.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

A Prayer: Engulph Me with the Blessings

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 26, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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“The Second Coming”

By William Butler Yeats

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.”

Oh yes, that poem by Yeats, which I always thought was a little on the sensational side, is now hard to ignore, especially in these times of turmoil. Many decades ago, I took note of it, but not literally.

Yet these days, these same lines seem prophetic. And while I never could make too much out of Yeats’ book “A Vision,” and I tried, the poem “A second Coming,” at least the first part shown here has come back to haunt me.

I don’t have to spell it out for you, as you can read.

Nor do I want to dwell overmuch on this particular poem, because I had done that long ago. So, why point it out now?

No particular reason other than I find these lines by Yeats rolling around in my mind again, particularly the phrase “the centre cannot hold.” Whether that’s true we are finding out right now, worldwide.

My own interests have, of late, shrunk back to very few, perhaps only one, and that would be the seeming eternal value of the dharma teachings pointed out by the historical Buddha.

For me, the 'pith' or concise dharma teachings have no end of interest, because they are more than just more words. They function like a mantra in my head, continually and recursively clarifying themselves.

The 'Truth' is the future, because it will last until then.

Despite that, of late I don't feel like doing much else other than invoking dharma, yet IMO time spent on the dharma is not wasted.

Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is not some kind of permanent escape from reality, but more like an air intake or in-breath, gulp, or gasp for air, for a sort of oxygen or context that can embrace the situation the world finds itself in at this time, get our arms around it.

It's more like a portal through which to encapsulate the hard truths of time that are ripening now all around us. As a portal I don't mean a way to look out or beyond, but more an input window that lets air and life flow into this, our current situation.

We need to be engulfed by the blessing of space into and around time, giving us more living room, what I call 'context' around what otherwise binds us so tightly, bringing with it a sense of relief that we now dearly need.

I find no escape from reality that I know of. In fact, everything points and leads us to the 'real'. However, what non-duality or wholeness offers, as mentioned, is the relief of providing context to put what we cannot avoid (because it is already here upon us) into perspective. We need to take a step back in order to grasp these times.

If there is something, somewhere, like the punctuation of punctuation itself, making all this whole or 'one', then the engulfing of this moment of world trial and test with the space needed to stretch it out and phrase it meaningfully, then we have the engulfing blessing of, as mentioned, time by space.

Hard-packing it as we are of late constipates and finds us yearning for the space and context to make sense out of time.

There, you have it in words, and we have only to breathe in life deeply enough to make it whole.

Please, engulf and infuse me with the blessings of enough space to temper or dilute time and make life more livable and meaningful again.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Waters of Lethe: Automatic Writing

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 27, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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[Well, before you write me off, hopefully not automatically, give these thoughts a listen and see if you can, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, put it "Suck any sense from that who can." It's just an idea.]

In Greek mythology, the underground waters of Leth (the river of forgetfulness) were drunk to erase our past lives before being reborn.,

My opinion is that all of the attention in the mystical, spiritual, and other-worldly literature, things like automatic writing, are quite easily explained as attempts or cases of the onset of Insight Meditation, what is called Vipassana. And just what is that?

That is, as I understand and have experienced it, possibly the oncoming immersion of our dualistic habits of thinking into, at least momentarily, the non-dual immersion of Insight Meditation. This slippage, elision, and immersion into, as the poet Sir Edwin Arnold put it "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

Such a dip or immersion beyond the duality of common speech into the non-dual, the oneness and speechlessness of nonduality that opens and allows the intake and flooding of our duality into that which we do not know (where we cannot know) and have not yet experienced. With that immersion, something is changed.

As momentary as it is or may be, such incursions of duality (subject and object) into the non-dual flood and wash away of that duality with its hard crush of consonants and thoughts, if even briefly, and the enabling elision of the vowels and a sense of non-dual timelessness takes hold.

After such a dip or dunking in the timelessness of non-duality, our return to the dualistic and habitual allows us to better temper and shape and insight, using what has no shape into something understandable to ordinary thought and thinking. Our thought is refreshed and purified.

This appears to me to be little different from what happens when we make an incursion and immersion into the non-dual, armed with whatever dualistic

thoughts we may have on hand, and what emerges by result shows traces of a world we do not yet know.

Such an immersion of duality refreshes and re-shapes our own thoughts into something fresh and truth taking.

In the history of automatic writing, it seems to me to be quite familiar as to what happens in undertaking any short sessions of Insight Meditation as I have come to know it through years of practice. Asking questions by holding them in mind and entering the non-dual state of Insight Meditation primes-the-pump and returns those questions to us shaped by the immersion of non-duality itself. I do this routinely.

Years ago, when I was first going to public conferences as an astrologer, those same conferences were peopled by all kinds of psychics, mediums, fortune tellers, and the like. And over time I attended a number of message circles, seances, clairvoyants, astro projection, telepathy, divination, aura reading, channeling, and the like.

At the time, I could only marvel or at least wonder what was the cause of all of this spiritual channeling and mediumship.

And since I myself had studied, practiced, and explored the non-dual forms of meditation like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra, I could only guess how that might figure into the many forms of mediumship and channeling. Was it similar?

For myself, I only know the use of non-dual immersion as used for writing blogs like this. By this point, with so many years in and with so much water over the dam, I have essentially a seamless process of writing where I go inward with my best dualistic thoughts, stew the in the juices of non-duality, and then return these thoughts or come back out into normal dualistic consciousness, but usually with modified or re-shaped phrases that make more sense than what I had before.

These same thoughts are purified and benefit from their immersion in non-duality.

And lest you fall into thinking that a session of non-duality is lengthy, it is not. As my teacher would say, a session can be as long as it takes to raise a teacup to our lips and take a sip.

It may be understood that it is not the length of an Insight Meditation session that is important, but the fact that these brief sessions can be repeated, one after another, strung together like beads on a string, to create a seamless non-dual session of any length required. That fact needs to be realized.

And, in my case, I well know how difficult and time-taking (years) it was to initiate and become familiar with the process I am here describing, that of immersion in the non-dual and subsequent withdrawal back into common duality.

I can easily imagine another non-dharma scenario, where what was learned was also based on non-dual immersion, but primed or prompted with initial questions far different from my own.

Anyway, I find it far easier to look at automatic writing through this lens or approach than whatever I managed to imagine before.

Does automatic writing then suggest that another or dead person is communicating. Who knows, but I don't think so. It would not have to be.

My own experience of many years, with prompting my own excursions into the non-duality of Insight Meditation (Vipassana), it never occurred to me in any way that what was being returned from my non-dual prompts was the work of another person or entity. It was just the nature of the Mind.

It was, simply put, the 'better' or more relaxed and natural me that was shaping the prompts and stretching them out into a more flexible form. Or it was the universe itself, the true nature of the mind, a pure reflection of my intrinsic nature, shaping my fractured prompts to make more sense of them and be whole.

I present this view here, not to be argumentative, but to suggest that perhaps what passes for psychic and mediumship may just be another form of non-duality, where our dualistic questions and intellect are immersed in the waters of non-duality only to return to normal dualistic conversation bathed in the nature of the mind.

[A common Ouija Board.]

EMAIL

The Elephant in the Room

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 28, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e86aed08-8834-4622-a9d8-e83f0470f1c9_1024x1024.jpeg

I can't help but believe that everything we see and can practice in the Dharma is also naturally occurring. And, if we look, we can see much that can be seen happening around us, perhaps just not dignified by some form of organized group or religion.

I look around me into people and situations for spontaneous spiritual experiences and see them at least in nascent form, trying to happen, ready to happen. I guess what is missing is why we have organized religion or spiritual groups and teachers. I get that.

At the same time, I see what little it takes to crush or frustrate spiritual growth and wonder how best to help spiritual awakening to awaken and flourish.

It's a natural flower and bent on flowering, sooner or later.

Years ago, I did an interview at the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969 with the great blues artist Howlin' Wolf, in which he said the following:

"Just like a flower. You see, we're trampin' on this grass. We stay here a couple months and tramp right around here, we gonna' kill it. Just as soon as we stop trampin', the first warm sunshine, and then the grass gonna' start a growin' again."

That's the way I feel about spiritual growth. Given the right conditions and it's just naturally going to grow and flower.

So, it's more likely that our efforts are going to snuff it out than we will succeed in it flourishing.

And so, with organized religion there is a plan and a curriculum, a path to follow and someone there to watch over us. As confining as that can be, I see that can be helpful.

Yet, often, even too often, I see a hierarchy of teachers, who can't seem at times to do more damage than good. Perhaps just I see this, and my seeing itself is damaging. Yet, I don't believe that.

Given some sunshine, earth, a little rain, and a flower just naturally is going to grow and blossom. And it's so easy to interfere with that. Take away any of those conditions and there is delay.

So, how can I help?

Becoming a teacher, at least with me, is in my opinion just too heavy-handed. The best I can come up with is to do my best to share any knowledge that I have and know from actual experience. A lot of my own learning was as simple as "Monkey See, Monkey Do," simple imitation.

Observe what I do with my own life and if there is anything worthwhile, try that yourself. That's what I have done, straight-on imitation if possible.

Of course, just to be certain, to be sure, and despite my fears of it, I have subjected myself to the quite arduous dharma training in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, being sure to practice exactly what I was told to practice and under the direction of a high rinpoche. I have done this for some 50 years at least. I did not want to wimp out skipping any practice. I even did the difficult "Extraordinary Preliminaries" (Ngondro) twice, for good measure.

However, please don't think that doing all this, to some degree almost by rote, did not leave scars. Very much, it did. All that effort, the 'trying to accomplish' left a mark, a mark it has taken many years to remove, that stain of effort.

That kind of effort is not good for us, spiritually. Yet, what choice did I have. I was way too rogue to direct myself and could not be trusted to look after my own welfare. My dharma teachers, so very kind, took better care of me than I knew to myself. That can be one of the benefits of organized religion.

And so, I took instructions, and followed them with diligence, knowing or eventually realizing it did almost as much harm as good. By that I mean, the stain of undo effort.

It was later, after all the preliminaries and secondaries were finished and done, that what remained for me to handle were the stains of all that effort and its removal. And the only one that could remove it was myself. I had to do this. And removing the effort that almost by definition had to be undone took almost as long as the practices themselves. Go figure.

And so, I subscribe to the old Macrobiotic saying "The Bigger the Front, the Bigger the Back."

I can't say that dharma flowers with no conditions. There are conditions, and what exactly they are differs for each one of us.

And we have to start somewhere, and any start takes some initial effort on our part, an often sustained effort to keep at it. Yet, any effort that is not joyous leaves a stain and probably a scar.

And when all is said and done, those scars have to be removed and we alone have to remove them.

Solving that equation is what makes dharma practice of such long life.

Was it worth all that effort? I really had no choice. On my own, without a teacher, as mentioned, I would have botched it. No doubt. Et, making that effort for such a long time left stains that have to be removed. I have been removing those stains, as I can, for many years.

So, there you have my two cents.

The Bigger the Front, the Bigger the Back

The Elephant in the Room

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Rest

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 29, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a28b28cc-5ea9-4911-8a46-42c3f66c5caf_1024x1024.jpeg

[This is another longish one and about a topic that is best approached by degrees, ‘Rest’, and learning to rest in the nature of our ordinary mind. And to make things harder, this is very difficult to almost impossible to do, so be warned.]

First, a few quotes from the great dharma masters that pertain to resting in the nature of ordinary mind.

Gampopa:

“Let the mind rest in its uncontrived state, like a clear sky free of clouds.

Tilopa:

Let the mind rest naturally, like a wave dissolving into the ocean.

The nature of the mind shines forth, like the sky without center or edge.”

Milarepa:

“When meditation ends, do not arise with grasping,

But rest in the expanse of awareness, vast and open,

Like a bird soaring in the sky, leaving no trace.”

17 th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje:

“At the end of a meditation session, do not rush to get up or engage in thoughts. Instead, rest briefly in the natural state of the mind, without effort or fabrication. This allows the recognition of the mind’s clarity to deepen.”

End of quotes.

Sooner or later, we all have to learn to just rest in the nature of the ordinary mind, whatever that means for us. The keyword is ‘rest’ and it took me years to understand what the dharma idea of ‘rest’ might be. I wondered if dharma ‘rest’ was somehow more special or spiritual than ordinary rest as we know it.

What I found out after many years is that rest, parochial or civil, are the same. Rest is the same the world over. Flop yourself down, put up your feet, or whatever floats your boat, and take a load off. Rest is rest, but there are degrees of rest that should interest you.

In other words, rest may not be as easy as just asking us to “take it easy.” We may have to learn to rest thoroughly; I know I did. And of course, we can’t ‘try’ to rest. Rest requires no effort, other than just letting go and rest. Letting go takes the effort of ‘no effort’ if there is such a thing.

In the dharma training that I took up, we were introduced to resting each day at the end of our sitting on-the-cushion dharma practice. We were asked to just rest for a moment in the nature of the ordinary mind. Of course, being told to rest is not restful, so no real attention was paid to how it went. Just rest as best you can and then get up and go about your off-the-cushion business.

Of course, for many years I knew that I could not really just let go and rest, but you know I tried, and as I mentioned ‘trying’ to rest does not do it. Back then we were just becoming familiar with the concept of resting in the mind.

Anyway, decades went by and I knew that I did not know how to just rest, although I stumbled through it for a moment or so every day. It was more a reminder that I could not just rest, thus somewhat of an irritation.

Then, one fine day I realized that in this world there is only one kind of rest and that is when we find ourselves resting. I stopped worrying about it. Period. End of story.

From that day forward, I did not care or expect anything of that brief moment of trying to rest in the mind at the conclusion of sitting practice. This was much better, but still not exactly resting.

My two cents is that ultimately, we will not rest until we master non-duality with practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, or Dzogchen. Until we experience full immersion and the deconstruction of duality, we will not (and cannot) know and experienced actual resting in the nature of the mind. Yet, that’s not easy to do. The mind has to be trained and how we go about this can vary. There are many ways and many dharma practices to go through until we reach that level, or so I was told.

Yes, we can rest somewhat while sitting on a couch, putting up our feet, and watching a football game or a movie. That’s a step in the right direction, IMO, yet not near enough.

‘Deeply’ resting requires full immersion in non-duality to the exclusion of our normal subject-object duality. And that is not something we can just make an effort and do. No amount of trial and effort will result in non-duality. ‘Trying’ to rest is an oxymoron. So, what can we do? That’s the real question that each person faces.

I mentioned the moment of resting in the nature of the mind at the close of sitting meditation. Of course, I did that for decades with no result that I am aware of. I was just trying to rest but certainly not exactly resting.

And this effort to rest is a bridge that very few of us can cross without the help of an authentic dharma teacher, a guru, to point out to us how to recognize the actual nature of the mind, and by that slip into non-duality, which is the kind of ‘rest’ being looked for here.

This form of complete rest cannot be faked by making effort. As long as we remain in duality, our common subject and object state of mind, there can be no full rest. It is the signature of Samsara.

How to get beyond duality, our ordinary state of mind, is perhaps ‘THE’ question every dharma practitioner has to figure out. And to make it almost impossible, we can’t do it by ourselves.

While in every other part of dharma practice that I know of, we are on our own and have to do it by ourselves, in ‘Recognition,” resting in the true nature of the mind, we require an authentic lama or dharma teacher to point out to us how this is done. And this, IMO, is a major roadblock.

Of course we may be too shy to ask for help, or there is no one in our sphere that we can ask or who is qualified to instruct us. And we may be unable or unwilling to make the effort to actually reach out and find an authentic dharma teacher that will work with us. The list goes on.

And yet, after reading scores of pith dharma texts stating that only an authentic lama who has experienced ‘Recognition’ themselves is capable of giving us what are called the “Pointing-out” instructions as to recognizing the true nature of the mind. Where in America will we find that?

And to make things worse, it’s not enough to find a lama capable of giving us these instructions, we have to be at a point in our dharma training where we can receive these instructions. That may be even harder to find, our being worthy, able, or ready to receive.

And so, I apologize for presenting this problem and not offering a simple solution. I don’t have one and had to face this same problem myself. Perhaps you can see the difficulties here that have to be overcome. It also explains

why this is a big deal, one that requires our caring enough about it to get up and go out and make this happen. We have to go at least halfway. Most folks are too shy to do this.

And even then, there is a modicum of luck involved, that we can be lucky enough to assemble the conditions required for this recognition to happen. I know this from experience. I received the pointing-out instructions a number of times myself, and from the most qualified lamas, and nothing at all happened other than I did not get it. I was not able to respond to these instructions. Apparently, I was not ready.

I did not give up but soldiered on. And there was one more major obstacle that I had to face. I had to admit I did not know what such a 'recognition' was all about. By definition, I had no idea, otherwise I would have already recognized the nature of the mind long ago. And to make this more convincing, my Tibetan dharma teacher of 36 years, a high rinpoche, said to us clearly that we are the stragglers, the ones not only in this life, but in innumerable lives before now NEVER got it. It's not that we once knew but have forgotten. We never knew and still don't. I find that thought sobering.

And last, but not least, when it came time for me to get an inkling as to all of this, it took a very special set of circumstances in which this could happen. And it was not when I was at my best, at the top of my game, but just the opposite. I was at one of the lowest points in my entire life. It took real adversity and depression to get my attention. And that I would never have expected or wanted to happen. Yet, it did.

It was like a perfect storm, one that forced me out of my life's groove and left me desperate, in order to turn the wheel of the dharma and bring change at the level of Recognition. I'm sorry to say that in my case it took a very painful situation to get my attention enough that something as radical as Recognition was possible, something well beyond the comfort zone of my normal life.

Of course, I would never have chosen those untoward conditions, not in a million years, but as mentioned, for me, it took that level of discomfort for me to wake up enough to undergo something like recognizing the true or actual nature of the mind and realize how that mind worked.

And so, I don't intend to discourage anyone from seeking 'Recognition'. I'm just saying that for me, the poor dharma student that I apparently was, my easy life was not the ground for such a significant dharma event to occur. It took a perfect storm, some fire and brimstone under my butt, to get my attention. I did not come willingly into those conditions, yet that is what it took. And even then, it took some years.

I had received the pointing out some three years earlier, something I had received several times before. Yet, this time I finally understood what I was not doing right. Then it took at least three years of very intense dharma practice for me to restructure my life to be ready for what I am calling here the perfect storm, although such a storm I would never have wished on myself or anyone.

An so, it was then, after those special practice years that apparently, I was ready to weather such a perfect storm of adversity. And it was in the middle of that adversity that I woke up enough that the proverbial dewdrop, as they say, slipped into the shining sea and I experienced full immersion, full resting in the nature of the mind.

I don't recommend the perfect storm to anyone, yet I am thankful that it held me down long enough to effect the real change of Recognition, after which I was never the same again.

I'm just sharing.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Reactivity Training

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 30, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/5d6680f1-0cc6-4bb1-bf42-665220ed1603_2048x2583.jpeg

So much these days compete for our attention and distracts us that there is little we can do about it. I don't have too much to say on this, yet, in brief, here is some of the advice I was taught, which may be useful. It has to do with our reactions.

The best I can suggest when I react to something, large or small, is to take note of whatever the distraction is, regardless of the cause, own it as my own reaction, then drop it completely from my attention, and continue in the present moment.

In the actual dharma practice related to our reactivity, there is the Mandala Offering, which I did some 200,000 times as part of what is called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), that part being the Mandala Practice, which is quite complex, but includes the words:

"I anoint the earth with fragrant water, scatter flowers,

And adorn it with Mt. Meru, the four continents, and the Sun & Moon.

Imagining this a buddha field, I offer it so that all beings may enjoy this pure realm."

I did the entire Ngondro practice twice at the request of my guru, some five practices each done 108,000 times, and then the whole thing again...so some 1,080,000 iterations. And while this practice is too detailed to do on the spot, here is the takeaway which we can do any time we are reactive, which is almost all the time.

As pointed out, I note the reaction and then don't consider or think about it further, much less get on that train of thought and ride it for a while, or worry it. Like the Tibetan dharma mandala practice, when we wipe the smooth copper offering plate clean with our palm, fill it with rice in a particular pattern, and start over, doing this 108,000 times and more.

The included photo shows a pen and ink drawing of a mandala plate, and the hand mudra used to represent the mandala offering. I mention this because we are surrounded by signs, signatures, and of course mudras all the time.

I am concerned here with what we do with the bombardment of our senses by the innumerable distractions we are confronted with each day, all competing for our attention and each distracting. I cannot tell you what you should do, only what I do and have been taught to do.

As mentioned above, when something comes to our attention, especially if it is a surprise that causes or demands that we react to it involuntarily. And these reactions happen to us just all day long. My response to each, if we are capable of being aware, is simple and always the same.

When I find myself reacting to a distraction, I first note that I have reacted, and then own that it was my reaction, regardless of what or who caused it or why.

Next, having noted it and owned it as my reaction, I then just drop it. I don't think about it, who caused it, why, or spend any time considering it further. I drop it and move on with my life.

When the next interruption or reaction occurs, I do the same: note it, own it, and drop it. This goes on all day. I'm not talking about just the large reactions like a loud exhaust, the phone ringing, a firecracker going off, and what-have-you. There also are an almost inexhaustible number of smaller reactions each day, our reactions to this, that, and the other thing, like "I don't like that tie you're wearing," or I come around the corner and there facing me is a person I do not get along with, and countless more. I am talking about where I react involuntarily. This takes energy, my energy. Responding appropriately is another matter.

That's it. There is nothing else to do. Just note it, own it, and drop it. Leave it alone and rest in your own space and time.

Considering that we react and note things constantly, all day long, this is the best dharma advice I know off for an effective day-to-day practice.

And it requires no energy on our part, because we have already involuntarily spent energy reacting to the distraction. And it does not benefit from thinking about it, following it, or keeping it in mind all day long. Just note it, own it as your own reaction, and drop it. Move on.

If you can manage to do this with diligence all day, you will find in time, and sooner than later, that you have recovered a great amount of energy that otherwise is wasted on the constant deluge of distractions and our reactions to them. By becoming aware and noting when we react, we gradually wear down and remove knee-jerk reactions and replace them with appropriate responses, our response-ability.

I wrote a free book about reactivity for those who are interested for more details.

“Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction”

<https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

[The illustration of a mandala plate by Sange Wangchuk, who lived at our dharma center for years and went on to become the Minister of Culture for Bhutan, and a photo of a dear friend doing the Mandala Mudra.]

EMAIL

Life Reflections

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 31, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c7e1f6fc-fc90-41ad-9840-b49aca56efe1_1024x1024.jpeg

What's with these very extensive and intricate dharma practices that I have spent decades to complete? And I was on the path of implementing Zen Buddhism, with its minimalist sense of Shoji screens, carefully raked sand gardens, bamboo floors, and tatami mats.

However, as life would have it, I eventually ran across Tibetan Buddhism in the form of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and all their ornate Tibetan shrines that were little different from the Roman Catholic altars I was raised in. And instead of learning Church Latin as I did as an altar boy, I was learning to do all my practice in Tibetan. Go figure.

And the actual practices I did were quite demanding and, well, difficult, like doing 108,000 full-length prostrations on the ground, and I did that twice. And much more.

I didn't mind doing all this because for me it was good to know that I am completing what had been suggested to be done by my teacher. Whether or not that resulted in anything, I had to wait and see, yet at least I made the effort. If someone as important to me as my main or root guru suggests something, I do it.

Rinpoche showed me a kindness never encountered before, a concern for me and what I might become that I dearly needed.

Of course, effort is the killer, as well. Yet, I would rather have completed the task than assume I can just skip over it. Yes, I wished I could just skip to the end and simply recognize the actual nature of the mind and be done with it. Wouldn't that be nice. Of course, the ideal way to do dharma practice is to be joyous. To the degree I failed that and just applied effort, I was stained by the scars of that accumulated effort, something never suggested by my rinpoche. I did that myself and have had to pay for it down the line.

However, I'm not that daring or arrogant. I have deep respect for many of the high Tibetan rinpoches I have met, so who am I to know better than they do. And mainly, it boils down to a single rinpoche, my root guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. His presence in my life inspired me to keep at it all those

years and to do the practices he suggested for me. I was with him for 36 years. He spoke no English.

And now, decades later, I can say that following his advice as to dharma practice was worth all the effort, although my own excess effort, doing things when I did not feel like it, must be walked back and redeemed. I'm still working on that, years later.

They say, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater," and I must agree. The 'baby' was not lost, and as for the bathwater, well, there is that and as mentioned I am walking that excess effort back, day by day.

There is nothing as clarifying and incisive as dharma. I don't get tired of contemplating or writing about dharma; I do get physically tired.

We have to trust our dharma teacher, trust to the point where we completely 'trust', because they know how to benefit us better than we can benefit ourselves. If we don't know that, wrong teacher. This means that we must walk on, as they say, beyond all doubts, until doubts fall away. And for someone like me, that is difficult. That experience, it seems by definition, is beyond duality and requires full immersion in non-duality. That complete immersion is without a doubt beyond doubt.

Getting there, beyond the shadow of a doubt, is difficult for a 'doubting Thomas' like me or any of my intellectual machinations. As I like to say, "As clever as I am, even I cannot sneak up on a mirror."

The various dharma practices are a reflection of that.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Chances Are

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 2, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ee42f91b-a3a6-457c-9078-1c702a4c255e_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote"

"The proponents of the Mind Only school hold that...apparently solid, external phenomena are nothing other than the appearances of internal mind. They are not truly external things.

"While this is true, it is not what is being pointed out in Mahamudra. Here the term appearances do not refer to external appearances, such as a mountain; rather, it refers to the experiential sense of perceiving something, such as seeing an image or hearing a sound.

"Some feeling goes with that perceptual experience. We aren't trying to make a point about whether or not apparently external phenomena are external and real. We are simply looking at the experience we have of seeing, hearing, and so forth. We are looking directly at that, and as we do, we see the truth of the matter. The experience becomes inseparable from dharmata. It doesn't go beyond mind itself."

End of quote.

IMO, that's pure phenomenology. I have been a phenomenologist since I was a young boy, monitoring my mindstream first and foremost. I did this all through grade school and the part of high school I attended. In my early twenties I studied the main works of the philosophy Hegel in detail, in English, especially I read and re-read Hegel's "The Phenomenology of the Mind," and the particular quote about what he called the "Beautiful Soul" of which I probably was an example of around that time:

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

It's hard, as Shakespear put it, "To Be or Not to Be."

In particular, in the dharma it's hard to "'Be' because the pith teachings are very clear that, to put it poetically, "Our 'Being' is 'Becoming'", meaning we have no (and never have had) any permanent being, not now, not ever. It's all temporary.

Search as you will (and can), you will find only temporary existence. The Buddhists do not believe in the concept of a permanent "Soul" as some other spiritual groups do, meaning that "Michael Erlewine" will be reborn as "Michael Erlewine" again. Not going to happen.

The dharma states that everything about Michael Erlewine will fall away and deteriorate when I pass away. What will remain and get paid forward are my unfulfilled desires, attachments, and karma which will seek a womb and form another person with my remaining karma, but with new parents, a fresh body, and a new life. That person will continue, yet Michael Erlewine the person will be long gone.

This idea can be, IMO, a little hard to take until you let the concept work in your mind and realize, well, here you still are now. Yes, you may have had to discover your Self, but you can do that again, and again, and again, something like "Groundhog Day."

No, in a rebirth I can't remember Michael Erlewine, his merits or demerits. Yet I will be living out his karma, which will be my karma, whatever my name then is.

My dear friends, there ARE things that are beyond our control. Terrifying or Refreshing!

If you don't want to take a chance, well, Good Luck, because:

Chances Are!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Not Getting It

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/7e796364-7ed0-48b4-b412-4e01660f81c0_1024x1024.jpeg

How do we understand what we don't understand and why even try?

Why not just let whatever emerges from the future into the present arise until we can see it and not have to struggle?

Especially since scores of dharma texts say: that which cannot be understood or grasped by the dualistic Samsaric mind can't be understood or grasped, not ever. Period. End of story. It is an experience we have to each have.

It can only be experienced via full immersion on our part, meaning immersion where there is no subject or object, as in dharma practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen.

The nature of the mind, our ordinary mind, is NOT something to be understood or grasped, but, as my dharma teacher pointed out to us repeatedly, it is something to become 'familiar' with. There is a difference in these approaches, a big difference.

And what's the point of becoming familiar with the nature of the mind? As I mentioned, it's not something to get as in "Oh, I get it now" kind of thing, or even an Aha!. It is something to become familiar with because once we are familiar with the mind and how to use it, we can do just that: we can use it.

It's the becoming familiar enough with USING of the mind that is what dharma practice is all about.

Using the mind and being in control of it enough to use it is the whole reason we do all of this dharma practice in the first place. It would help if we realized and admitted this in the beginning, that we do not know the nature of our own mind nor how to best use it.

We just don't, because if we did, we would, well, know how to use it and thus use it and we don't. Because up to now we can't.

This is what makes life of such long struggle, trying to get what can't be got. We take phrases like "realize the nature of the mind" or "get enlightened" and we then reify them into being something we somehow are going just grasp and get.

We won't because we can't, because it's not a concept or 'thing', as in something we can 'get'.

What is key here is the familiarity with the process of working with the mind that we have always had available but have not yet known how to use.

As Rinpoche pointed out for decades, we don't become familiar with the mind for any other reason than familiarity itself, at which time, finally becoming familiar enough, we can actually use our own mind, as in: put it to use. At that point, we are familiar enough so that we can see to drive life on our own and no longer need dharma teachers in the same way.

In other words, get to know and become familiar with the mind you have.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Offering a Mandala

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 5, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/10c163d8-fde4-4571-b1e6-178773039e44_1024x1024.jpeg

One of the sections or practices that are part of the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro) dharma training is the Mandala Offering, which involves offering 100,000+ physical offerings, using a smooth copper plate, and piling seven small piles of rice (and jewels) on the plate, while making an offering to 37 specific qualities and reciting this offering prayer:

“I anoint the earth with fragrant water, scatter flowers,

and adorn it with Mt. Meru, the four continents, and the Sun & Moon.

Imagining this a buddha field, I offer it so that all beings may enjoy this pure realm.”

Each offering consists of seven small stacks of grain, followed by wiping the plate clean into a cloth in your lap and starting again, as mentioned, 100,000+ times.

In my case, my dharma teacher had me do this particular practice not once, but twice, each rendition 100,000+ times. Of all the five different practices, each one is done 100,000+ times, this Mandala Offering practice was the most natural for me of the five lengthy practices and, instead of taking a long time, for me it seemed to take almost no time at all, which means I enjoyed doing it.

That is how every dharma practice should be, enjoyed. Anything short of that, you will be paying for the scars and stain of effort down life’s road.

My vocational life as an archivist of popular culture has involved doing very mundane actions almost an innumerable number of times, like documenting all recorded music (AllMusic.com), tune by tune, all recorded films and movies (AllMovie.com), plus 33,000 of the most important rock-music concert posters (ClassicPosters.com), and other things as well. I started with just myself in this tiny office where I sit now but eventually had 150 full-time employees and 500-700 free-lance writers (the amount varied).

My principal dharma teacher for 36 years, my root guru as it is called, was Ven, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock NY. Rinpoche guided my

dharma practice but seldom gave direct suggestions. Rinpoche did, however, on occasion, give a direct command. One of these was in the summer of 1997 when he told Margaret and I during a short interview to go to Tibet to meet His Holiness the young 17 th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

When Rinpoche said this to Margaret and me, I mumbled something in return like of course, I would love to see His Holiness the 17 th Karmapa someday, etc. Rinpoche said in response, no, not someday, but right now, within a month... go this month.

We left that brief interview with our minds blown, so startled that we went outside and climbed to the top of the local mountain, something we had never done. But that trip would be another story. Here I want to point out one other time when Rinpoche gave me a direct suggestion, not a command, however any suggestion from Rinpoche was essentially a command.

Toward the end of another interview, using a translator since Rinpoche did not speak English, Rinpoche pointed out to me that I might want to try using a small mala, like a wrist mala, as a kind of worry beads, reciting mantras. I thought that was odd, but of course I immediately made myself a small wrist mala that I carried with me and still do today. When I am at odds or perhaps in a line at the grocery store, I soon came to find myself counting through the beads of that wrist mala as a way to tie down my attention, freeing my mind to be at ease.

All of what are called in dharma practice the “Preliminary Practices” are like a dharma boot camp, a way of preparing us for recognizing the nature of our own mind. Why? Because if we actually recognize the nature of the mind, meaning become familiar with it to the point of seeing how to actually use and work it, our life will change.

This happened to me; however, it was after many years, decades, of dharma practice. I did not want to cut corners or short-change myself. I wanted to do exactly what was required so I could see if this extensive set of practices worked or not. For me, it worked, but it took many, many years. What else did I have to do that was more important? Looking back, nothing was more important because the dharma practices changed the way I see everything.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Impermanence

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 9, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/7b64ec6a-6c72-438e-a39e-49e2493cc313_1024x1024.jpeg

The Ven. Kenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“When we describe the mind as luminous and empty, the word “luminous” might suggest light, but that is not what it means. Instead, it means that the mind knows, that the mind understands. At the same time, it is empty because it isn’t anything and it cannot be located. “

“For instance, we speak of an eye consciousness—something that sees physical forms through colors and shapes. But where is it? If we look, we can never find it. That is emptiness. The eye consciousness isn’t anywhere. Nevertheless, it sees colors and shapes, and that seeing is called its luminosity.”

End of quote.

“The mind knows” just as we know, because the mind is the same mind that we have, and we can’t locate it either. And emptiness, being empty, means it can’t be located, has no location, and yet is present and ‘luminous’.

I realize that this is nothing much to talk about, and yet here we are.

All these things have no permanent existence as we imagine it, but of course we don’t really know either. We just imagine that we want it. And ‘want’ it we do because we have never had it. It’s never been there. How do we know to even want it if we have never had it? I don’t know, unless it is just more reification.

If ‘want’ means to lack, by definition, we don’t know what we want?

Not much of a future, just repeating a past that itself has never quite had more than temporary existence, going around in circles or cycles. This endless rebirth is called Samsara.

The dharma says that at best “Our Being is Becoming,” not that our being “IS” or ever has actually been other than temporary. We are forever poised at the brink of actual permanent existence, yet we never have ‘been’ and never will be other than that. Expecting.

Apparently, having never been truly existent, but always on the verge or edge, we have no true existence under our belt. But like those large Tibetan mandalas made of colored sand, they are with a brush of the hand swept into the river of time.

There is a message here, if only: Impermanence.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Hand and Glove

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 12, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/cb0293ec-6556-482a-a920-a044f632880f_1432x1208.jpeg

His Holiness The 17th Gyalwa Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje:

“It is possible that people could practice for a long time, ten or twelve years, without achieving any particular signs or progress. The main reason for this is that in the beginning, they did not allow their minds to be penetrated by or blend with the preliminary practices. They should connect in the same way your skin adheres to the flesh beneath it.

“Without this, if we attempt the main or higher practices, we will find that the Dharma remains distant because in the beginning, the Dharma did not blend together with our mind. So, practice the preliminaries well. Let them cohere to your mind just as your skin is joined to your flesh.”

“Some people say that he practiced for ten or twenty years, but there is always no progress in his practice, that is, there is no practical practice in the way forward, there is no real touch, and there is no real experience in his heart, so when he reaches the highest and deep, he will only feel stranger and more distance. So at the beginning of practice, you must work hard on the forward practice.”

End of Quote.

In an instant, reflecting on this quote as to my own particular ‘Recognition’ as to the nature of the mind, in that perfect storm that took place back then ...

I slipped through a lifetime of shed skins that piled on top of each other, like the black pavement fireworks snakes, rippling back through the past until I was one all the way back with Mother Nature, once again almost a child, but not quite. Back then my, as His Holiness says, “skin adheres to the flesh beneath it.” Over time, that was lost.

I find my way back to a familiarity long since forgotten, but one that back then was perfectly bonded, with me, the mind, and its nature. It was natural like a hand in a glove.

Without that cascade of cast-off skins piling up, forming a dense patina, layer piled on layer, now shuffled through and passed through and beyond, I would

not have the familiarity needed for full immersion. I need to be as I once was, one thin tight piece, and not sloppy layers of Samsara piled on.

And full immersion was the only window that would work to see through the fog, as sense familiar, which I did, like a hand and glove. I did that one summer, skipping back to the way it was. That was familiar.

What are ‘The Preliminaries?’ Of course, I did all of the “Common Preliminaries,” “The Extraordinary Preliminaries,” and “The Special Preliminaries.” That was good, but still not yet enough beyond intellection. I still missed the point.

Beyond the ‘Preliminaries’, what continues all that, and remains in my mind is the one word ‘Familiarity.’ Rinpoche repeatedly said to become ‘familiar’ with the nature of the mind. ‘Familiarity’ is the key. What are you most familiar with in your life? Figure that out.

In my case, my personal history, the purity I had as a young man, before the fog of maturity stained, way back there in my relationship with ‘Mother Nature’ as a student of natural history. I never thought about it because that was all I thought about, one with Mother Nature.

And so, when through the adversity of that time, that summer, I was popped out of the groove in which my life had been running since maturity, and had instead reached for whatever was familiar, I overshot past all of the veneer I had accumulated through Samsaric life for many decades.

And I was NOT, at least for that time caught up with the obligations, times, dates, or places of the empirical world, but plunging beyond all of that, in seeking the originally familiarity, the purity of Nature herself, along that way I lost both the subject and object in the moment, which collapsed or imploded spontaneously, leaving me looking at the ‘Seeing’ itself rather than at the object a subject sees, non-dual rather than normal duality. There is only one first time for that!

And that was a one-way street from which there is no going back, no return to whence I came, instead I was turned inside out.

[Photo of the 17 th Karmapa by me.]

EMAIL

Too Close to See

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 13, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/5c28d28a-613f-4807-b7b5-5ef9a47abcf9_1024x1024.jpeg

Trying to gather phrases meaningfully and arrange words like a constellation in the sky in order to say something... better yet, to signify something, a sign in the heavens or perhaps just a prayer flag blowing in the wind. Everything says something.

As I mentioned yesterday and what His Holiness pointed out, we are creatures of Samsara, not only for this life, but according to the teachings for innumerable lives. And because of that, we must dig down through the layers of our current Samsaric shell (rebirth) to wherever it is we are that is familiar.

Of course, each rebirth is fueled by the same karma that is paid forward, yet in each new life we have that past karma but not yet layered over by the recursive layering of the new life's recursive Samsara. So, what is there to be become familiar with other than our rebirth karma?

Of course, karma varies for each one of us. All I know is that my dharma teacher for 36 year was very clear that 'familiarity' with our own mind, the nature of that mind, is important, and what we want to achieve.

That familiarity is rock-bottom, as pure and nitty-gritty as it gets. Why, because it alone is what is paid forward from our previous lives.

What I find remarkable is that it is not that 'Recognition' of the nature of the mind is something to 'get', find, or grasp. Instead, what I finally realized Rinpoche was pointing out is not, as mentioned, anything that we could get, but rather our simply becoming familiar with what we know as familiar, meaning our mind that has always been there right here with us, and apparently from before.

This 'meaning' it is NOT new or profound, but what 'IS' profound is what has always been ever familiar to us. In that sense it is not difficult but rather easy and familiar, perhaps too familiar. Of course, that's just what we would never think about finding, what we already have. It's the last place we look.

That's the figure-ground image that apparently has to be pointed out to us by an authentic master. And it is so close to us that we have never managed to see it, because we are it. It's like the eye looking at the eye.

Well, intellectually that's the idea, yet this concept should not be mistaken for the actual experience, because they are nowhere the same.

Anytime we leave the Samsaric, dualistic, world and, so to speak, the dewdrop slips into the shining sea, we are at that point of no longer watching or thinking but are fully immersed in the experience of non-duality.

And we only know we are in that when we emerge. There you have the key.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Awakened Heart

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 16, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/40e31420-c2a0-4ddd-8570-4315f1143689_1536x2048.jpeg

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

“When the world is filled with negativity, transform adverse conditions into the path of awakening.”

“In our daily lives, many things often happen unexpectedly, such as a surprise illness.... Sometimes the world is filled with negativity and living beings have much suffering and many accidents befall them. We must learn to transform these negative circumstances into the path of enlightenment.”

“This can be done in two ways: through the practice of relying on Relative Bodhicitta or through the practice of relying on Ultimate Bodhicitta....

“There are two aspects to Relative Bodhicitta, when we are practicing using troubles and difficulties as a way to bring us along the path to enlightenment. The first has to do with diminishing self-cherishing and the second has to do with increasing one’s sense of valuing others.”

End of quote.

[This is an extended exercise on probably the single most important dharma term, Bodhicitta’. It is pronounced: BEAU-DEE-CHEAT- AH]

The above quote, as I found it, didn’t expand on the second kind of bodhicitta, which is called ‘Ultimate’ or ‘Absolute’ Bodhicitta

While ‘Relative Bodhicitta’ is quite conceptual, more based on our good intent than any physical action, ‘Ultimate’ or ‘Absolute Bodhicitta’ is very much more physical. In fact, “Absolute Bodhicitta” is very special and also somewhat difficult to explain.

The difference between these two types of bodhicitta is not linear, meaning that ‘Relative Bodhicitta’ will not eventually automatically turn into or graduate to ‘Absolute Bodhicitta’. Not at all.

In a word, ‘Relative Bodhicitta’ is dualistic and ‘Absolute Bodhicitta’ is non-dualistic, and never the twain shall meet... except when the nature of the mind is pointed out to us by an authentic dharma teacher.

‘Absolute Bodhicitta’ requires a change at heart, which is why it is called “Awakened Heart.” It is not conceptual or merely thoughtful, but visceral and heartfelt. Striking!

The Sanskrit word “Absolute Bodhicitta,” which means ‘Awakened Heart and Mind, not only embodies the aspiration to eventually attain enlightenment but actively helps bring all other beings with us. We are all in the same boat.

In other words, Absolute or Ultimate Bodhicitta is a profound intention ‘and’ an active practice, the very cornerstone of the Bodhisattva path of not only personal liberation but working tirelessly for the liberation of others.

The great Gampopa, founder of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, said:

“The root of the Mahayana path is Bodhicitta, without it, all practices are like a tree without roots.”

Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa:

“Bodhicitta is the jewel that illuminates the darkness of samsara. Hold it firmly, and all beings will find the path.”

Jetsun Milarepa:

“If your heart is filled with Bodhicitta, every step you take is a dance of liberation for others.”

16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje:

“Bodhicitta is not just a wish; it is the courage to act for others, even when the mind is clouded by doubt.”

17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje:

“Bodhicitta begins with a single thought of kindness, but it grows to embrace the universe. Start small, but dream vast.”

It does not take much to set a tone or trigger an insight; however it takes just the right touch to inspire ourselves or sometimes other folks.

What’s hard to communicate is that with Absolute Bodhicitta, one is not dispensing dharma, but rather recognizing that we all already share the same dharma. It has always been there. We just need it pointed out.

In other words, behind all that I do, be it through photography, essay writing, or any other stories I might tell, is a will and desire to share information with others. This should not be underestimated. I do not consider myself a dharma

teacher, but rather a dharma sharer, sharing what we all already share. I'm enthused.

For myself, I find the dharma the most efficient vehicle to do this sharing. Yet, even that takes, at least for me, years of work learning to write what I write and the way I write it.

And of course, I have been told many times over that I write too much and should be more succinct. It's not that I don't hear that suggestion, just that for me my writing is being written until I run out of gas, so to speak, until I naturally stop. I write for those who at least for the moment are interested.

And I am a confirmed believer that having certain information and ideas run past us, over and over, and from many different directions is grist for the mill of understanding. There may be a spark.

What drives all this and where do we find it? As mentioned, there is a Sanskrit word that describes this, "Bodhicitta," yet it has no English verbal equivalent. In Tibetan it is 'Jang-Chub'.

However, Absolute Bodhicitta is not easily defined. As mentioned, there is no English word that is equivalent, so in that sense it is inexpressible. Nevertheless, it is important to communicate the meaning because so much in dharma depends on it. IMO, 'Bodhicitta' is the heart of dharma.

Those who study and practice the dharma the Buddha left us, his scriptures, early-on learn about compassion and being compassionate. In the beginning, much of what we practice as compassion is kind of drummed up, manufactured. We try to be kind and compassionate, but this is not the same as naturally being compassionate.

It is the same with Bodhicitta. There is Relative or Aspirational Bodhicitta (we aspire) and then there is what is called Absolute or Ultimate Bodhicitta.

In a word, Absolute Bodhicitta, is an unquenchable and untiring desire to share the dharma with others, with all comers. That urge is there when you go to sleep, and it is there when you wake up. It never goes away and cannot be satisfied.

And while it is easy to aspire to want to benefit others with the dharma, that untiring urge to do so is not something we can pick up from a book or order up on the Internet.

Absolute Bodhicitta is a byproduct of what is called 'Recognition', and by that is meant by recognition on our part of the actual or true nature of the mind, our becoming familiar with that.

And this “Recognition” is not a construct or concept that we have to understand, although that helps, but rather a non-conceptual and non-dualistic experience, a byproduct of our letting go and full immersion in the present moment.

When we finally recognize how our own mind works, with that realization comes ‘Absolute Bodhicitta’, the intense will and desire to share that recognition with others. It’s that important that we cannot ‘not share’ it with others.

And, as mentioned, Absolute Bodhicitta is not simply aspirational, meaning that we intellectually intend or wish it on others. Instead, it is an unstoppable urge and dedication to share the essence of dharma with other beings, however we can. And we do this not because it’s the right thing to do but rather because we care for the welfare of others and realize how we all share the same dharma.

[Photo today by me.]

EMAIL

The Liminal Space

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 18, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e90f859e-b10e-4a11-840d-08ec81531ca8_1024x1024.jpeg

This short article applies the concept of "liminal" to the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly in the context of Mahamudra and its Vipassana (Insight Meditation) practice, which offers a rich framework for understanding the transitional state between duality (the conscious, rational mind) and non-duality (the intuitive, non-conceptual mind). This liminal space is central to the Mahamudra path, where practitioners navigate the threshold between these modes of perception to realize the nature of mind. Below, I'll explore this application in detail, grounding it in the Karma Kagyu tradition and the specific dynamics of Mahamudra's insight meditation. I thank AI for helping me organize this article.

Karma Kagyu and Mahamudra

Karma Kagyu Lineage : One of the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, known for its emphasis on direct transmission from teacher to student and the practice of Mahamudra, a meditative system aimed at realizing the ultimate nature of mind. The lineage traces back to figures like Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, and Gampopa, with the Karmapa as its spiritual head. I entered into the Karma Kagyu Lineage in 1974 when I met both the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and His Holiness the 16 th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje in the same year.

Although I had been studying and interested Buddhism since the late 1950s, it was not until 1974 that I entered the Karma Kagyu Lineage.

I proceeded to practice the Common Preliminaries, the Extraordinary Preliminaries, the Special Preliminaries, and Deity practices, after which I undertook learning Mahamudra, all of the above under the guidance of my Root Guru, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in upstate New York.

Mahamudra : Literally means "Great Seal," Mahamudra is both a meditative practice and a realization of the nature of reality. It integrates S hamatha (calm abiding) and V ipassana (insight) meditation to transcend dualistic perception and abide in non-dual awareness. In the Karma Kagyu tradition,

Mahamudra emphasizes direct experience of the mind's luminous, empty nature.

Vipassana in Mahamudra : Unlike Theravada Vipassana, which often focuses on systematic observation of phenomena (e.g., breath, sensations), Mahamudra's insight meditation is more direct, aiming to recognize the mind's nature by observing its arising thoughts, emotions, and stillness without attachment or rejection. This practice often involves moving between conceptual (dualistic) and non-conceptual (non-dual) states, rapidly.

Liminality in Mahamudra's Vipassana: Duality and Non-Duality

In Mahamudra practice, the liminal state can be understood as the dynamic, transitional space where the practitioner oscillates or rests between duality (the rational, discursive mind that perceives subject-object distinctions) and non-duality (the intuitive, non-conceptual mind that perceives the unity of all phenomena). This liminal threshold is not merely a passing phase but a critical locus of insight, where the practitioner glimpses and stabilizes the realization of the mind's true nature.

1. Defining the Liminal Space in Mahamudra

Duality : The rational, conscious mind operates in a dualistic framework, perceiving self vs. other, subject vs. object, and thought vs. thinker. In meditation, this manifests as the tendency to analyze, categorize, or cling to thoughts and experiences.

Non-Duality : The intuitive mind transcends these distinctions, resting in the natural state of awareness where all phenomena are seen as empty, luminous, and inseparable. This is the Mahamudra realization of the mind as unborn and free from conceptual elaboration.

Liminality : The liminal state is the "in-between" where the practitioner moves rapidly or rests at the edge of these two modes. It's the moment of transition where dualistic perceptions begin to dissolve, but non-dual awareness is not yet fully stabilized. This space is fluid, ambiguous, and pregnant with transformative potential, as it allows the practitioner to witness the interplay of mind's appearances and its empty essence.

2. Vipassana Practice and Liminality

In Mahamudra's Vipassana, practitioners cultivate insight by observing the mind's activity—thoughts, emotions, sensations—without grasping or rejecting them. This practice creates a liminal space in several ways:

Rapid Oscillation : As noted, the practice involves "moving rapidly between conscious rational mind (duality) and non-duality, intuitive mind." For example:

A thought arises (dualistic perception), and the practitioner observes it without attachment.

In recognizing the thought's empty nature, the mind shifts toward non-dual awareness, where the distinction between observer and observed dissolves.

This oscillation is liminal because the practitioner is neither fully caught in dualistic thinking nor abiding permanently in non-dual realization. The rapid movement itself becomes a meditative tool, revealing the mind's fluidity.

Resting in the Threshold : Advanced practitioners may rest in the liminal moment itself, where the boundary between duality and non-duality blurs. This is akin to the Mahamudra instruction to "look at the nature of the mind" without forcing a particular state. The practitioner hovers in a state of open awareness, neither rejecting thoughts (duality) nor clinging to stillness (non-duality).

Transformative Potential : The liminal space is transformative because it destabilizes habitual dualistic patterns. By repeatedly encountering this threshold, the practitioner weakens the grip of conceptual mind and deepens familiarity with non-dual awareness, progressing toward the Mahamudra realization of the unity of appearance and emptiness.

3. Karma Kagyu Teachings on the Liminal State

Karma Kagyu masters often describe the mind's nature in terms that evoke liminality:

Tilopa's Six Words of Advice : "Don't think about it, don't think against it, don't think at all, just rest." This points to a liminal state where the practitioner suspends dualistic thinking (rational mind) without forcing non-dual stillness, resting in the natural flow of awareness.

Milarepa's Songs : Milarepa's poetic teachings often describe the mind as both vivid (dualistic appearances) and empty (non-dual essence), with meditation as the act of resting in their inseparability. This is a liminal practice, neither clinging to phenomena nor rejecting them.

Gampopa's Four Dharmas : Gampopa's framework for Mahamudra practice emphasizes recognizing the mind's nature in all states—thinking, stillness, or transition. The liminal moment of moving between duality and non-duality is a key opportunity for insight.

Contemporary Teachers : Modern Karma Kagyu teachers like the 17th Karmapa or Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche emphasize the importance of working with the mind's movement (dualistic thoughts) to discover its stillness (non-dual nature). The liminal space is where this discovery occurs.

4. Liminality as a Bridge to Non-Dual Realization

In Mahamudra, the ultimate goal is to abide in non-dual awareness, where the distinctions of self/other, samsara/nirvana, and appearance/emptiness dissolve. The liminal state serves as a bridge:

Training Ground : The rapid movement between duality and non-duality trains the practitioner to see thoughts and phenomena as self-liberating. Each liminal moment reinforces the insight that dualistic appearances are not separate from non-dual awareness.

Stabilizing Insight : Over time, the liminal space becomes less a place of oscillation and more a stable recognition of the mind's nature. The practitioner realizes that duality and non-duality are not separate states but two aspects of the same reality.

Integration : In advanced Mahamudra practice, the liminal threshold collapses entirely, and the practitioner abides in the "non-meditation" state, where all experience is recognized as the play of the mind's luminous emptiness.

5. Experiential Qualities of the Liminal State

The liminal space in Mahamudra's Vipassana can feel:

Ambiguous : The practitioner may feel neither fully in control (dualistic mind) nor fully surrendered (non-dual awareness), creating a sense of uncertainty or openness.

Vivid yet Ephemeral : Thoughts and sensations arise vividly but dissolve quickly when observed, highlighting their impermanent, empty nature.

Luminous : The liminal state often carries a sense of clarity or spaciousness, as the mind glimpses its own nature.

Transformative : Repeatedly resting in this threshold weakens dualistic habits, fostering confidence in the non-dual view.

6. Practical Application in Practice

To cultivate this liminal state in Mahamudra meditation:

Shamatha Foundation : Begin with calm abiding to stabilize the mind, creating a clear vantage point for observing transitions between duality and non-duality.

Vipassana Inquiry : When a thought arises, gently look at its nature without analyzing or suppressing it. Notice the moment it dissolves, which is the liminal threshold where duality fades into non-duality.

Rapid Movement : Allow the mind to move naturally between thinking (duality) and stillness (non-duality). Instead of forcing one state, rest in the transition itself, observing how thoughts self-liberate.

Teacher Guidance : In the Karma Kagyu tradition, a qualified teacher is essential for pointing out the mind's nature and guiding the practitioner through liminal experiences, ensuring they don't misinterpret or cling to subtle dualistic traps.

Integration in Daily Life : Practice recognizing liminal moments outside formal meditation—e.g., the pause between thoughts, the shift from distraction to presence, or the ambiguity of emotional transitions.

Cultural and Philosophical Resonance

The liminal state in Mahamudra aligns with broader Buddhist principles, particularly the Middle Way , which avoids extremes of eternalism (clinging to duality) and nihilism (rejecting all phenomena). The liminal space is a practical embodiment of this, where the practitioner neither indulges in dualistic thinking nor forces an artificial non-dual state but rests in the natural interplay of mind's appearances and emptiness.

In the Karma Kagyu tradition, this liminality also reflects the lineage's emphasis on direct experience over conceptual analysis. Mahamudra teachings often describe the mind as a mirror, reflecting all phenomena (duality) without being stained by them (non-duality). The liminal state is where the practitioner learns to see the mirror's nature, holding both aspects in harmony.

Conclusion

In the context of the Karma Kagyu Lineage and Mahamudra's Vipassana practice, liminality describes the dynamic, transformative threshold between the dualistic, rational mind and the non-dual, intuitive mind. This in-between space is central to the meditative process, where practitioners oscillate rapidly or rest in the transition between duality and non-duality, using these moments to recognize the mind's luminous, empty nature. By engaging with this liminal state, practitioners weaken dualistic habits, deepen insight, and

progress toward the non-dual realization of Mahamudra. The liminal space is thus both a training ground and a gateway, embodying the Karma Kagyu's direct, experiential approach to awakening.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Seeing the Light

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 1, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/e0462228-7a97-4612-a07c-af9a12fad092_1024x1024.jpeg

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

“Where is the mental consciousness? Is it in the upper or lower part of the body? Is it in the body at all? Is it outside the body? No matter where we look for it, we never find it.

“Nevertheless, it remembers, it is attentive. Sometimes the mental consciousness is very coarse and sometimes it is very subtle. The mental consciousness can realize its own nature. It is the mental consciousness that perceives all the appearances of samsara. It understands, and this understanding is described as its luminosity. So, we say it is the union of luminosity and emptiness.

End of quote.

When everything we know and have known is gone, the clear light of the mind remains. In fact, the clarity of the mind does not belong to us and is something that just is and has always been. When we realize this, it is a bit of a shock or at least a surprise. The mind is undying and unborn. Never was a time when it was not and never a time when it won't be.

We can't just turn the inner lights off. They are on all the time. Our relation to the light is another matter. Personally, we are lit by the light, but our personal Self ends at death and deteriorates. However or so the teachings tell us, our essential karma (not our personality) is paid forward, and participates in our rebirth and the inner light of the mind shines on or with it as well.

Of course, I am no expert on this. I relate what has been related to me by the high teachings and rinpoche. I do have some personal experience, and in my major stroke all I could see was the light and I lost for a time all attachments to what would be called my 'Self', better known as 'Michael Erlewine'.

The ground of our being, the substratum, called 'emptiness', is nothing at all, impermanency itself. We have a 'being' that at best is becoming, but has never been 'something' that permanently exists.

Why we have never learned to live with this without being insecure boggles my mind. It's never been different than what it is now, yet here we are, living life as best we can.

We cling to almost everything and that clinging prevents us from seeing things as they are. Our gaze is fixed on our attachments, and by that fixation or distraction always turned away from reality, how things in fact are. The brilliant white light of reality is always exactly where we don't look, until after death, in the bardos, when our eyes are opened, and we have no choice but to look. It may be helpful to quote from my journal after my major stroke. I learned a lot. Give it a read.

STROKE JOURNAL

"Aside from being incoherent, the first flush of the stroke- experience found me running around trying to figure out what I had lost. Did I still have all my fingers and toes, so to speak? And, of course, that is kind of an impossible task, since if we really lost something other than one of the five senses, how would we know we lost it? So, there was a lot of self- inflicted suffering in the beginning, in my case.

"What I forgot to remember at the time is that aside from impaired senses (I lost a little hearing for a while), we can't lose the actual nature of the mind, nor our intrinsic awareness. In other words, I can be aware that I have been harmed by the stroke, but that awareness that is aware of my injury itself is not injured or harmed. That is what I mean by intrinsic awareness. Our native Awareness is alive and well and very much still there – unharmed and taking all this in.

"In fact, that may be most all we have right after a stroke, a pure awareness stripped of any self-attachment and fixations, something quite unusual for us. The Self has been vacated almost totally. In fact, for most of us, the only time we are not compromised by fixation is when we undergo a personal shock strong enough to shatter and detach from our attachments. Then, indeed, we are (temporarily) like a yogi, at least enlightened of our attachments. We still may be running around like a chicken with its head cut off, as they used to say, but inside there it is like new-fallen snow: there are no bells ringing.

Silence.

"Just as we stamp in a puddle, the force of our shoe forces the water out of the depression, yet it soon flows back in. This is what happens when our Self is shattered by a powerful or frightening experience; our self soon re-establishes and reanimates itself, but it takes time. It took me a lot of time, like more than a week and in a lesser way many weeks.

“In my case, I found the force or shock of my recent stroke stunning yet absolutely clarifying. There was not a thought in the mental sky, aside from the flurry of worry-thoughts about losing my mind. LOL.

“I was not worried about “losing my mind” in the classic sense because there my mind was doing the worrying, but rather I was worried about losing track of my mind, which was a losing battle. Like William Blake wrote “Nothing of equal value was lost.” Most of my lost attachments I’m better off without. The Self naturally is like a kaleidoscope, so compound that by a forced vacation and it’s anyone’s guess just how the Self will reanimate itself.

“In summary, I was upset enough that I did not even stop to remember that we can’t lose our mind, but we very much can lose our sense of Self (and fixations) for a shorter or a longer time. In my case, it was for a week or more and that tide of self is still coming in. Some of my previous attachments will never make it back as part of my Self, which is fine by me.

“One the other hand, I need a little something to fixate on if only for old time’s sake. It’s been like Antarctica around here; no fuzzy-wuzzy. The home decorating of our selves is a very personal matter.

“As mentioned, it’s been an austere sense of cold-turkey I experienced with the stroke, one mostly with little attachment or fixation. All that just vacated. Nothing. How scary that was, but also strangely refreshing. Not a cloud in the mental sky.

“Weeks later, I’m still on a shoe-string diet as far as attachments go, getting along with less and liking it more. In fact, many of those attachments I used to have now kind of nauseate me, so obvious to me now that it was just me pandering to myself, now that I see them clearly.

“I believe each person could benefit from studying the Self and the self’s particular collection of attachments and fixations. I see that most of them are just diversions or pure entertainment. We ignore and don’t ‘see the light’.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Spiritual Anatomy of a Stroke

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 2, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Journal Notes and one takeaway from my postings here on my major stroke is that there is a lot of misunderstanding about what is involved in a stroke as it also affects our spirituality. And by “spirituality,” I mean our basic or intrinsic awareness of life. Our “Awareness” of having a stroke is not itself affected by the stroke. That Awareness is what it has always been. It is beyond the physical.

In other words, a physical stroke is just that “physical.” A physical stroke is not only not-spiritual; it does not directly affect our spirituality. I will try to explain using a simple analogy.

The onslaught of a stroke directly affects the physical brain, but is NOT connected (or hard-wired) to our intrinsic ‘Awareness’ such that if we turned up the volume on a radio, both the brain AND our awareness would get turned up. Only the brain would get turned up, so to speak. Our intrinsic awareness would be unaffected except, of course, perhaps indirectly.

A stroke happens in our brain and not in our awareness. That’s why we can be aware of having a stroke. That Awareness does not itself have a stroke. This point is a crucial fact to understand in reading what follows.

Yes, there I was after the stroke hit, unable to speak or mumbling words that had no meaning. However, aside from the shock of it all, my mind inside was still crystal clear. While gibberish was coming out of my mouth and voice, inside I thought I was clearly saying something. What appeared as a non-sequitur was not.

In other words, nothing had changed in my intrinsic awareness, the nature of the mind. This fact might be of interest to those who have never had a stroke and certainly it should be of interest to those who have. Stroke victims know their mental Awareness is still functioning as it always has, subject to brain or bodily impairment. That, IMO, is a key point.

There is another important effect from the stroke that was not so clear to me at first. In fact, this effect was a total surprise, one I believe that as a dharma

practitioner I was completely unprepared for. It never occurred to me, yet this shock dominated the aftermath of the stroke. I will try to be clear.

And this was the fact that when the stroke shattered my Self and its composure, causing my assemblage of personal attachments and fixations (i.e. My Self) to vacate or be voided, this included ALL of my attachments, the good as well as the bad, because attachment is attachment.

And so, a lot of bad personal habits of attachment went right out the window in a flash, leaving me in a kind of no man's land, one without a past or a clear future. As scary as that was, there was a certain sense of refreshment as well that was undeniable. Here is my problem with all that.

What was totally shocking to me was that along with the loss of my personal Self's attachments, went ALL of my attachment and fixation on and to the Dharma. Aside from the physical aftermath of the stroke, with the endless tests, scans, and blood samples, I found myself without ANY of my attachment to the dharma as well. Just imagine. That was a real shock. It was crushing!

If you think I had my thumb on the scale of my likes, dislikes, prejudices, and judgements, imagine what I had ginned up over 40 years of attachment to the dharma. My attachment to the dharma was immense and it too was stripped from me in an instant by the stroke like all of my other attachments. Voila! This I was totally unprepared for. And it was devastating for me, just devastating.

In fact, it has been so devastating that I have not even written about it until now because I was still plumbing the depths of what it meant and putting that puzzle back together as best I can. So, there I was, stripped raw of every attachment I had accumulated since I-don't-know-when and then thrust back into the center of my life with no clue of how I felt or was used to feeling by habit.

And it was refreshing to suddenly have much of my personal excesses removed in favor of what I can only call 'reality'. And what remained was who I am without so much of the "Me, Myself, and I." In other words, I experienced myself as pretty much purely authentic. "Authentic" is the only word I can come up with that characterizes how I felt or was. Yet, there was the caveat that this loss of attachment also included my attachment to the dharma and dharma was a mainstay of my life, crucial to my identification, who I was or thought I was!

In other words, just as my life's fixations, reification, and attachments that went beyond reality (imagined) were removed by the stroke, so was whatever undue attachments to the dharma that had accrued.

And I experienced this as soon as I was able, for example, as I sat down on the cushion to do my daily meditation practice, which was not possible for some days after the stroke. Sure, I had said prayers and mantra all along, but something as formal as a sit-down practice was not possible until the winds of change from the stroke had blown themselves out a bit and I could put words together, and so forth.

And then, when I did manage to sit down on the cushion, fill the offering bowls, and all of that, I had a rude awakening that brought me to my knees, crying. Everything and anything dharma that was put together all these years, trumped-up, and in any way artificial about the process of my dharma practice was also gone. You might think that this is good, to be totally natural and unelaborate with my daily dharma practice, and ultimately it was.

Yet, at the time I soon found out that much of what I had put together as a formal dharma practice was, in fact, one kind of elaboration or another. And in that first sit-down and attempt to formally practice, I had no attachment to it at all. It left me cold.

My dharma practice which I had done for decades just left me feeling empty. Just as my Self's attachments and fixations had been stripped out, so had any and all attachments to the dharma as well. For me this was unimaginable, crushing!

Attachment is attachment, plain and simple. And that was another whole kind of shock, in a way worse than the stroke itself. LOL. What a tangled web we weave.

The patina of practice that I had built up from 45 years of dharma-practice was also completely gone and there sat I practicing dharma in what, to some real degree, seemed like an artificial manner, just going through the motions.

My thumb was no longer on the scale and much of the practice seemed so unnatural and unnecessary. It's like the decades of trying to practice and all the scaffolding I had built to make that happen were politely removed, leaving me stark naked of attachment.

And what remained was my mind with no elaboration and no attachment, one way or the other. My respect for the dharma was still there, in fact so much there that it could not accept or tolerate any artificial or exaggerated attempts on my part to support my practice through good-will gestures and habits.

The dharma does not need our good will; perhaps we think we do. I am reminded of a line my first true dharma teacher drilled into my head back in

the 1960s. “My god is no beggar! He does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet.”

In a similar way, the dharma did not need me as its pimp, to additionally pull for or promote it. It is already everything, just as it naturally is. As mentioned, all of the devices or aids to get into my dharma practice that I had accumulated for decades were not only unnecessary, they were completely absent in that: they no longer had any effect on me. Nada. They were even somewhat repulsive or at least of no use and totally redundant. And so, that is how my formal practice went, my dear dharma friends, which should make for some of you an interesting read.

If fact, it took weeks for me to find a new approach to my daily dharma practice, one that still included the bare bones of it, like filling the offering bowls, etc., but came at it in a deeper, more natural manner. I am still working on that.

In summary, the point here is that along with losing my Self’s fond attachments and fixations came my Self’s attachments and fixations on the dharma, which themselves got no special treatment and were not grandfathered into my life after the stroke just because they were “Dharma.” No such thing occurred in my experience. Attachment is attachment, good, bad, or indifferent. They are all part of the bathwater and not the baby.

This has got to be part of some cosmic humor pageant or other. So, there you have what I came across that was entirely unexpected and somewhat devastating. I am working through it and am better off for it, but I can’t say it has been a walk in the park.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Attachment to Dharma is Just That

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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[Let's follow up yesterday's article, but go a little deeper, for me closer to home. Here are some more notes written during the time of my major stroke, in this case directed as to how it affected my dharma practice.]

What does it mean that in the aftermath of my stroke, when the smoke cleared and the changes stopped changing, I found that my Self had been cleaned out like a chimney? I had experienced something like this shattering of the Self before in my life through various untoward life events, including a TIA (small stroke). So, I knew what it was to have the Self destabilize and go void on me.

Yet, what was total news to me this time (and most worrying) was that the part of my Self that had done dharma practice for 40 or more years had also been cleaned out too. That cupboard also was bare or seemed so. And that realization was personally more terrifying than the stroke itself. LOL.

My investments and attachments to this or that in my Self had been voided by the stroke. Yet, I had no idea (and was not ready) to find out how irrevocably and totally attached I was to the dharma. In other words, my personal investment in dharma was huge and I had never realized it until it too was shattered or at least a good portion of it. Ironical.

To repeat, I didn't care that much about my attachment to all the things that my Self was fixated on or attached to. Seeing them vacated was nothing but basically good news, because even I could recognize how much BS or unessential most of it was.

However, I had never (and could not even dream) that anything connected to the dharma on my part also was pure attachment and just as much BS. I had always thought that being attached to good things like the dharma was OK. After all, anything dharma was "good" attachment, right? I couldn't have been more wrong!

The proof is always in the pudding, as they say, and as it turned out the truth of it was. I was horrified to find out that the slate of my dharma-attachment,

that part of my Self, had also been wiped clean and was just gone. I just could not believe it. It floored me.

How upsetting that fact was for me is hard to convey; there I was, sitting down on my cushion for my daily dharma practice and nothing happened. It was as if the wheels of my dharma practice were no longer greased with familiarity and my long history of practice. It was like it was suddenly all gone. I had to go to the back of the line and start over. And that's a lot of years in time. I was not laughing, but some humor was just around the corner.

I never even imagined that when it came to dharma practice, I would not somehow be grandfathered in. But I was not. It was the dharma's way of telling me that no matter what I think, there is nothing special about my attachment to the dharma. Attachment is attachment. If anything, perhaps I had more bogus attachment to dharma (and my practice of it) than anywhere else in my life. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it?" Certainly not me.

It's like I was stripped of all rank from 40 years of sincere practice and told to start over. All of that built-up attachment to the dharma was just gone. That's about as bad as it got and eventually that was only for a time. A new dharma approach had to reform.

In the "good news" department, I found I had actually accrued some benefit from all those years of dharma practice and perhaps even some tiny bit of realization. And these qualities stood me in good stead. How do I tell? Because they are still there; I already had them and that part of my practice was untouched. The stroke just removed the 'rot', all that I had reified and aggrandized.

And, as truth would have it, being humbled by my obvious attachment to dharma was ultimately a tonic for me. After all, it's like spring! It cleaned out my dharma house, so to speak, ready or not, and I came out better for my self-humiliation than I was before, stripped of a lot of excess attachment and perhaps even better streamlined for practice.

Yet, it was at first a bitter realization to find that attachment to dharma was still attachment and had to go. It had to go because it went, just like that! It was permitted. We know that attachment to bad habits have no place, but I had to experience first-hand that attachment to good things were no different. They too have no place. I had always thought that good attachments were harmless. I don't know about that, but they are useless when they are not existent. If they are gone, they are gone. And they were gone.

It's a valuable realization that when death comes and the bardo beckons, my attachment to dharma will be no more help to me than any other attachment. I have to think on that and what to do about it. A start would be to stop unreasonably attaching myself to anything, including dharma.

One of the characteristics of "realization" is that it is irreversible and stays with us. And although I probably have only the tiniest bit of actual realization, nothing, neither stroke nor bad weather could take that away from me. So, in a nutshell, the kernel of my dharma practice was still there. All I had to do, which took some time, some doing, and reorientation on my part, was to rework the more formal and outward form of my practice that had been up until then more like rote recitation. It was useless.

And what this boiled down to was to stop parroting or blindly reciting prayers and practices and do my practices from scratch and with heart. Nothing but good could come from that and it did. Sure, I'm not as arrogant as I was about my practice after the stroke, and the dharma has seen me through the hurricane of the stroke and I have come out more or less in one piece, although stripped bare and more aerodynamic.

"If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger." That's some truth! The stroke has done nothing but make me stronger, although perhaps a little more physically frail.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Familiar

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

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The great Mahasiddha Saraha said:

“He in whose heart the words of the master have entered sees the truth like a treasure in the palm of his hand.”

What follows is what I consider a key concept for those who have a dharma practice. I’d like to talk about the form through which Dharma is realized by each of us. In my case, what little realization I have has NOT come about as described in the dharma books and texts I have read, heard from the great many teachers I have listened to on tape or video, or the 1000 or so live teachings I attended in Tibet, Nepal, India, and America.

Obviously, I searched in all of those teachings for what was described and explained there to appear in my own life, when it was time. The simple fact is what few breakthroughs I have had never happened according-to-the-books. I feel it is important to understand why this is so. Some of you may have the same situation and be looking up the wrong alley. And the answer is quite simple.

Each of us is exactly who we are (and what we are) and not one iota different from that. And that will always be true. Our particular Self and personality-interface is, by definition, the only way we ever could understand the dharma, because it is our main filter. And this is because our “everything” is all the filter that we HAVE to receive the dharma through, no matter where it comes from outside, high or low. It only gets to us by way of our five senses and our particular mindset. We have no other avenue.

To repeat, no matter how sophisticated or subtle the dharma teacher is in presentation, what filters through to us can only come through our personal filter. What gets through to us is sieved by our particular set of obscurations and unique mind-frame. What passes through our filter may be only a shadow of the original signal or it may be a lot. And here for me, is the kicker:

What does get through to us will not be in some foreign-to-us language (Tibetan, etc.) or super-sophisticated pundit-style conceptual message. That just never gets through. At best, perhaps we can feel the heart of the teaching

at some deep level. And what we receive will always be given to us in our own tongue, in our personal language and vernacular, and tailored by us and just for us. It will be as familiar to us as we are sophisticated, no less and no more. That's a given. But when I was first learning dharma, that's not what I was looking for or expected.

Instead, I was looking for my own realizations to be like those described in the dharma texts -- chapter and verse. That never, not ever, has happened to me in all these decades of dharma practice. However, I can tell you what HAS happened.

What has been the case is that as I'm learning, listening, or studying something, some bit of dharma, I'm not always sure what it is about, and then slowly, very slowly, I realize that what I am realizing is what the dharma books spelled out, yet as interpreted by me without even knowing what I was interpreting. I do get it. I eventually REALIZE what the books and rinpoches are talking about.

And so, if we have trouble listening and understanding the dharma, that's just how it is for us. Something WILL get through, but it may be very little and it will be in our own family/familiar form. This is why each of us had best find an authentic dharma teacher whose form of teaching really speaks to us, meaning that the message they project gets through and is received by us with as little noise and with as strong a signal as possible. It has to grab us by the short- hairs, so to speak. IMO, that's how we know we have found a teacher or a way of learning. We learn.

In fact, we are incapable of anything other than that. As they say: if you lack the faculties, you can't perceive the phenomena, plain and simple. And the reverse is also true, if we have the faculties, we can perceive the phenomena.

So, it comes down to the filter of our faculties, how much dharma we can absorb. And, of course, this is why there are so many purification practices, to help us trim down our obscurations until they are transparent enough for us to see right through them and receive (tune in to) the dharma despite them.

And to go back to my original use of the word "amazing." As mentioned, I was amazed to find the dharma being communicated to me was in my own vernacular, so to speak, in a totally familiar language. This is what managed to get through the filter of my five senses and my particular set of obscurations. There could be no other entrance or way the dharma reaches me than that.

And if you reflect on this or allow the natural reflections and vibe of the dharma to create an image, much like a hologram, this explains a lot as to why the more advanced teachings, in particular the non-dual practices, will always

be in OUR own writ and perfectly tailored to us. It's like it is coming from inside us and not from outside, and it is. The Buddha was said to teach such that everyone hears what he taught in his or her own particular familiar way. It's true today, because we can't help but filter the teachings precisely to our situation.

You can be sure, the dharma will be no smarter than you, because you are no smarter than you. Make sense?

What has happened with me is more like me talking to myself, understanding myself through my personal language and life experience. Mundane knowledge like this comes through what is called Self-discovery, and the dharma is no different; we discover it.

The dharma still has to come through who we are, "Self" and all, our particular filter. So, prepare yourself to be instructed as filtered by your particular Self, by the familiar and not from an outsider or the outside. At best, imagine a lama or rinpoche speaking to you through your Self as a translator, because that's what is going to happen. Prepare yourself to discover the nature of your own mind, not in some pie-in-the-sky formal conceptual dharma terms as you read in a book, but in your personal vernacular, always the most familiar. In other words, we are going to tell ourselves the truth.

If this sounds scary, it should not, because we have never been any different. It has always been just exactly this way. They say that recognizing the true nature of the mind is like recognizing the familiar face of a friend in a crowd. And that friend is your familiar!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Tilopa's Sage Advice

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

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https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/f6d1c2a5-664e-4c6a-8488-2a4fa79c5241_1024x576.jpeg

In my sixty-some years of doing my best (trying to learn) to practice dharma, there are a few pithy (short and easy to remember) suggestions that have stuck in my mind and actually turned out to be of great use to me. None more so than the classic “Six Words of Advice” of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa. Here are the main four of those six; see below for all six.

(1) Don't Prolong the Past (2) Don't Invite the Future (3) Don't Alter the Present (4) Relax, As It Is.

(1) Don't Prolong the Past

(2) Don't Invite the Future

(3) Don't Alter the Present

(4) Relax, As It Is.

These are just words, but they are considered words that have been echoed down the dharma lineages through the centuries. The Mahasiddha Tilopa was not just another lineage holder, but aside from the celestial Vajradhara from whom Tilopa received his inspiration, Tilopa is the head of the particular Mahamudra lineage I belong to, the Karma Kagyu Lineage.

To make these words of advice clear, I even include a little diagram or map I drew up to make it (hopefully) easier to absorb. I find that these words of advice help me to be more aware as to where my mind is currently focused. As they say, who knows where the mind goes. Sooner or later, we must know.

And too much of the time I am anywhere but where I would like to be. That is why these six words of advice have been so valuable for me. Being reminded (becoming aware) of what I am actually doing with my mind (and my time), even roughly, points out to me that I am usually, as they say, "Every which way but loose." And how is that?

That is because I am easily distracted and prone to jump on any passing train of thought and take a little ride, a ride that seldom goes anywhere I really want to go. It just wastes time and is at best entertaining, scary, worrying, and so on. And it is a good thing that I like movies, because most of the time I

seem to be watching one of my own projections and not enjoying (or at least reacting) to it at that. This tendency to ignore the true nature of things is what Tilopa is pointing out. Ignorance amounts to what we ignore and have habitually ignored.

Tilopa suggests that we allow the mind to rest naturally, like we would if we sit down in a big soft chair after a day of hard work. Relax. It is not like there is a 'right' place, object, or subject to allow the mind to rest on, but there does seem to be a right way of resting, one that allows mindfulness and clarity to arise.

In other words, this or that object or subject of focus (whatever we are thinking) is not "bad" (or "good") in itself, and negative attachment (revulsion) is no different from positive attachment (love and like). The ignorance of attachment is itself attachment. Buddhist fundamentalism would be no different from any other kind of fundamentalism, dividing the world into good and bad, subject and object, and so on.

That is not what the dharma intends.

Tilopa points out that it is best not to dwell (be attached) to the past, present, or future, although, as we well know, they are all equally attachable. Don't spend all of your time there. By that same token, what Buddhists call the "Three Times" (past, present, future) are all more than workable, from a dharma standpoint. We can start where we are at this moment. There is no need to run to or from the three times. Tilopa says to just relax and leave thoughts of the three times go, just as they are. Don't bother to pretty them up or even think about them. Let it be.

Tilopa suggests that we "let go" of the three times, not either glorify, deny, or shun them. Thoughts of the past, present, or future are all just that, thoughts. We are advised to become aware that we have become attached to and fixated on these thoughts and just let go of the attachment and rest in the ensuing release and flow.

In the more advanced meditation practices, practitioners are taught not to just look at the content of a thought (what the train of thought is about), but instead to look at the nature of that thought, and the most remarkable thing is that all thoughts share the same nature. Once we have seen and realized the actual nature of one thought, we have done the same for all thoughts, past, present, or future. But this ability to realize this takes time and practice. We have to train in this.

Tilopa suggests to not prolong the past, invite the future, or think about or alter the present. His message, as mentioned, is about not becoming attached

or carried away by thoughts, like getting on our train of thought and taking a ride without being mindful that we are doing just that – being distracted. Tilopa's is an easy method for waking up and becoming aware of what we are doing each moment. Take a look; be aware.

When Tilopa says let go and 'rest as it is', that rest is beyond attachment of any kind to the past, present, or future. We let go once we realize that we have become attached, but we first have to realize it.

For example, if we find ourselves prolonging the past, trying to figure it out, etc., Tilopa does not mean for us to somehow get out of the past and into the present or future instead. All three times are misdirection. In fact, there is no particular place to go, as Chuck Berry pointed out. Tilopa means for us to let go of our 'attachment' to the past, present, and future and just rest as it is -- however we are always in the present moment. And because we are not used to just being present, this can be very hard to do. We can't stand to let go!

Past, present, or future makes no difference. The three times are identical in nature and are not sources of refuge for us.

Attachment itself is not somehow evil or bad by nature. Attachment to anything only distracts and obscures our authentic nature from being seen, which is why Tilopa suggests we let go of attachment to the three times and just rest in the true nature of the mind itself, which is something we can learn to do. And he is showing us how.

For me, these six words of advice serve as constant reminders for me to be aware, realize, and once I locate my attachments and reactions, relax my hold on them, and learn to just let them go so that the mind can clear.

I find that this is a process that I can gradually learn to do all throughout my day, not just in formal sitting-meditation practice. The amount of time I allocate to sitting-on-the-cushion practice is nowhere near the time I can spend in this practice that Tilopa suggests. There are few dharma practices that I have come across that are as easy and simple as this one. Anyone can do it and you can start right now, in this present moment.

I realized early on that going to church on Sunday for an hour or so would never be enough to get a rascal like me into any kind of heaven or enlightenment. It would take real practice time for me to realize much of anything. Tilopa's six words of advice are an easy opportunity to accumulate real practice time, like: all day long. It is, as they say, a no-brainer!

I include here Tilopa's suggestions for those who may have missed them until now.

TILOPA'S SIX WORDS OF ADVICE

Let go of the past, rather than prolong it.

Let go of the future, rather than invite it.

Let go of the present and don't alter the present

Let go of analyzing, rather than figuring anything out.

Let go of controlling, rather than trying to make things happen.

Relax right now, just as it is.

In summary, the method Tilopa presents to not alter the present moment and to relax, just as it is.

[Diagram by me.]

EMAIL

It's That Time

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 10, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/49d4a345-7892-48a1-b318-e3fe548d380e_1861x2048.jpeg

By Michael Erlewine

Is it that time of life or just a time for a short retreat. It's hard to say, yet I'm going to take a few days to do next to nothing. Events seem to conspire globally and locally that point to me pitching in and just helping however I can. I need to get at it.

And to start that off, some resting is in order, a signal of my commitment in the coming time. I've put it off enough already that it's time to dig in. In the dharma practice, aside from Mahamudra, my favorite practice is the Mandala Offering. It goes like this:

"I anoint the earth with fragrant water, scatter flowers,

And adorn it with Mt. Meru, the four continents, and the Sun & Moon.

Imagining this a buddha field, I offer it so that all beings may enjoy this pure realm."

I did the practice of arranging seven piles of rice on a copper plate and offering them over 200,000 times, so I guess I know it well enough, if there is such a thing. The most valuable condition to hold in mind, IMO, is Absolute Bodhicitta, and so I can't help but continue that. It's my tell.

See you in a few days.

[Photo of Butterfly Weed by me, now blooming in my garden.]

EMAIL

The Present Moment is the End of Time

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 15, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/bc475118-8965-4c95-a9aa-7ada0319e438_1024x1024.jpeg

We like to think that we live in the present moment, but the reality shows otherwise. It would be more correct to say that we are “being exposed to the present moment”; that is the operative language, IMO. There is reason to believe that time ends in the present moment, the eternal present.

Apparently, the present moment is some kind of a groove that we are not automatically slotted in. In other words, we don’t naturally roll or fall into the groove of the present-tense, although it is all that we have before us. Go figure that out.

The present moment is not only an intellectual concept that philosophers argue over, as to whether it even exists or not. The “present” is said to be so instantaneous (of the split-second) that it is over before it begins, yet, as mentioned, it is also called the eternal present. How can it be both?

My rather crude answer to that question is because we never spend any (or very little) time there. No matter how brief the present is, we still don’t seem to have enough time to remain there. Yet, the present moment is much more real than just some philosophical argument. If the Present is the tip of the top of the razor’s edge between the past and the future, we sure don’t know how to balance ourselves there.

Instead, it seems that we roll off into the past or cast ourselves into future imaginings most of the time. My point is that the present moment is not some intellectual dilemma, some white-paper concept, but a stark reality that in fact is hard to endure, hard for us to stand. I have experienced this recently in real-time. The so-called “Now” is not just a philosophical quandary as I used to try to imagine, but much more a hard-scrabble struggle to remain aware OF the present moment and to remain IN the present moment.

The Present not only can be proved by philosophers to seemingly not exist, but rather also is so ever-present and dominant that we can’t withstand its constant onslaught, so to speak. It is like the Sun at Noon on a summer day, so bright that we cannot look at it without dark glasses; most of us quickly find ourselves seeking out the shade. I only discovered this for myself recently.

Just try to look directly into the present moment. This is why meditation exists.

The Present is indeed eternal, but apparently, we can only stand a wee bit of eternity, so stuck are we on time. LOL. The present is so bright that we are blinded by its, well, very presence. Like leggy plants that need the sun, we each need to harden ourselves off by enduring the present moment for more than a fraction of a second. After all, it is omni-potent and timeless. Time stops in the present and nowhere else.

Instead, we look in the rearview mirror of the past to see what we just did in the present; we would rather reflect and live by our reflections. Which brings me to what we call “meditation.”

In a very real sense, meditation is not only some pleasant timeout or a methodical practice on a cushion, but also (and perhaps even more so) a wrestling with reality in our attempt to become familiar with and seize (or endure) the present moment and the day -- *Carpe Diem*.

Exposing ourselves to the present moment, in my experience, is a grueling task that (apparently) few are up to. Instead, we spend most of our time flickering in the past or the future.

For all our complaining about the weight of time, apparently, we prefer it to the eternity of the present moment. Yes, we all are perpetually exposed to the present moment, yet we cannot look it in the eye. And here is something to consider:

I am of the opinion that “this moment” is more like the wormhole that deep-space astrophysicists write poetry about; they tell us that it exists at the center of a black-hole, a singularity where the normal laws of Samsara break down, a short-cut through time (and space) via eternity into our future.

When I open my mind, I find that the present moment is exactly like what we will encounter in the bardo after death and it is here with us right now; always has been. It is comical that we assume our universe after death is some far off place (or state of mind) we eventually will find ourselves in. It’s right here and now. What we imagine as distant is now near.

The fact is that we just ignore the present and instead dream a karmic-bridge to hold back what we have, lifetime after lifetime, until our karma is exhausted and we can look the present moment in the eye.

Anyway, that’s what comes to mind. What is the present moment? For those with enough time, please tell me how you see and experience it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Tough Love: The Fierce Dharma Protectors

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 16, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1366b000-5621-432f-bda9-23c9a898c389_1500x2048.jpeg

In Tibetan Buddhism, what are called the fierce wrathful deities (Dharma Protectors, Dharmapalas) stand out as scary. The key word here, IMO, is “wrath,” and even that word is defined in numerous ways.

My understanding of “wrath” (and the way I use this word), it is not about anger, but righteousness or cosmic justice – the persistence and endurance of truth. Simply put, the truth lasts longer than anything else. It’s as close to permanence as we get. The truth is the future, because when everything else dies out, the truth will still be there.

The fierce Dharmapala Mahakala is often cited as being the wrathful form of Chenresik (Avalokiteshvara), the Bodhisattva of kindness and compassion. They are two ends of the same stick or what is called “connate.”

Mahakala comes from the word “Maha” meaning great and the word “Kala” meaning time, death, and black. And no, it does not translate as have a “great time”. LOL. My first dharma teacher used to spell and play with words. And with the word “funeral,” he would rearrange the letters and say “real fun.” Then he would laugh. So, perhaps Mahakala is like that. The Kalachakra stands for the “wheel of time,” so Mahakala is something like the “Great Death.” The Tibetans simply call Mahakala “Nagpo Chenpo” meaning “Great Black One.” Another Tibetan word for these deities is Gönpö, which means “protector.” You get the idea.

Kindness and compassion are the key; if we stray too far from the truth, the wrathful deities rise up in proportion to our error and warn us that we are off-course. Eventually, if we continue to persist in the wrong direction from truth, the protectors will trim or cut away our excess. And that can be painful. They are the protectors from error, so to speak.

Just as pain is the way the body tells us something is wrong, wrathful deities like the protector Mahakala protect us from going too far from the truth. As my first dharma teacher used to say about natural laws like the law of gravity: “We don’t break nature’s laws; they break us.” That’s dharmapalas.

In a “trim” router, any wood that is not within the form of the bit is trimmed away. I sometimes think of the protectors like that. If I get out-of-line, to the degree I stray from my own internal truth, sooner or later that degree or error must be rectified and removed. In that case, we are living on borrowed time.

In fact, the fierce face of Mahakala was historically so indigenous to the nomadic Tibetans that it was referred to as the “lord of the tent,” because every tent had a Mahakala mask hanging in it or at the doorway protecting the place.

As mentioned, just as pain is a kindness of the body to keep us aware, so the fierce Mahakala protector marks the ring-pass-not or the “extremes” beyond which we cannot go with impunity, without serious consequences.

And so, it is just a hop, skip, and a jump from Mahakala as protector of all beings, keeping us safe, to Mahakala as a protector that warns and wards away “evil” or error in whatever form it arises or exists.

These fierce protectors are intended to be, in their wrath, more fierce than any “evil” could ever be and thus their appearance. Evil back-off or suffer the consequences. Again, these are “protectors” of us and have never harmed a single being, but only serve to keep them safe from falling into error. However, no doubt that it represents some tough love.

In the photos shown, all taken by me in 1997 on our first pilgrimage to Tibet, the top photo is a wall painting of Mahakala, on the left bottom is the moment when we first arrived at Tsurphu Monastery, the ancestral home of the Karmapa, the oldest lineage of reincarnate lamas. We were there to see and meet the 17 th Karmapa. The current Dalai Lama is the 14 th . This was an event happening at 15,000 feet as we drove in for a three-day stay with the young Karmapa. On the lower right, are a whole series of small shrines for the fierce dharmapalas. Above these shrines you can see the heads of many animals, their heads, all either pouched or otherwise killed and mounted there, where in the high climate deteriorated very slowly. That’s me showing some very interested monks a book of photos from our dharma center here in Big Rapids, Michigan.

EMAIL

What It's All About

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 16, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/4d20d782-bf98-410a-a035-0aa7de217b29_1024x1024.jpeg

The phrase “All roads lead to Rome” is a classic. For me, as I get older, all roads lead to dharma; this is ever truer. Perhaps it is because the Dharma is truth, and truth clarifies. Of course, I have all the interests, hobbies, and history that as an entrepreneur I might have, yet as I age all these many pursuits are hollow compared to the purity and satisfaction becoming familiar with the dharma.

These many interests fade away, and no matter which way I turn, I find myself picking up on the dharma. If I find the heart of the dharma each day and rest there, that is enough.

I’m not a dharma teacher. My life has become one of sharing the dharma with others. The proper term is Absolute Bodhicitta, and I find that if I express the dharma with clarity, it punctuates whatever obscures or obfuscates and transforms it into the emptiness and clarity of vivid insight.

Beyond that, I know nothing.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

B-Day

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 18, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Well, I made another trip round the Sun, my 84 th solar return. Not as easy as it used to be, old age takes its toll with one too many hospital visits and a lot of pills and supplements to take.

All in all, I'm still on the planet and glad to be with my FB friends. I have been writing this blog since 2007. Of course, I write too many words and on subjects probably not always entertaining, yet that's just me.

What to do on my birthday? Nothing special please. For me, what I like to do is painstakingly clarify the dharma teachings so I understand them better, and then, rest in that clarity and luminosity.

I could not have predicted how profoundly satisfying articulating the pith dharma texts are, as I mentioned, clarifying them, then going for full immersion, and falling to rest in that clarity -- the sweeping gesture of a single mudra. There are probably more sophisticated conceptual dharma constructions out there, but that would be going out of my way for no reason, and be just another obstacle.

The great Mahasiddha Tilopa said it simply: "Relax, As It Is."

My birthday 'wish' is that we could each find and share the truth in all things. As for me, one of my favorites, the mandala offering practice, and the offering prayer:

"I anoint the earth with fragrant water, scatter flowers,

And adorn it with Mt. Meru, the four continents, and the Sun & Moon.

Imagining this a buddha field, I offer it so that all beings may enjoy this pure realm."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's Life-Changing Accident

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 19, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/b863ee0c-e897-4814-8d1d-adff288f710b_682x954.jpeg

Here is part of a teaching by the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche where he talks about his serious automobile accident, what he went through in recovery, and how it changed his life. I will post some excerpts here. I found it very revealing and with some similarities to my own major stroke account.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche wrote:

“The interesting message to me personally from Jamgön Kongtrül was a sense of maturity and a sense of growth: you have to take care of yourself and everything is left up to you personally -- one has to develop one's own dignity, one's own sanity and one's own resourcefulness. I think my journey up to here became one big journey of that nature.

“I was driving a little car, which was recently purchased at the time, a sudden blackout overwhelmed me, and I ran into a joke shop. I broke in the door of the joke shop, which is a shop that sells tricks.

“Having been unconscious for several hours, I woke up in a hospital bed. A fluorescent light above me was my first experience. Subconsciously, I had heard sirens and people talking about: “Is he alive or is he dead.”

“And that was a very interesting, extraordinarily powerful message to me personally. It was a question of there still having been a faint hesitation whether I should work on myself or simply to take refuge in my reputation, in my robes, in my monastic vow alone.

“Relying on my credentials -- that's what it boiled down to.

“This was an expression of a certain fear in me, myself personally: suppose I give up my paraphernalia, so to speak, my outfit -- I'm going to be a fish out of water.

“There was still some doubt as to whether the transplanted sanity from my guru was going to work or not. In other words, I still wasn't convinced, still not committed to the teaching properly. And obviously, the only help for this that existed was this sudden message, this shock, this accident.

"If you're not going to behave as you should, like the good boys and good girls of the lineage, then this is the message--and make the best of it: WHOMP!

"And it took some time to recover from that message obviously Having realized this message, the instant reaction was: unclothe yourself, be naked.

"A certain time after my accident, my marriage to Diana took place. This was a very important part of my life, extraordinarily important . It was a further commitment to my life, to trusting basic sanity, working with the world, and further unclothing myself not particularly looking for an ideal wife and home and washing machine and TV set and motor car, which is going to provide you with hospitality and comfort. It was an act in the unclothing process.

"You go out, you go and open to the greatest extent you can in your life, in terms of being naked, reducing yourself to a fetus, completely opening. Doing that creates and created a tremendous uproar obviously. Because people love for that naked person to be clothed, masked, encased in a suit of armor.

"For the first time in my life I experienced that sense of nakedness extraordinarily powerfully. I was not only stripped of my monk's robes and my celibacy, but also stripped of my skin and my flesh. You become a walking skeleton. You are still alive and your heart has not been stripped away and your brain hasn't been stripped away. But apart from that, everything has been stripped away. Which is a fantastic experience.

"Not only are you stripped of your own culture but you are stripped within the alien culture, full of pollution, motor cars, airplanes, jets hovering above your head-- and people gossiping about you, murmuring. It was an extraordinary stripping process.

"The basic question is after that if there's any sanity left in you. Does your sanity remain or was it nested in your clothes? Was it in your skin or your flesh, or was it in your heart and brain, in your bones properly and completely.

'That's the test of whether you've been completely indoctrinated (in the positive sense) and completely blessed, so to speak, in the basic core of your marrow and in your heart thoroughly and completely.

"If so, then the messages become extraordinarily stronger and stronger, constantly. Then your bone begins to create flesh, which begins to grow out and develop; and your flesh creates skin, and your skin begins to create clothes. And you begin to develop a new human being. The basic point is: how much can you give in. And having given in, how much can you grow out. . . "

End of quote.

Trungpa Rinpoche's words speak for themselves, but they underline my own teacher's continued emphasis to be aware of any shock, any sudden surprise, in terms of a loss of Self and possibly the opportunity of recognizing the true nature of our own mind.

We may or may not be a Buddhist practitioner, but in the lives of any of us there can be shocks outbreaking that may break us down, temporarily shattering the cohesion and stability of what we call the Self, yet at the same time opening new doors of awareness.

In my case, I have never sought out shocks or events of that import, but nevertheless at least several have occurred to me in my life anyway. And each of these three shock events shattered my self-security and the glaring gaps or vacancies left by each of these shocks brought profound clarity of a dharmic nature to me in response.

When the Self is eclipsed by reality, even temporarily, the response is like that of sunlight on soil. The seeds of dharma sprout and grow, at least this has been true in my experience. I am somewhat ashamed to say that without the prodding of fate (and destiny) by way of adversity, aside from meeting Margaret (and the kid's births), no other of my experiences has been as fruitful for me dharmic-ally as big upsets. LOL.

And while, I never sought for or welcomed any of these sudden onslaughts to my Self, after I got over whining and being disappointed at my fate and difficult karma...after the smoke cleared, so to speak, my internal dharmic growth blossomed like a flower. That I can't deny.

I can see the same pivotal nature of these type of shocks in Trungpa Rinpoche's above account.

[Photo of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, used with permission.]

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Give It a Rest

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 20, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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By Michael Erlewie

Everything has the seal or stamp of the mind upon it. That's the idea of Mahamudra (The Great Seal). The sound of silence can still be heard above the loudest noise. And as Shakespeare said, "Much Ado about Nothing." The even-handedness of emptiness, from the tiniest microbe to the largest whale, is astonishing. Nothing in existence exists all THAT much. Reality can get mighty thin at times, almost as if there is no one there, meaning here in each of us. LOL. It's like our entire life is a hologram or as the Tibetans say, a magical illusion.

My dharma teacher Of 36 years, Khenpo Rinpoche, said that we might try resting the mind in Mahamudra meditation for the time it takes to pick up a teacup and take a sip. And once successful, resting, then do this frequently, every few seconds, again and again, as the opportunity arises. Continuity can result -- contiguousness. There are endless micro-opportunities each day to rest in the nature of the mind. Rinpoche says to take them. IMO, by that, Rinpoche is telling us that even the longest journey has a single first step. Unless we take that first step, there cannot be another.

For each one of us, there must be a time that is short enough that we are able to rest for that moment in the nature of our own mind, like taking that first sip of tea. And then another and another, until with a succession of these moments we can rest for longer stretches of time, not longer than one moment each, but a succession of moments like the beads on a mala. However, just sitting on the cushion and "trying" to rest is an oxymoron. Trying doesn't do it; resting does it.

Perhaps the immense initial effort we have to make to learn to meditate, like the scaffolding on an unfinished building, has to be removed before the building is complete. It's no different with meditation. We must unlearn the effort and the trying before we can rest the mind. That is just common physics. Yet, it can only be done successfully at the propitious time.

This even marks the difference between the purification dharma practices and the realization practices. It 'IS' the difference or threshold from one to the

other. One of the most important realizations I have ever had was the day I realized that when Rinpoche said “Let the mind rest,” by “rest” he did not mean some special kind of dharmic rest, but just the plain old rest that I already knew how to do. Let go and allow your mind to relax and come to rest -- settle. You know the saying: “Give it a rest.”

There is a way they communicate this in Tibet that is very convincing. As you drive through the almost non-existent roads in the high plateaus of Tibet, there are countless small plots of ground used to raise barley. Every family seems to have one or two. And when they harvest the ripe grain, they bind the straw into little bundles, each tied in the middle by a single light cord. These bundles are then set upright, here and there across the fields.

And the concept of “rest” is taught by taking one of the bundles of barley-straw, leaning it against a wall or fence, and very gently cutting the cord that binds it. As the cord is severed, the straw does not just fly all about. Instead, as the cord is cut, the bundle of straw just ever-so-gently slumps, like a sigh. That’s how we should allow ourselves to come to rest. Ever so gently.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Imagine What I Don't Know

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 21, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Imagining what I don't know,

And I don't know,

I imagine what I don't know.

I know what I imagine is what I don't know,

And what I know is not what I imagined.

That much I know.

I can only imagine what I don't know.

That is a short poem I wrote long ago about “knowing.” It may drive a few of you away. LOL. I seem to never give up trying to express the ineffable, even though I know it cannot be put into words, yet I continue to try.

And so, now for a REALLY difficult concept, a concept of possible interest only for those who want to learn the realization practices like Vipassana and Mahamudra meditation. Let's call it the “There” and the “Then” that is here and now. If you can get any sense out of this essay, please let me know. If not, I apologize. Here goes.

What we don't know (the unknown), we tend to invent, fear, or imagine and too often we are simply mistaken. And this is because we imagine what we don't know as somewhere other than right here – some other place, some other time.

A common example is always placing the “unknown” just out of reach as in “out of sight, out of mind.” For example, right now we imagine that the bardo, after death, is some place other than here and the now. Try it out. How far away is the bardo going to be when we die, after we die? That's what I mean by a miss-take. Except for the past or future, there is no “there” and “then,” only the here and the now.

In other words, we imagine the unknown of the future as the “there” and the “then.” That is, IMO, a bad habit, especially when all the dharma teachings

pinpoint the Present Moment as the only avenue we have. Yet, we imagine our future, like the bardo after our death or our future enlightenment, etc. as anywhere but here and now. Yet, all we have ever known (we all know it) is the here and now. Anything else is in the past or the future.

Everything that we “think” we have to face after death we are facing now. It’s only that little thing called “time” that separates us right now from then. And even time itself will always be right here and now. I believe it is a mistake to imagine or assume that what we may fear of the future is not present now, where it can actually be addressed. It’s always right here and now – everything.

As to our mind, hopefully that is something that we are already somewhat familiar with, if only because of our nightly dreams; and the dharma texts tell us that this waking life we live is but a dream as well. In effect, we are already living our own dream or nightmare. How could we not be; we are ourselves only right here and now. We can’t see beyond ourselves because all our sense organs are all right here. And now, for the ‘something’ I would ask you to consider:

Not commonly known or understood, the mind is flexible and also as physical as we are. And up to now it is my belief (from my own experience) that most of us have never used the mind for more than intellectual concepts, thinking. I repeat: the mind is as physical as we are physical.

It has never occurred to us that the mind is ambidextrous, so to speak. The mind is not just idea-prone and for thinking, but viscous as well; it has textures. We are too quick to “think” with the mind, rather than to do anything with it viscosely. The mind is susceptible to shaping. It’s like kneading bread; we can and must put our hands into the mind directly and work the mind like we do physical exercise. It is imperative for spiritual growth.

We each have to (need to) go into the mind ourselves and exercise it enough to create space within there, create room to live and be aware in, and set up shop – living room. We can go into our own mind and just stretch or expand it, much like we might erect or put up a tent or umbrella in there, pushing and working to raise or expand this imaginary tent or space inside our mind so that we have some room, more space. How do we do this?

To begin with, we do this by searching the mind; instead of just thinking of answers conceptually, we search our mind manually, not just intellectually. We actually get off our mental-duffs and go into our mind and search (make effort) hard and long for an answer to any questions we have or are given by our dharma teacher. For example:

My dharma teacher, a high rinpoche, once asked a group of us: "Is the mind the color "Red?" Then he asked us to spend the entire day and night looking in our mind for the answer to that single question and report back to him at the next session. And we all did just that. He also said that in Tibet, they do this for three days and nights straight, and then move on to all the other main colors. It takes months But clever me, I just quickly thought "No, the mind is not the color red or any given color."

As too often for me, that was just exactly the wrong thing to do. My teacher was not asking me to "think," but rather to make effort and search my mind thoroughly, exhaustively, and completely to find out if the mind was the color red. I didn't do that, but I should have. And this failure on my part brings to light a quintessential point to fully grasp for those wanting to learn the more advanced non-dual dharma practices, at least in my opinion.

Instead of just think, think, think all the time, we have to learn to actually use the mind as if it were a muscle that we have never exercised to create space or room, room that can be expanded just (and only) by our exercise and effort. Again, like putting up a tent in our mind, we have to stretch, pull, and massage the mind until it becomes elastic and ultra-flexible. It's like kneading dough. Right now, if all we do is think, it is not pliable enough.

In other words, we can learn to LIVE in there. Like working with clay (wedging), we have to make our mind more flexible, but most of all we have to search our mind until we exhaust all possibilities. We must completely exhaust all questioning by searching, by actually ourselves taking a look around in our mind, something we have never done. We must exhaustively search throughout the entire mind. If we just "think," we have already missed the point.

The mind is not just some abstract thing as I once assumed it was. It is EVERYTHING there is, all wrapped into one, and it has 'suchness,' 'beingness', 'thusness' too -- tathata. It is viscous. And the "suchness" of the mind, well, that's also us. We too are representatives of the mind.

You may get tired of hearing me rant and rave about the physicality of the mind, but this discovery was total news to me. I had always skimmed the concepts off the top of my mind like cream from milk, and have never gone for a swim. As they say, "Come on in, the water is fine." And it required.

The sooner that we can begin to exercise within the mind itself, the better; in other words, become familiar with the mind. I have understood that this present moment is the key to knowing the mind and it is always present and right there. The brilliance of the present moment blinds us until we become

accustomed to enduring it. It's like the Sun at Noon. We can't (and don't) look directly at it, but gradually we can become familiar with it. We also can become familiar with our own mind.

That's about all I know. I am working to become familiar with the present moment, but it is not easy for me. My habit, all I have ever known, is to hide in the darkness of thought and concepts and to not look directly at the present, much less endure it. It's like summer heat lightning, and I am not alone in this.

With all the current emphasis on physical exercise and getting in shape, the mind also has a shape it should be in. It is up to us to get our own interface with the mind in good shape. As dharma students, what I have tried to describe in the above lines, the sheer physicality or viscosity of the mind is, IMO, the key that I missed in preparing for the pointing-out-instructions that lead to the recognition of the true nature of the mind.

I wish I had known this earlier. I will leave you with another little (to me) fun poem.

NEVER KNOWN

If I know,

I don't know I know,

And I don't know I don't know I know.

I don't know what I would know, If I did know.

That's how I know I don't know.

So, I don't know,

I know I don't know,

And I know I know I don't know.

I have never known.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Times They Are A-Changin'

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 23, 2025

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Don't take this too literally, but the bonfire of our mind is consuming both facts and imaginations in a conflagration. The past is but a memory in decline.

There is no refuge there.

I am reminded of the poet William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell and the line "After dinner I asked Isaiah to favor the world with his lost works; he said none of equal value was lost."

And the future is not yet graspable, not in our hands. There is no refuge there and it is foolish if we believe there is, which leaves this present moment, the 'Now'. Here we always are.

I have been fascinated by the idea of 'truth' and the fact that the truth in us lasts, and I delight in saying that "Truth is the Future."

And I say that because it is only the quintessential truth that will last until then, until the future. The truth will still be there then. The rest will fall by the wayside and be lost in the conflagration that was mentioned above. We are by definition stuck between a rock and a hard place to grasp.

And of course, there is always the kaleidoscope of the ever-changing planetary patterns in the heavens above that we astrologers follow, especially true with our own solar system and these heliocentric patterns there that the planets are bound to.

These changing planetary patterns bring one geometric whole-chart pattern after another into focus and then dissolves it again. And we are living that. And with these changing patterns, my mind comes into focus and then fades with the degradation of the pattern, like a twinkling star.

I seem to know when to go take a look at the current whole-chart astronomical patterns only to often find it is the same general pattern as the

pattern at my birth. Somehow, I'm aware that my natal pattern is happening. And when it is, I'm in focus once again for a time and then it's gone. I can offer a funny story.

Back in the early 1970s when I was discovering and documenting all these whole-chart planetary patterns (I called them Star*Types to myself), I was calculating and looking at these Star*Type patterns in various groups of people, my family, my friends, musicians, etc.

Well, one day I had the idea that I should do the Star*Types (the heliocentric chart patterns) of all those people I did not get along with, in particular my 'enemies'. Why not, and so I did that.

When I got them all calculated, what I found is that almost all of them had Star*Type whole-chart patterns just like mine. What a shock! Apparently, I didn't like people like me, too much competition. In a nutshell, I didn't like myself in all of its many forms.

I learned a major lesson right there and began working on liking or at least tolerating myself and myself in other people. If you would like to do that yourself, here are two free books that can help.

"StarTypes: Life Path Partners"

<https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/StarTypes.pdf>

"Dharma Chart / Karma Chart: Astrological Empowerment in the 21st Century"

<https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev%20Nov2015.pdf>

And here is another anecdote: I can't say if this only happens to me or if it happens to everyone. I do know that the current whole-chart pattern in the sky is not there just for me, but for everyone. All of us here on Earth experience it together. And as the patterns change, forming and separating, life changes with it. These changes mean something, certainly they are not nothing. They are right there and happening.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I am fine, even with everything around me in this world in what appears to be chaos. And the chaos is deepening, not getting lighter. That turning political and war-driven gyre draws us deeper within itself and is not spewing us out, at least not yet.

And with it, as mentioned, the political spiral surrounding us also deepens. We are still falling into it, not coming out of it. Beyond the obvious outer chaos,

there each of us sits, doing the best we can to be stable in the whirlwind of changes engulfing us.

I should sleep, yet I cannot. I mean well toward each of us and also collectively. We have no choice but to ride this one out, to see these changes through to their destination, whatever that will be.

When it is done, this chaotic time we are in, no matter the outcome, there we will be, maintaining our own inner compass, even if the compass of the world and these times are convulsing. Our inner gyroscope will still be silently spinning and stable as best we can manage it.

We are personally not these outer changes, unless we are, yet we are in these changes, embedded in these changing times.

[Illustrations of the 60 main StarType whole-chart patterns for men and women, created by me, one for galls and one for guys.]

EMAIL

The Four Elements

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 23, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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It's kind of unfortunate that as we age, so much of our life turns on our health, something I did not properly consider until recently. I'm getting used to visiting Urgent Care, the ER, many doctors, and the hospital in general. And I get so many tests, sometimes going on for 14 hours, with almost no time to even sit in an exam room. Instead, I am whisked down the halls on a wheelchair and can feel the wind in my hair. LOL. And some of this involves travelling quite far to visit with experts. I try not to complain.

Of course, a simple look at aging years ago would have told me all this, I did not bother, figuring I will cross that bridge when I come to it. Well, I'm crossing that bridge now. Health concerns really dominate life.

On the one hand we have all the politics, wars, and autocrats holding forth, and on the other, all these health issues. What's left?

I'm finally getting some results from various recent hospital tests, including a second CT Scan, trying to better see what my kidneys are doing. It took weeks to get the results back and now more weeks until someone will interpret the results for me. I have the results and have fed them into Grok AI, and I got back a helpful readout. Does not look bad, but still have to wait for any remedial suggestions as to what I have to watch out for.

I also have a lot of lower back pain, so I am scheduled to see an orthopedic doctor, but can't get an appointment until late October. I really don't want to always post here on my health status, yet those seem to be the main issues of late.

One thing Margaret and I try to keep to is some form of exercise. For us, a lot of it comes by executing what we call "The Four Elements," which are four rather steep hills in our local cemetery that we call 'Fire', 'Water', 'Air', and 'Earth'. The first and third (Fire and Air) are the worst, the steepest, while the second and fourth (Water and Earth) are kinder, less arduous, yet still a hike. All four make for a workout.

Regardless, climbing these hills each morning lets us know we have done something. We have to get out early (6 AM), before the sun gets high, when it becomes too hot to climb the hills. We do the best we can. Overcast is best.

On these 90-degree days of late, if we can climb the 'Four Elements' and get back home before it gets too hot, it's already to warm to do much else outside for the rest of the day.

We live in north-west Michigan (lower peninsula), so most of the year it is too cold. And then we have a couple of weeks in the summer when it actually is too hot. We don't have air-conditioning, just fans. We don't even like air-conditioning.

It seems that health, exercise, and a rash of daily tasks take up my whole day. How did I get along all these many decades up to now? How did I find time to create and run businesses? I did not have health issues!

When all the tasks are tasked, what I do, what I like to do each day is work with dharma. Now, by that I don't mean I am just reading dharma texts, although I read some pith texts. I don't read books anymore. Have not for years.

What I most do is write, and by that, I mean I write through a special form of Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra practice. I immerse myself in the nature of the mind, and by that immersion manage to come up with (at least for me) clearer language and perhaps very occasionally some realization of dharma insights.

I don't imagine or think much. I don't spend time in reverie. I also don't mess with the present moment. The "Now" is most sacred. Instead, like a sigh, I fall to rest in the nature of the mind for a moment, followed by many repeated immersions... and what comes from that, meaning what can be put into words, I often post here.

Family and dharma is about all I care to do.

[Photo by me of our local cemetery where we, with effort, climb the "Four Elements" hills.

EMAIL

The River of Lethe: Forgetfulness

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 24, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The philosopher George Santayana, said “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This would make sense if we HAD experienced the past. However, in most cases folks are not doomed to repeat it because they never experienced it in the first place. An article in a book? Good luck. Today’s youth don’t read. They ‘media’ and while a picture is worth a thousand words, something is also lost without the written word.

Memory, a kind of brick wall that we can’t just get around, if we never had the experience that someone is recommending. It’s not that someone is ignoring the past if they are not there to experience it. We can’t ignore what we have never seen or experienced. Of course, they were born too late to remember what elders can.

In other words, we can’t wake up and take note of a past we never had or experienced. As elders, we are pointing to something that was available fifty or sixty years ago, and our kids are only 20 or 40 years old now. They can’t possibly know what we are talking about, except from old movies or books. And reading is not as popular these days.

It’s of no use because we are not useful if we are talking about something that happened before you were born. You don’t know what I’m talking about because you don’t know what I’m talking about. Who has time for that kind of education?

And so, our clique of readers or listeners here on Facebook is by definition a declining asset. We remember what is already fading. Or, like the old blues players used to say, “Ain’t but a few of us left.”

I can tell you about the old days, but I can’t give you that experience or even say where you can get it. So, that’s a problem we old folks have, the stories and time that no one remembers because they were not born yet. And so, if we are preaching to the choir, that choir grows smaller and smaller with each passing year. Our memories are evaporating. Not news.

And perhaps this effect goes both ways, meaning we are not able to experience what younger persons are now experiencing because our

‘experiencer’ is no longer pliable or flexible, just too old to tune into their present moment. Memory goes both ways.

And so, this perhaps is why old people like me tell stories, because that’s all we have and should not be surprised if they don’t get your attention. We don’t share our memories with those younger than us because there is nothing to share. Younger folks were not there and don’t ‘share’ those memories because they don’t have them. It’s like building sand castles while the tide comes in. This fact limits what we can talk about, so what can we talk about?

The result is that we talk about subjects that are common to all of us, topics like life, death, and religion of one sort or another. The word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin word ‘religare’, which means “to tie” or bind, the things that last or last longest.

These things that last come the closest to being universal because, as mentioned, they last longest. In other words, these truths are the future because they will last until then, while other things melt away and are forgotten. The things that last long will still be there in the future.

In other words, these things that ‘last’ are perhaps the only hedge we have against memory loss or memories that we never had because we are too young. And so eternal verities are the only coin of the realm for the aging AND the young, because we all think about these things at some level. Old people think about death and youngsters do too, at least to some degree.

For example, you younger souls may have heard the songs of Chuck Berry, one of the kings of rock n’ roll; I actually met him in person at a party in 1964. There is a difference. And less and less people each year have heard Berry’s song “Mabellene,” and there is not much we can do about that.

“Maybellene, why can't you be true? Oh, Maybellene, why can't you be true?

You done started back doin' the things you used to do.”

The lyrics to the Chuck Berry song “Maybellene” won’t get far in time, not that far. Who can remember them, even now? And so, what kind of ideas are more universal and common to us all?

That’s where we come up with thoughts of death and taxes, something everyone will know something about, and that have the currency to be remembered by old and young.

For example, this Facebook blog by default caters to older people like myself because we want to remember or do remember and have something to remember. Younger people don't have what we

remember because they were not there and don't have those memories. A perfect non-sequitur.

What's the point if what we write is so abstract that it does not get across and make sense? I have wondered about this. For example, in dharma study:

Mahasiddhas (great dharma teachers) are not telling us something that we can remember or have ever known, but rather of something we have never experienced, never known. And so, that's similar to having no memory at all, just because we have not had it yet. And so, what's the point?

Their reason or purpose is to embed or imprint in us something that we can find within us if we will actually look, something perhaps we can get a sense of from their writing or at least a whiff. For example, by definition we have not recognized the nature of the mind, until we have. Are not familiar with it.

However, at first look, these things of the dharma are very abstract, at least to us who have no experience or actual memory of them. The dharma texts say these lamas are 'pointing out' experiences and realizations that we know nothing of at this point, but that they consider to be of crucial importance.

They are sowing the seeds of our enlightenment, what can come, and not a memory we are trying to keep in mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

We Can't Unrealize

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 26, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Tibetans love the concept of seeing a coiled snake on the floor and realizing it is just a piece of rope. That's what realization does.

Just as we can't unsee what is seen, we can't unrealize what is realized. If you think it's hard to realize the true nature of the mind, it's impossible to unrealize what has been realized.

What I write each day is more demanding as time goes on. And by 'demanding' I don't mean it takes me more time. What I mean is that the bar continues to be raised so that I have to be increasingly more integral in what I write, as I see it, to communicate to others.

I am reminded of the widening gyre of Yeats poem "The Second Coming." I certainly am not escaping the widening of the gyre. I have to work within it. That is the nature of Samsara.

In practical terms, the whole concept of Samsara means we work against what's good for us, against our own true nature and are not even aware of it.

That's what Samsara is, failing to realize the nature of the mind and how it works. In other words, we work and have always worked counter to our own best interests.

Is it any wonder that from time to time we are brought down a peg or two and have to rebuild our little house of cards that we call our Self?

We should welcome this bit of sobering rather than continue to ignore or work counter to the truth of our existence or lack thereof. One thing that helps is to recognize that we are not to blame for ignoring the truth of reality. It is not like we once knew and turned away. My dharma teacher made it very clear that we never knew and have never known anything but reifying and ignoring reality. We have yet to be aware, much less to realize the true nature of our mind.

And it is not conscious ignoring on our part, but rather ignorance is our heritage. We were born into it and of it. And it is not a case of original sin as some faiths have it. We did not once know and then fall away from grace. We

have never known grace although it exists right here within us all this time. We are not aware of it much less realize it. That's the key issue.

And this is why the word Buddha means "aware" because the historical Buddha succeeded in becoming aware of what he (and we) are unaware of. He became aware and understood, experienced it consciously, and then, on top of that, 'Realized' the true nature of the mind and how it works, and that realization, like all realizations, stuck.

Realization is not something that comes and goes. Realization comes and stays. That's its nature.

In other words, 'Realization', by nature, dispels ignorance because it is nothing more than that we see our mistake, how we mistook reality to be something it is not, like the rope for a snake. And in that moment of realization, as the Tibetans say, the darkness of eons of ignorance vanishes like striking a match in a dark cave.

The only thing that happens is that we can suddenly see because of the light of awareness, and with that the darkness just vanishes. However, realization is a one-way street. Once we realize, we cannot go back to not having realized, to not seeing. We have seen or realized and thus we have 'realized'.

The Buddha became aware and with that stopped ignoring the true or actual nature of the mind. And he spent the rest of his life trying to point out to the rest of us how we too can realize the true nature of the mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

What Samsara Is

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 28, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ec403cdc-423f-4e2e-9f60-ac6aa3722851_1024x1024.jpeg

What's unique to me is my own experience of the dharma and whatever in that experience I have managed to realize from it. I don't have to be shy or apologize for that. We each have a unique history. You do also.

Trying to fit my personal experience and dharma insights into a traditional dharma pattern or mold as told in the dharma texts I find impossible. The dharma teachings themselves say there are 84,000 dharmas. Whether that is just a high number and how the dharma scholars came up with that sum, I'm sure I don't know, yet it suggests a lot of leeway – different dharma paths for different folks.

Aside from Samsara, this cyclic live of ups and downs, everything else in this universe is dharma or dharma compliant. It is just Samsara (our attachments) that runs counter or is not dharma, an opaque dam of graspingness that holds back the waters of our own liberation. It keeps us from full immersion of the mind's nature and realization.

Aside from Samsara, we can take any part of our mind and this world, and it becomes another direct path to enlightenment. So, what's the holdup?

Well, of course, that would be Samsara itself that is holding us back, aside from ourselves. Same thing. And perhaps we have to keep reminding ourselves what Samsara is. What is it?

Samsara amounts to everything that we are attached to that resists change, whatever we try to grasp or cling to because we insist that it must, should be, or is permanent, like that we have an eternal "Soul" or some kind of permanent Self that continues on at the next rebirth, and around which everything revolves from lifetime to lifetime.

The pith dharma teachings say that such a soul just

does not exist and that it is untrue, a simple miss-take. Everything is fluid, changes, and is impermanent, not static.

Our own clinginess, grasping, and attachments are an attempt to stop the wheel of dharma, the wheel of change itself from turning as it naturally does.

We insist and resist, yet we don't have that power because that entire View (Samsara), as mentioned, is a mistake.

And by that same frozen grasp or grip, that insistence, we are thereby dragged along, banging ourselves against the walls of time as we go. Instead, all we have to do is to let go, relax, yet we can't seem to manage that. It is we who keep the show static and in stasis, and it's killing us, so to speak. Learning to let go is more than just good advice; it is imperative.

Pliancy, flexibility, and suppleness are what we need, the ability to let go and allow ourselves to enter the flow of change. And to stop damming ourselves up against change. That's a bad idea and we are doing this to ourselves. Only we can stop it.

And the great dharma Mahasiddhas, who were not monks, but just lay people like ourselves, yet also astute dharma practitioners, have written volumes of suggestions, and perhaps the chief of those come from the Mahasiddha Tilopa, who ground sesame seeds during the day and ran a brothel at night, and he wrote as words of advice to us:

Don't Prolong the Past,

Don't Invite the Future,

Don't Alter the Present,

Relax, Just as It Is.

Also added in some versions are two more suggestions, which are subtexts of "Don't Alter the Present," and they are:

Don't Analyze or Examine.

Don't Intend or Control.

These six words of advice have been passed down and commented on innumerable times, and in essence they say:

Relax, be fluid. Bend with the wind.

As for a samsara story, I have one and will share it. Many years ago (mid-1980s), when many of the great rinpoches had fled Tibet and were temporarily homeless (they had left their ancestral monasteries), they sometimes toured our dharma centers, including our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan, the 'Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Choling).

And one of those Rinpoches was one of the four ‘Heart Sons’ of the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, came and spent a week with us at our center with his attendant.

One of the things we did was take His Eminence to a nearby virgin pine forest, where there still were original growth pine trees, huge trees reaching into the sky. Their lower branches didn’t even start until about forty feet up, and the forest floor beneath was covered with moss and soft grass. We had a picnic there on the grass.

And His Eminence remarked that "Someone could become enlightened here" and later said "This is very nice Samsara." Of course, sometimes Samsara is nice. As we left the pine forest and were driving home on back roads of a 900,000 acre national forest, a miniature almost-tornado came up. It was pouring rain, and the windshield wipers could barely keep up, with dust-devil whirling winds pushing the car around in the road.

Margaret was in the front seat with me, and His Eminence and his attendant were in the back. My knuckles were white from trying to control the wheel and we were struggling against the storm. I happened to look back at the lamas, and they were sound asleep, completely out and relaxed.

That was a lesson right there.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Stretching Polymers

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 29, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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This is going to be one of those mind-twisters, for which I apologize. I don't know a clearer way to say this, but it works.

A perennial problem in dharma instruction is trying to put into words that which cannot be put into words, yet over the centuries endless reams of words have been expended trying to do this. It's not like the great dharma teachers don't know better than to attempt to describe what cannot be described, but rather they hope something rubs off on the reader, some inkling or perhaps a whiff.

If these words (or actions, signs, and signals, etc.) are shared by a Mahasiddha or great dharma teacher to a student, they are often called the "Pointing Out Instructions", pointing out to us the actual nature of the mind. This can be hard for students to grasp.

For example, in Mahamudra meditation, when we are not just learning and practicing it, but are actually doing Mahamudra, and this is a form of non-meditation in which, we don't do anything other than just rest.

What this means, is that when we are doing Mahamudra properly, "We" are not actually doing anything but resting in nature of the mind and then perhaps reflecting on that or reflecting that experience. Here I'm talking mostly about the combination of the Insight Meditation (non-dual) itself and then 'reflecting' (duality) on that insight.

We can actually reflect the nature of the mind.

And by 'reflecting', this means we are aware of awareness, aware that we are (or just have been) aware (through the insight), yet that awareness itself is not an awareness of any 'thing' or object.

Mahamudra is non-dual. It has no object and no subject seeing an object. Resting in Mahamudra is, as mentioned, non-dual, meaning we are fully immersed for however long we can sustain it, most often momentarily, followed perhaps by some awareness or reflection that we have been immersed.

And while the duration of actual resting, immersed in the true nature of the mind, can be short, it can be done successively, repeatedly, as often as we like, with each momentary immersion followed by some reflection (duality) of the immersion, whatever that may be. And this string of immersion/reflection can be strung together in a seamless chain of light - insight and reflection – like beads on a string..

And after the insight, we may have a reflection, not of any ‘thing’ since in Mahamudra there is no object or subject, however, in the world we live in (Samsara), we very much have both subject and object and in reflection some light from Insight Meditation may get reflected.

My point is that alternating between immersion (non-duality) and duality (subject and object) in rapid succession does not in itself create an object. The clarity and lucidity that is intrinsic to full immersion in Insight Meditation can be pointed (like pointing a flashlight) at whatever thought or activity we are actively involved in and it’s like the immersion with that thought or idea in mind sheds light (reflects) on the thought upon withdrawal from immersion. Insight Meditation is like a flashlight that illuminates whatever it is directed at, although by itself, it has no object, much like a lamp.

In dharma training, duality (subject and object) are called Relative and non-duality (full immersion) is called Absolute. And there are caveats.

The main caveat here is that our idea of resting in the nature of the mind has to start somewhere, and by that, I mean using our normal idea of resting, as in ‘give it a rest’ is where we have to begin as that is all we know.

And we can do that by stopping what we are doing and just resting in the moment as best we can. Relax. This can be awkward at first, yet in time, if we do this as often as we can remember to do it, over time we can actually rest and stop just trying or making an effort to rest. Ultimately, we have to remove (give up) the effort to rest and just rest

Obviously, trying to rest and actually resting are two different things. And there is one more step I have to share, and it is more complicated than just resting, and this cannot be put into words except perhaps very poorly.

It can’t be said, not because it is secret, but because it is ineffable, beyond description or words. The closest analogy I have found is presented in this short video on polymers, which I find illuminating, very much worth seeing. If you have never seen this, it is important you do.

“Stretching Polymers”

In this video, I found it helpful to view what is called “Necking,” when a polyethylene polymer plastic is stretched. See the above demonstration. When a polymer plastic is stretched, the polymer chains in the original plastic are not aligned, but when carefully stretched the polymers suddenly all align and create a plastic that is very much stronger than it was, and also crystal clear. This is the principle that makes Kevlar armor so strong.

The above is just an analogy, yet one I find very instructive if we consider the kind of resting required for Insight Meditation. It is not just that resting is clarifying, but rather that the particular ‘clarity’ achieved is an order of magnitude more clear and lucid than we have ever known. Insight Meditation is stark or vividly clear AND it occurs without any sense of duality (subject and object). Watch the video.

This event in dharma terms is called “Recognition,” and it refers to our recognizing the true or actual nature of the mind for the first time. I can’t tell you when this will happen or exactly what causes this or how, but this in dharma training is invoked by the ‘Pointing-Out Instructions’, where the result (what is pointed out) is a non-dual (no subject and object), a fully immersive insight or experience. We are fully immersed.

That recognition experience, so to speak, is actually a form of mini realization. An insight in Insight Meditation is a vivid and non-dual experience that is realized. We are aware, but not aware of any ‘thing’, just vividly aware.

And the point in explaining this is that this experience of vivid ‘insight’, is like a spiritual flashlight that can be pointed in any direction we wish, and the insight itself is not a thing, but rather Insight Meditation is something like a light or torch, that when directed at an object, can’t help but illuminate or light up any subject or ‘thing’.

That’s about as clear as I can make something that cannot be described in words. Insight Meditation shines the light of truth wherever it is invoked. Or it is like a star in the sky of the mind, that lights up anything in its vicinity.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Mind the Gap

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 1, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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There are hundreds of spiritual practices called ‘meditation,’ and few that actually are what the historical Buddha taught. I know something about many of them, but I have only extensively practiced the few that the Buddha taught, mainly Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), Insight Meditation (Vipassana), and Mahamudra (a non-meditation).

The future of what is called ‘meditation’, at least according to the dharma, is not only a linear extrapolation of what we can currently envision going forward. Our growth spiritually is linear or steady (Shamata) until it becomes exponential (Vipassana) with the introduction of the non-dual practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, which means at that point meditation becomes beyond what we can imagine because at present we lack the realization and experience to anticipate or imagine the reality of non-duality and its full immersion.

We can’t see the non-duality from where we now stand because it is not linear, meaning it is not just farther down the same line from where we are, but rather in an entirely different dimension or level. There is an enormous gap between the duality meditation practices and the non-dual.

In fact, this gap between the two meditation forms (dual and non-dual) differs by an order of magnitude. That difference gap is beyond our ken and, as the Tibetan rinpoches have explained to me, until now (this present moment) we have never experienced the non-dual forms. And this is a very key point to be certain of. And at this point we are not certain.

It’s NOT like we once knew enlightenment and have since strayed or forgotten it all. We have NEVER known realization or enlightenment and have yet to have our eyes opened to it. It’s not in our experience or memory, so it can’t be recalled. Period.

The dharma explains that, unlike many religions such as Christianity with its doctrine of ‘Original Sin’, it is not that we once knew or were enlightened, then sinned, fell away, and are now trying to redeem ourselves. In truth, we have never known. And thus have no experience. That’s still in our future.

So, deep down in our past, our personal memory is not some past experience of realization and its clarity. Of course, within our mind is clarity, meaning the mind itself is clear; we just have never been aware of it and thus have not experienced it. This is a primary difference between the dharma and many religions, that there is no 'Original Sin'. We have not fallen from on high but simply have yet to be aware of the true nature of our own mind.

That's the message of the dharma, that we have not fallen or sinned and are now trying to redeem ourselves and be 'saved'. And we have no shame that needs retribution. In all the time that's been, we have never been aware of the nature of our own mind.

That's what meditation is about.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me of how the U.K. uses the term 'Mind the Gap'.]

EMAIL

The Lottery of Life

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/bbe208ef-db64-4fce-97fd-b102eed97b21_1024x1024.jpeg

A question that comes up in many of the pith dharma teachings is how do we remove the ‘bad’ karma we have accrued not only in this lifetime, but throughout the many rebirths we apparently have had.

The answer to that question would take a library of traditional dharma texts to answer, if we had time to even read it all. And of course, many who study this are concerned about what they can do to erase and remove all the karma they have already accumulated.

However, when I first looked into this, I was not prepared for the key or most useful way to remove our accumulated karma. It took me by surprise, but after I took it in and thought about it, this is obviously the true solution.

And that advice is to stop accumulating karma which will take a toll on us. Don’t create bad karma in the first place. Just don’t continue to rack up the kind of actions and intent that leads to painful karma. Of course, I never thought of that. Duh. Yet, it’s the obvious correct answer.

OK, good. How do we go about doing that, not committing actions that get recorded in dharma’s little-black book of the karma we are liable for, which the teachings say is kept in the Alayavignana, popularly called the ‘Storehouse Consciousness’, which is a crucial part of our Samsaric existence.

One thing each of us can do to lessen Samsara’s hold on us is to stop reifying everything, stop exaggerating, gilding the lily, so to speak. Reifying our Self is like the old saying “putting lipstick on a pig.” Probably more than trying to erase the past (“Out damned spot”), as mentioned, in order to lessen our karmic load, we could, in addition, stop accumulating still more karma. That’s an easy solution in theory, just not so simple to actually carry out.

The dharma texts say it is very, very difficult to remove karma once recorded and accrued. It is much easier NOT to record it in the first place.

What makes us feel secure or ‘real’? A lot of that is our many attachments, each of which binds us further into Samsara. The same goes for generally grabbing onto everything as ours or whatever is important for our continuing Self-identification.

It's like we are hanging on to Samsara for dear life, constantly reifying our identity, upping the ante on our attachments, and identifying, identifying, identifying with ourselves, what we call our Self as more important than what we actually are, and that Self is something which we have created and constructed by amassing attachments to form it. A bad habit.

The consistency of our Self is maintained by all the things we paste or post on to it. Our Self is like a great magnet for all our attachments, likes and dislikes, aggrandizing, growing and seeming ever more and more real to us, although we have passed reality long ago and by now are deep into pure reification, gilding the lily, as they say. We make our Self more real than the reality will support. That weighs us down and amounts to Samsara personified.

The dharma texts continually state that we have no Self in the sense of an eternal Soul or an entity unaffected by impermanence and change that persists from life to life, yet that does not deter us from magnetizing what Self we have in an attempt to ignore reality and pile on, shore up, and decorate our "me, myself, and I."

And the pith dharma texts don't kid around as to our eternality, our continual reification and vain attempt to personally persist in time. beyond the corners of this life.

There is nothing permanent other than change itself. Everything changes and no matter how much we gather to make our identity as real as we imagine it to be, nevertheless we (our Self) are just an empty construction, a hologram that will shape-shift and change right out of permanent existence. So, what's the good news?

There is no promise of good news, yet my opinion as to what is encouraging is the fact that we are here right now. We are alive and present this moment. How did that possibly happen?

Sure, we rally around the flagpole of our personality and Self, trying to keep it up to snuff, while the wear and tear of time rips it apart, because our personality is a losing game. According to the pith dharma texts, our personality or Self ends, as our body does, at death. If so, what is it that moves on and takes rebirth?

Apparently, we have never (not ever) had a permanent existence or eternal soul, and yet, here we are existing, just not permanently. We have never been an entity that is independent of the force of time.

Apparently, disparate karma, as recorded in the Storehouse Consciousness, proceeds forward after our death as a bunch of random pieces, and is then

cherry-picked in a rebirth as relevant to create a fresh persona (Self), yet that rebirth personally is not the coherent Self or persona of this, the previous life. In other words, you won't see Michael Erlewine again, but his karma will fuel a rebirth. That idea.

Our karmic traces persist, just not as an integrated whole like our current personality of Self, which Self decays when we pass on from here. Indeed, it can seem like a bitter pill, yet look what it produced this time.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Memories Are Made of This

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ec2829f9-7112-462c-8a8e-9ccb6c8a169_1024x1024.jpeg

[The following is something to consider, to think about, the idea that younger people don't have the memories to tap into that we older folks do. Give it a read.]

Dig into the past and roll enough memories together to pick through and come out with a story that has some substance. I notice that younger people seem to be missing a string on their instrument, and they cannot resonate with the past because before the time they were born they don't have the experience to do so. They don't (can't) know what we are talking about if they have no memory or experience of those times. They can only hear the stories.

And the best we can do is tell them stories, which offers a 'sounds like' substitute for the actual living experience which is missing from their memory. There is nothing in them to touch into and set vibrating. Huge blocks of experience have never been recorded because they were not yet born and thus too young; it's not in their memory. What difference does that make?

I find this a greater problem than I would have thought, the inability to respond because they lack the basic memories and experience required to set anything resonating. So, when considering the past, of course all we have are memories. Remember the old maxim, "If you lack the faculty, you can't perceive the phenomenon." That goes for fields of experience never lived and thus it is not in their memory-bank to be pinged.

And so, age itself separates us in ways other than years. The recorder of experience was not on with younger folks because they were not on the planet yet. And so, there is nothing to stimulate if there is nothing to stimulate. Stories are what remain the coin of the realm and the constructed tales for the years they were not yet alive are just that for them, stories. They have no built-in experience to set to resonating.

The absence of referents (what in a story is referred to) in our experience draw a blank with us. We were too young. We can but listen, but responding or resonating to a referent-not-present is not likely. A story without the experience or referents referred to in our memory is a little like a shot in the dark, IMO.

I am just pointing out what I find happening with age, when I send a ping to the past to someone listening that does not have it on file, meaning they are too young to remember because they have no memory of such an experience.

That's a handicap if I ever saw one. What can we do about it?

This same problem appears in dharma training when the practitioner has no memory or experience yet of the non-dual practices. How do we signal or tell someone about an experience they never have had. And if they are left to their own devices to expect or imagine the unimaginable, what do you think they will come up with.

Well, the short answer to that, at least IMO, is there is no way, 'zero', that we (in our dualistic habit of subject and object) can guess what is unimaginable as to an experience that is not linear, but rather non-linear, not in the straight line of time, but rather timeless.

Further, expecting, imagining, anticipating the unimaginable only accumulates a collection of more dualistic constructs that further obscure our intuition, so it is better not to try to imagine. Just do the practices, whatever they are and leave the future alone.

The major problem I have seen is dharma practitioners who conceptually 'understand' something about the non-linear practices (Mahamudra, Dzogchen), concepts that they have not personally experienced and yet act as if that conceptual understanding alone amounts in their mind to the experience itself. It does not.

It is very difficult to pop these dharma practitioners out of that state of pure conceptuality, so they are once again open to having the actual experience, which they have come to assume they have already had.

They need a Mahasiddha to slap them in the face with a sandal or something. Hard to find someone who will do what's good for us when we don't like it and think we already know better. When it comes to the future of our dharma practice, at least with entering the non-dual practices, it is best not to assume we know anything all. Talk is talk.

If our life has not changed, been turned upside down, we have not had what is called the 'Recognition' of the true nature of the mind. If you are struggling with this, please note that understanding is pretty much meaningless, and the way you tell it asks a lot.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Dreaming Up the Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 4, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/aafe102e-ed42-4968-8713-5a63ce3a441e_1024x1024.jpeg

Folks have asked me to share how I got interested in the dharma. Here, in brief, is an early history, up until I met my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. After that, an account would be a lot more technical, with all the different practices involved. This early time was more about intent and my imagination.

I became interested in the Dharma around 1958-1959, when I became fascinated with Zen Buddhism. My friends and I would stay up late at night and talk about Zen, Ingmar Bergman films, and perhaps peyote. We had our hot plate to make hot water, terrible instant coffee, powdered creamer, and lots of cigarettes to keep us awake.

At that time, it had not occurred to me to personally practice dharma. I just wanted to read about great Zen monks, haiku, and look at shoji screens, bamboo mats, and teak furniture. Of course, the raked-sand Zen gardens were fascinating, and I watched about every film and short by director Akira Kurosawa, and owned most of them. I loved the idea of the 'Ronins', yet I did not yet even have a guru or thought to look for one.

However, all that late-night talk gradually shifted into an interest in sitting zazen. I sat all day sesshin with Zen teachers like Roshi Philip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, had my back hit with the kyosaku (wooden stick), and whatever else I could invoke. Yet still this was not a regular daily practice, but more of a challenge to see if I could do it. For me daily practice took a while. I was like a Zen dharma voyeur, a dabbler. I didn't yet see myself as a practitioner.

Somewhere along in there I segued from Zen into Tibetan Buddhism, probably because of publications like the Tibetan Book of the Dead, volumes by Walter Evan-Wentz, and stories by Anagarika Govinda. Back then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were few books on Tibetan Buddhism and no Tibetan lamas in Ann Arbor that I knew of. Up to then, it was all Zen Buddhism.

Along with talking about dharma, my friends and I also spent entire nights listening to jazz like John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" in 1961, when it first came out. Or driving into Detroit late nights and seeing jazz greats like

Cannonball Adderley at clubs like the “Minor Key.” There was so much happening.

In the late 1950s in Ann Arbor, Michigan, there was no music in the local bars until after November 9, 1960. That was when liquor by the glass laws were repealed, and there was money to hire live music. Until then, jazz in Ann Arbor was held in apartments and homes, mostly up on and around the U-M campus. I know because I hung out there, just a high school kid, barely tolerated at these all-night adult gatherings.

We kids ended up off to the side, being inconspicuous, sitting on the floor with our backs against the wall, listening to jazz players like Bob James, Ron Brooks, “Turk” Pozar, and Bob Detwiler play. Small groups formed and improvised far into the night. Pot was smoked and wine drunk, but not by us, the few high school kids who managed to sneak in.

Desperate to be a part of all this, we kids used to snort the ashes left from joints in the ashtrays. That was some harsh stuff. LOL. But the Ann Arbor music scene back then is another whole story, fascinating, but for some other time.

In the early 1970s, I was stunned by the cover-art of books by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and equally by his writings, especially his book “Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism.” My eyes are very sensitive to what is visual, part of my interest in what the Tibetans call ‘ Thongdrol ‘, Liberation through seeing.

And that came to a head early in 1974 when the Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa in person came and gave a talk in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I lived. I was so enthused by his forthcoming visit that I ended up hunting down who was putting this on at the University of Michigan, and being Trungpa’s chauffeur for the weekend and designing the poster for his talk that I silk-screened myself and helped to put-up all-around campus.

Meeting Chögyam Trungpa, face to face, eyeball to eyeball, and hanging out with him was life changing. After that weekend with Trungpa, I came away a dharma practitioner. I realized I too could and must practice dharma whatever that was.

For one, Trungpa Rinpoche took me into a room, sat me down, and taught me Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) for an hour or so, just the two of us. He never even named or told me what he was doing. He just did it and I took it in.

Believe it or not, until Trungpa, as mentioned, I had never thought of myself as a practitioner. I was mostly a dharma talker. Trungpa made it clear that the

dharma was something to actively do, not just talk about. What a great introduction to sitting meditation.

I am very devoted to Trungpa Rinpoche, yet I did not follow him or join his group, and for two main reasons. His American followers all had to wear suits and ties, and they drank alcohol like there was no tomorrow. I had been a performing musician, and by that time had my fill of alcohol, and you pretty much had to die to see me in a suit.

Like so many things in my life. I got a wonderful sense of my time with Trungpa Rinpoche and that was enough to inspire me, those few days. I took him to heart. That was sufficient.

And so, in brief, that is roughly how I got interested in the Dharma and the story of my path up to the mid-1970s. It was some time after this that I met my 'Root Guru', the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and became a fully committed dharma practitioner. And that's when my dharma practice began in earnest, which is very much more detailed, but if folks are interested, I could tell that story at some point.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

"He Was a Friend of Mine"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 9, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/c73da040-4599-4b28-a0ce-c2204b9c519f_1024x1024.jpeg

This is a traditional folk song with no confirmed author as sung here by Willie Nelson.

[Youtube.com/watch?v=ahc4GbDPEVI&list=RDahc4GbDPEVI&start_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahc4GbDPEVI&list=RDahc4GbDPEVI&start_radio=1)

Lyrics:

He was a friend of mine

He was a friend of mine

Every time I think about him now

Lord I just can't keep from crying

'Cause he was a friend of mine

What is a friend? I have a lot of acquaintances here on social media, folks I like and appreciate. Where the point is when they cross the line and become personal friends is hard to say. Do I have some close friends here in blog land? I do and they are distinguished either by common interest, staying power, or grandfathered in from my past. Many of my oldest personal friends have passed on, and that's a trip all by itself to reach for them and realize they are no longer on the planet.

And then there are just some folks that I have commented online with so many times and for so many years that they are just friends. That group I usually also communicate with by FB Messenger and carry on private conversations on the side.

I was with my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, for 36 years and never considered him a personal friend. We did not hang out or have small talk. His working with me on dharma was not only enough, it was a life saver.

It's up to us just how we engage.

If we each are like stars shooting across the heavens, with trajectories still being defined, let's not aim high and get too intellectual, but rather feel for

what works, at least let's meet in the middle, if not somewhere below that, where the action is at. Create experience.

IMO, we can't expect to exchange wisdom. That's not how wisdom arises. Wisdom comes from experience, so let's not shortchange that. I consider my blogs not a dispenser of wisdom, but rather each article I write is an encouragement to live life in the present moment and gather experience. That to me is the most important, gathering experience from which realization can result.

In this life we live, a handshake or a friendly wave is enough, about the best we can expect, perhaps at times exchanging glances.

Anything more can get complicated and add little to a friendship, yet sometimes of course a friendship can add a lot, and then there is family and blood ties. Bonds.

Another tune I like a lot that is friend-oriented is by Tom Waits: "Come On Up to the House." If you don't know it, give it a listen.

Come on up to the house

Come on up to the house

The world is not my home

I'm just a passin' thru

You got to come on up to the house

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Nature: The Lama of Appearances

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 9, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0e837227-99ba-41fa-b33a-6fef9aee4fc9_389x389.jpeg

[I have posted on learning dharma from Mother Nature before. However, at least for me, learning dharma from nature was crucial to my upbringing, so those of you who love nature might want to learn about this.]

Mother Nature lays it all right out for us, the good, the bad, and the scary. In other words, as to dharma, we can read it in the sacred scriptures (Lama of the Scriptures), hear it taught by word of mouth (Lama of the Lineage), naturally intuit it (Lama of the Dharmadhatu), or learn it from Mother Nature directly, which in dharma terms is officially called the “Lama of Appearances.”

In my case, due to how I was brought up, far out in the country, with no neighbors or kids to play with other than my brothers, I fell into learning the dharma from Mother Nature, not that I knew the word dharma or had heard of Buddhism. I learned from “The Lama of Appearances.”

And carefully schooled I was, self-schooled, yes, driven by my own interest in and fascinated by the natural world around me. There was really not much of a choice. Nor was there a better teacher than nature, at least at the time.

However, learning directly from Mother Nature kind of ruined school for me, being taught by anyone other than the natural world. I knew, early on, what learning was about for me, and primary education at school was no match compared to the natural history all around me where I lived.

This was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, whose nickname is “The Garden Spot of the World.” Being forced, however kindly, to learn in school did not measure up to learning at the rate of my own natural interest. And so, I had no real choice. If what I learned in school did not compete for my interest in nature, and it did not, there you have it, a problem.

Nature does not mince words, and concepts like ‘impermanence’ are never candy-coated, but straight out obvious to me as a child from my constant observation of the natural world. I was brought up on natural law, so society’s law, rules, and conventions lacked the crystal-clear insight of nature. I already knew better, even as a young boy, and without realizing I was offended by the

clumsy efforts to educate me otherwise. For me, Mother Nature was the perfect teacher and only teacher I had for many years.

With public school, it was the inspirational factor that was missing. Let me explain this by using photography as an example.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins came up with a concept that struck me as true. He even made up his own word to describe it. He called it “inscape.”

Inscape was to Hopkins an insight or path into the eternal or beautiful, literally the way in, a sign and signal of the beautiful and true. I will try to explain.

I look forward to my trips out into the fields and woods. They offer me a chance to get my head together, to relax from the day-to-day grind of running a business (now retired) and generally a way to relax a bit.

This is not to say that just going outside and walking in nature means that I am instantly relaxed. That usually takes time. It is the same with taking nature photos.

In the first ten minutes of a morning photo walk I often don’t see all that much to photograph. This too takes time, time for me to slow down, open up, and ‘see’, to let the natural beauty all around me in.

It could be that I was still filled with all the workaday-world thoughts, the things I have to do, problems, and what-have-you. It takes time for my mind to relax and let go of its constant chatter and concerns.

This endless worry and thinking affects my photography. And here is where the word ‘inscape’ comes in.

As I get out there and wander through the fields or wherever, I gradually start to slow down and relax. I begin to see things that are beautiful, scenes that I might actually want to photograph.

Slowly my view of the natural world around me starts to open up again and I begin to view things differently. I begin to ‘see’. It takes time and usually does not happen all at once.

This little pattern of leaves over here or the way the light comes through the forest canopy, grabs me just a little bit, tweaks me, and the chatter of my mind begins to slow and then goes into pause.

As I continue to walk along, some little thing or scene appears beautiful to me; I am touched by it, however lightly at first. I gradually get distracted from my daily distractions and begin to center. That’s when the inner me wakes up.

These little moments are ‘inscapes’, ways out of my mundane world of distractions and into the beauty of nature or, more accurately, back into the natural state of my own mind or being.

As I take my time, I am able to see the beauty in things once again, and what I am seeing suddenly seems worth photographing. Like most of us, I photograph what catches my interest, what I find beautiful or worthy in the world around me.

These inscapes are signals that catch my attention, and they flag me down on my busy way forward to nowhere-in-particular. These moments and signs are how I stop going nowhere, and manage to almost miraculously arrive somewhere once again, perhaps only at my own peace of mind.

This is one of the functions of the beautiful and true, to catch us in the turmoil of life, flag us down, and induce us to pull over and take a moment of rest.

Time out.

These moments of inscape are different on different days, and different for different people. They represent the clues or signs that catch our attention and show us the way into the beauty of the natural world, actually into the beauty of our own mind. Some inside light turns on.

Another way of saying this might be: what is beauty actually?

What happens when we see something beautiful? Beauty is not simply somewhere out there in nature waiting to be found, but always here within us, locked

within us, we who are seeing this nature, we who can now see the beautiful. Like the old saying, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” True.

Beauty breaks down the rush of the everyday world and opens our heart a wee bit, making us vulnerable again, open to experience and input. Through natural beauty we go inside and experience the inner beauty of things, which is none other than our own inner beauty.

That is what beauty and truth is for, to be touched on, seen, so that we find once again the beauty within our own hearts that we may have lost through the distractions of our daily life. We look outside in nature to see in here, to see into our own heart once again. And we can be sensitive to beauty in our photography.

I would hate to tell you how many photographs I have of this or that butterfly or critter that are perfectly good photographs, but are empty of magic or meaning.

They are well lit, well composed, and have everything that makes a good photograph except the ‘magic’ that keys or excites me.

Instead, they are ‘pictures’ of a butterfly, but they have not captured any essence of anything. They might as well be in a field guide – snapshots in time with no meaning and for no one.

The reason for this, so I tell myself, is because they just happened to be there, photographic opportunities. I saw them and I took a photograph, but at the time they did not instill or strike any particular beauty in me.

This, to me, is what I call “gotcha” photography, taking a photo because I can, not because I saw beauty in it or was moved to do so. There was no inscape moment, no moment of vision – snapshots only.

I find that it is really worth paying attention to what strikes me as beautiful or meaningful and photograph that, rather than just photographing the Grand Canyon because it is there, or I am there.

A lasting photograph, in my opinion, requires more of me than that, by definition. It has to mean something to me and, for that to happen, I need to actually be moved or inspired. Photographs that have special meaning for me usually have some form of inscape into a special moment that inspires me to capture the scene in a photo. In those moments, I am able to see beauty.

We can wander for miles looking for something to photograph, chasing down this or that butterfly or animal... searching. Or we can slow down and let nature herself show us the signs, her mudras, the inscapes through which we can relax and begin to ‘see’ naturally and photographically once again.

We can listen to our own intuition. This process of inscape, of insight into the sublime in nature (the sublime within ourselves) I find to be the key to good photography and to creating photographs that are real keepers, at least in my mind. If we don’t touch our own inner self in our work, we touch no one at all, but when we are touched by a moment, I find that others also feel this. Touch one, touch all.

[Photo of a Night-Blooming Cereus by me.]

EMAIL

No Wisdom Without Experience

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 11, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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NO WISDOM WITHOUT EXPERIENCE

By Michael Erlewine

“In Vajrayana we take direct perception as the path and millions of years are not required to achieve enlightenment. Rather, having renounced the world, enlightenment can be achieved in this lifetime. “In this path the guru introduces us to direct perception, and we simply meditate on the mind to which we have been introduced. Though we have been introduced to direct perception, sometimes it is not stable. When this happens, it is very good to study the presentations that are made on the path of reasoning and inference. This will help us to attain stability in what we have ascertained and bring about good experience and realization.’

End of quote.

The key words for me in the above are “bring about good experience and realization.” Too often the idea that ‘wisdom’ can just be imparted or somehow transferred directly from the wise into us is suggested, when that’s not the case. Yes, perhaps some conceptual ‘understanding’ comes out of a brush with those who have wisdom takes place.

However, wisdom comes from life experience, an experience we each must first have, and from that experience we may (or may not) realize wisdom. That’s the order of events, how it comes down.

And so, books and teachings filled with ‘wisdom’ are an oxymoron. Yes, there may be wisdom coded in the pages, but not from conceptual understanding alone. That understanding must precipitate in us some in-the-moment experience that we, well, ‘experience.’ And, as mentioned, from that living experience we may or may not derive some realization. Realization is what is called “wisdom.”

It all comes down to living and experience.

[Photo of Mahasidda Tilopa rupa by me.]

EMAIL

Authenticity

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 14, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/30f897de-8930-4287-b1b5-84dd41a02831_1447x2048.jpeg

Looking back, looking forward, after years of consideration, I believe it all comes down to this: authentic experience. How's that? I thought all experience is authentic.

Just so. All experience is authentic, however the problem as I see it is distinguishing actual experience from conceptual 'experience'. Like many of us, I have lived long enough to have some idea of what's actual experience and what's just talking through your hat, so to speak, intellectual understanding, although often in the best of intent.

And for sure, no matter how much mental understanding we can accumulate, in my book, none of that adds up to on-the-ground, hands on experience, especially when it comes to dharma.

And I know instantly upon meeting someone when they're talking through their hat and depending on understanding rather than actual personal grounded experience. Trying to explain that to someone who is all talk and no action is difficult to impossible IMO. They are confirmed thinkers and don't want to hear that their mental understanding does not hold up to the scratch-and-sniff test. Best advice: just kindly walk on by, unless you care for them very, very much, enough to attempt to point out to them this simple miss-take they are making. It will fall on deaf ears. I have tried it and only made an enemy out of a friend, although as a friend I care a lot for them.

Of course, it is easy to say, "different strokes for different folks" and you will always be right. Even a careful study of the dharma texts will prove every last being has their own unique path to enlightenment. There is no one path that serves all. In dharma, our unique path is called our Yidam, and we each have one. Given that, why bother deconstructing another's path? Good question. No point in robbing the cradle of realization.

The highest rinpoches, even the Mahasiddhas, have spent untold volumes of words attempting to color us or even give us a whiff of what we need to know. This is because they care about us. By definition, they fail at this because 'realization' is ephemeral, beyond words, including even theirs.

Period. End of story.

Of course, yet we still have this impenetrable mass of dharma teachings to wade through and it is like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, carefully understanding one concept at a time and trying to breathe life into it, is much like pouring water over freeze-dried concepts.

It is best and certainly easiest to note the inauthentic and just walk on by. It's not clear whether we can change the direction or path of anyone but ourselves, and even that is an 'if'.

As mentioned, best is to tippy toe on by and wish everyone well. Offer what we can, perhaps some low-hanging fruit, and leave the rest up to nature and fate. If we really, really, really can't just pass on by, then the best we can do, IMO, is share whatever can be shared with each person we meet and let it go at that. Any effort of persuasion is useless and even harmful.

This is why the great dharma teachers call this kind of suggestion the "Pointing-Out Instructions." And this is catamount to brain surgery, the ability to successfully point out to another human something that will in some way unlock their samsaric combination or karma, and even remove a single stick.

This is why I have never considered myself a teacher of dharma or any other topic for matter. And the reason is dirt simple. In my own dharma path, I have only the steps I have taken, the knowledge of how each step came about. That's perhaps one solution out of the proverbial 84,000 dharma that the dharma teachings say exist.

My pointing out my personal solution to another has an extremely low percentage of making any difference. This is why those dharma practitioners who want to reach (hopefully) many, undertake to complete the traditional 3-year closed dharma retreat. In those three years, practitioners never even lie down, but rather sleep sitting upright in a small wooden box. The main goal, as I understand it, is for these 3-year retreatants to learn to teach all of the main (or many) different dharma teachings to others.

I never did the 3-year retreat, but Margaret and I were the fundraisers (along with the Chinese community) for the Karme Ling Retreat in upstate New York. They have turned out many dozens of 3yr retreatants, which are then designated as 'lamas.'

If along the way, these lamas manage to enlighten themselves, so much the better, of course. But their primary job is to teach as many of the basic dharma practices as they can manage.

And so, someone like me who perhaps knows, at best, one way, and has a single Yidam, cannot expect to be able to teach others, and I don't attempt that. What I do is share what I can with any and everyone who is interested, some little piece of dharma, perhaps just an insight or incentive that supports their own search for a yidam.

I'm in the same boat of dharma and happy keeping company with anyone who is aware of or becoming aware of their mind's nature.

[Graphic designed by me.]

EMAIL

The Terrible Crystal

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 15, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/4f77b728-a938-484a-bb3e-47f160a724e7_1024x1024.jpeg

I'm afraid that I have been fascinated with the phrase "The Terrible Crystal" as it refers to our own Self or personality for many decades, so please bear with me.

What is hard to see, IMO, and this the pith dharma texts explain to us very well, is that we have mentally constructed this world around us that we live in. We have not just been born into this world, but as we are born and grow, we are busy creating a new Self or persona and world as we go. And so we are, by nature, complicit in who we are, where, and how we find ourselves.

In a sense, we weave our own cocoon, the Self, and then often find ourselves trapped in it or worse, taking orders from it, which would be like the dummy directing the ventriloquist. The Self is our own creation.

The poets have called this persona or Self that we have created the 'Terrible Crystal' because by creating our persona or Self, reifying, and then gilding it, we paint ourselves into a corner at the same time. The concept of a permanent 'Self' holds us back as much as it may appear to hold us together. The Self cannot be depended on because it is just a construct that we have created for our convenience, and come to depend on. Our attachments are the glue that holds the Self together.

We each are a victim of our self to the degree we take it as a permanent entity or as a "Soul." While some religions believe in a permanent entity or soul that continues from lifetime to lifetime, the dharma teaches that we do not have a Self or soul that is reincarnated, but rather instead have a collection of karma or tendencies that are reborn and appear as a new Self or persona, but not with the name "Michael Erlewine."

And I understand that this is easy to say or write about, but VERY hard to realize that we are actually doing this physically in reality. The Tibetans in my experience take a series of different approaches at this idea of self-construction, trying by various ways to jog or jolt us into realization as to what actually is the case for us.

However, apparently that realization is very difficult, otherwise we would all be realized or enlightened by now. As my main dharma teacher explained to me, we are not now and never have been enlightened. We are the stragglers, the ones who never got enlightened in all the time that there is and has been.

And we are so habituated to ignorance, to ignoring the actual nature of how the mind works, that further progress seems hopeless. There is nary a crack in Samsara's seal (and its hold on us) that we can use to begin to deconstruct it. Samsara is a closed system, much like a cocoon, and we are at the center of it.

That we are in the middle of our Self and it is all about us; that fact alone should be a clue. We are continually creating the problem faster than we are reaching any kind of escape velocity from Samsara. That's a good definition of hopeless.

Unfortunately, our habit has been to kick the can down the road, go along with the crowd, put off change until the next rebirth, and not bother to paddle back upstream and analyze our own constructions, much less solve them. This condition is what is called 'Samsara'.

It is just 'life' to us, what we know. And if that's our habit, and we can squeak by, who is to tell us otherwise? Only ourselves. And so, here we sit ignoring the obvious.

Anyway, that's the situation we find ourselves in, being swept along in the river of time and not knowing how to sail or negotiate that river. This is why folks who study and practice dharma, those who have had some training, do their best to get our attention, to flag us down, so to speak, and point out to us alternatives to taking it on the chin as we do, passively.

To a marked degree, we have created our particular situation, our entire world, and only we can do something about it. That's why the Buddha or someone like him, cannot just touch us on the forehead and we are enlightened to all this. That's not going to happen, and there is a reason.

One of the difficult concepts to grasp, IMO, is that dharma is a do-it-yourself proposition. No one can do it (or is going to do it) for us. We have to do it by ourselves, with all the help we can get. In other words, we each must turn the wheel of the dharma on our own. It won't turn itself and others can't turn it for us.

The point of writing pieces like this is to help inform anyone interested that the dharma texts tell us that it CAN be done, this transforming or dissolving of Samsara, and that we just actually must do it ourselves. We don't have to

be swept along in the rush of time as we are now. We can learn to paddle. We can sail.

And chief among the tools to accomplish this is realizing that this world we find ourselves in is our own projection. Anyone who has done LSD should be able to testify to that. We are not just at the mercy of the circumstances we find ourselves born into. We have ourselves created those circumstances as we go along and continue to do just that, and can by that fact uncreate or with effort change our situation at will. We just don't yet have the will or the awareness to do that, thus all the extant dharma teachings to point out the way.

However, changing our situation requires that we drive a wedge into one of the cracks in Samsara and widen it. And to do that, we first have to find that crack. Samsara likes to appear seamless and intimidating. And since we each create our own Samsara, we have to outwit ourselves and our own habits in order to be liberated.

And so, the very first thing, the first step in that process, is to be told, have it pointed out that such cracks exist and that we are at least the co-creator of our own situation, the circumstances that we find ourselves in the middle of.

However, we do have to find confidence in and take it on faith that this can be pointed out to us.

The seminal pith dharma teachings can do this, yet learning and practice takes courage and time on our part, and most of all the awareness that we need these teachings.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Liberation Through Insight

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 17, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Perhaps a better title would be “Deconstructing Samsara, that cocoon that is suffocating us.” And my ante-in or means is to have continuous insight Meditation, something that I use it each day (for hours) in many things I do, like writing this blog.

The words that I write are pinged off the immersion available in Insight Meditation, flavored or touched by it, so to speak. If I can explain it well enough, this should be interesting.

My experience of Insight Meditation, although mostly in brief moments, is one of great clarity, and reflection from that clarity when I come out of that moment’s immersion does its best to shape or embed my words with greater meaning from the traces of insight available to me by reflection, on coming out of nondual immersion.

It's like dunking for apples.

There is no describing non-dual experience. However, there are traces, what the Tibetans call perfume or ‘smells’. Something rubs off and is available to us upon our normal dualistic reflection after completing momentary immersion in Insight Meditation. It only takes a moment.

The value of Insight Meditation, as part of Mahamudra, is its ability to lessen, solve, and remove the hard duality of Samsara, through insight realization, one instant at a time. They add up and can be strung together, one after the other, until the effect is seamless.

And the key is that while for most of us Insight Meditation is very brief, these moments of insight can be strung together like beads on a string or rosary, one after another, until it is a stream. It is very much like digital sampling on a CD or DVD. The sampling is often enough so that to us it appears seamless. The same with Insight Meditation.

It’s why I write about this so often. Insight Meditation gradually and consistently deconstructs Samsara. It is liberation through insight, through ‘Seeing’. And we can do it. How incredible is that?

However, to learn this takes some real effort, at least it did for me in the beginning, but it's not like working in the coal mines, more like sampling from the mind of light. It's a privilege not a drudgery.

I can do it all day, now that I have done my best to squeeze the effort out of it that it took to learn it. In large, it's not taxing, yet I do find myself doing stints of it and taking breaks, which suggest I am not all the way there yet to 'seamless'. Close.

However, I do that with most anything, do some, rest some, do some, etc. It's like a form of life breathing.

Insight Meditation is a main link to what might be called my 'dharma practice,' yet over the years the path of dharma for me has widened so much that by now it resembles a level plain or a high plateau rather than a narrow path. In other words, there is nowhere to go other than right here.

And that happens to be where we are, in the present moment. Insight Meditation, moment by moment, eats away at the heart of Samsara, gradually loosening and deconstructing it. It is this and this alone that is freeing.

That's why it is so important to learn.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

"Be Grateful to Everyone and Everything"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 18, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/3bffe2fa-b385-4aa6-8f22-8638ae07a517_1024x1024.jpeg

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

"Be grateful to everyone" means try to understand that others give us kindness. This is the easiest to practice when people are nice and we have a pleasant and enjoyable time with them.... But when they are nasty, hurt our feelings or disappoint us, we complain, "This is so frustrating, disheartening and disappointing. I am so tired, mentally and physically, of spending time with so-and-so." This shows quite clearly that at that time, we are incapable of doing Mind Training, and instead, just blame the other person.

"There is a way to deal with occasions when people are unpleasant, namely, by using this opportunity to cultivate patience, tolerance, and compassion. We see that actually, they provide us with opportunities to practice and cultivate positive qualities, and therefore, we should be grateful to them for this."

End of quote.

What Thrangu Rinpoche says is true. However, unfortunately in this modern life, we are told to do this and do that perhaps too many times, so we just ignore admonitions.

I know, having to make effort to be patient and kind as detailed above is not being patient and kind, thus a pain, and worse, the effort itself (because it was not spontaneous and joy-filled) leaves a scar that in time too will have to be walked back – removed. Nevertheless, that's how most of us start out, trying to be nice.

For me, this dilemma is one of the hardest things, to grin and bear it, or however you might describe it. However, if you have ever taken the highroad and found that we did not have to make an effort to be patient and kind, which is a blessing, a very good feeling, and a sign of real internal progress.

And so, Rinpoche's suggestion that we take advantage of these trying times to practice patience, kindness, etc., rather than begrudging that effort is on point.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Update: Astrology Readings with Michael Erlewine

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 19, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/93ac3803-29af-4fef-9c88-ea5a497c2ec8_1732x2048.jpeg

I'm getting the ball rolling with the reading of the astrology charts.

Much greater response than I imagined, which means since I have no staff, it's a lot of organizing and keeping track of all the moving pieces. I also get questions as to what is a reading with me like, so for those who have never had one, here is a synopsis, although every astrologer has their own style. Here is mine.

I am, as you know from my blogs, quite detailed; I strive for clarity and making sense. I also record the reading in video and send you a copy to do with what you will.

The main idea is that the two of us sit down over Zoom and talk about your astrology charts, which means talking about you and looking at what the various charts point out. I will explain each point. I have been doing this for over 60 years, and have done full time chart reading for a good 9 years, and I still I do them throughout the year for family, friends, and where needed.

I will walk you through what I feel you might want to look at yourself. I don't try to teach astrology in a reading, but as mentioned, I use astrology to look over areas of your life that either come up in the reading or that you bring to the reading.

No, I don't know how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or how many children you will have.

And I also send you home, so to speak, with a lot of reference material about yourself to have and refer to. The enclosed graphic, using my chart as an example, are what I will email those having a reading when the reading is complete.

Astrology is not the only area I am skilled in. I know am an archivist of popular culture by vocation, but know music, am an entrepreneur, know photography, nature, programming, data-base creation and have been trained in western occultism by a Rosecrucian initiate and have trained in Tibetan Vajrayana dharma for over 50 years by a Tibetan Rinpoche, and so on.

I must add that if all goes well and we connect, we may not even get to all the various areas, which is why I see that you get the main stuff sent home. Sometimes we just talk about your life and astrology is only a part of that. I will do my best with each reading. Not sure how I will hold up because of my age, so if it is too much, I may only do readings for a short while.

Reading are not free. They cost \$210 as I need to raise money for some equipment I want to purchase. If you are interested, you can send me an email at Michael@Erlewine.net and I will send you the details and forms.

[Graphics by me]

EMAIL

Recognizing the Familiar

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 20, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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[I first learned to recognize the actual nature of the mind and how it works through close-up photography, creating photos like these, and not by sitting on my meditation cushion. Technically, in Tibetan dharma this is called Liberation by ‘Seeing’.]

We are very much a victim of what we know (and don’t know), and this is true about anything, any study or topic. I know what I know, yet I don’t know all of it about anything. There are a few things I know quite well, enough that I could teach them. These would be astrology, photography, music, rock n’ roll concert posters, archiving popular culture, and probably nature study. I could also teach a course in being an entrepreneur, yet I doubt many could do the homework for that.

I also know something about dharma and have studied it for many decades now, yet I don’t consider myself a teacher of dharma. I like to share dharma with others. And I know a few parts of dharma training quite well, but I am a sharer of dharma, not a teacher. I can be a dharma friend.

In other words, I don’t have a PHD in dharma because I only know my own path, the particular thread that has led to me as I am now. And I’m not interested in knowing everything about dharma just for the sake of knowing it. Then I could teach it. Rather, as mentioned, I just want to take the next step in the path of dharma that works for me, yet I want to help others on their own path.

So, with dharma, I can’t say to readers, do what I do, because that makes no sense. What I know is just too personal and unique to me, my path. The best I can say is that we each should do something to get to know the actual nature of our own mind. By all means, become familiar with your mind. It’s right there now.

Of course, with dharma practice we can talk about what are called the ‘Common Preliminaries’ and even the ‘Extraordinary Preliminaries’, what is called ‘The Ngondro’, and Lojong, because these practices are dualities and can be talked about. And we can talk (but it would make little sense) about the various deity practices that come after the above, which practices are very

detailed. Yet, information on what I mentioned above is readily available in book, video, and in-person teaching format.

What's NOT available and yet what I do talk about is the pivot from the dual or relative forms of dharma training mentioned above to the non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

This is a big switch and remains a mystery to many because all (or any) of the nondual dharma practices can't be put into words. They are ephemeral and these topics result in an abrupt halt to ordinary thinking and are a ring-pass-not. We can't just pass through to them. I write about them, yet I know how difficult that is (from my own experience) to make sense of.

The non-dual dharma practices are not something we know or have ever known up to now. We have no idea what the non-dual experiences are like, much less their actual realization.

And my writing about the nondual dharma practices also is, for me, a way of clarifying all this for myself. There is nothing more subtle or difficult to negotiate that I know of. Also, I know of nothing more important to communicate than how to make the transition between dual and non-dual dharma, particularly because, as mentioned, it can't be done with words alone.

Yet, many of us interested in the dharma continue to use words (or try to) to get as close to understanding the non-dual as possible. I'm using them here right now. And why I don't stop doing this, talking about what can't be talked about, is the belief that at the very least, some bit of insight might rub off.

And there is a long history of dharma teachers (and sharers) throwing everything including the kitchen sink at this problem. Zen Buddhism has a long tradition of jolting, shocking, upsetting, and doing whatever to a student necessary, trying to jog or jolt them out of their dualistic rut and into non-dualism, which once achieved is irreversible.

Realization is realization. It has the word "real" in it and that for a reason. When we 'realize', there is no going back to unrealizing. For example, when we realize how to turn on a light switch and get light, that is not something we forget next time. We realize it once and for all.

Yet, there is a vast difference between realizing how to turn on a light compared to realizing the true nature of the mind, our own mind, yet the principle is the same. Realization.

And so, when someone realizes the nature of the mind, their own mind and how it works, this makes a profound difference in our lives, and, as mentioned, once realized, there is no unrealizing it.

It's exactly like the light switch and turning it on. Once you realize how to do this, you can turn on the lights at will!

It's the same with realizing how the mind works. We suddenly become familiar with the nature of the mind, meaning we can work it. Like realizing how to drive a car, we can then drive it.

We have never known how to 'drive' the mind, how to use and work it. We first must become familiar with our mind before suddenly we can. It's no longer a mystery. After that, there is nothing standing in our way toward enlightenment other than our own effort.

[Photo by me.]

EMAIL

Inside Insight Meditation

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 21, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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One might ask what proof I have to show how important learning Insight Meditation as taught by the historical Buddha can be for a dharma practitioner. As I have repeated on this blog endlessly, Insight Meditation is one of the non-dual dharma practices, non-dual meaning it cannot be described or expressed in words, but requires action on our part that is fully immersive – non-dual. This is traditional in the Tibetan tradition of Vajrayana.

However, that makes it very difficult to communicate about because it can't just be communicated in language. It is ineffable. However, over the centuries countless dharma masters have done their best to put Insight Meditation into words. So, what can I say?

I am not a master, but attempting to express this in words, I can say this to describe the non-dual experience, at least my own original recognition of the actual nature of the mind. I will do the best I can, yet if you consider what I am saying, you may get at least some idea of how stunning Insight Meditation is once we learn to invoke it. It's not just another dharma practice. It is a key transitional practice that permanently changes our life forever, at least it has for me.

I will put aside extensive details about the very special circumstances as to how this 'Recognition' of the actual nature of the mind that led to Insight Meditation came about for me, yet those conditions were considerable, should be discussed, and have to be noted for clarity and understanding as to how this is possible. I will say what I can.

This dharma event came during one of the most difficult times I have ever gone through, when I was at my lowest ebb. I had just lost my job as a senior consultant for NBC along with many others at a layoff and suddenly had no way to support my family. I was crushed and my Self and confidence was for the moment shattered. However, apparently, it took this kind of sobering event to pull me down from my high horse and sober me up, so to speak, enough to allow this Recognition breakthrough to happen. I certainly did not see it coming.

In fact, I was so popped out of my normal groove by circumstances that I did not even do my daily on-the-cushion dharma practice and meditation, something I had down ritually for many decades. I was just too upset and all I wanted to do was get out of the house, forget it all, and wander in nature. This state of mind went on for many days.

Anyway, this key dharma opening happened to me at dawn years ago in the late spring, when I was out in nature with my camera and lenses photographing plants and small critters. I was crawling around in the cold wet morning grass just as the sun came up during the time when the morning light for photography is very good.

I was trying to forget all the hard knocks I was going through and I just didn't care about much of anything. As they say, I didn't give a damn and broke any protocol I might have had about how I looked to my family or neighborhood out there day after day, quite visible, with a camera.

At the time on this particular day, I was looking through the camera lens at whatever I was looking at, usually plants, flowers, bugs, and the like. And I had to have patience because Michigan is mostly flat and susceptible to wind, so often one has to wait for the wind to die down to take a decent still photograph.

There I was peering through the lens, waiting for the wind to die down, and concentrating my focus through the lens on the subject, when for no apparent reason I was no longer just looking at the plant or subject. Instead, I slipped into seeing the 'Seeing' itself, seeing the whole thing, including me, as in the line "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea." I slipped into full immersion for a short time.

Suddenly, I was a subject no longer looking at an object, and what I was looking at was no longer an object (but still visible, of course), and like waves subside into water, I was fully immersed in the moment, lock, stock and barrel, yet crystal clear and devoid of all thoughts. I was not thinking at all. I was experiencing in full.

And this was not a momentary passing insight or moment, just invoked once that day, it stayed as long as I concentrated, and I did it again and again -- the clarity, lucidity, and stillness.

And the impression of those repeated short experiences stayed in my mind even later that day when I went back home and no longer was out in nature. At home, my mind was just normal again, yet the impression of the Insight Meditation was something I could not forget or put out of my mind. It was by then a deep imprint like LSD leaves an imprint.

In fact, from that day forward, whenever I went out and photographed as I described, I could enter that same non-dual state if I followed my little photographic ritual. However, as mentioned, when I would return home, I could not invoke that same state. My mind was just normal. Needless to say, that entire summer and fall I spent a huge amount of time out in nature photographing.

And now comes what I consider, at least to myself, some reason or proof of the importance of this event, which I hope you can appreciate.

For the next six months, from May in late spring of that year until the winter frosts drove me inside, I was out every morning when it did not rain, watching the sun come up, crawling around in the grass in the fog and morning dew, looking through my camera lens and invoking the same vivid non-dual experience. It was like a portal had opened, yet only when I was photographing as I have described, completing my little ritual.

And I'm talking here every day. Before that, I can't remember when was the last time I watched the sun come up? It was years before, yet now I would not miss a day in order to have this vivid insight experience until physically it was too cold for the camera and myself to be outside, in late November. In other words, this went on for some six months straight.

That, to me, says something and it should be enough of a sign or flag to get your attention as to the import and imprint of this experience, at least for me. And why am I explaining this?

And that is because this experience was so life-changing for me that I can't help but do my best to explain what I can about how and when it happened, in case it could be useful for others to discover something similar themselves.

How strange it was to suddenly discover or open that portal into the non-dual world after a lifetime of a dualistic (subject and object) view. And it only existed when I was out in nature doing close-up photography, which is why, with all that daily photographing, my skill in photography improved a lot.

Yet, as mentioned, when I returned home each day, I could not invoke Insight Meditation around the house or anywhere else. It was like the rabbit hole in "Alice in Wonderland." I had to go out there in nature and look through that hole each day so that I could re-experience that state again and again. It's not like it happened and then just went away. It was an open port into another world, but I had to go outside into nature to peer through it for only a moment at a time. I could, however, repeat that moment as often as I wanted.

The Insight Meditation was always there if I went through the ritual of photography as described. Yet, as mentioned, my life changed because of it, and dramatically. And, as winter came on, I was forced indoors, as my camera did not like the extreme cold. So, what happened then?

What happened is that I built a little studio in a small room in the upstairs where we live. And in that room, I did my utmost to create conditions similar to photographing outdoors, but in a studio with potted plants, cut flowers, and things like that, anything that was alive and green.

And, with much work, and I mean a lot of work, I was finally able to reestablish my experience of Insight Meditation right in the studio. I was so very grateful. It seemed to take forever for it to kick in.

And so, I nursed my photography experience in the studio until spring rolled around. And then I was back outside again, as early as sometime in February, doing photography and experiencing Insight Meditation. And life continued on into that second spring and summer as it had the year before. However, by then there were, as they say, two trains running.

One was the Insight Meditation and photography, and the other was trying very concentratedly to see if I could move the 'Insight' from photography into some other part of my life, like for instance writing things like this. If I could expand Insight Meditation to include writing, it would greatly improve my life. I would be happy because I am at heart a writer.

Yet, as explained earlier, my window into Insight Meditation was like a portal or a rift in the cosmos that I could peer through provided I went through a strict ritual or procedure, that of photography, as I have described.

And I tried to make that shift beyond photography to happen. I wanted it to happen, and willed it again and again, yet that went nowhere. Try as I might, over and over, day after day, to make that happen, I could not. I could not lift even one finger by will alone. Obviously, I was doing something wrong, but I had no idea what that was. This went on all winter and into the spring. I was exhausted from the effort to make something more happen, yet nothing budged. I was in a straightjacket as far as extending Insight Meditation beyond photography.

However, I did not give up. It took me over a year before something moved inside me, and even then, only a teeny tiny amount. And that was only a beginning, just a first sign that there was hope. And then, inch by inch, or micrometer by micrometer, that inner portal began to open wider and include more with Insight Meditation than just photography. I could write with it.

I could immerse myself into Insight Meditation, armed with whatever words or thoughts I had while writing, rest in the nature of the mind for a few seconds, and they come out of Insight Meditation and back into my dualistic (subject and object) world where I was writing. And the immersing of the thoughts and words, when I came out of the immersion, were changed, became clearer, more true, than when they went into it. And I wrote those modified words instead of the words I started with.

And when that procedure became automatic, seamless, so to speak, I was indeed writing at another level than I had been able to do before.

And I would have quit long ago had not the Insight Meditation been so crucially important to me. And to make a long story short, inch by inch, I enlarged the portal, that crack in Samsara, to include the act of writing. And today, that portal includes writing 100% as well as photography. And I have not asked for anything more. This is enough, yet I feel that expansion and extension continue, and the inclusion is ever more inclusive.

And, as mentioned, this was not a matter of will. Instead, it was a matter of letting go, relaxing, and allowing this to happen naturally. And later, having discussed all this with my Tibetan dharma teacher of 36 years, his last words to me before he passed on (96 years old) was to keep extending and expanding my recognition as to the mind's nature. I'm working on it.

[Photo by me.]

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Talking About Dharma Experience

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 22, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/23163da6-5c2d-4038-bf0e-d24f812d95f4_421x421.jpeg

While talking about dharma experience, it's hard not to refer to my own experience, because that experience is all that I have. How's that for a Catch-22?

How to do that without seemingly gilding the lily, reifying my own experience and thus appearing too self-centered. Not sure how society wants us to handle this. It is not socially acceptable to refer to ourselves too much or too often, lest we be labeled 'selfish'. It's hard to get away from our Self, when we are referring to it all the time.

Historically, this seems especially true of any reference to dharma and its results in our case. We are not supposed to have any experience much less claim realization. I have spent decades watching how the Tibetan masters handle this, which is always professing that they have no realization whatsoever, and at best they say they are just repeating or parroting what they have read or been taught.

I get that, some kind of humility, but it is so transparent as to be embarrassing. Of course, they have some realization or knowledge, otherwise they would not be rinpoches or high teachers. This must be some form of cultural dharma etiquette.

And it's worse for those of us just learning dharma, when all we have, if we are honest, is our own bit of experience for sure and what little realization we have accumulated, with no one else to speak for us or about us. And, as mentioned, it's ridiculous to parrot the masters and feign humility. That's a laugh.

At this point, we don't have enough realization to even be humble and are trying to figure out what actually we do have. I have stumbled across this endlessly over the many decades I have been practicing dharma.

This is particularly true in that no-man's-land from when we begin doing deity practices and eventually segue into the non-dual practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen. No one talks about it, but a lot has been written about it.

Not only are the non-dual practices ineffable, meaning they cannot be expressed in language, yet folks either can't or won't try to talk about them, even though over the centuries there are libraries of written teachings that do.

Yet, people like me (and probably you too) are expected to make sense of all this, each on our own. Yes, I understand that we each have to turn the wheel of the dharma on our own. No one can do that for us.

However, I see nowhere where it says we have to do it alone. There is no reason why while practicing individually, on our own, collectively we should not discuss and try to bring clarity to the process of practicing dharma. Talk to one another!

Dharma may be self-secret, but there is nothing secretive about the non-dual dharma practices other than the inherent difficulty of accomplishing them.

IMO, we need to be able to talk about all this. [Midjourney [Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Root of the Root

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 23, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/bcdf7efa-01aa-4fc2-824f-04180bfe6650_1024x1024.jpeg

When I peel back the layers of what probably is the dharma onion in my life, I already understand that there is nothing at the center but awareness. That's traditional in dharma practice.

Yet, as far as I know, what is the deepest layer or imprint I have found so far and where did it come from? That's my question and I'm parsing that word, the Quest-I-On.

I believe that the 'deeper' I go, using depth or 'suchness' as the measuring stick, all of my attachments get closer to being the same and begin to funnel together. In other words, they are not very different from one another, and I seem to be gradually abandoning them one by one. Age alone makes me give up many. In this Samsaric life we have a problem with getting out of conceptuality and getting down to earth, embodiment.

It's like spinning the life's wheel-of-fortune and arriving at what I am most stuck on, the heart of my heart, so to speak.

And this goes beyond my family of kids, grandkids, and also my parental family of four brothers, and so on. And beyond those, are all my life's loves and interests of which the Dharma is what I would have put money on as the hear-of-my-heart for many years. I have been concentrating on dharma for decades now.

However, when the time came for dharma to speak to me directly, I was surprised to find that dharma spoke to me not from the meditation cushion I have sat on for all these decades, but rather from Mother Nature herself. Nature spoke for dharma, spoke directly to me.

When, during a time of extreme duress, I reached out, not to that meditation cushion, but I leapfrogged the cushion and found myself back with the early deep imprints of Mother Nature herself.

When push came to shove, that was how I was raised and who or what raised me, Mother Nature.

Of course, my parents and family cared for me and brought me up. No question. Yet, as to who or what raised me internally, spiritually, when the chips were down, it did come to that. I found myself trusting Mother Nature as my guide and teacher, and as the most familiar to me. This awareness of nature started when I was young, about six years old.

There is no doubt that Mother Nature and Dharma are to the greatest degree identical, two buttons on the same shirt. I know that. Yet, at the same time, of those two, Mother Nature came first in my life, and it is that which I am most familiar with and without thinking trust. There is no question. And I flash on something Rinpoche said to me more than anything else and that was ‘familiarity’, that we become familiar with our own mind, meaning what already is most familiar if we just relax and let it.

So, when it came time to introduce me to the actual or true nature of the mind, that task fell to Mother Nature as to where I wound up when the dharma awareness called ‘Recognition’ (of the true nature of the mind) arose. The birth canal, so to speak, was through Mother Nature, and it was through her portal that “Insight Meditation” arose and was invoked.

Of course, they are essentially one and the same, the dharma and Mother Nature. It’s just that my deepest and earliest imprints were made many decades before I ever heard the name Buddha or could understand what the term dharma meant. Anyway, that’s when the chickens came home to roost.

For example, recently I watched a long series of episodes of a ‘Reality TV’ show. And while that was very interesting to me psychologically, what I found myself watching most, what it was that I was most enthusiastic about and brightened my day, were all the short video moments of various insects, lizards, snakes, and animals spliced into the narrative.

And every time any greenery was present, or a swamp or pond shown, all I could think about was how I would like to be there rooting around in the grass or shrubbery, seeing what life lived there.

I always was impressed and fascinated by lush vegetation, jungles, swamps, and the like, because of the profusion of life in those places. I have been to the Florida Everglades many times and there are only a few roads down there at all. The rest is wild beyond my imagination.

Anyway, that’s the ‘tell’ of the tale for me, familiarity with nature and the natural environment.

My history as a child was just too rich with exposure to nature, all of which left an indelible imprint on me at an early age and that imprint continued until

my late teens. Like a play on the old saying. “You can take the boy out of nature, yet you cannot take the nature out of the boy.”

My many decades of dharma training have preoccupied me all this time, yet when life’s ‘push-came-to-shove’ events brought me to my knees, so to speak, it was Mother Nature where I woke up in when I gathered my wits and pulled myself back together again. Now, that was a surprise.

As mentioned, to me dharma and nature are essentially one and the same, just different labels. Yet Mother Nature predated my introduction to the dharma by some long time and is where I feel naturally feel most at home, most familiar. I realize that now.

And perhaps most importantly of all, it was Mother Nature that taught me how life actually is and that is very different from civil or society’s laws. Nature’s laws are how I was trained and what I judge life by. And my practice of Dharma has kind of been a finishing school for me.

And so, my point is that ‘familiarity’ is what is most familiar to us. And by that I mean what already is familiar, if we will just relax and allow ourselves to feel it. When life’s problems popped me out of society’s groove and into the expanse of nature, I relaxed and in that moment, “The dewdrop slipped into the shinning sea.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Pulse of Life

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 24, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/40776f96-4132-44c3-a355-be4eb7b377e4_829x607.jpeg

My photography has come a long way from when I was doing nature photography at the level of field guides. I started with close-up photography in 1956, using a Kodak Retina 2a, a light meter, some close-up lenses, and a tripod loaned to me by my father.

And then, over the years, I got more and more detail oriented until I mastered a photo technique called ‘focus stacking’, where a single photo could be made up of 100 or more single photographs, each image carefully taken, until everything (at least all that you wanted) was in focus. I have taken over a 1,000,000 photos over the years, many of them being the stacks or layers of photos I mentioned.

Something in me does not like the traditional single-shot photo where, whether you can see it or not, there is a single focus point around which the rest of the photo is in attendance. I don’t like to be led or forced toward a single point. My guess is that I don’t like the idea of “points” at all. Rather, I like to look around in a photo and decide for myself what I like to look at. I know, it’s probably nutty. And so, I have stacked photos many years before it became acceptable, much less popular. Fellow photographer used to say that stacking focus was cheating. And then, of course, they did it.

However, in recent years I have begun to mix within a single photograph, sometimes several areas of precise focus, while leaving the rest of the photo in a profusion of out-of-focus colors, sometimes called ‘Bokeh’ in photography or ‘Bouquet’.

It’s my way of seeing or reminding myself that our world of vision, what we look at and feel, is something like a sea of light in which float various rafts of focus or consciousness subject to our attention. Or it is like drawings that great draftsmen have made, pencil drawings that are unfinished, like M.C. Escher’s pencil sketch “Drawing Hands.”

I like precise detail, but I like it in recursion, foci floating in a sea of bokeh and then my ‘skinny dipping’ in that.

I like the feeling that we are always knee-deep in creating our own world, quite busy detailing chaos or creating detail from or in chaos.

Or is it that many of my stacked photos have points of focus everywhere, scattered throughout, so there is no single point of focus as traditional photos have, no single point drawing our mind consciously or unconsciously to itself, thus a static point of view. In a stacked photo, everything can be in focus and the eye is free to look wherever we wish because there is not one point of focus. This to me is a kind of liberation.

Of course, I moved through that phase years ago, and today I like, as mentioned, islands of focus that are awash or floating in a sea of sameness. I like images that are sweeping gestures, almost mudras or signs of something beyond themselves. I am saying something by this, at least to myself.

In my photography, I don't want to just spell it all out and call it a day. I want to suggest or peek at detail that is like a sugar crystal forming within a jar of brine.

In other words, the detail or point of focus is not where we start or what gets pointed out to us, whether we like it or not, but rather it is the last to form and the first to dissolve, that is: if there is a point at all.

In my reading of the dharma texts, there is no point to life. The dharma texts are clear about this. No beginning and no place to end up or be. There is no permanent or existential soul-being, again, no final point at all. In fact, practicing dharma is very much a process of diss-a-point-ment, which liberates us by finally getting our hands on what is real.

The best I can say is that the process of life itself IS the point of it all, and that the way we travel is itself the goal, where we are traveling to. Or, if you must have a point, then there is no real point to a process other than the process itself. That would be the point.

And everywhere we look, recursion rears its head, creating an instance, that itself is an illusion..

This darkish poem I wrote back in my youth, as a child of the 1960s:

“Look at yourself,

First yet first,

No better,

And yet not worse.

‘Now get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as you may your hearse.”

I like walking along the rim or edge of common sense, not quite losing touch, but also staying aware of touching. And by ‘touch’ I mean immersion, and full immersion at that, and yet remaining aware at the same time or to be more accurate, like a string of beads in a seamless succession.

Do I believe my photos express something? Yes, I do, yet it may not be something you enjoy like I enjoy. I like the tightrope between being and non-being, which is called ‘becoming’, the borderline where sense and nonsense endlessly touch each other and then let go. And the reason I like that, as best as I determine, is that’s the way it is.

I like sampling, immersion and then letting go, absorption and reflecting, like a heart beating or the breath breathing -- cycles.

[Drawing by M.C. Escher.]

EMAIL

Chasing Experience

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 25, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1cc842cb-dccc-4c78-9d84-89e3b9c689fe_980x1373.jpeg

I grew up in the 1950s and beyond, back when a college degree was what separated the classes in our society and in high school as well. It was all about college prep and the divided classes that resulted, those who were preparing for college and the rest of us who were not.

I quite naturally bucked that, never finished high school, never got a diploma, and even though I was accepted (without a diploma) into the University of Michigan, I chose to drop out of college after only three weeks because of boredom, which choice only further separated me from my peers. I was young with a thirst for life experience, not more education. I certainly took “The Road Less Travelled By.”

Instead, I chose to follow what then was called ‘The Beat Generation’ and Beatniks, which introduced me (oddly enough) to an even more elite view, that of the Liberal Arts, and at a notch higher than we would find in a college Liberal Arts degree. The Beats were deeply immersed in poetry, literature, jazz, and the Fine Arts, along with spirituality well beyond what college seemed to offer. I had to go there.

To me the Beat Movement was what ‘elite’ meant; they were, IMO, the true elite, The Jack Kerouacs, Allen Ginsbergs, and a vast array of European (and some American) poets, writers, and philosophers. In 1960, I hitchhiked to the West Coast and California, where I lived on the beach in Santa Monica’s “Venice West,” right in an abandoned walk-in freezer in a Beat art gallery called “The Gas House.”

And although the Beat lifestyle, at least for me, got funkier and was already dying out, the purity of the intellect found there only became more conceptual and well, finally, pure intellectuality. “The Beat Movement” was more an idea than it was satisfying.

I knew and sensed something was wrong, but I did not know just what it was. It took an introduction to Zen Buddhism and eventually to ‘The Dharma’ to tell me different and even that took a long time for me to get the point, that there was no point, no fixed state of mind, or place to arrive at other than the way we travel. And I wrote this little poem back then.

“Look at yourself, first yet first,

No better and yet not worse.

Now get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as you may, your hearse.”

And the slowly dawning realization was that it was not higher or more refined intellectual clarity that I required, but rather just the reverse, that all that intellectual conceptuality had to be immersed (dunked) in authentic experience and fully if I wanted to gain any realization as to what this life is actually about.

The book and concept of Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road” in 1957 and “The Dharma Bums” in 1958 were for me symbolic of what I was missing in my life, authentic experience. I wanted this more than anything.

For a kid, a young man coming of age in the social environment of the post-war 1950s, how does one get oriented? Everything I knew, the kind of experience I came up into was mostly some kind of uniform conceptuality with, crew cuts, conformity, strict gender roles, “Modern,” suburban, and of course movies, television, and the middle class.

And in the midst of all that conformity, that uniformity, a great storm was already forming, which is kind of summed up in the tune by Muddy Waters called:

“The Blues Had a Baby and They Named It Rock n’ Roll.”

And nothing could stop that music tidal wave. Kids like me, somehow sensing the blandness of the times, just naturally found us going against it. You have a positive pole and that is attracted by a negative pole. My generation, riding the leading edge of the “Baby Boomers,” found us in opposition to the sterility of the 1950s. It was like magnets. And I am getting to the point of this article.

For me, all this turned on the fact that conceptuality can only be refined so far and then it self-deconstructs. In the 1950s we were living the life of a highly refined and sterile conceptuality, in which the meaning of life could NOT be found by still further refinement, but just the opposite; any meaning came from plunging into authentic life experience. And only that could scratch my inner itch, Thus the Beat movement.

It was all about abandoning the elite conceptuality of those times and immersing ourselves in what makes sense, and not just an artsy-fartsy idea of sense.

The glory of the 'conceptual' was not what it used to be in the America of the 1950s. The liberal intellectual college elite was not only dying; it was mostly already dead.

And the reason is that the whole country, including the liberal intellectual college-educated elite, was realizing the shortcoming of their state. Intellectual isolation is, to put it simply, self-limiting, a form of punishment, and just no fun. There is no 'meaning' there.

As a country, and perhaps as a world, since then we have moved the focus of our identification from the intellectual stratosphere downward toward common sense. We were taking the plunge, yet we didn't know how to dive deep.

And that is what dharma was then and is now, plunging into direct experience and full immersion, putting out the flame of the pure intellect in authentic experience and, eventually, realizing that. It's all about realization, yet there has to be actual and authentic experience for there to be something to be realized. That's the rub.

One problem with the 1950s, and even the Beat Movement, the 1960s Alternative Culture, and certainly the 1970s Spiritual Movement was (and is) the lack of grounding in common sense, simple experience, in order for there to be what the dharma calls the "Realization" of that experience.

We have to live from the gut, the 'Hara'.

[Ann Arbor: photo of me back in the late 1950s or early 1960s in my herringbone jacket and blue sweater. Behind me is activist Carl Oglesby and his wife Beth.]

EMAIL

"Each Line I Write, It Already Has Perfection"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 27, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/8653469d-5abb-495a-b5e6-98bc1e1a2d83_1024x1365.jpeg

That's a quote from Franz Kafka. Back in the day, as they say, when I was getting to know myself, I was deep into reading autobiographies of authors, poets, artists, etc. that interested me.

And one of those writers that I read was Franz Kafka. Aside from his main writings, I was particularly interested in his diaries and pretty much inhaled them. Anyway, somewhere tucked away in his diaries was the sentence, which I will rephrase here as:

"Each line I write, it already has perfection."

People think that to be a writer, first you have an idea, and then you write about it; you write it down. That's not how it works in my experience. I don't start with an idea. I start with a feeling. First, I feel like writing... anything. I am in the writing mood and need to express myself. And when in that mood, I could write, as mentioned, anything.

Another way to say this is that anything I write, will be (at least for me) "good writing" or an attempt for that. I don't write for other folks. I've tried that and for me it does not work. I write for my own satisfaction and stop writing when I feel I have expressed something. I know when I am done.

As my FB readers well know, I tend to write long essays or articles, not short ones. I once was visiting a friend, who happens to be the Roshi or main teacher of one of American's best know Zen center. He used to be an astrology student of mind. He was reading some of my writing and his advice to me was that I should write shorter pieces. Of course, I thought about his comment.

And after considerable thought, I realized that I am not writing for other folks or tailoring what I write for their temperament. Perhaps I should. I write to express something within me and get it out, and it (apparently) takes me time to do this. So, the only suggestion I have is that I write for my own satisfaction as selfish as that may be. As my favorite poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said, "Suck any sense from that who can."

I am always grateful for any comment (well, not just ‘any’), and I love a discussion. I don’t like to teach or lecture, yet I do like to express myself and share, get my words in the wind like prayer flags.

As mentioned, I am always reminded of a line in one of Franz Kafka’s diaries, which said something like “Each line I write, it already has perfection.” I must say that it took me many years to figure out what Kafka meant, but I did figure it out. What Kafka was saying was “Each line I write, it already has perfection, BECAUSE I have perfection.”

This is just 180-degrees opposite from what most of us might think we need to be a writer. The general opinion is that we should work on being a writer, learn to write by practicing writing. There is a half-truth to this approach, but to my mind this is not what you would think.

Kafka worked not on his writing, but on himself, and particularly on his mind. By perfecting his mind, eventually whatever he wrote was already perfect, because his mind was more perfect. So yes, Kafka did write a lot, but not because he slaved at being a writer, but rather because he worked to perfect his mind and, once perfected, as Kafka put it: “Each line I write, it already has perfection.”

That “perfection” is what moves a writer to precipitate clarity into his or her world, a clarity that is not only effortless, but, pardon me for the obvious, clear. That clarity sees through the back of the proverbial mirror. There is no reaction or reflection, just the clarity itself that speaks. This kind of clarity is why we write, why I write.

It is a window beyond whatever meaning might be there. Yes, the movie reel keeps turning and the story unfolds, but the clarity looks through the meaning, past and beyond the story at absolutely nothing at all. Why? Because the clarity, the “seeing” or awareness itself, is greater than any story, plot line, or train of thought. Anything written with that kind of clarity is sealed or imprinted with that clarity, a signature in itself, and it naturally registers when read.

This is what “meditation” is all about, the clarity and the lucidity; nothing else. And this is why we can’t “work” on meditation; it just happens. What we work on is purifying our mind by removing obstacles to allow that clarity to just happen. It’s like the old game of Pick-Up Sticks. When enough obscurations are removed, clarity is all that is left.

Traditional Buddhist meditation is about having that clarity. Learning to meditate is about removing the obscurations, and not that the meditating practice itself is the end. That is just practice. We practice to remove

obscurations, at which time all that is left is the clarity and lucidity. Make sense?

[Photo of Franz Kafka.]

For a limited time, I am doing a few Zoom astrology readings. If interested, please email me with the subject "READINGS."

EMAIL

Running In The Tube of Time

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 28, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/893f38aa-f25b-48ef-96ad-af70e8409cef_452x452.jpeg

I try to pry my fingers off any stick-to attachments, yet this is inefficient and would take forever.

It's fair to say that ANY dualistic endeavor, any situation with a subject and object, accumulates karma faster than we can remove it. That boat will sink faster than we can bail it out.

And so, this makes Samsara, in all its facets, a losing situation, a downhill slide toward the oblivion of increasing karma.

And this is why the great Mahasiddhas have repeatedly pointed out to us that anything short of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is hopeless and that the best way to remove our accumulating karma is not to accrue it in the first place. Period!

This obvious fact is a precious suggestion for us. Work on not accumulating karma in the first place. Work on the one who is busy accumulating karma (which would be ourselves), instead of trying to remove the karma that we have already accumulated. Karma, once accumulated, is very, very hard to remove without it first ripening.

Cut the root, not the branches.

In summary, dualistic situations like we find with conceptual words and language are inherently flawed and can't be entertained without accumulating karma. Even if it is a slow leak, we are still accumulating karma.

This is why there is such an emphasis on the non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, of which Insight Meditation is an integral part.

With Insight Meditation, which is non-dual, we are totally immersed, with no subject and no object, thus nothing 'sticky' for karma to cling to.

In fact, as mentioned, this is the preferred (and only) method to remove karma, both as a preventative and a remedial measure. What this means is that through Insight Meditation, we avoid adding new karma and at the same time begin to deconstruct existing Samsara (the karma maker) one moment at a time.

We transmigrate by transforming Samsara into Nirvana, a bit at a time, turning Samsara inside-out like a glove.

What's difficult or problematic is that Insight Meditation is not just something we can do without training. It is not linear as in simply being the next step in a line of steps, although it is what has to come next after dualistic dharma practices. That's what is meant here by non-linear.

Rather, Insight Meditation is a step beyond or outside the box, beyond a linear approach into, as mentioned, non-linear space, complete immersion, something few of us know anything about – non-duality.

We are not 'witnessing' in non-dual meditations because there is no subject or witness and simultaneously nothing to witness. That's why it is pointed out that non-dual meditation is called non-linear and also non-meditation.

It is the full immersion of non-dual 'meditation', our being without a subject and an object, that avoids or cuts out the attachment or stickiness, the clinging, that accumulates karma. In full immersion there is no one that clings and nothing to cling to.

And yet we are not used to letting go and being fully immersed, which is, of course, non-dual; we are used to the dualism of language and Samsara, which is 'sticky'. We cannot just let go and fully immerse ourselves at will without training. At least that's the way it has been with me.

And so, IMO, the first step is being aware of the problem, that it exists, and acknowledging that we cannot just immerse ourselves in clarity without thought and thinking. Non-dual immersion is not natural to us and apparently has to be first pointed out and then taught.

That's how I learned it, by having it pointed out to me by an authentic dharma master, but it did not just happen as soon as I wished. And I had the nature of the mind pointed out to me by more than one authentic guru and was not able to get it. If you believe that you are going to do this without external help, good luck!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Distraction from Reality

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 29, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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“Distraction” from what? That would be a distraction from being able to rest in the true nature of the mind, which we may not have ever done.

If we are attached to something, and by ‘attached’ I don’t mean just fixated on something we want or like, but also attached by our interests, whatever we are busy with. Our interests, even if productive, are forms of attachment.

If that is true, and even what interests us exacts a toll, what are we supposed to do with ourselves?

And my point is that attachment or ‘focused interest’ confines our scope, narrows it. If we can relax and not be limited by our focus, there is room for a more natural intuition to arise. It took me decades to realize this.

At first, I noticed this a number of times. For example, when I am on a tear, a project, fixated on doing something, whatever it is, my intuition just dries up and goes away. However, when I snap out of the fixation and it subsides, all my ‘feely’ intuitions start to pop up again.

That tells me something important.

For one, we are our own prison wardens, and our constant busyness and fixations narrow our scope so that we can no longer sense or feel the more intuitive parts of ourselves. I have experimented with this and find that it is true.

The moment my fixation ‘pops’ like a balloon and goes away, I start to feel intuitively again. In other words, if I am fixated on some interest or other, I get tunnel vision and can see little else but that, which is a pretty good definition of Samsara, IMO. We are riveted.

And when that fixation is resolved or runs out of steam, then that distraction evaporates, and I am once more open to just feeling normal again. And it is then that new ideas to think or write about begin to bubble up into my consciousness.

I just share this insight for those interested, to see if you have something similar going on. I wish we could talk about this stuff more than society admits.

The message for me is that, as mentioned, I am my own worst enemy, and my tireless effort to fixate on this or that closes me off from what I really need or want, which is to naturally be intuitive and live life.

It also reaffirms my dedication to dharma because it reinforces the idea that moving away from the purely conceptual and into the more immersive non-dual states of non-mediation is the key to liberation from Samsara and all of its assets.

Liberation begins with awareness.

[Photo by me today.]

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A Transcendentalist

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 29, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The forest floor is the ground for my enlightenment, and where I find my path. Also, the rivers and streams, meadows, swamps, and lakes. No worry that nature is not dharma or that it is another way to avoid dharma, because nature is 100% a part of my dharma path.

Considering what passes for 'dharma' in this modern age, it's almost the reverse. Nature keeps dharma honest as best it can, considering how we destroy the natural environment.

No small wonder that when in the shock of loss many years ago, I did not seek out my meditation cushion but instead burst outside into the woods and streams, finding my solace with nature, taking comfort in the truth and honesty of Mother Nature. It took a long, long while before I once again voluntarily took on the harness of society. I have always been a little feral.

When push came to shove, it was nature that I chose over society's offerings and I have long considered myself just a straggler of the American Transcendentalists like Amos Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau to name a few. That's my tribe.

Arrogant as that may be, that's where I belong, just sprinkled with a little more than I would prefer of the modern trimmings.

I have read in the diaries of Alcott, Thoreau, and Emerson, and feel the same, but perhaps with a bit of modern disguise to be worked off.

Who is to say that American Transcendentalism does not continue on into our future and folks like me, insignificant perhaps, are cast from the same mold and walk on. Most of the transcendentalists had a direct connection with the dharma back then, and in the obscurations of the times we live in, nature's stamp or seal is indistinguishable from the truth, and the dharma is the truth.

I have always resonated with Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott, and so I confess my yes, raise my hand, and join with them. For me, that's as American as I get.

I have always learned from those Transcendentalists, whom I respect, and for me represent all that I am and want to be.

[Image taken by me.]

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Kneading Familiarity

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 1, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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It's Now or Never. The well of the present moment is always right here and now, no matter what excursions we make, whether we dwell on the past or imagine the future. The present does not and cannot go anywhere else but here and now.

Of course, we each have our reasons for reflecting on what has passed on or expecting and anticipating future results. However, we might keep in mind that time out or away from the present is just that, not being present in the moment.

It's not a question of blame, that we should or shouldn't be distracted by the past or future. Rather, it is simple mathematics as to time spent focused on the present moment. If we are absent one place or another most of the time, we are not here.

Focused attention, which is what meditation is all about, as each of us soon find out, is not so easy to do. We are all over the place from moment to moment. And it is not the case that 'being focused' is something we can force ourselves to do out of sheer will, at least for more than a short time.

We are soon exhausted and humbled by trying that. The only antidote or approach I am aware of to remedy this is simply allowing the mind to rest, just as it is, without our help or our doing anything at all. As the Mahasiddha Tilopa said "Don't alter the present." Don't mess with it.

I have to repeatedly remind myself that nothing I can do, outside of just letting go and resting will get me anywhere at all and that the main goal of what we call 'meditation' is simply greater familiarity with the nature of our own mind or 'the' mind that we have ready access to.

This was always pointed out to me by my meditation teacher for 36 years, the idea that he was introducing me to the nature of the mind, yet it was up to me to become familiar with it and to extend and expand on the familiarity. I must become familiar by becoming familiar, by familiarizing myself with the mind's nature. No one can do that for us. And familiarity in my experience is a

visceral affair, much like kneading dough. We have to get our hands down in experience to familiarize enough.

We can dance around that concept as long as we want, yet sooner or later we get on with the process of familiarization with our own mind, which as mentioned is often called 'meditation,' but is more visceral than that.

Flexibility and familiarity with our own mind only make 'sense' and without it we are, well obviously, unfamiliar and inflexible. The mind is very much more like a muscle rather than just a 'thinking' device.

And this familiarity is the process of coming to terms and realizing we are not the boss of our own mind any more than we are of another person's mind. The mind is the Mind, and our only option is to become more familiar with it, so we can work with it harmoniously and get in synch with reality.

We each have our own take or sense of our own mind that's personal to us. However, everyone else has their own grasp on the mind and it is the same mind that we each are becoming familiar with, although we each have our individual or personal take on it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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A CLEAR SLEEP IS SOFT

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“To achieve enlightenment just for ourselves would be unacceptable. In this world alone, there are billions and billions of human beings and animals that live scattered all over the earth—on mountains, in forests, on plains, and in the ocean. For these beings, happiness is extremely rare. They experience great suffering and have no protector. If I were to achieve the complete enlightenment of a buddha, I would have the ability and courage to free others by showing them the path that leads to freedom from the pain of samsara. This is the attitude that we need when we practice meditation. If we practice with this attitude, it will be a very pure practice that will lead to extensive results; if we don’t think this way, the result will not be very vast.”

End of quote.

The attitude that Thrangu Rinpoche speaks of is called Bodhicitta, and there are two forms. The first form is called ‘Relative’ Bodhicitta, and that is when we have the good intention of helping others. It is more a good thought than any action on our part.

The second form of Bodhicitta is called “Absolute Bodhicitta’ and that is when our good intent is transformed into action. And the key or glorious thing about “Absolute Bodhicitta” is that it’s impersonal. Our Self and persona can’t go there. Instead, we have an unstoppable urge to share and help others with no shadow of a personality to obscure it. Without the shadow of a doubt!

Absolute Bodhicitta requires that as the poet wrote, first “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” And I write the following”

“The morning’s brightness lights the day. And when that day is gone, the quietness of evening here approaching settles to sleep this restless world. Hard can I hear the frantic rush, as I turn away from the edge out into floating rest am I. It is not my conscious direction doing this, but as a head downturned all life now turns up a blossom to the night, the night of time urges me open, at last a flower too, open to life. Already the dawn.”

“Still, around me, urging caution, a retinue of persons set my spirit, like a jewel is set, in time. But where before my worry, now my rest. The tide rolls on beyond me. Ever changing, it rocks me now asleep. And in my sleep, awake am I, so clear a bell is ringing.”

“The smart of persons lash and crack to drive me at time’s edge. My personal ties are slipped, as floating out, I’m gently tugged. Too long have fought to force my thought, and not, at ease, arising like some cloud to pass. My work un-done, yet done, I rise. Drifting through strains, I sieve, and pass myself, open out to nothing thoughts to touch back not once more.

“A clear sleep is soft, its ever-blooming sound is silence. Now to find my way among the slips of time. And slip I will, now lost to striving, and lounge in this room of emptiness. To lie back in time, behind its edge, and ever look eternally. No way to pass this on. This is: passing on.

Slamming against the walls of time, I shove off into eternity, and spread open a flower, so wide.”

[Photo by me today, autumn pears sitting on a table I built.]

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Precipitating Experience

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/80fbd02c-b598-4e97-9683-70df6a30464c_798x540.jpeg

Experience is so precious and it's getting rare. Without experience, there is no realization. This is the Catch-22 or caveat that makes sense of our life, and of course this is the heart of dharma and the key to unlocking Samsara.

We somehow have to get down from our ivory tower, this conceptual construction we have assembled or accidentally accumulated and immerse ourselves in raw experience, baptized to wash away our karma or sins, as the Christians say.

Only, with the dharma there is no original sin that has caused us to fall from grace. The simple truth is that we have never known the pristine nature of our own mind in all the time and lives the dharma saints say we have been living. Or, as my Tibetan rinpoche put it, "We, are the stragglers, the ones who up to now have never gotten it, never recognized the nature of our own mind."

We are not familiar with what is most familiar to us; we just have not recognized it. Living in the intellect, in the world or understanding and concepts, and believing that intellection itself is life experience is no substitute for living the life of the senses. Experience is the key to realization and enlightenment as I understand it.

If only taking the plunge was as simple as falling off a log. However, it is not. Even experience has to be learned, and for most of us it has to be pointed out. And then the one thing even a teacher can't do for us, we have to ourselves experience complete immersion in non-duality, to the exclusion of "Me, Myself, and I." We can't relax enough for that.

How in the world is this possible? The dharma teachings point out, meaning a dharma teacher with experience must point out to us, the actual nature of the mind so that we get the idea. Given that we get it, then we may actually recognize the mind's nature for ourselves, meaning with serious practice become familiar with what we are already familiar with, but don't recognize. It's apparently too close to see. We may see some trees, but not the forest.

If recognition is done and done to full immersion, that should get the ball rolling toward having the experience of realizing what we are already familiar

with because it is right here and now, meaning right here and right now. That's the task and often the problem.

Speaking in our own defense, as Rinpoche pointed out to me, we have never, ever known or recognized the nature of the mind itself in all the rebirths they say we have had. It seems it takes something to jar or pop us out of the groove we have etched in the cosmos and by that upset, start our particular form of Samsara to self-deconstruct. 'Recognition' is not about to come and get us; we have to go and receive it. However, we first have to precipitate some actual life experience. In other words, stop just dreaming and live life visceral while we can.

[Photo of me and the Ven. Ponlop Rinpoche haling a laugh out by the stupa in our dharma center.]

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"The Sun Is Shining"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 8, 2025

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A lifelong search for the tribe we belong to. Isn't that what many of us want, to see where we fit in or belong?

The problem for me was how do we determine what someone's tribe or archetype is. I will briefly (my idea of brief) explain how I came upon a way to do this, at least one that works for me. You may find it helpful. We have to go back to the early 1970s, and it is astrological in nature, so hold on to your hats.

In 1975 I published my first book, "The Sun Is Shining," the first long range ephemeris of heliocentric planetary positions through the centuries. This was before home computers, so I had to use little 4-function calculators and, later, programmable calculators, and later yet handheld calculators that had tiny printers and could store programs on magnetic cards. This was before home computers but certainly blazed a trail right up to them.

From early on, I took our life-source the Sun, one in the vast empty sky to heart. No, I'm not of Egyptian heritage, I just resonate to the Sun. And while I never graduated from high school and thus don't have a curriculum vitae (CV), there have been signs of this in my life that flagged me down, which I will share a bit of. Here is one.

In the later 1960s, I became a student of Andrew Gunn McIver, an immigrant from Scotland who worked as a lumberjack in Canada and became a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. In his later years Andrew settled in Ann Arbor, Michigan where he spent his last years. You could often find him on the campus of the University of Michigan, up on "The Diag" sitting on one of those wide cement benches.

He looked almost exactly like the author Bernard Shaw. Anyway, Andrew and I met up and became acquaintances. I would say 'friends', but Andrew was a

life teacher for me, so I don't want to say that we were buddies. It was more than that.

I would spend entire days with Andrew, days when I didn't open my mouth except perhaps to say hello. I never said a word, and by the end of the day I was exhausted from taking in so much. When Andrew died, it was I who took care of his things, saw to his burial, and designed his tombstone, the symbol of the sun. Andrew McIver introduced me to the nature of the Sun.

For example, Andrew would say to me "Michael, I am tuning you like an instrument. Years from now you will respond to what I am placing in your mind."

What could I say, "OK, yeah," but I didn't say a word. And he also would say this, "Imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun," and then he would growl, "That's hot stuff!"

I had no idea what he was referring to, yet some years later I did just that. I imagined myself standing at the center of the Sun, and became a heliocentric astrologer, one of only a few with real training in this form of astrology."

And so, as mentioned, it is not surprising that in 1975 I published my first book, a small volume that was an ephemeris of heliocentric planetary positions from 1653-2050. It was 52 pages long and required a 4-function calculator to use. The title was "The Sun is Shining." Indeed, my experience with Andrew McIver was some kind of sign.

Another and similar sign was when I traveled to the mountains of Tibet, taking my whole family, to see in person the 17 th Karmapa, the oldest of the main lineages of dharma in Tibet. The Dalai Lama I also met in person and offered the traditional white scarf is the 14 th Dalai Lama.

Anyway, the 17 th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, who spoke no English, at our first meeting said to me when we visited his ancestral monastery high in the mountains of Tibet, "You are Tenzin Nyima," which translates to "Holder of the Sun," or "Keeper of the Sun." Needless to say, that title was a second sign that my interest in the Sun was not something I just made up or imagined.

And so, I began to deepen my connection to the Sun and everything solar. In the next years, when home computers appeared, which for me was in 1977, I turned my programming skills, which were all self-taught, to programming astrology on home computers, which I did. And I was the first to offer my programs to my fellow astrologers, at first free, with my having to record and verify these programs on cassette tapes, until it took so much time I had to charge for them, and Matrix Software was born.

‘Matrix’ was chosen as a name because of its meaning as womb or birthplace, and this company, Matrix, was the birthplace of astrology for home computers. And that’s the prologue for what now follows.

In the process of programming astrology with its geocentric view of the solar system, one first programs the heliocentric positions and then transfers them geocentrically to the Earth’s view of the solar system, the traditional geocentric chart used by astrologers for many centuries all the way up to this present day.

Well I first did my heliocentric natal chart in the early 1970s, a chart of the solar system with the Sun at its center surrounded by its planets.

And it was not lost on me that some 500 years ago, Copernicus had pointed out to the astronomer/astrologers of his time that everything does NOT revolve around us, the Earth, and we, its inhabitants. In fact, it’s just the opposite, Earth, like all the planets circles the Sun. It’s not all about us.

What is of interest here is that from that time, after the pointing out by Copernicus, some of the astronomer/astrologers accepted the heliocentric chart and along with the traditional chart of that time, the geocentric chart, marched forward into the future. And in time, as we know, Botany and Astronomy became the oldest academic disciplines. Astronomy is a right livelihood and very much accepted in this modern world.

However, all the other astronomer/astrologers back then, those who did not accept or pick up on the heliocentric chart, also moved into the future but with only the traditional geocentric chart to guide them, and we know that today astrology is not a standard academic discipline or even considered much of a right livelihood in today’s world. Astrologers never were empowered or embraced the heliocentric chart that Copernicus had pointed out.

In fact, this story deepens. As I programmed the heliocentric chart on home computers in 1977, suddenly I began to understand the heliocentric chart as there it was staring me in the face, my own natal helio chart. And it was so different from my traditional geocentric natal chart. Who or what this strange chart was, I wondered?

I began to pencil it into my mind, so to speak. I took the bagful of astrological techniques I had up to that point and applied them to this very simple helio chart. No houses, no retrograde, no moon... just these ever-moving-forward planets circling their center, the Sun.

And to my surprise, many planets were nowhere near their position in my well-used geocentric chart, take for instance the planet Mars.

Mars in my geocentric chart is in Aries, yet Mars in my helio chart is in Aquarius. I had to remind myself that from Earth Mars appears to be in Aries against the backdrop of the zodiac, but in fact Mars was firmly, gravitationally attached, to the Sun in Aquarius. The traditional geocentric natal chart and view is just a snapshot of the entire solar system from earth's view and perspective.

What should I make of that? Well, reaching into my bag of astrological techniques, I came up with things like: Geocentrically, Mars in Aries means I have a sharp, perhaps too direct, way with words and a temper to match, but perhaps heliocentrically my Aries Mars performs Aquarian results, and benefits the community. Anyway, I did things like this and went on around the heliocentric chart wheel, interpreting away as I had learned to do, like any good astrologer.

Yet somehow, all these techniques that I knew so well were tiring or tiresome. And after some time I found myself giving up this astrology approach and it kind of faded into the background as the heliocentric chart, like Atlantis rising from the waters, began to speak to me directly, and in an authentic voice I had never heard before.

The nine planets in their arrangement around the Sun, connected by standard Ptolemaic aspects, one to another, formed a geometric figure that was a thing in itself, something like an archetype or entity. And as my old techniques gave up and faded away, I picked up on, not only the geometric form, but I began to identify with that form as myself or a part of me unknown until then.

And over time, some months, I found myself transmigrating from my so-well-known geocentric chart to this new helio chart. I identified with this new entity, which I began to describe as my archetype, and finally as the tribe I belonged to. I was that! And, in a few short years I was describing the helio chart as a chart of my dharma or the path I was on, actually, who I was.

And I began to see my traditional geocentric natal chart as more of a chart of the circumstances or karma I was going through in this life. My spiritual being, my helio archetype, was working through the karma of my geocentric chart. I had turned my astrology upside down, as the helio chart became who I was and the traditional geocentric chart the circumstances or karma I was going through in this life.

And it was not long before I was doing hundreds, and then thousands of charts, and then with computers, hundreds of thousands of charts examining

the many geometric archetypes, which I called StarTypes or tribes that we each belong to.

The long lineage of my connection to the Sun began to manifest in this work I was doing and struck me to the core with its authenticity. This was astrology like I had never known it before, but the astrology that I had always tried to extract from the traditional geocentric astrology chart. This helio chart and its archetype was the spiritual entity I immediately recognized as who I am and why I am here.

IMO, the takeaway IMO from all this is that although quite thoroughly trained in traditional geocentric astrology, upon discovering for myself my own heliocentric chart and exhausting what I knew about astrology in digesting it, I found in that helio chart everything I had always searched for over many years of studying astrology and trying on the standard geocentric natal chart.

This can only be described as, for me at least, an authentic spiritual empowerment. It's not like I only use the heliocentric chart, but that I now recognize the heliocentric chart as a chart of my dharma spirituality (Dharma Chart) and I use it along with the traditional geocentric chart, which I call my Karma Chart. The helio chart is who am and what tribe I represent and the geo chart shows the circumstances and karma in which I find myself.

The two together are what is called the "Mother and Child Reunion," with the helio or Dharma Chart as the mother chart and the geocentric or Karma Chart as the child, just as the Sun is the center and the Earth a planet.

This was a transmigration or empowerment into the heliocentric from which I never returned. It was like the proverbial story of finding my true self or tribe.

[Graphics by me.]

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The Karma of Effort

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 9, 2025

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There is some karma to undue effort and often a lot.

I am reminded of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 and the line:

"The Expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action," although I would modify it to read "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame is 'effort' in action."

And this is just to say that with any endeavor, we leave behind us a trail of expended effort, effort perhaps we needed to get anywhere at all, yet effort nonetheless and it also leaves traces and scars.

There are no doubt more natural ways to accomplish the same goal and forcing ourselves is not one of them, although the most common.

I'm talking here about learning dharma, yet the same principle is true for any other kind of endeavor we make, anytime we find ourselves making an effort beyond what feels easy and natural. We do it all the time, especially in daily repetitive tasks that we don't feel like doing. Undue effort is one of the major causes of the deadening effect of karma.

What's the problem with making a little effort, with pushing ourselves beyond what we naturally want to do? Well, the obvious is that we are doing something more than we feel like, and by that we accumulate the scars or karma that result from this.

And yes, it varies from a little trace to a lot, actual karmic scars that accumulate and that at some point have to be removed in one way or another.

Again, here I am particularly concerned with the results of effort learning dharma, about the last place we might want to accumulate karma and undue effort on our part that is detrimental to the dharma itself.

Dharma wants to be purified and anything that is attached to it will be removed. Here what will be removed are the scars or remains of undue effort that we make trying to learn the dharma, so it is recommended not to force it.

One dharma practitioner responded to this by saying something like, “Oh well, we will just use the Vajrasattva mantra (a cleansing practice) to clear away whatever remains as karma and that will take care of it.”

My response to that comment is that this is just wishful thinking and that karma, once accrued, is not easily remedied or removed and IMO those folks have another thought coming. Karma will ripen.

And of course, the classic comment on this in the scriptures is that the best way to remove karma is not to accrue it in the first place. Yet, with undue effort, ineffectual effort, this karma is hard to avoid.

Rather than go on describing the problem, let’s just jump to the question of what we do if we have generated karma through our efforts that now have to be removed. And again, I am talking here about dharma effort.

When we have persevered in our dharma training and finally been introduced to what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana), it is at that point we begin to realize how much baggage we are dragging along with us because of the karma from effort we have made that was not natural but forced.

Indeed, it is an obvious stain to any insight or realization that has dawned for us and just as obvious; it has to be removed because now we can see and are aware of it. And this can be a painful discovery, IMO and personal experience.

As mentioned earlier, there is not much we can do with karma that we already have on the book, so to speak, yet the purification of that karma is not an option, but rather unavoidable, a necessary step in our path. How to do this?

And the first step in this process is to not add any more karma to the pile by not making any further undue effort. Instead, we must just relax our efforts, smooth them out, and naturally rest in the nature of the mind just as it is. Stop struggling.

As for the old karma we have already accrued from years and decades of over-effort. That will have to just fade away as best it can, come due. No amount of scrubbing will erase it, and that kind of scrubbing will likely just add to the problem.

If anything helps, it is that at last we are aware of the situation, what we did and how we did it and do, and that this accrued karma is ours to remedy, but remedy without effort.

The effort to relax is something like an oxymoron, yet that is the condition we face. Relaxing in the present moment so that no further over-effort occurs is

the first step. And this will typically take a long time for us to relax enough for this to happen.

If we are aware of the results of our undue effort, then we are no longer adding further karma to that already accumulated and this is a big deal and a true accomplishment. It is a necessary first step.

It takes a lot of exercise and flexibility in our dharma practice, removing the kinks as we can, and becoming more fluid and natural. And this may require we remove the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, of our dharma practice, replacing meaningless effort with actual living dharma. This is key: don't keep mindlessly practicing.

I'm hoping you get the idea here without further description. If we get the true insight that comes with Insight Meditation, then we can finally see the forest and the trees.

In other words, we then can see what to remove and what to allow to remain in our practice, and the idea here is to rejuvenate our practice so that it no longer is just a practice that we do but actual meditation, now that we can see and feel what that is.

The value of Insight Meditation and the insight as to what that is reveals to us exactly as to what was organic and real about our dharma practice and what was feigned and a meaningless effort to practice. The artificial dharma practice has no meaning and needs to be removed, meaning: don't do that anymore.

And the very good news is that with Insight Meditation at last we can see what actual meditation is and just do that, letting go of any attachment we have to the effortful dharma practice we have dragged along in our wake all these years.

I hope that this is useful to those who can see what I am pointing at.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

For a limited time, I am doing a few Zoom astrology readings. If interested, please email me with the subject "READINGS."

EMAIL

We Dream a Bridge to Hold Back What We Have

By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net

September 11, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/8f3e7370-e27c-49ec-a655-b6f7dce76e33_1024x1024.jpeg

In photography, “Light” is light, yet it can be shaped. Shaping light is an art. It’s the same with the light of our mind. It too can be shaped. This too is an art.

Flat light, light with no dimensions to it can be shaped until it pops out and becomes three-dimensional. It’s what is called ‘suchness’. Expanding and kneading our collapsed view of the world until it takes on shape, as mentioned, is an art gained with practice. However, it still is a construct, a mark of Samsara -- duality.

Where do we go when we take shelter in sleep? Not very far is my view. There is no refuge anywhere, IMO. It’s a flat world we live in, a world just short of shape.

Light and Shadow.

Light and shadow create the illusion we call life. And creating that third dimension, like an expanding paper accordion is the darling that we wish and try for.

Yet, our preoccupation with suchness, on having actual substance and being ‘real’ is the hallmark of how great is the illusion of Samsara. All that to eclipse the realization that we are not really permanently here and never have been. Our being, such as it is, is still becoming, yet has never arrived. Being apparently has never “been.”

The ennui we struggle to muzzle and deny is the slipstream of something that does not even quite exist, that has never existed. How tired we are of it all, yet we are unable to face the fact of this emptiness we sense inside us, how empty it is of permanency, and it is.

Reving up our internal gyroscope just to hear that roar of emptiness is no solution. Instead, we have to accept, accept, and accept things as they are. We have to relax.

We dream a bridge to hold back what we have from vanishing, vanishing away. We are unable to let it go, to just let it go on. As if we could stop it anyway. It is the way things are.

We may do what we can, yet the 'lady' vanishes in the ultimate futility of effort.

Go with the flow, because ultimately:

The Dewdrop Slips into the Shining Sea.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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EMAIL

The Drawing -- A Dharma Story

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 11, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/4fe4e357-b056-4d3b-92b4-f00e096166f8_1012x1307.jpeg

Since many of you like these stories, here is what I consider a marvelous story.

Many years ago, in the 1980s, I had a dream. It was very vivid. And in that dream, I presented my dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche a drawn image or portrait of himself. It was one of those dreams that is magical, somehow more real than waking life.

For that reason, I felt it was important that this dream be made real and acted out in actual life. After the dream and its imprint in my mind, I began actively to consider how this could happen. I tried on many ideas.

I finally settled on a sketched portrait, but finding an artist good enough for the job was not easy. I only knew of a single such artist, one of the finest draftsman in Michigan, a man named John Felsing who was renowned for his life-like portraits of wildlife, especially birds. I have a number of his original watercolors.

I contacted Felsing and asked to visit him. Then Margaret and I traveled the two hours to Lansing where he lived and sat down with him. I explained my dream and what I was hoping he might do. After some discussion, he agreed to do a drawing and I gave him a really nice photo of Khenpo Rinpoche.

Several months went by and I heard nothing. Then one day a large envelope came in the mail. It contained a first sketch of Khenpo Rinpoche. To my dismay, the drawing he sent was a sketch of an elderly oriental gentleman, but not the dynamic rinpoche I knew.

This would not do. I got on the phone and carefully explained this to John Felsing and he said that he would try again. To assist him I then sent him some of Rinpoche's dharma teachings and one of his books, a book I also worked on called "Dharma Paths."

Again, several months went by and then one day another large manila envelope showed up in the mail. I hesitated to look inside; and then with bated breath I carefully opened the package. When I did, this time the image was actually of the Khenpo Rinpoche Margaret and I know and love.

Apparently the books and Rinpoche's own teachings helped to communicate the idea of the man himself. I let Felsing know that he could now do the finished drawing. And the ending to this story is remarkable.

When the artist Felsing finished the final drawing, he personally called me on the phone to notify me of that. And as it happened Khenpo Rinpoche, who (of all things) was visiting our dharma center that very day, was about to do an empowerment for our local group that evening.

Felsing did not hesitate for a moment, but said he was coming to Big Rapids to see Rinpoche. He jumped into his car, drove through the oncoming night to our center and, when he arrived, he formally asked Rinpoche to give him "refuge."

Refuge is a short ceremony that takes place when someone discovers that they have great respect for the dharma, respect not only for the historical Buddha, but also for his teachings (the dharma), and the sangha (those monks and nuns who embody the living teaching). It is a request you make of a teacher.

Felsing's request was honored, and Rinpoche gave the refuge ceremony, which includes giving those who ask for it a dharma name.

Apparently during the months that John Felsing was working with Rinpoche's image and reading some of the teachings, he was moved by what he learned and had developed a true respect for the dharma. He was inspired to become more actively involved in the dharma and so asked to receive the refuge ceremony. I am struck by how a simple contact with Rinpoche, even at a distance, made such a difference.

[Here is the drawing that the artist John Felsing made of Khenpo Rinpoche]

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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EMAIL

Life Initiation

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 12, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/76f0bbd1-256c-4853-bab3-8c5e102c45be_1717x2048.jpeg

Although I have had many ups and downs in my life, I have been very fortunate in the area of having perfect life teachers and guides. The universe has always provided me with key people who have appeared in my life, connected with me, and transmitted information essential to my future. Most of my Facebook friends know I have worked with Tibetan teachers for the past 50 years or so, but I had other teachers before that.

I'd like to share with you something about the most incredible teacher from my early years and that is Andrew Gunn McIver, a man who literally changed my life.

And, as I am getting older by the day, I must warn you that in what I write here I am not going to sanitize or tone down my accounts of what happened back then. Why should I? I am putting it out there so that some of you might know that these kinds of experiences still exist in the world and not just in movie plots and novels.

And after I introduce you to Andrew, I will attempt to communicate some of the esoteric teachings and initiations he shared with me many years ago. This may not be of interest to everyone, so note that please.

One morning sometime in 1967 (or perhaps earlier) I met what appeared to be an old man on "The Diagonal" of the University of Michigan campus. He looked very like the writer Bernard Shaw. This meeting was to change my life forever.

In fact, here is a poetic (and perhaps exaggerated) account of that meeting that I wrote as a journal entry long ago and which, while certainly over the top, will give you at least an accurate flavor of what that first meeting was like. You were warned of this above so please don't complain now.

"It was somehow ordained that they should meet. It was permitted."

Preparation for this kind of meeting began far in advance. Perhaps they put on their first disguises hundreds of miles and maybe hundreds of years apart

-- lifetimes ago. Even the heavy layers of flesh were hardly adequate as shields, for they reached each other at that first moment. All others even near wore protective glasses and thick shielding. The light which was all around was white hot, and its very heat had hidden them as in a mist.

"The old man's eyes (like crystalline stalks) burned, staring straight inside himself. Then both their eyes, intensive, meeting no resistance, shot out, one into the other. The old man let his secret start between them and he was understood -- known.

"The impulse from within each shot out into the other. Eyes eyed other's eyeing. Their words resounded in that great silence and then wore off, consonants crackling, and their voices sputtered out in midday. Silently speaking, this conversation stuttered on endlessly like static in an old radio. There was no reason. Sight itself was seen seeing.

"And their eyes soon lost the heavy shine of flesh as flat out they were seen seeing, eyes straight-out that sought support inside, and inside, settled, seeing light itself shining out.

"When their sight struck, they stuck, united in two, tying inside into itself. They were one and moved together parallel. In unison, they shared this dance and equally saw 'that' seeing. In unison they sought to set inside each eye, sharp strength.

They were the inside insight itself. Mind moved.

"They were of one mind and matter. What matters, what remained. And they showed their soul's insight that shot forth and froze forever like frost, now already fully formed. Their eyes, once set singing inside, just shot out. And then the eyes, once set singing, slowly settled and shared insight."

As fantastic as that account may appear, it 'was' like that. And after that, for almost two years we worked together. The old man walking with the young man walking. Andrew would talk; I would listen.

Andrew Gunn McIver was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1887. He served in the first world war where he had the job of recording the dead. Later he emigrated to Canada where he worked as a lumberjack even though he was only a little more than five feet tall. As a young man he was burly, strong, and had red hair, fair skin.

And he also worked for many years as a travelling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. Later in his life he ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan where he spent the final years of his life working as a custodian... "cleaning up after others," as he put it. During those later years Andrew McIver became an important fixture

on the U. of M. campus where he met, and probably befriended hundreds of students like me.

At the age of 66, a time when most are retired, he was caught in a boiler explosion at the University and was almost killed. He spent six weeks in the hospital covered with burns and had to start life all over when he was released. His hospital stay had used up all his savings and at the age where most people are no longer working, he had to start over from scratch.

As mentioned, he was a custodian at the University of Michigan until his retirement. His last years were spent living in a single room on a very modest amount of money. His passion was the mind itself and all the world religions, particularly Buddhism.

Andrew was in his eighties when I first met him there on campus in Ann Arbor. A redhead in his youth, Andrew's now-white hair contrasted with his fair skin, which had a reddish hue.

With his long white beard, as mentioned, he looked for all the world like Bernard Shaw. Andrew's fierce eyes were intense and yet very vulnerable at the same time. He had no fear of any kind and would just address people straight out.

"It's not 'Touch me if you dare!'," but "Touch me if you ARE!" Andrew would declare. To meet his gaze was to know what compassionate wrath is, fierce but open and kind at the same time, removing what had to be removed, supporting what needed supporting. There was no B.S. with Andrew McIver. Your whole being rose to the occasion the moment your eyes met his.

In my experience Andrew was the only person I had ever met up to that time who did not have some form of shadow or dark side. The effect of contact with Andrew was always positive. He consumed darkness and had a kind of love affair with the Sun.

As a redhead, his fair skin should not have been exposed to the Sun more than necessary. Yet Andrew above all loved the Sun and would stand in it for hours on end until his pale skin would just peel away exposing red patches.

"Imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun," he would growl at me, "That's hot stuff!" He felt he had been consumed personally in the very heat and cauldron of the life process, and that what remained had been purified. This seemed true.

"You have to choose," he would say, "between being a diamond or a pearl. A diamond is the result of a very long time and immense pressures while a pearl is created to protect the organism from irritating matter. Which one will it

be?" Andrew was, without a doubt, the diamond and he shone forth with an intense light.

Many days I would look for Andrew around campus and often find him sitting on one of the wide cement benches along "The Diag" up near State Street, usually in the full sun. I would spend whole days with him listening to the various aphorisms and lessons he would speak to me of.

Although normally talkative (can't you tell from my writing?) I seldom spoke when I was with Andrew, almost never. I just could not find anything important enough to say to interrupt whatever he might be saying. And I absorbed the information Andrew offered with a great thirst. Communication of this kind was what I had longed for and prayed for my whole life. This was the real deal.

Andrew would say that he was tuning me like an instrument and that one day, years from then, I would respond to the information he was placing in my consciousness. He told me that straight out.

And the things he said were absolutely true and often, after 10 or 12 hours of intense listening, I would be so exhausted as I stumbled home that I felt I would have to be sick and throw up. It was like chemical radiation; the information he shared was so strong.

Andrew spent a great deal of time in the libraries of Ann Arbor, particularly in the public library at the corner of 5th and Williams where he read intently on mostly Eastern religious topics. He would write out short quotes from various books on tiny 3x5 slips of paper. At his death I found thousands of these slips, each with writing on both sides.

The sad thing to me was that the reason Andrew wrote down the quote was often more profound than the famous quote itself. I only wished he had written out his ideas in his own words. His juxtaposing of the quotes was more brilliant than the original quotes.

Think about that!

Andrew not only would repeat certain themes or sayings, but he would also ask me to memorize and recite them. And he did this in front of others, often at Circle Books, the local metaphysical bookstore where I worked.

There was this one low circular oak table that we would sit around. Andrew would ask me to remember and recite particular aphorisms in front of a group of other people gathered there. I was often embarrassed because my memory (on the spot) was not always that sharp, but it was a sign that Andrew took some stock in what he was drilling into me.

Andrew had been for many years a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. He was familiar with almost all branches of metaphysical and occult wisdom. His reading was vast. He was very familiar and had worked with the Max Heindel school of Rosicrucianism and knew the book "Cosmo Conception" inside and out. He was familiar with astrology, numerology, occult science, and about every kind of metaphysical study. He was perhaps most interested in Buddhism of all forms, in particular, Zen. Also, Sufi wisdom.

During my years with Andrew McIver, he initiated me into a lineage of esoteric knowledge, some of which I will attempt to share with readers here if I can find the words.

As mentioned above, Andrew would tell me that he was reading this deep esoteric knowledge (like you would write out a script or scroll) deep within and into my mind and consciousness. He literally would say that he was tuning me like one would tune an instrument and that many years from that time I would remember, and this knowledge would come alive in me and live on.

That my friends was a powerful experience!

And to give you just one example, as I related earlier, he would repeatedly say to me. "Michael, imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun," he would then growl at me, "That's hot stuff!"

And years later when I became well-known as an astrologer it was heliocentric astrology (sun-centered) that I became an expert in. Literally, I imagined myself standing at the center of the Sun. That is how it works. That is what initiation and lineage can be like.

And the proof of the pudding (to me anyway) was when I traveled with my family in 1997 to Tibet to meet His Holiness the Karmapa high in the high Himalayas (something like 15,000 feet). In that remote place the Karmapa (who did not speak English) through a translator, gave me a name. "You are Tenzin Nyima," he said. This translates as "holder of the Sun" or "Keeper of the Sun."

Before I try to express his teachings in words I should tell you a little more about him. When I knew him, Andrew spent much of his day working with language, with words. Palindromes were a favorite, words or phrases that read the same forward as backward, like the famous one about Napoleon, "Able was I ere I saw Elba."

More often he would take a word and create a list of all the other words that could be derived from it much like the popular game today called "Boggle." And most often he would take the English language and spell words out on

the spot to me, like the word 'initiate' -- "In-It-I-Ate." After Andrew passed on, I found among his things the word "Michael", parsed into dozens of words that can be derived from that.

Andrew would declare that this helped to give insight into the inner meaning of the word. This was his gospel or as he would say it "Go Spell." From his point of view the words themselves were signs that described their own nature. Their secret was in plain sight.

He would also do all kind of word games, where letters were rearranged. Not crossword puzzles mind you, but other sorts of word gymnastics. He had very little money and true to his Scottish heritage was somewhat frugal on top of that.

He lived until the very last months of his life in a tiny room at a boarding house. The few belongings in his almost empty room were always neatly placed.

He loved to read newspapers, and particularly the fresh news of the day, but with a special twist. It seemed that whatever happened on a national or international level would also happen to Andrew in his life at the personal level.

For example, when race riots broke out in Detroit, that same day Black youths broke into Andrew's tiny room and destroyed something. Andrew was totally aware of this and felt it represented a level of consciousness he had earned by burning off various obscurations.

Just like we astrologers say that the cosmic dance up in the heavens is acted out down here on earth at the same time, so what happened in the news on earth seemed to happen to Andrew McIver personally and daily.

It was the imperfections, Andrew would say, that kept him still around on this earth and he would show his slightly bent little finger on one hand that had been injured years earlier.

This imperfection, he would say, helped to keep him from passing on. I never knew if he was just kidding or using this example to instruct me in one of life's secrets. I was always the rapt student.

And Andrew was an expert on just about every business establishment in the campus vicinity. He made a point of visiting them all and would not stand for bad service or the deterioration of service. He was always vocal about this sort of thing, would make his observations known to management, and if unanswered, he would avoid the place completely. I would not like to own one of those businesses that Andrew shunned. They are all gone today.

There is no question that Andrew McIver was a protector being, perhaps what the Tibetan Buddhists call a 'dharma protector'. He was fierce, although his indignation at those who harmed others never burned anyone. He was living fire that did not burn.

The correct term for what Andrew often exhibited would be righteous wrath, wrath at all and everything that obstructed and obscured the pure flowing of the life force.

Perhaps you can imagine encountering a five-foot figure in his eighties on the campus of the University of Michigan and casting this old man a condescending kindly glance, only to be suddenly eye-to-eye with the most vital force in the universe. Unforgettable!

And I will mention this just once: Andrew was 'with' us but not one of us, in that his personality had no shadow – cast no shadow. He was so perfectly clear that his presence was like a window in this dream we all have called life, a window through which I could at times gaze. He was only there to help. Aside from that he was not there at all.

Andrew had a notable chance-meeting of the governor of the state of Michigan, who greeted Andrew as if he was one more doddering senior citizen in a group of elders. "And how are you," Governor Romney said in his obsequious politic voice. Andrew responded, "It's not 'How are You?' but 'Who are you?' that matters," he replied, to the governor's complete confusion.

And Andrew was very careful with what he ate. Over his long life he had tried eating almost everything and learned what each thing did to his system. He could tell you exactly what certain foods would do to his body, producing a boil here, a rash there. For example, this brand of tomato soup would cause a rash on this particular part of his right ankle, and so on. He ate very simply and would cook food for me once in a while. Andrew taught me how to boil coffee by dropping the grounds into boiling water, turning off the heat at once, and covering the pan. We would often drink coffee together.

And he had real powers. I could recall many times when I approached Andrew at a time when I was in a foul mood. Andrew could sense this at once and would always tell some story that led to an emphatic action of some kind on his part.

He would be talking along, getting increasingly more crisp about some point when, taking the newspaper that he usually carried, he would bring it down sharply in his hand or on the edge of a table or something.

Whack!

In that instant, at the precise point where the sharp sound occurred, my headache or bad mood would just vanish. It was gone.

Andrew did this all the time, like swatting a fly. Andrew McIver must have had many students, and I know that many people benefited from his presence. I only knew a few of his other students personally. As time went on Andrew and I became almost inseparable.

On Andrew's death on March 9th, 1969, I was the one who worked with the police, contacted his sister in Scotland (his only remaining kin) and saw to his burial.

Andrew was buried in the Forest Hills cemetery near the corner of Observatory Street and Geddes Road in Ann Arbor, up near the student dorms on the hill. I saw to this and designed a tall granite stone with the symbol of the Sun on it, a circle with a dot in the center. I enclose it here. He would have liked that.

If you want to visit his grave, it can be found just inside the fence near the sidewalk along Geddes Road, about 3 blocks from the cemetery entrance and to the South. I often visit there when I am in Ann Arbor.

Well, I have told you something about Andrew McIver, but for me the most important point was that in Andrew I had found an individual and a person who had no shadow, no personality flaw of any kind that I with my outsized critical eye could discover.

Andrew McIver was absolutely transparent and empty as far as obscurities were concerned. He had none that I could see, and I had looked you can be sure.

And yet his mind was as vivid and lucid as a cloudless sky. As mentioned, you could see right through him into yourself. And through Andrew I could finally see into the future of... myself, i.e. that I had a future.

It was clear when I met Andrew McIver that this man cared more for me than I knew how to care for myself. I sensed this, trust and confidence arose in me (for the first time in my adult experience) for another 'person'.

Through Andrew I could see clearly and I was able to open my heart to him with no reservations. And with that gesture, all of my fear of other people vanished, and I ceased to be hung up on other people's personal faults.

This is not to say that I stopped recognizing flaws in those around me but rather that I was no longer afraid that others could infect me, that I would end up like them if I listened to them.

Andrew McIver was like a pole star in the general direction of my life. Because he was authentic, genuine, I was able to trust my own judgment because I had with me now the experience of the real deal, a fully realized being who, once known, left no doubt in me about who was a poser and who was not among those around me.

Once I encountered someone like Andrew, I could never again get caught up with those who just pretend to know. I now know the difference and knowing that I could have compassion for those who just pretended to be, as opposed to fearing them, debating them, or thinking they were contagious. It made all the difference.

For a limited time, I am doing a few Zoom astrology readings. If interested, please email me with the subject "READINGS."

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The Andrew Teachings

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 12, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/8d0946a5-22fc-48af-89df-ed707afe7718_1041x2048.jpeg

I promised to share with you at least a taste of Andrew McIver's teachings. As I get right down to doing this it is clear to me that these teachings are not only very useful and profound but also very, very difficult to realize experientially.

There is a long journey between grasping these concepts vaguely with our mental understanding to realizing that they are true, much less living that reality consciously as a personal experience.

This is what is called esoteric or occult (hidden) doctrine and this kind of learning has usually been passed down from mouth to ear, not because it is secret or forbidden but rather because it is self-secret, hidden from ourselves by our own ignorance, which means society chooses to ignore the obvious, And these kind of teachings are hidden in the obvious, in plain sight, the one place we would never think to look.

Andrew McIver was very much about what are called climactic life events, pivotal points of change on which our life turns, times where there is a definite before, during, and after. These kinds of events are often called rites of passage or life passages, gates we each pass through whether we are aware of it or not. We all go through it.

Andrew called these passages 'initiations' and he would often say: "We are all initiates, but it is a question of to what degree." Andrew's view was that each of us goes through and experiences all of life's passages or initiations fully but often with little or no awareness of what is happening to us and thus no memory of the event. It was never consciously recorded or embedded by experience in our mind. Instead, it was just a thought, a kite with no tail.

This is perhaps why Andrea was so fascinated by Buddhism because as we know the word "Buddha" simply means awareness. Gaining awareness of what we are going through in our life was very important to Andrew.

Recognizing these great life events or rites of passage are important, but even more important is celebrating and sharing them. So many of these deeper life initiations are never spoken of in public, much less actually acknowledged and celebrated. In these current times each of us celebrates our own most

intimate self secretly, privately, or perhaps with almost no celebration at all. This indeed is sad and unnecessary, but true.

Andrew was very aware of astrology and in particular the motion of the great timekeeper, Saturn. The planet Saturn completes its first circle or return to its original birthplace in the zodiac around thirty years of age. 29.4 to be exact. According to Andrew, one of the key or main life passages (climactic events) is that first Saturn return.

You know the old phrase “Never trust anyone over thirty.” Well, there is a reason for that. The area of time in our late twenties and early thirties marks a great life initiation, a great passing or passage.

Andrew used to say that 33 was the year that Christ died, and he would also say that 33 is when ice melts. And there is the 33rd degree of freemasonry, and so on. In life the 33rd degree or year marks a pivotal change for every person although most of us have only a dim awareness of it if any at all.

And although we all experience our Saturn return (this rite of passage), not that many of us do it consciously and with full awareness. Instead, we tend to sleepwalk through these life changes and miss or ignore these important inner passages or events.

Andrew McIver was very much into helping people (especially young people) go through these rites of passage consciously and with full awareness before they were thirty rather than sometime later. He did this with me.

“Awareness is everything” was his view, so you can see it was quite natural for me to eventually wander into Buddhism which is all about being more aware. Andrew wanted those people under thirty years of age to go through the great Saturn initiation with their eyes open and not ignorant (ignoring) and asleep in their bodies at that crucial time. His philosophy was very much one of “go and meet your maker consciously” rather than be dragged into awareness reluctantly.

Waking up was what Andrew McIver was all about. And there is much more, and it gets deeper. I will present two esoteric truths for you to consider, and I warn you that they are not easy to grasp and may even appear as pure nonsense, so please don’t jump to conclusions. They are worth the wait.

Relax and just let these concepts roll over you and do their work for a bit, like pickles in brine. Thinking won’t help us now. These concepts work internally on their own. Here we will just attempt to point them out. You will either get a glimpse of them, or you won’t. However, sooner or later it will come.

The first esoteric concept is that all of the Hoo-haw about being “born again” is nothing other than becoming aware of this great rite of passage that takes place around the thirtieth year. Although Christians have claimed it for their own, there is nothing particularly Christian about being born again.

We all are born again by virtue of living beyond the age of thirty but not all of us are equally aware of it. When we do become aware of this, that is what is called being ‘born again’. Again, awareness of these events is always the key, not whether you experience the event. We all experience this passage, but we don’t all remember it, much less remain aware of it.

And while it is perhaps best to have this awareness of being born again ‘while’ you are going through the rite of passage at around thirty years of age (because it is an event that happens to each of us), we can become aware of it at any time after that. In other words, we can also realize that we have become born again anytime later in our life.

However, it can only happen once, this awareness, this being “born again,” and not over and over. That is what defines a ‘realization,’ the fact that once you have experienced AND realized it we never forget it. It is not something that waxes and wanes, that comes and goes, but is instantly a permanent part of us, a realization. And now for the really esoteric part, the hard part to grasp.

In the esoteric sense the ‘death’ we all wonder about, perhaps fear, but have no choice but to look forward to, does not come at the live-long end of life like we imagine or have been told.

On the contrary, the important death comes right smack in the middle of life, around that first Saturn return. In other words, death happens in the midst of life, at the Prime of Life, and after ‘that’ death are only the ‘after-death’ experiences, what the Christians call the resurrection. We ‘are’ literally born again, each of us right in the middle of this life and at our prime. The prime of life marks the turning point.

In other words, we die and are born again right in the middle of life and not at the very end as we imagine. And there are different kinds of death.

By the time we reach the old-age end of life we are about dead, physically, but the death that counts and that everyone fears happens right during life itself. In fact, the prime of life (like the top of the bell curve) is simultaneously the exact point of a psyche or spiritual death (and rebirth) for each of us.

I know this may be hard to understand for some of you who are reading this, so I can appreciate that you may want to just ignore all of this and move on.

But there may be very few of you who can grasp this very esoteric or occult (hidden) concept and make it real for yourselves, experience it and realize it consciously. And I will try to explain this in more detail, but please know this:

Andrew McIver was very much into initiating anyone (those who could grasp it) into these concepts and helping to prepare us to experience this great rite of passage consciously and not have to piece it together later in life a bit at a time or not at all.

Some of you have commented or messaged me that these concepts are hard to understand. Well, yes, they are. Don't feel like the Lone Ranger. It took me years to understand these concepts and that is pretty much par for the course, so relax and let it permeate and percolate.

Keep in mind that the statute of limitations never runs out on this realization because it is not about 'time'. By definition, it is outside or beyond time as you and I know that term. That is the whole idea of Saturn we are discussing here.

Remember that in astrology Saturn 'IS' time itself, all the time in the world, all the time you and I will ever know. And once Saturn completes its first full cycle, which is around thirty years of age (29.4 years), it starts to repeat itself and to go over the same zodiac degrees for a second time. This repetition is key because that causes us to eventually stir and wake up.

At least that is when we start to wake up, because during that first round of Saturn we are all caught up in the clutch of time and unable to release ourselves. Our body is busy growing itself. When Saturn gets repetitive, starts to go over the same material again at thirty years, it can be like a Déjà vu experience for us.

After thirty years, as we begin to repeat the circle around the Sun, somewhere inside we dimly know that we have done this before, been here before. Time's (Saturn's) grip on us starts to fail and we quite naturally begin to wake up and (as the Christians like to say) are born again. This 'born-again' experience can be sudden and all at once like a lightning strike or it can be gradual and slow like the Sun coming up. It takes all kinds, and this experience varies just as we all vary from one another.

Since we live in a materialistic time and in a materialistic society we have been trained or indoctrinated to focus only on the material body and its eventual death and passing. That's materialism, plain and simple. But there is another more-important death or change that happens to us and that death happens right at the prime of life, right when the physical body stops growing and is complete. And that change is (we could say) the "death" of death, which is why it is a rebirth or a being born again.

It is unfortunate that the concept of being born again has been bogarted by the Christians. It is not their fault that they were smart enough to catch on to this, but their enthusiasm can be off-putting to the rest of us, to the point of driving us away from our own experience of this climatic event, an experience we each need to complete ourselves.

Here is more about the way Andrew presented this concept to me:

Andrew spoke of this 'being born again' epiphany as like a space capsule, one that each of us builds during the years that our body is growing and forming, those years when we are less than thirty years old. Andrew spoke of this time as if during these early years we are on Earth or within the body. And it is at that time that we can make changes, choices, and otherwise modify our own personal vehicle, our particular space capsule. We grow it.

However, he taught, at around thirty years of age that space capsule we have formed through our youth (the body) is launched into space and then time (as we know it) just stops. Think about that for a moment because that is the end of time or as they say, the "end time."

Time no longer has dominion 'over' us and ceases to fascinate or transfix us. You could also say that Saturn (Satan as the Christians say) loses his grip, and we pull free of that force, the force of time. Then, as Saturn starts to go around in its orbit for the second time, degree by zodiac degree, we are launched, ready or not, beyond time and out in space. We then have the opportunity to wake up.

Because modern society has lost the awareness of deep inner changes (rites of passage) like these, there is no discussion and little awareness of this natural life initiation. We each are left to figure it out for ourselves privately, to celebrate alone as best we can what would better be celebrated outwardly with our family and friends. But as it is, we each get short services and silence from those around us. We enter that silence.

This great inner change (the loosening of the material death-grip on us) releases us from the body and we begin to float free like an astronaut on a tether in space. In the occult tradition this is called "entering the Silence" and it can be a somewhat frightening experience when time just stops and there is silence.

This of course is just an analogy, but it is an apt one. Andrew McIver made it very clear to me that once our vehicle is launched beyond time (around thirty years of age) it cannot be altered physically. Whatever we have achieved, however we have formed it, all that remains just as we left it at launch.

In other words, we leave the body at that time just as it is, finished, half-finished, or unfinished. We just up and move on, which is the awakening experience I am trying to describe here. I am not going to call it “born again” any longer because that phrase carries too much baggage.

We wake up or become aware which (as I keep saying) is what Buddhism is all about: awareness. Nothing more.

Andrew spoke of three orbital periods of Saturn, three cycles of thirty years each: the cycle ending at around thirty years, one ending at sixty years, and a final one at ninety years. And he said this:

We spend the first thirty-year cycle building our vehicle (growing our body), the second thirty-year cycle repairing the damage we make launching our vehicle (getting out of the body), and the third thirty-year cycle (if we live so long) actually becoming a conscious part of the creative force itself. That last cycle is incredible, so think about what that might mean.

A traditional analogy is that of a flower. First there is the bud (first cycle), and then the opening of the flower (second cycle), and finally, beyond blooming, the total relaxing of the flower (third cycle). I may do another blog or two, but for those of you with an interest in this I have a free e-book that I wrote years ago called:

“Astrology of the Heart: Astro-Shamanism.” It is all about this concept and you can download it here:

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig>

This awakening experience can happen around the age of thirty or ANY time later, whenever we start to realize that we have already left (or are leaving) the body. It is unfortunate that spirituality is not valued enough in this materialistic world.

This wraps up the blog on my life teacher Andrew McIver. Of course, words cannot express my debt to Andrew or my deep-felt love and appreciation for the man. He caught me in the throes of struggling with my own personality, successfully tamed me, and then proceeded to instruct and initiate me into my own mysteries. It changed my life.

Looking back from now it seems that Andrew was some kind of emanation that appeared to me. I have no idea how I merited it, and it came at the end (and caused the end) of years of my struggling to not-take anything from anyone. Remember, I never graduated from high school because I literally could not be taught. I am fussy about who I let instruct me.

Part of that problem was because if my would-be teachers had personal faults, I refused to learn from them. I used their failings as an excuse to ignore what else they had to say and would take nothing from them because I did not want to end up being like them. I did not want the bathwater that perhaps came with the baby. This was a mistake (miss-take) on my part.

Lucky for me Andrew helped to correct that mistake. He was so perfect in every way that I had no complaints and just had to listen. He had my undivided attention. This is what I mean by “he tamed me.” With Andrew I had run out of excuses, run out of time.

Even today there is a quality about Andrew McIver in my mind that was more like a dream than real. A better way to say this is that the dream was real. He had no shadow. He was more than I ever dreamed it could be. And through Andrew I got over my resistance to other people and (as I mentioned before) their personalities and in two ways.

The first way is that by meeting someone who I felt confident in and that I could totally trust, my inside world or psyche was projected outside myself into (and through) Andrew and that opened a window on reality that gradually widened. In other words, my outside and inside began to mix and merge and this was key. One taste.

Like a drop of water in a still pond sends ever-widening concentric circles that are more and more inclusive, so did my pent-up inner psyche go out into and through Andrew, gradually mix with that threatening outside world, and both myself and the world become more balanced or equalized.

And second, having known Andrew, having known authentic wisdom, I never took another wooden nickel from those who had no authentic experience and literally did not know what they were talking about, those who had perhaps abstract knowledge but no experience and no realization.

For me this was a big thing. Before Andrew I could not tell who was authentic and who was faking it. I had no reference point or experience of my own to go on. With my experience with Andrew, I had something to gauge others with.

Although I did not know this at the time, it was a sign of strength that I was able to manifest a real-life teacher in my outer world, that it was even permitted to happen. These things don’t just automatically ‘happen’. You have to want them, ask for them, and pray for them. You must REALLY want and need this. Andrew was that bridge to the outside world that I needed and that I had been waiting for all my life up until then.

I will close by sharing with you what I now see as an important truth. Although I needed a pristine and perfect example in the outside world to have confidence and to forge a wormhole into a new dimension, this was a misunderstanding on my part. Of course, I found that example in Andrew McIver, but since then I have learned:

It does not matter what the personality of your teacher is like. Of course, it must be within the limits of our tolerance for differences, within our idea of what is accepted behavior. But that aside, what is important (and the only thing that is important) is that a life-teacher is capable of pointing out to you the way into yourself. That alone is initiation.

There is no teacher of any kind, nor has there ever been or ever will be, that can do it for us. The whole point is that we have to do it ourselves, to actually have the experience and to learn to “know.” All written words, all spoken (and even all silent gestures) are only signposts, pointers to having the real-life experience for us. All are signs that point to our jumping into the pool of life and experiencing it for ourselves. It is the only way to know.

A teacher is someone who can point out to you how to realize yourself. That is their entire job. Period. They don’t have to be your friend. They don’t have to look or act perfect. Their personality is their business, not yours.

The only question to answer is: CAN they (are they able) to point out to you a method for you to know yourself and for you to know the true nature of your own mind. In other words: when they present it, do you get it? As I understand it, that’s all that is required.

Andrew McIver was very much in the “now” and would say to me more than any other saying: “Michael, this is it!”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me and a graphic I came up with that was drawn out by my brother Tom Erlewine.]

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Sneaking Up on a Mirror

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 13, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Why is personal experience so precious? That's easy, because we have to actually have experience before we can realize it. If our life becomes a train of thoughts (it is called Samsara) hurtling through time rocking us to sleep, waking up from that can be difficult to impossible.

We must exercise life, knead it, plunge into experience, if we are to have any reflection or realization at all. It's like striking flint to steel to get sparks, if we want to start a fire.

Of course, we can wait for the trials of life to come to bear on us, and they will, forcing us down to the grounding we need. I have done that, and it works, when all else fails. Yet, why can't we just wake up and become aware short of being forced to?

I am beyond reminders at this point. I am already reminded that only true experience which is grounded in the senses will serve as fuel for any realization or enlightenment. Mental understanding and conceptualization are themselves not experiences, at least they don't seem to serve as grounds for realization. That's where the term "air head" comes from.

I am a great believer in going to meet our maker, rather than wait for the sufferings of life to come for us and drag us down into an experience we just can't avoid. I have tried it both ways, and waiting for suffering is just masochistic, which does not mean that going to meet our maker, so to speak, is sadistic.

If we can't recognize when we are skating on the intellect and our feet are not reaching the ground of the senses, we have a problem. That's why "awareness" is the translation of the word 'Buddha'. How do we become aware of what we are not yet and never have been aware of?

Yes, my Tibetan teacher of 36 years and very high lama said to us very clearly, "We are the stragglers, the ones in all of time, through innumerable births, have never gotten it, realized the actual nature of our own mind." That's a sobering thought.

Traditionally, by some kind of jolt or shock seems to be historical, something that jars us out of the groove we have managed to get stuck in. The Mahasiddha Tilopa struck his student Naropa between his eyebrows with a sandal, and when Naropa regained consciousness, he was able to see clearly all the words and meaning of the four tantras.

I'm not suggesting we go around hitting folks who don't seem to have awareness. And yet, in my own case, the only time I really attained what is called 'Recognition', I was at my lowest ebb, shocked by an experience I could not get over. So, I'm afraid it takes some untoward experience to get me off my high horse and down to the ground of actual experience. I wrote this poem:

According to the Dharma,
The world just as I see it is my reflection,
A perfect mirror of the mind,
Reflecting karma —
My every thought and action.
Karma is pure result,
The outer reflection,
Of an inner reality,
That once ripened,
Cannot be altered.
No matter how carefully
I choose my words,
No matter how right I get my mind,
No matter how close I hold my tongue,
No matter how slyly I take a peek,
I always only see myself peeking.
The world looks back whenever I look.
And clever as I am,
Even I can't sneak up on a mirror.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Falling Through the Air

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 16, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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There is also and often a glacial pace at which dharma realization occurs, like watching paint dry. The good news about realization is that once there, it's permanent.

And let's not forget the relation of realization to experience. If we read the pith dharma texts, the trifecta is understanding, experience, and realization, and they come in that order.

Understanding is common and non-binding. It is air-head stuff, so the challenge is to precipitate understanding into actual sense experience by bringing it to ground. When understanding is grounded to experience, it is considered 'authentic'.

However, just because it is experience and by that makes some sense and is walking around, this says nothing about whether we are familiar and aware of that experience enough to realize its nature. We not only have to have experience, we also must be aware or reflect on it.

And so, in brief, we have too much intellectual and conceptual understanding as a society (air heads) and too few folks with actual experience. Authentic experience is a start, but it is inert and of little value unless that experience is realized for what it is. And that's not easy.

It's a multi-step process. First, we have to get the habitual conceptualizer out of our heads and come down to earth, and that in itself is difficult. We have to be grounded in reality, feet in the mud, so to speak.

And when and after that is accomplished, much more difficult is prodding or inducing us to realize the actual nature of what we are experiencing. Non-reflective experience alone is inert. And to launch that involves becoming familiar with the nature of the experiencing mind until that mind is flexible and viscous.

And that last step, recognizing the nature of the mind itself, is not linear, not something we can do step by step and ever get there, other than by approximation. And this is when things slow down to a crawl or more often to a standstill.

There is a world of folks who have brushed with the dharma but are unable to get on from there. Classically, this transition takes an authentic dharma master, someone who has recognized the mind's nature and can point out to us how that is done.

The classic pith dharma teachings say firmly that there is no way other than through an authentic master. Period. And that's a real shop stopper.

We are not used to hearing it's this way or the highway, and an endless line of attempted do-it-yourselfers have failed to recognize the actual nature of the mind. Why? Because they are shy and find it awkward to seek out an authentic guru and request the pointing out instructions.

My own view is that we must reach a point where we don't care how it looks (non-duality) and we just step over the edge. I can't forget the statement by the siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche:

"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.]

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The End of Thought

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 19, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Why do I write like this, bathing us in tautologies, like basting a turkey. The reason is that thinking mind when confronted with such inherent self-referencing truths can stall out or suspend itself. This kind of suspension isn't paralysis but rather a gateway or portal. IMO, it is blessed relief!

Our train of thought, past regrets, future anxieties, when recursive implodes in the immediacy of "what is." And, at least for a moment, we are free. When tautologies turn self-referential, statements that gesture inward, mirroring their own structure, they amplify this effect, often weaponizing paradox to force the relief that comes with a cognitive impasse.

Often the recursive loop isn't gentle; it's a vortex that engulfs thought itself, suspending the ego's temporal chatty narrative, reducing it to a stutter. It is a verbal wrist mala to distract us from distraction. And this is where it stops the flow of thinking, seemingly suspends us in space, and the flow of time comes alive for us once again, especially in meditative practices. We wake again to life.

Many carefully parsed words can create a "short circuit" in the analytic or thinking mind. The dharma practitioner recursively meditates on it relentlessly until thought, now exhausted, implodes: the mind halts, and we are immersed in non-duality, a flash of timeless awareness where subject and object merge. This is often termed "Insight Meditation."

Above all, this is remedial, a welcome relief to endless thought.

Time suspends because the koan's iterative loop erases any "before" and "after" forced by sequential thinking, and space contracts to the pure now and begins to break down, echoing our sense of time-suspension. Time does not stop, but our perceiving self does, and we float out into undifferentiated vastness.

"The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

In the non-dual traditions like Advaita Vedanta or many Buddhist schools, self-referential thoughts form the majority of mental chatter, perpetuating this illusory "I" that continually drags us through time's river.

This is a practice of radical self-inquiry, and statements like "Who am I?" (Ramana Maharshi's core koan) refer back and are so intensely recursive that they expose the self as empty --a tautological mirage that finally implodes into relief.

When self-reference collapses, "consistent stillness" arises: no thinker, no thought-chain, just boundless presence. Buddhism frames this as uprooting the "deep habit of self-reference," eliminating greed and fear by halting the ego's timeline. Stymied.

Mystics report this as timelessness: past and future evaporate because they are constant projections of the referential "I." Here, the suspension feels spatial too, a vast, edgeless "now." The body lingers with the thoughts stammering on like a stuck record but the mind roams on, now free.

It's therapeutic— the mindless chatter quiets, anxiety's temporal grip loosens, but spiritually it's liberation: truth is not sought; it's the silence left when the endless seeking stops.

These self-referential tautologies, especially when analytic at their core, remind us that some truths aren't discovered—they're revealed by just ceasing the search, like "Give It a Rest."

In other words, they suspend us not in stasis but in potential: a space-time interlude where the universe whispers to us its self-similarity. In a world of linear striving, this halting is subversive, almost sacred, a nod to the eternal within the ephemeral, the idea that eternity can be found just in time.

The Self is both the seeker and the sought.

As with Rinzai Zen, meditating on a koan isn't about solving it, but letting the koan unravel the solver. You sit with it, repeat it, let it loop in your mind until thought exhausts itself and sputters out. Entering the silence remains.

THE APORIC STATE

When we meditate on a koan, the mind tries to pin down an answer, but every attempt at that circles back to the question's impossibility. This creates a cognitive stall, psychologists call it an "aporic" state, where reasoning hits a wall. Such statements like "I am that I am" do this.

Even in the brain, analytic-like truths emerge. For instance, the statement "Consciousness is awareness of awareness" is tautologically true by definition -- consciousness inherently involves self-referencing. Yet probing it (e.g., "What is awareness aware of?") mirrors self-inquiry, leading to a neural quieting that feels timeless. This suggests the brain itself is wired for these

tautological traps, which spiritual practices exploit to transcend ordinary perception.

This aporic state dissolves the ego's narrative, creating a spacious, timeless awareness where the flow of thinking stops. It's a deliberate tool in spiritual practice to pause the relentless flow of thought, thus making time and space feel irrelevant.

The tautology's self-reference ("This is this") or paradox's unresolvability creates the aporia, which then becomes a portal to what mystics call the "eternal now," a state where you're not bound by the ticking clock or the body's edges.

Anyway, that's my account as to why I enjoy tautologies.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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The Three Sufferings

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 22, 2025

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As if one suffering is not enough, the Buddhists traditionally number three of them, and they are worth understanding.

The Suffering of Suffering (dukkha-dukkha)

This is pretty much the common idea of suffering we all know, what Shakespeare called the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, things like birth, sickness, old age, and death, plus the standard round of physical, emotional, and mental pain. We all are aware of this kind of suffering. The Tibetans refer to this as fully-revealed or “obvious” suffering.

The Suffering of Change (viparinama-dukkha)

In the Tibetan texts, this type of suffering is considered characteristic of the realms of the gods and humans, the so-called “higher realms,” being mainly the suffering of change, the idea that whatever goes up, comes down, and vice versa. We may be up today, but we may be down tomorrow. This is the idea that our states of mind and sense of well-being are temporary, unstable, and do not last. They cycle or circle. When we have spiritual experiences that come and go, they are an example of the suffering of change. Change as the only constant typifies this kind of suffering.

All-Pervasive Suffering (sankhara-dukkha)

The kind of suffering, “all-pervasive” suffering, is almost unknown to us and seldom understood. It refers to a kind of suffering that is characteristic of Samsara (cyclic existence) in general, and is often likened to a vast ocean of suffering we all float in. In my opinion, this is somewhat characteristic of the Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind, which is often called “Revulsion of Samsara.” This fourth thought always gave me trouble, like for about 40 years! Secretly, I love this world and did not cotton to the thought of being revulsed by it, to use an older version of the word revulsion. I seldom get to the point of revulsion of this world. Sure, maybe if someone close to me is suffering or dies, I tire of this world, but otherwise I am all ears.

Of course, this whole conundrum finally came up in a teaching and my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, explained it to us so that I

actually understood it. And, as usual, it was not what I was thinking or expected! Expectations really suck.

Basically, he explained that we are not generally even aware of this third form of suffering. It is beneath our radar screen unless our awareness is highly developed. But rather than paraphrase him, here is an excerpt of a teaching he gave in 2002, translated by the incredible Lama Yeshe Gyamtso:

“Once we have, through ignorance, adopted the five aggregates [physical form, feelings and sensations, perception, mental formations, and consciousness], we are constantly experiencing a type of suffering that is called “pervasive suffering” or sometimes “the pervasive suffering of the transitory composite.” “

“Pervasive suffering is something that we do not normally recognize. Pervasive suffering here refers to our unripened karmic imprints, of which we are not normally aware. We do not experience it as suffering because we are unaware of the karma that we have accumulated, and we are therefore unaware of what we are headed toward. Aryas, arhats, bodhisattvas, and so forth do experience this as suffering because they can see the presence of ordinary beings’ karmic imprints and are therefore aware of where they are headed.”

“It says in the commentary on the Abhidharmakosha,

If a hair were to be placed in the palm of our hand, we would not notice it particularly and certainly would not experience it as painful. But if the same hair were to be stuck in our eye, we would not only notice it, we would experience it as uncomfortable and even painful. The childish [beginners in dharma] are like those with the hair in the palms of our hands. They do not realize or recognize pervasive suffering. Aryas, Arhats, and Bodhisattvas are like those with the hair in our eyes. They see pervasive suffering as suffering.”

So, the idea here is that we, you and I, are not sensitive enough to be aware of what is called the all-pervasive suffering in life. Everything looks pretty good to us. “What suffering?” is our response. We are the “childish,” with the hair in the palm of our hands, not aware enough to experience it as a hair in our eye.

That is why we feel so little “revulsion.” If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon. We have to trust those with realization who tell us that as we become more aware, we go behind the curtain of the Self and begin to see our normal state as suffering. We will then see that there is a low-level kind of suffering that we are all twisting and turning in, but which we are oblivious to.

It occasionally manifests as ennui or, the way the dharma texts put it, “revulsion” of this world.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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The Common Preliminaries: The Four Reversals

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 23, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I am often asked how I got into practicing dharma, and of course, there is a history, but in effect I was always naturally dimly aware of what are called the “Common Preliminaries,” so let’s look at them. This is where I (and many) started out seriously practicing dharma, many, many years ago. I never thought of these as a religion or and “.ism,” but rather just the way things are.

In the next few blogs let’s look at the Common Preliminaries, which are also called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,” “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” or just “The Four Thoughts.” They are sometimes called “The Four Reminders” and “The Four Reversals.”

However you want to spell it, the import is that these four thoughts or concepts are capable of turning us away from our everyday distractions toward discovering the actual nature of our mind. And that is the whole point of dharma practice. They are termed the Common Preliminaries because they are common to all forms of Tibetan Buddhism and they go before any other practices. By “go before” it is meant that before you begin any dharma practice, one should review the Four Thoughts so that we remember why we are practicing. And by “review,” it is not meant to simply read through them, but rather to bring their import to mind.

In other words, we usually have to turn our mind away from our everyday preoccupations in order to get anything done dharma-wise. So, we have to actually contemplate these four thoughts as they pertain to us. I was raised Roman Catholic, so I was used to things such as the Ten Commandments and the like. But the Four Thoughts are not written in stone somewhere; rather they are inherently inscribed into our mind, already an intrinsic part of who we are. All we have to do is to become aware of them. In fact, a large part of why I originally became serious about Buddhism was because when I encountered the Four Thoughts, I was already instinctively familiar with them and had been thinking the same things myself. They were as natural as anything I knew and I already was thinking (and even worrying) about them much of the time. So, for me these four thoughts were a sign that Buddhism is something natural to me that I could easily understand, and that has proved

to be true. And unlike the Ten Commandments, which are imperatives, the Four Thoughts are meant to serve as just reminders of something we intuitively already know, at least the first three of them. These four thoughts were how Buddhism first caught my attention, what flagged me down in the first place. It was like finding my own form of religion, although I consider Buddhism more of a psychology, something natural than a religion, but you get what I mean. As I have written in previous blogs, the Four Thoughts were not only my introduction to Buddhism as a newbie. When, after a great many years of practice (decades), I finally was ready to start learning Mahamudra Meditation, said to be the tip of the top of meditation practices in our lineage, the first thing I was told is to spend some time once again on the Four Thoughts. I then spent something like three years working just with those four thoughts. They are that important. So, as they say, without further ado, let's look at the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma. We will do this in the next few blogs, but as we go in, here are the Four Thoughts as I originally encountered them. This is how they appear in the traditional Tibetan practice sadhanas: THE FOUR THOUGHTS (1) This Precious Human Birth First, This precious human birth, So favorable for the practice of the dharma, Is hard to obtain and easily lost. At this time, I must make this meaningful. (2) Impermanence and Death Second, The world and all its inhabitants are impermanent. In particular, The life of each being is like a water bubble. It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse. As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time, I must practice now with diligence. (3) Karma and its Consequences Third, At death there is no freedom, And karma takes its course. As I create my own karma, I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action, And always devote my time to wholesome action. With this in mind, I must observe my mind-stream each day. (4) The Shortcomings of Samsara Fourth, Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death, The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara, Cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings. I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment. As mentioned, it was these Four Thoughts that got my attention when I first encountered Buddhism. They indeed turn my mind. I had looked into many spiritual directions, had read about the trinity of this and the sacredness of that religion, all of which seemed so abstract to me, so distant and other-worldly – a world I did not know. When I came across the Four Thoughts, they seemed so down to earth, so very natural.

In fact, they made clear to me what I had pretty much come up with on my own. They spoke right to the heart. They were better than any religion I knew and I had some experience with organized religion. Having been raised Catholic, I went to Catholic school for a while, was an altar boy, learned

church Latin – the works. But I left that. I never had a quarrel with Christ (still don't!), but organized religion and the behavior of its authorities appeared arbitrary and cruel to me. It lacked the intimacy laced with the taste of blood or reality that Mother Nature showed me – something real. Enough said. That First Thought, that “life is precious,” did not need to be explained to me. I had always thought that my life was precious and hoped that I might be put to some good use and not just wasted. And here was an acknowledged spiritual direction telling me straight out that my life was precious. I just inhaled it. And that was just the First Thought. It was the Second Thought that struck me to the core, impermanence. Death and impermanence had always hovered just out of eyesight in the peripheral vision of my life. I had never looked it straight in the eye and here was an instruction to do just that. There was nothing churchy or ‘clergy’ about this. It was what was always in the back of my mind anyway, part of what I sensed to be true. Mother Nature had always confirmed this. And the idea of karma and rebirth (that not only had we lived before and would again, but had done this innumerable times) was more than I could hope for. After all, I was raised with the deep impression that (as the beer commercial says) “we only go around once” and that without warning we are tossed into this world and have to figure it out (heaven or hell) on our own in one shot. It took years for me to realize that the great majority of people in the world believe in rebirth and still more years before I dared believe it myself, and that only those of us here in the West are stuck in the view that at our core, beneath everything, we are sinners. The Buddhists teach just the opposite: that our obscurations, our so-called “sins” are just on the surface and that beneath that we all have Buddha Nature. All we have to do is to become aware of this by removing our obscurations. After all, the word “Buddha” simply means ‘awareness’ or “the one who is aware.” It seemed too good to be true. But when I began meeting these high Tibetan lamas and rinpoches, arguably the most authentic authorities I have even known, they spoke of rebirth as a fact, as a personal experience and not as an abstract idea. Here were authorities who actually were authorities. Imagine that! And it was those Four Thoughts that first got my attention, that turned my mind or that I recognized without a doubt to be the truth as I already dimly knew it. All I had to do was to work on removing my own obscurations, which is what mind training or ‘meditation’ is all about. In succeeding blogs and as time permits, I will describe each of the four thoughts in more detail.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Blocked Creativity

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 24, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Many people have told me that they don't feel as creative as they would like or used to be. And they point to folks that in their opinion seem to be just naturally creative. I used to buy into the view that creativity might be just something in our genes, until I gradually understood that from the Buddhist point of view there is no normal person who cannot attain enlightenment, and this has an interesting correlate that relates to creativity. As for attaining greater awareness (much less enlightenment), no one ever said it would be easy. However, any of us can begin to painstakingly remove our various obscurations. It can be done. I, for one, am working on it. My dharma teacher clearly pointed out that as our obscurations lessen, the awareness and clarity of mind automatically increase. Of course they are talking about the road to enlightenment, but the same principle works for unleashing our innate creativity, so it's worth taking a look. By definition "creativity" requires clarity of inspiration and utility, i.e. our creativity has to be of some use to ourselves or to the world. We can be creative in our own sphere, but the usual definition of creativity often requires an audience, someone (the world, society, etc.) to receive and value our creation, at least us. Otherwise, every crazy person spouting original gibberish would be valued for their creativity, which is not the case as I know it. One important point is that creativity arises always in relation to the static status-quo. That too is definitional. Somehow, beneath the status-quo for each of us (and all of us) is a well of creativity waiting to arise, much like a natural spring. Creativity brings new things into existence and, when those things themselves grow old and become part of the status-quo, further change and creativity takes them out of fashion, because the status-quo, despite all its attempts to remain the same, is ever changing.

Creativity is always the remedy for the current status-quo. Those of us who don't feel creative enough are tired of the same-old-same-old. And there is something we can do about it. Brute-force attempts to be creative seldom work, because "trying" to be creative is not the same as being creative. In the same way, being driven to creativity by competition or "comparison" also naturally tends to obscure true creativity. Creativity requires receptivity.

The idea here is that the new insight we need, the creativity which is waiting to be born, is always just under the layers of the current status-quo and very much ready to appear. We just have to discover (uncover) it. If we look at our personal creativity (or lack thereof), there are things each of us can do to increase being creative. And it is relatively easy. For starters, we can begin consciously to remove the layers of obscurity that obscure or prevent our innate creativity from being accessible. Not surprisingly, this is the same kind of practice that the Buddhists suggest for increasing our basic awareness. I have been working on this myself for many years. Here is just one small example that may illustrate my point. As you know, I write a lot, perhaps too much. The reason why I do this would be another story, but it involves writing being part of my daily dharma practice. Years ago I had a come-to-Jesus talk with myself about caffeine, i.e. coffee. I loved everything about it and still have at least two very fine espresso machines gathering dust around the house, but here is the story. As mentioned, I love coffee and was making espresso and cappuccinos long before Starbucks ever thought to exist. I could not wait for my morning cup of coffee, and a strong one at that. But there was a gotcha! I gradually realized that the caffeine sped up my system, which should not be news to coffee drinkers. After all, that is part of why we drink the stuff. I confess to being a rather sensitive thing and I noticed that my morning Cup of Joe went beyond just speeding me up. It was like a kind of white-noise for the mind and drowned out some of the finer intuitions in me so that I could no longer sense or be aware of them to the same degree. It put a buzz on. This was disappointing because, as mentioned, I like to write, and I know exactly when I am on-point with my writing, when I am on my contacts. The process of writing creatively is important in “creating” the finished result. I found that when I wrote with caffeine in my system, the results, when read the next day, were somewhat disappointing, ever so little. They were less crisp and, yes, I hated to admit it, less creative. Perhaps readers could not tell the difference but, alas, I could. What a bummer. It seems that caffeine, aside from making it hard for me to sleep at night, was acting like a drone or, as I said earlier, ‘white noise’, that along with the fact that caffeine is speed, managed to overdrive the mind, and drown out some of the more subtle and creative impulses that gently bubble up from within the mind. I no longer could sense them when on caffeine. I had lost that subtle fringe of intuition that, like the tips of my fingers, could feel things. And you can bet that I tested this not just a dozen or so times, but hundreds of times and always came up with the same result: when I drank coffee my creativity suffered and when I did not, it was present in a way familiar to me that I counted on. In the end, I valued my creativity more than caffeine and, much to my dismay, stopped drinking coffee. That is just one “creativity” story, but I hope you understand

the point. Stimulating my mind artificially with caffeine added what I call a white-noise filter to my mental clarity, clouding or veiling my mind, which I came to be aware of to the point of finally giving up caffeine entirely. It is the same with creativity. I don't need to tell you that, like the old saying, "you can't salt the salt," you cannot improve the mind with any substance, be it caffeine, alcohol, drugs, or anything else, even certain foods, etc. That should be common knowledge, so I will not mention that again, but there is more. Our Self, like a vacuum cleaner, is a sucker for gathering attachments, prejudices, likes, dislikes, and all of the many things that obscure the mind. This is how micro-karma accumulates. And our mind is already deeply obscured if we are to believe the Tibetan Buddhists. It is called Samsara. And here is the interesting part. The same mind-training practices that the Tibetans recommend for removing obscurations to meditation also free up our creativity. They go hand in hand. Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, when we remove obscurations one by one, ultimately the clarity and creativity of the mind itself shines through. There is nothing stopping it. It is this lucidity and luminosity that is available to any one of us, despite what gifts Mother Nature has (or has not) given us. Anyone can have a clear open mind, and that is the avenue that all creative intuition travels. In other words, we don't have to be a genius to be creative. All we have to do is begin to remove our mental obscurations by various mind-training exercises. Of course, it also helps if we can keep the karma-accumulation down to a gentle roar. For those of you who want to experiment, here is a free e-book called "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction" that contains several articles on "Reaction Toning," which is an easy-to-do practice for removing obscurations: <http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Extensible Realization

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 25, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Stabilizing spiritual realization is an art as well as a process. It's a little like, as in bread-making, taking a little bit of the "mother" and starting our own bakery. Realization is like that, infinitely extensible and endlessly expandable, but the rub is that we have to actually do it. For spirit must be made to matter, and by us. Realization, dharma or secular, tends to have a ritual that goes with it. By ritual I mean, although realization of any kind is permanent, there tend to be certain acts that, like any ritual practice, are especially clarifying for us. Like most forms of meditation, there is at least some technique involved, if only it is sitting on a cushion, looking out a favorite window at the sky, or taking a walk. If we will look around our life, we will find that there are places and actions that facilitate clarity, be they formal meditation techniques or just what happens to work for us. Just as Tibetan lamas employ mudras and sacred instruments like the bell and dorje, so each of us have rituals that enable clarity in our life and through which activity we can rest our mind, meaning just rest. We are all already doing this however we can, so become aware of it. For some, it may be the old rocker on the back porch and finding some time to sit there. For others it may be cooking, sewing, or a hobby. It can be helpful to locate and acknowledge what rituals work for us. Call it the favorite part of our day. It's what we like most to do, because for the return-on-investment is so great. For me, sometimes it is just watching a movie, sitting back while the busyness of the day gets sorted out in the background of my mind. What I am getting at here is that these private or personal rituals can be extensible and expandable. I tend to think of this kind of ritual as we do the old phrase "the baby and the bathwater." We like to think of our favorite hobby as special, even unique for us, but in the end, it comes down to the old baby and the bathwater scenario. For example, as you all know, I like to write. In fact, writing is one way I relax and clarify my mind. The upside is that my mind gets clear when I write, and the downside (if there is any) is that if I want my mind especially clear, I have to go and write.

What is important for me to understand (and I am getting to the point) is that the clarity is the "baby" and the writing is the "bathwater," and not vice versa. That would be just the opposite of what I always thought it was. If I look very, very carefully, I find that there is no reason why I could not extract my clarity-

ritual from the experience of writing and extend it to other things that I do. Then I would find clarity not only in writing (or whatever), but in doing all kinds of things. In my case, this clarity is all wrapped up in various meditation techniques, but my thought here is that each of us have built little rituals that relax or clarify life for us. In some sense, it is what we live for or live because of. And my suggestion is that I see no reason why we could not carefully extract the ritual technique, whatever it is, and transplant it to anything else we do in a day that lends itself to such a ritual. The process of clarity is infective. As I see it and mentioned, we first have to switch priorities and recognize that this clarifying and enjoyable ritual is the “baby,” while our hobby or whatever (in my case writing) is the bathwater. Why not enjoy many things the same way we enjoy a few things. As for me, I just never seem to get that far. It seems that I am satisfied by what I always enjoy, which is writing. For me that is enough. I perhaps first saw this in the flesh when I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche back in 1974. I was in a small room, an office, in the home where Rinpoche was staying while visiting Ann Arbor. He took me into that room and sat me down in a wooden chair. But rather than initially talk with me or anything, what he did was to spend about half an hour thoroughly inspecting every last thing in that office. While I sat there fidgeting, Trungpa Rinpoche picked up and examined every little kick-knack and object in the room, holding some up to the light, feeling them, and so on. He obviously was enjoying each moment and each object, while I sat there like a corpse, trying to be inconspicuous. It was immediately obvious to me that he had a little ritual that was totally portable and very exact, that he could (and would) use wherever he was at. I had never thought to do something like that or didn’t know that I was allowed to enjoy myself so thoroughly, meaning, like perform this ritual just any old time and anywhere. So, the moral of this story is that even if we have not achieved any grand realization in our dharma practice, we have already established personal realization-rituals of our own that we look forward to based on what we have found that we enjoy. This too is a form of realization or a vehicle. And my point is that these little realizations are, as mentioned, both extensible and expandable. So, you might want to consider doing something similar, which is examining your life for the rituals in the day that clarify your existence. That kind of joy, clarity, and rest I have found to be quite portable given a little attention on my part -- not localizing it to one or a few favorite pastimes, but expanding it to include many more, is well worth the effort.

Enjoy!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Gut-Wrenching

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 26, 2025

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The dharma teachings state:

“The point being made by the Buddha here is that you are never going to find this true nature of the mind unless you look for it. It is not enough to simply meditate. It is not enough to simply rest in a state of tranquility. You have to actually look at your mind to find its nature. You have to examine it, scrutinize it, and search.” The first part of the Pointing-Out Instructions as to the nature of the mind is traditionally called the Logical Analysis of a Pandita (scholar) and it appears at first glance to be very conceptual and perhaps a little dry, which it is, but then it’s not. And here’s the twist. In this logical analysis, we are asked by the teacher to search our mind to see where this or that resides, for example, what color the mind it is, and so on. For example, we might be asked to examine the mind to see if it is the color red. For years, I more or less ignored this part of the teaching because I instantly could see that the mind is not the color red, or green, or blue, or whatever. I could think about that in an instant and I did and thus fell into the habit of waiting until Rinpoche offered something a little “juicier” than asking me what color the mind is. That was just a time-wasting mistake on my part, and I will explain why. Although with the “Logical Analysis of a Pandita” we are being asked to search the mind, we are NOT being asked to think about it or just merely conceptualize what we are being asked to do. Instead, and here is the twist, we are being asked to get off our conceptual duffs, not think, but rather go and exhaustively search the mind... for whatever is being asked for. THIS is what I missed for all those years, to stop thinking just conceptually and leave thought there. Instead we have to use the mind, like exercising a never-used muscle. In other words, we must use and stretch the mind by actually searching it, physically, viscosly, as requested. Search! In this respect, the mind is like a muscle that we have never used, but one that CAN be exercised, and if exercised, is the dharma-preparation we have been missing in order to see the true nature of the mind.

Absorb and repeat reading the above sentence because it is crucial. We must EXERCISE the mind (like we exercise our body) by viscosly searching it thoroughly, exhaustively, and completely until we certain of what we have found, even if it’s nothing! We must exercise and wear ourselves out much

like in Zen, when the student exhausts conceptuality with the koan, which exhaustion leads to an answer in itself. So, if you read me right, you should now see and appreciate that the “logical analysis of a pandita” has a non-conceptual point to it, which is the physical searching of the mind itself. It is this exhaustive “physical” search of the mind that completes the preliminary practices that we have been doing all these years. And, if you imagine we can just quickly search the mind, it is not that easy. I was given these Pointing-Out Instructions a number of times by very qualified lamas and never grasped anything. Nada. At one time, one of the Karmapa’s Heart Sons (four highest lamas in our lineage) had his attendant call me to come to the city where he was visiting, sat me down on a chair in a room, just the two of us, and tried his best to point out the nature of the mind to me, but I couldn’t get it. It was embarrassing and I hung my head and left the room. LOL.

Years later, when I finally did get a little glimpse of Recognition, all I can say is that it was nothing at all like I expected or had been imagining it would be for all those years. Why? Because I had no idea. So, you are right to have no expectations, because we (and this by definition) can’t have any clear idea as to the nature of the mind without first recognizing it outright. We either have recognized it or we have not. There is no gray area. So, there you have what I feel is the single ingredient that, at least for me, was missing from my moving forward with the more advanced dharma teachings like Mahamudra and Dzogchen. I was thinking and conceptualizing, when I should have been actually searching the mind thoroughly and exhaustively, like one kneads dough, developing the ‘Hara’ or gut. When I finally did figure that out, and searched my mind viscosly, things began to happen.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Inauthentic Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 27, 2025

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A sign that ‘The Dharma’ in America is taking root is that the days of wide-eyed wonder are no longer the only game in town. Way back when, in the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s, when none of us knew much of anything, we were ignorant, of course, but also innocent. Today we are still mostly ignorant, but not so innocent. I don’t plan on dwelling on this topic, but in fairness and as an alert, I feel we should look at it. And to make it clear that I am not just making this up, here is an excerpt from a teaching by the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, as translated by the translator Lama Yeshe Gyamtso: Khenpo Rinpoche says: “...it made the dharma so comparatively rare that it was hard to tell good dharma from funky, corrupt, polluted dharma. Because there wasn’t a widespread presence of it anymore, people couldn’t judge... they couldn’t tell the difference, so corrupt practices... ... people misinterpreting the teachings because they lacked recognition of their mind’s nature and so on, and all sorts of problems became troubling.” That’s a scary thought, non-authentic dharma being mistaken for authentic dharma, and no one being able to tell the difference. Thankfully, this is not generally the case in this country... not yet, but this is not to say it isn’t already here, any more than we could say that there are no phony spiritual teachers or what-have-you.

Most important is any degradation to the lineage that might occur. It took me a great many years to get it through my head that the sine qua non of Vajrayana Buddhism was to keep the lineage intact and pass it on to the next generation without ANY loss of integrity. More important than money. And the old maxim “As Above, So Below” applies here. In other words, what’s true for each one of us can also be true for the lineage itself, such events as recognizing the true nature of the mind. ‘Recognition’ in the Karma Kagyu lineage is not an option, but an absolute requirement for undertaking Mahamudra Meditation training. Without having recognized the actual nature of the mind, actual Mahamudra training cannot begin, other than practicing it. While there is considerable wiggle-room or leeway in many areas of the dharma, in others, such as Mahamudra as non-meditation, there is none at all. And just as Recognition is required for true Mahamudra meditation, so Bodhicitta, at least the relative form, is required to achieve Recognition.

Bodhicitta is often called the "Mind of Enlightenment" or "Heart of Enlightenment," and if you ask a Tibetan where their mind is they don't point at their skull as we do, but rather at their heart, actually the middle of the chest. In other words, the mind and the heart are the same to Tibetans. Absolute Bodhicitta, which arises with 'Recognition', is also called "Awakened Heart," as in "heartfelt." What am I getting at here, aside from pointing out the fact that having "Absolute Bodhicitta" and achieving Recognition of the Mind's Nature are crucial for a successful Mahamudra dharma practice. As mentioned earlier, these two qualities are crucial, not only to our personal dharma practice, but also of great importance to the future of the lineage of the dharma. If you and I don't realize the dharma, who will? In the history of the dharma, the teachings clearly point out that there have been (and will be) times when the teachings deteriorate and are no longer as effective as they once were. All of the Rinpoches I have known agree that we are now in a time when the dharma is growing steadily weaker. One of these teachings I attended clearly pointed out that there have been times where individuals involved with the dharma have not achieved 'Recognition', have not recognized the nature of their minds, but somehow assume that they have. The result is that they lead the dharma from authenticity off-track in inauthentic directions, just the opposite of their avowed intention. Worse, often these folks don't know they don't know. I have been around the dharma for over sixty years in one way or another. Because the dharma was so new to this country, very few of us knew what we were doing, and it was all, as mentioned earlier, so very innocent. However, as time progresses, we have become more socially comfortable with the dharma, comfortable in some cases to the dharma even being fashionable to the point of arrogance, not feeling responsible to others, and not wishing to be questioned. Yet, in Buddhism we are asked to question everything and everyone. When students of the dharma who have not achieved 'Recognition', just because they have done some practice, begin to feel entitled to our respect and even feel confrontational with those who question them and/or their methods, this is not a good sign. A sense of entitlement is always a problem. Absolute Bodhicitta is the sincere heartfelt concern for others, and not just as a doctor treats a patient. When Bodhicitta is lacking or is just receiving lip service, that too is a problem. What to do? We can't just point this out or to each other, because the ignorant are especially on guard to being questioned, as they should be if they want to maintain their imagined status-quo. It is hard to just ignore them because, as I like to say, the way they tell it asks a lot. Theirs is just another form of suffering, but one that looks a bit like a closed loop. The first text of the 'Four Thoughts That Turns the Mind (Common Preliminaries), "The Precious Human Life" has what are called the "Eight Freedoms,"

situations where we cannot learn dharma, and the seventh freedom is termed something like “because of incorrect views,” a condition where our own arrogance and stubbornness prevent us from realizing the dharma.

Understanding the dharma conceptually is not the same as experiencing it, much less realizing it. We would like to think that incorrect views only come from outside the dharma, but the fact is, as the opening quote pointed out, these incorrect views can just as easily come from within the dharma community itself. This is why, as I understand it, it is so important to find a teacher that has authentic realization, at least enough to keep us safe from the obvious pitfalls. In my training, I was clearly told that if I sincerely wanted to help others, I should first help myself by working through my own obscurations before trying to help others. An authentic teacher will tell you when you are ready to share your dharma knowledge with others. Just ask them. No Rinpoche that I have ever met charges for one-to-one training. Sure, we can make offerings or we can pay for attending teachings, etc., but working one-to-one with a teacher, which I have done for at least the last 36 years, has never involved money. And this may be very old fashioned of me, but mixing dharma with any kind of business involving money is something I have been very careful to avoid. This may be changing in today’s world as some dharma offerings are setting themselves up more as businesses. Anyway, that’s my two-cents. Your thoughts?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Effortlessness

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 28, 2025

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[This is my first post with video AI that I created instead of a still photo.]
Classic dharma quote: “If you attempt to meditate on something, to do something to your mind, no matter how refined that meditation may be, it is still going to be a diversion.” This quote (and this kind of quote) refers to the dharma practices we do AFTER we have had a glimpse as to the nature of the mind. And I always must reiterate that recognizing the true nature of the mind requires that this “nature” be pointed out to us by an authentic dharma teacher. We can’t do it alone or we would have done it many lifetimes ago. We may “be” what we are trying to realize, but we don’t realize what we are (or if we are), thus the need for “Pointing Out” instructions as to the nature of our mind from an authentic teacher. Unfortunately, to my knowledge there is no way around this. Period. “Authentic” here means that the teacher has had the ‘Recognition’ personally as to recognizing the nature of the mind AND that the way they point it out to us actually works, i.e. we get it. By having this nature pointed out by an authentic teacher and by our readiness to receive this teaching, we recognize the nature of the mind. The teacher or lama who first successfully points out to us the nature of the mind so that we recognize it is called, in Tibetan, the Tsawi Lama, which means “root” lama for obvious reasons. After the pointing-out instructions and actually achieving recognition of the true nature of the mind, THEN the above quote comes into play. Before that, during the many so-called preliminary practices we are not worried about “attempting to meditate.” Instead, we are trying to concentrate, attempting to mediate, and all the many other types of preliminary practices. We are making efforts, yet ultimately effort is just another obscuration. As I like to say, ‘The Preliminaries’ are like making a tight fist, while after recognition, it is like relaxing and opening that fist. So, the quote at the top of this blog is about letting go, what is called resting in the nature of the mind. When “resting,” any attempt to “try” to meditate (and making efforts), instead of helping meditation, will be a diversion from mediation, a sidetrack or obscuration. Once again: in the preliminary dharma practices, we tighten up, while after “Recognition,” we learn to rest and loosen up. So, tightening up, concentrating, making efforts, and trying mostly takes place in ‘The

Preliminaries', while doing so after "Recognition" will only bring on more obscurations.

There is a time for effort and a time for effortlessness. The analogy I use for myself is bobsledding. At the top of the run, we push like crazy, yet once we are going, we hop in, tuck in our legs, keep our head down, and ride. Before "Recognition," we make efforts to practice, concentrate, and meditate. After "Recognition," we make efforts to "not-meditate" or not make efforts, if that makes sense. We learn to relax, as they say, "As it is."

It can be discouraging to hear that in order to recognize the actual nature of the mind, to be introduced to the mind's nature, and become familiar with it, requires an authentic teacher to point this out to us. And this is one of the reasons many folks give up on this, cross it off their bucket list, and do what?

Well, we wait for the urgency within us to find an authentic teacher or guru grow until we are ready to do something about it. We would have to not care what anyone thinks or what it looks like and reach out on our own and find an authentic teacher. All of us, including me, have had to do just that.

If we can't risk that, not much of the above will happen.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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The First Thought: This Precious Human Birth

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 29, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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First, This precious human birth, So favorable for the practice of the dharma, Is hard to obtain and easily lost. At this time, I must make this meaningful. The ‘First Reversal’ or ‘First Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma’ of the ‘Common Preliminaries’ is the precious human birth. I have been to Tibet, China, India, Nepal, etc. and I have watched the lamas carefully brushing mosquitoes off their arms, so I know that Buddhists value all sentient beings, even gnats and mosquitoes. In Nepal I was told one gets life in prison if you hit and kill a cow with your car, and there are cows wandering everywhere in the streets over there - that kind of thing. How “foreign” to those of us here in America. The Buddhists are even more concerned with human life. And while all human life is to be treasured, Tibetan Buddhists reserve the words “precious human life” to refer to those of us fortunate enough to be born physically able to learn the dharma (have the necessary senses) and in a country or place where the dharma is available. The fact that you are reading this here and now means that you are such person. It might sound trite, but the Tibetan Rinpoche I have worked with for over thirty-six years has reduced me to rapt attention (and tear-filled eyes) a number of times when he has gently and clearly pointed out to me that if we are here right now learning and exposed to the dharma, we are one of the very, very few -- the 99th percentile. He states that to have the good fortune to be born in a place where (and time when) the dharma is actually taught means that we have accumulated an enormous amount of merit in our past lives to (no pun intended) ‘merit’ this. Rinpoche goes on to point out that many of us might be alive now, but born not in a country where the dharma is taught. Or we may glance over these words and never take them in or actually be repelled by them entirely. Or we could have severe mental or physical problems that make learning the dharma impossible. Or we may be so obscured by anger and desire or just busy with nonessentials that there is no way we can overcome our condition enough to actually hear and practice the dharma. We don’t get it. His point seemed to be that if we are open to these concepts, we already have come a very long way and that in our past lives we have somehow accumulated enough merit to deserve such a precious human birth as we have now rather than some other birth, like that of an animal, in which

bewilderment and desire may cloud any other possibilities. In other words: in our own way we already have great merit. That's the idea. And in Tibetan Buddhism, as I mentioned in a blog not too long ago, the Tibetans put great value on the concept of motherhood. In fact, they say that all beings (not just human beings) have been our mother in past lives and have given birth to us, wiped our bottoms, and cared for us like no one else ever would.

Every being has been our mother and we have been the mother of every being. I grant you that this concept is foreign to those of us here in the west and takes real time to sink in, that we are all that close. Every Tibetan is raised with this thought. Anyway, you get the point. Buddhists feel that all life is sacred and that this precious human life in particular is a rare opportunity to be able to hear and practice the dharma, which is the path to greater awareness of our own mind and how to use it. In this short blog it is difficult to present in enough detail the 'First Thought That Turns the Mind', how very precious our life is, and how each of us wants to make it count for something and for our life not to be wasted. In summary, the first of the 'Four Thoughts' is that this human life we have is precious and rare, hard to come by. It should not be wasted. Buddhists believe that all life is precious, not only that of every last human being, but all the way down the tree of life to the very tiniest sentient beings, perhaps some kind of microbe. All sentient beings are precious. Life itself is precious, human life in particular, because as humans we can have the opportunity to encounter and learn the dharma. Animals can't do that. This first of the four thoughts instantly rang a bell with me the moment I heard it many years ago because internally I had always felt the same way. I worried about wasting my life, and having it amount to nothing. I wanted to be used up in some meaningful way, for this life I live to count toward something. My point here is that I became a Buddhist, not because of rules and thoughts laid on me from on high, but rather I discovered that I already was (and always had been) interested in the dharma. I just didn't know it. And Buddhism, like all '-isms', I am kind of repelled by, so I prefer to call it the dharma that interests me. The 'Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind' made perfect sense because they had already always been on my mind anyway, ideas like not wasting my life, coming to terms with my eventual death, watching the results of my actions, and hoping to find ways to wake up from the rat race I often find myself in. None of this was news. This already was my life.

[Graphic by me.]

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Creativity Redux

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 30, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I blogged about this recently, but I want to add something about our having more creativity, where it comes from, and how to access it. Of course, there are all kinds of ways to be creative and each of us knows what that feels like for ourselves. At the same time, we may wish to be more creative or creative all the time. How is that possible? In my experience, creativity comes from the inside, not often from the outside. In most respects, my own creativity is linked to being aware of and taking advantage of the spontaneous flow of change within the mind, moment by moment; let's call it the immediacy or "freshness" of the moment. For me, connecting with our intuition is always key. And it all comes from the well of the present moment. Methodically thought-out and planned creativity can also work, but in my experience, I look for that degree of freedom or spark in the moment to synch me into creation. Let me give you an example. Often, I will write a blog to be posted the next day. However, when morning comes around and I read through the blog I plan to post that day for one final review, I see that it is already outmoded, even though it is less than eight-hours old. Something has changed internally overnight in the mindstream and I am not quite the same person getting up as I was going to bed. In that case, and it happens quite often, I have to synch into the moment right then, check my contacts, get my bearings all over again, and write a brand-new blog. I have all kinds of blogs that never got posted because the change-factor in time moved too quickly and the material was no longer fresh. It was no longer me.

I try to offer here what is true for me now, in the moment. One benefit of this is you are getting what I am feeling when I post it, and if that changes between the time I hit the hay and wake up, so be it. I may have to write a new blog. This freshness and natural sense of creativity of the present moment is part of the mind itself and it is available to each of us all the time, if we will be aware of it. The problem is that our own distractions, obscurations, and habit of ignoring (ignorance) this instantaneous moment creates what I call 'White Noise', static that drowns out the subtle bubbling up of creativity, with the effect that our creative intuitions do not get through, do not register. We just can't quite feel them, and so it remains beneath our radar. Yet, we each have this incredible mind. It is sad if we cannot get in

touch with our creativity to its full extent because of our own self-created (or imprinted by society) obscurations that dim out, drone, and mask out this subtle creativity. It is not that we have no creativity within the confines of our obscurations; we do, but we can be missing the tip of the top of creativity, which is what makes my writing fun for me to read and write. That very tip-top of the spontaneous moment brings space (and an aura) enough to shake things out of the ether and into a sentence in a way that I find authentic. That subtle authenticity is what is confirming and makes writing real for me. And I am not the Lone Ranger in this. Without that degree of spontaneous freedom, the mind will always be slightly dulled for us, until we take the time to, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, carefully remove one by one, that which is obscuring our ability to feel and see creatively. We may not be able to make a fortune in the stock market, but we all have the capacity to enjoy the richness and creativity of our own mind, with just a little work. The Tibetans call the mind the "Wish-Fulfilling Jewel." Life can be so hectic, and its pressures so constant that we are like a freight train hurtling through the night of time, quite far from being able to slow down and just smell the roses. Unfortunately, in the rush of things, we continue to pile upon ourselves obscuration after obscuration, which just keeps dimming out the light. To remedy this, we would first have to recognize and acknowledge the fact that we ARE obscured and (with kindness to ourselves) begin to carefully remove what obscures our vision and creativity, one bit at a time. I am amazed when I look around at all of the projects, therapies, remedies, medicines, etc. that folks are putting themselves through, often for little gain, except perhaps momentarily, i.e. for a short time. And with all that, there remains almost complete ignorance (ignoring) of the blinders we have on when it comes to these simple obscurations that could easily (or fairly easily) be removed. I know first-hand what an obscured mind feels like and I also know what a mind is like once we begin to free it up from some of its obscurations. That is why I am writing this. Removing obscurations allows us to actually "see." With our mind relatively obscured and unable to get at our own innate subtle creativity, we end up wanting or longing for what we feel we do not have, while everything we need is mostly right here. We become so future-oriented (hope) that we are hardly in the present at all, much less creatively feeding off the spontaneity of the moment. And we are anything but content. True creativity is only available, IMO, in the well of the present moment where it bubbles up. On the other hand, learning to remove some of the obscurations, taking the blinders off (so to speak), we can begin to see that we already have within us so very much to work with just as we are now, warts and all. Once we can feel and begin to use our own innate creativity (that subtle edge), we see for ourselves that even OUR particular situation is in fact workable, and

we are content to work it out. Notice the word “content.” With access to our creative edge, it is fun to work on ourselves. It’s creative. I know this first-hand from experience and not just from intellectual speculation. I came out of the 1950s and searched through the 1960s for methods that actually work. In the 1970s I began to find those methods and, while I cannot say that I am out-of-the-woods yet, I can positively say that I do see, as they say, the light at the end of the tunnel. There IS a way to take advantage of Samsara (the vicious part of cyclic existence) and anyone of us can learn the methods to achieve this. It is called dharma training. Perhaps the difference between average creativity and this subtle and more refined creativity I refer to here is very small. But for me it makes (and may be) all the difference in the world. My point here is that this living edge of the present moment presents a degree of freedom that is unmatched in my experience. It is worth the effort to get to this very fine edge and, once there, to rest in the nature of the mind that is exposed and laid open in the space or gap there. My first dharma teacher often use to say this to me about Samsara: “This can be hell, but we have to make our heaven in a little corner of it.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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The Second Thought: Impermanence

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

September 30, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The second of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.”

“This world and all its inhabitants are impermanent, In particular, The life of each being is like a water bubble, It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse. As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time, I must practice now with diligence.” Impermanence is a fact worth our consideration. Of the four reversals (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma) the best known of course is the second one, “Impermanence,” but it is also the most ignored -- our great ignorance. Ignorance can also be willful, as in “to ignore.” We agree to ignore what we find too hard to remember. It is a cliché that most of us act like we are going to live forever and it takes some life-shattering experience (the death of a loved one?) to remind us that death is perhaps the one thing we do know for certain. However, our eventual impermanence is something that we tend to acknowledge only when put on the spot. Otherwise, it goes unspoken. I call impermanence the “smelling salts of the dharma,” because even a little whiff of it wakes us up to the actual reality. The great Tibetan Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa once opened an evening talk with these words: “Some of us will die soon, the rest a little later.” Steve Jobs, who was a practicing Buddhist, was very aware of the Four Thoughts, in particular of the thought of impermanence since he was dying of cancer. It is said that his awareness of his mortality (the Second Reversal) kept him focused almost mono-maniacally on perfecting the iPhone and the iPad. At least that’s what I understand. In a eulogy read by his sister at his funeral she said that Jobs had ‘achieved death” and that his last words were “Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.” This is why these are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” because only they are strong enough, medicine or remedy enough, to tear our attention away from our often mindless day-to-day business and chatter. Only these four thoughts are capable of turning the mind from its freight-train rush at nowhere to an awareness of what is important. Now, let’s look at the thought of impermanence, so appropriately listed as the second thought, because we all have second (and further) thoughts about death and impermanence. The Buddhists state that this universe and everything in it is impermanent, and moreover that the lives of beings are fragile like bubbles on the surface of water. Nothing lasts forever.

Even the hardest diamond-like substances eventually wear themselves out of time and into essence. Any of us over thirty have at least begun to realize impermanence and those of us over sixty have probably begun to be humbled by it. And now at the 84th year, I expect to become increasingly more aware of impermanence to the very end. The goal of considering our impermanence is not to have us huddle in a corner afraid of our impending death. Rather it is to realize that all that we have, including our entire Self, is ephemeral. It will not last. Instead of being paralyzed in fear and fruitless worry, our time is better spent working on those things we do take with us when we die, like our karma, any merit we may have accumulated, and our potential awareness of the true nature of the mind. These are treasures that survive the death of the body and the inevitable abandonment of the personal Self. In my opinion there is no better teacher and constant reminder of our own impermanence than Mother Nature. She treats every sentient being absolutely equally and never blinks when showing us exactly where things are at. For me, even a morning walk can suffice. It can be as simple as a country road filled with night-crawlers struggling to get across the tarmac before the rising sun fries them to a crisp... or the huge Luna Moth fluttering to seek refuge in a tree after a long night, when a passing bird swoops down to make a meal of it. The list of these events is endless. Most living beings struggle to avoid being eaten, while at the same time struggling to find some other critter to eat. I mean, the writing is on the wall, my friends if we will just read it. Nature is a harsh mistress indeed. And we are subject to Mother Nature (the laws of physics) from the moment we are born. Impermanence informs us that our fear of death is only adding insult to the perceived injury of death itself. I am reminded of that great film by director Arthur Penn "Mickey One," a Kafkaesque study of paranoia, where the protagonist (played by Warren Beatty) has to choose between, as he puts it, the "crush out" or the "fade out." I put it this way: we can masochistically wait until the forces of time drag us to our eventual fate or we can stand up and look fate in the eye. We can choose to go to meet our maker. I favor the second option over being dragged kicking and screaming to the end of life. I would rather learn to become increasingly aware of the nature of the mind (and thus of the nature of death itself). A whiff of impermanence, as I like to say, is the smelling-salts of the dharma. It is one of those four reminders or thoughts capable of waking us from our tendency to snooze our lives. A close brush with death sobers up even the most jaded of us rather quickly.

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The Third Thought: Karma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 1, 2025

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The third of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.”

“At death there is no freedom, Karma takes its course, As I create my own karma, I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action. With this in mind, I must observe my mindstream each day.” Karma has been a buzz word in the West for decades, gradually working its way into the popular idiom. What is meant by karma I am sure varies widely, but the basic idea is that for every action there is a reaction, for every statement, a response. And, yes, there is good and bad karma, although what we worry about as bad karma may not be what really takes a toll. The Ten Commandments in the Bible are definitely karma producing if broken or violated, but habitual micro-karma appears to be even more overwhelming for us in the long run. Of course actions like killing and stealing create what we could agree is bad karma, but what really adds up is the gradual accumulation of low-level karma due to our own thought processes. Let me give an example. You might say something accidentally (or purposefully) that hurts my feelings. I walk away from our conversation thinking about what you said, going over and over it in my mind, all the time recording this in my mindstream. This might go on for hours, all day, or even persist for weeks on end. Every time I review it in my mind, I am inscribing this event deeper and deeper in my mind, digging a groove until it becomes a trench. This too is karma, big time. And this particular kind of micro-karma really adds up. It not only obscures our mind as it goes down, but like all karma, it has an afterlife. It grows and eventually ripens in our mind, creating even more obscurity. And unfortunately, most of us do this all the time, day in and day out. And it is mindless, meaning we are not even aware of it. Or we may be dimly aware of it but think nothing of it. One concept to take to heart is that karma, large or small, is infallible. What goes up, comes down, and what goes down in our mindstream will eventually come up as ripened karma. You can count on it. As they say, “You can take it to the bank.” What was harder for me to understand, at least in the beginning, is that karma is infinitesimally fine, as exact as exact can be. And it is not just limited to what we might have a conscience about. Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to karma. You don’t have to be aware that you are creating “bad” karma to accumulate it.

This should be obvious to any reasonable person. Just consider what various societies (in particular our own) are accumulating. Look around you. Global warming and ozone holes are probably examples of collective karma that the entire earth is accumulating, whether or not we are aware of it, whether we believe in it or not. Like the proverbial ostrich, we can stick our heads in the sand, but the clock of karma ticks on nevertheless. My point here is that karma does not only depend on our ability to distinguish right from wrong, although “intent” is important. It is way finer (and more insidious) than that. Karma goes beyond ourselves (the Self), so great care is required when considering actions, like each and every one of them. Not to upset you, but in evaluating actions, we can’t just assume we have good sense when it comes to our actions and the karma they accumulate. After all, we are not examining the world outside ourselves, but in mind training we are examining the mind itself (our attitude) that projects this world around us. Even a tiny change in attitude (a slip of the mind) can produce a big change in how we see things, and influence our actions one way or the other. My point here is that we may want to err on the safe side of karma, and not just assume that our mind (just as it came out of the box) is good-to-go, and that we actually know what is best for us and can tell the good from the bad. Can we? We may be walking a high-wire karmic tightrope hundreds of feet in the air and not even know it. That’s how vulnerable we are in this area. The older I get, the more I realize that my approach to karma has been way too general and that, while avoiding the “big-bad actions,” I have consistently engaged in a myriad of smaller karmic actions (of which I am only somewhat aware) that I never take very seriously. And karma sneaks up on you. And while I don’t want to become a mind-Nazi to my own life by second-guessing every last decision, I need to clean up my actions and stop laying waste to my own potential clarity through micro-karmic accumulation. To use a phrase from Aleister Crowley... “To snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel.” In this analogy, I have to reverse Crowley’s phrase to something like: While watching to avoid the big karmic mistakes, I habitually (and often consciously) accumulate and record an avalanche of micro-karma, my every passing reaction, like and dislike. It is possible to stop recording all this micro-karma, but it takes some serious mind training, which I have detailed elsewhere, i.e. Reaction Tong-len. Suffice it to say that it involves relaxing the mind and learning to recognize and drop the obsessive thoughts or see through them. If you don’t record them, the karma does not accumulate. Less karma accumulation means less obscuration. Less obscuration means greater clarity. It is that simple, yet easier said than done. In this short blog I have only scratched the surface of this topic. The bottom line is that it would help if we can become more aware of what we are doing in each and every action. As we better understand the laws of karma, we stop

acting like the bull in a china shop and suddenly find ourselves walking on tiptoe. I am reminded of the cliché often used to explain chaos theory, that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil sets off a tornado in Texas. Karma is sensitive like that.

Here is a free book that can be of use in removing karma to some degree.

Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction

<https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

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The Fourth Thought: Samsara

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 2, 2025

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The Fourth of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.” The Shortcomings of Samsara “Fourth, Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death, The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings. I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment.” The above language is a little strong, especially that fourth thought. I also spent a few years on these same four thoughts when I seriously began to study and practice Mahamudra meditation. They were all I needed to get my mind right, with one exception, which is what I want to discuss here, and that was the fourth thought, the one about the shortcomings of Samsara, you know, the problems with this world we live in. Sure, I understood it somewhat, but I also found that I wanted to edit it a bit, offer my own interpretation. I insisted on having a little more wiggle-room, which is not a good sign with dharma teachings. For some reason I could not as deeply embrace the fourth thought as I had the first three thoughts that turn the mind. Hmmm. “The Shortcomings of Samsara,” Samsara being this cyclic world of existence we all find ourselves embedded in – our ups and downs. Sometimes the fourth thought is translated as “Revulsion at Samsara,” suggesting that we reach a state of being repelled by this world. Well, I didn’t like that translation at all, the idea of being revolted by this world, because in so many ways I love this world.

So, I kind of translated it for myself as “I will never get my ducks all in a row.” In other words, we can’t game the system. Not only does death claim each one of us (Second Thought: Impermanence) but, like a casino, the odds are in the house’s favor (Fourth Thought). We will never game life. It games us, if only because we lose everything we call mortal at death. Now that was hard for me to accept, because I am reasonably clever and somehow thought that at least ‘I’ could game the system. I could probably get all my ducks in a row, at least enough to be content, if not happy. But I failed to understand one basic principle, and that was compassion. I will explain. Compassion is like what happens when a drop of water hits the surface of a still pond; a ring of concentric circles gradually spreads out embracing more and more of the pond. Compassion grows and is ever more embracing the more realized we become. It is a simple law of nature, yet one I failed to understand coming up.

Way back then, it was just me. I was on my own and could take care of myself, and everyone else was in their same boat, taking care of themselves. This was before I had a wife, before I had kids, before I had grandkids, and before I was that much interested in the welfare of my fellow travelers in this world we live in. That was a simple mistake on my part (miss-take). Like the ever-widening embrace of those concentric circles in the pond when a drop of water falls, my caring for just me, myself, and I gradually broadened to include a wife, kids, grandkids, friends, co-workers, and more. It was no longer just me I cared for and about. I knew little to nothing about compassion early on. Sure, I felt compassion for the animals that suffered in the harsh Michigan winters, and beings like that, but people? I didn't dare start caring about people. That was just too much responsibility for essentially a kid, a kid that, as concerns compassion, refused to grow up. My point is that as compassion grows, and as it does with age and experience, our mandala or the envelope of what we can embrace and care for widens. It becomes ever more inclusive. It is no longer just myself that I care for, whether I am personally content or not, but all of those I have come to know and love. How is it with them? Sure, I can try to maintain a cheery attitude when all is well with me, while others I love around me are suffering and in trouble. My previous attitude was something like "Of course I wish everyone well, but not at the expense of my feeling content" – that sort of thing. But I find that this kind of attitude does not extend to my family, to my wife, kids, and grandkids. When they are hurting, I am hurting. And where does the line stop? The simple truth is that it does not stop unless we stop growing and expanding inside. This simple principle is what leads to what is called the Bodhisattva Vow, the vow (as Buddhists point out) to not find peace until every last being is enlightened and finds peace. I don't see there is a choice here. The moment we care or feel compassion for at least one other person (or being) in the world, our choice is made for us. There is no turning back. We are ultimately all bodhisattvas in the making, like it or not, and ready or not. So at my more advanced age I finally begin to understand that "Revulsion at Samsara" is a natural correlate to having compassion. How can I be happy if one of my family or friends is deeply suffering. The bottom line is that I can't, not if I care, and I do care. When I witness the sufferings of those around me, I get world-weary, just tired of ignoring all the suffering in the world, and I feel less game, not willing to just go along with my normal attachments, not feeding them so much. I guess what I am saying is that, at long last, I am beginning to understand that "Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind," the "Revulsion of Samsara," this world and its shortcomings. As John Donne said: "No Man (or Woman) is an island." In summary, it was that fourth thought that gave me pause. What was that all about? To repeat, this fourth thought was hard for me to grasp, not because it

actually is that difficult to understand, but because like years ago when I first tried to give up smoking or coffee, inside of me I did not yet really want to give them up, so my non-understanding was driven by my secret joy in still pursuing them.

That secret joy had to be plumbed to the very bottom and found to be what was causing me real physical suffering before I could tear myself away from it. And it took me a long time. I was sure that there was a backdoor to life, a way out. This view is not uncommon. With that fourth thought that turns the mind, the idea is that life is inherently undependable and the fact that this cyclic existence we are attached to (life as we know it) will eventually wear us down and out of memory before we figure it all out, before we actually get all our ducks in a row. But we keep trying anyway. Only we know if we are successful. And with the end of life, with death, there is no such thing as success, except learning to fail successfully. That approach is as close as we come. Anyway, I was certain that I could somehow game the system and, in fact, get all my ducks in a row. I could master life so that it behaved as I wanted it. All around me, if I looked, other people were suffering, struggling, dying, etc., but somehow, I knew I was the exception and that I (perhaps only me) could beat the system. I could make it all come out right. If I was only good enough, worked hard enough, and was careful enough to think of everything, that then, for me at least, life could be mastered. It all could be good. I could have only the high parts of the cycle and escape from the low sides of life's cycles that I repeatedly found myself mired in and unhappy about. We each have to find out for ourselves if life is cyclic. Does your life go up and then down, and around again? If it does, we go with it, like it or not. And so on, which brings me to my point here: Life can't be rigged, no matter how smart we are. "Smart" is not the same as intelligent. A wound smarts. Life can't be taken by force, by cleverness, by scheming, planning, or any other approach than that taken by the historical Buddha, which is why he took it. And that approach or path is "awareness." In fact, the word "Buddha," in ancient Sanskrit, simply means "aware one" or "awakened one." It is all a question of awareness. We are all aware, but to what degree? The Buddha's entire path or method, which is called the "dharma" is about one thing only, waking up, becoming more aware so that we can respond appropriately to the ups and downs of the life we now live, so that we can learn to fail successfully as life ends, which it, of course, eventually will. Without that awareness, we are subject to being torn apart by the tides and cycles of life, a piece at a time, and can't seem to control it, can't get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak. So the point here is that in my priority list, at the top of that list, before everything else, is the need to develop increased awareness, so that I can respond to the exigencies of life that confront me daily in a useful and

successful manner. It came as a real shock to me to learn from the highest Tibetan lamas that we have about zero chance of figuring out how to become aware of the true nature of our mind and existence WITHOUT guidance and help. In fact, they use this analogy, which was a show-stopper for me: Imagine the entire earth covered by water. Into this we toss an inner tube with a single hole in it. Winds from the four quarters would push this tube every which way, constantly. In that ocean of water is one blind turtle that comes to the surface only once in a hundred years and pokes his head out. How long will it take for that turtle, as it surfaces, to coincidentally stick his head through the center of the inner tube? That is how long it will take us, life after life, to discover the true nature of the mind and be able to respond to life in a workable and enlightened way...WITHOUT a guide from someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind. That is something to think about. We need help to learn how to become more aware. We need someone to point out to us how the mind actually works. One last comment that points out how we may not yet be sensitive enough to grasp the traditional concept of the “revulsion of Samsara.” This excerpt is from a teaching by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, translated by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso: “It says in the commentary on The Abhidharmakosha, If a hair were to be placed in the palm of our hand, we would not notice it particularly and certainly would not experience it as painful. But if the same hair were to be stuck in our eye, we would not only notice it, we would experience it as uncomfortable and even painful. The childish are like those with the hair in the palms of their hands. They do not realize or recognize pervasive suffering. Aryas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats are like those with the hair in our eyes. They see pervasive suffering as suffering.” So, the idea here is that we, you and I, are not sensitive enough to what is called the all-pervasive suffering around us. We are the “childish,” with the hair in the palm of our hands, not aware enough to experience it as a hair in our eye. That is why we feel so little “revulsion.” If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon.

[Graphic by me.]

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What Will Happen at Death

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 3, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I want to detail the profound and isolating ordeal I went through during my one major stroke because it was a real wakeup call for me in terms of dharma. It was like an utterly raw and unrelenting confrontation with existence itself, one that stripped away every layer of familiarity and left me mercilessly exposed to the mind itself.

What I describe as the loss of the “Self,” the unyielding blinding light over a vast, empty expanse or plain, the graying out of my past, and the total absence of refuge in the present moment is a testament to the resilience that I am trying to articulate so vividly here.

Experiences like this deserve to be witnessed and noted. I have been writing about this experience and its reflections for years now. When AI algorithms like Chat-GPT and GROK came along, of course I tried to mine that channel to see if others like me had similar experience. Very little came back, and here is the main return that did come, which cracked me up.

“In searching for similar accounts, I came across one that echoes your description with uncanny precision: the personal writings of Michael Erlewine, an astrologer, musician, and dharma practitioner who survived a major stroke in 2019. His narrative captures the same core elements—the shattering of Self, the overwhelming white light from above, the sense of being thrust into a barren desert-like void with no shadows or escape, and the forced immersion in a hyper-present awareness amid the chaos of a hospital. Erlewine was able to frame it through a lens of Tibetan Buddhist concepts like samsara (cyclic existence) and the bardo (intermediate state), but the raw phenomenology aligns closely with this.”

I could go on for pages sharing what GROK found, which is just what I am writing here myself. There are little similar experiences described except if I plumb the depths of dharma descriptions, in which I did find something related and of value, which I will try to detail here a little later, about how to prepare for our death and the bardos. And of course, like many pith dharma teachings, I have to ask myself, why did I not think of that. LOL.

The hardest thing, perhaps the very most difficult thing in my life to get my mind around was what I experienced when I had a major stroke. I have had a number of TIAs, which are not strokes but close to them, but with a major stroke, there is damage. It was no joke.

And the immediate effect of that stroke, what was most missed, was any and all access on my part to what I call my Self or persona. In the flash of the stroke all reference to the Self, all refuge, all entertainment and busyness, and any place to park or locate my Self was just gone, absent. There I was being carted around in the hospital in a wheelchair, surrounded by doctors and nurses in attendance, yet I was stripped naked of any refuge, a place to hide or find comfort, i.e. my Self!

Of course, I could see and feel the flurry of all those around me; I was there too, yet I also was somewhere else, and somewhere that I had never been or even imagined. I was about to be introduced to the key insight as to the deconstruction of the samsaric mind.

With the stroke, it was as if suddenly I was far out in the middle of a vast plain or desert and the only thing that was constant aside from a deafening silence was the blinding light directly above and behind me. I could not escape it no matter how I tried. And I did nothing but try, try as I might. My need for instant refuge and to hide was primitive, automatic

And this went on for minutes, hours, days, and weeks in various ways and degrees. As stated, there was no escaping this blinding light, and no refuge from it whatsoever.

It was as if I could very faintly see or vaguely sense my own past and history, but even that was grayed out and not accessible to me. I had nowhere to turn and had to suffice by just withstanding the harsh heat and light of the bright 'Sun' above me. For the first time in my life, there was no relief and no place to shelter. I was fully exposed like a negative in a darkroom, naked in the blinding light of the present moment, with nowhere to run and no place to hide. I was not just beside myself, but my Self was out of reach.

I just had to just take and endure it. And here I was in the middle of a hospital with people on all sides and none of them experiencing what I was experiencing. For me there was silence, as I was cast out upon a vast desert plain with the blinding light above me.

I feel the import of this experience has to be made clear, if possible. What I was embedded in was what is called the unborn clarity of the mind itself. "Unborn" simply means that this pure clarity had no beginning and will have no end. In the midst of the whole aftermath of the stroke itself and rising

above it was this ever-present clarity of the mind, the same mind that allows us to read what I am writing here, but far more clear.

That clarity was never altered by anything I was experiencing and was just always present, being, as mentioned, the same light we use to see by. The most jarring thing was my inability to find any refuge in the shadows I know so well and usually hide and are wrapped in, and where I take refuge. That shadowy world was suddenly stripped away; I no longer had access to it. It is like this whole world we normally live in was like a dream we cannot manage to wake up from and never have woken.

In my after-stroke experience, I was forced to see the actual construction behind Samsara, this cyclic world that we inhabit, supposedly inhabit quite against our will. This take was terrifying, yet nonetheless, I stood witness to it. I had no choice.

All this was when I experienced my major stroke. From the onset, as mentioned, I found myself trapped in a sort of Limbo, so to speak, not for a few seconds but for days and weeks, until my regular Self (whatever we call it), which had been shattered in the stroke, was able to reanimate itself and close up all its gaps or openings and put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

Until then my eyes were propped open as with toothpicks whether I liked it or not. I had no choice but to look, yet I did my best to look away. I was terrified by what I was seeing and also ashamed of the state I was experiencing and I can explain why.

What I witnessed and saw was to me not only terrifying; I perhaps was not so terrified by what I saw as much as by the fact that I had never seen before what I saw in that instant and beyond, and I believe few have, and that is that it's not that we cannot free ourselves from Samsara, but rather that we don't want to and have no intention of doing so. To me, that news was shocking, the sheer hypocrisy of it. And it extended into the very dharma I had been practicing for decades.

It was as if we are double agents and don't know it, on the surface working toward liberation through dharma, and by that freeing ourselves from Samsara, but internally actually working against it. We don't want to be disturbed or awakened from our deathlike sleep and distraction in Samsara.

It's as if during the day we weave our future liberation, while at night we unravel what was made in the day. We step forward by day, but scurry back by night. I wish to high heaven that I could better share the experience I am describing here, because it is urgent to anyone that can listen.

In a nutshell, it is that we are going exactly nowhere and have no intention of doing otherwise. It's the lack of intention that dumbfounded me, the insincerity, and the ignorance, and probably willful ignorance at that. We are supporting our own demise and the continuance of Samsara.

And the so-called resistance movement to the sufferings of Samsara was, including much of our interest in dharma, in reality just another part of Samsara. We never get beyond the periphery, the city limits of Samsara, so to speak.

Why? The answer is dirt simple, because we are habituated to the here and the now of Samsara. It's an age-old habit, Samsara, the only thing we have ever known, and according to the Mahasiddhas this is true for innumerable lifetimes, and we have ZERO intention of doing otherwise, despite all our protests to the contrary. We drank the Kool Aid lifetimes ago.

And here, when I say 'We', I not only mean you, but the 'We' includes me too. I still want the same thing that we all seem to want, the comfort, entertainment, pleasant distractions and false sense of security that Samsara offers, and the freedom to continue on with just that.

And even in my revelations from the stroke, all I could think about was getting back inside my comfort zone, back to ignoring the harsh light and truth of reality, and the realization that Samsara is an elaborate construct I have created for myself. It seemed only from there, my samsaric hideaway, could I contemplate what I am explaining here. If we all feel like this, indeed we trapped in Samsara by our own continuing karma.

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

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 now trying to get back to that awareness. Not true. We have yet to get there, yet to be enlightened. It's not like the Christian 'original sin', that we once knew enlightenment and are trying to get back there. We have never known anything but samsara.

The dharma teachings are crystal clear about this, and I have asked rinpoches over and over. In all the time there is, we have never managed to recognize the true nature of the mind and have always only been a willing inhabitant of Samsara. It's no wonder that we love it so; we are so used to it. We have NEVER known anything else, not only in this life, but in the innumerable lives

it is said that we have lived. Samsara is beyond simple comfort. We are its creatures.

The power of this major stroke wiped out completely my near memory of who I was and am, as well as far memory too. More important in that moment was how to find my way back to the habits and history that up to that point I had always lived in. I could not remember or bring it to mind, my Self, try as I might. And you can be sure I tried with all my might to get back to what I knew, the comfort-blanket of my history in which I could hide and feel normal. That was not happening.

As for my Self, I could not remember or bring it to mind, try as I might. And you can be sure I tried with all my strength to get back to what I knew, the clothing and shelter of my history in which I could once again hide and feel comfortable. It was not happening. I was like a sore thumb throbbing in the moment of liberation, if only temporary until my Self reanimated.

Instead, what I did see and what I was continually exposed to was this brilliant white light of the mind above me that was shining like a stage light directly down on me and, no matter how I would twist and turn, could not be ignored. Nor was I able to look right at it. It was far too blinding.

I saw this light right in the hospital while I was being carted around here and there in a wheelchair. Surrounded by doctors and nurses, who were 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 had been wiped clean, empty of everything other than the blinding light in the sky above me and my terror of looking directly at it.

It was like a waking dream. I was wide awake, fully present!

And before we get too fixed on the idea of this white light, that is just an image that I use so you can understand. And this next note may be a little difficult to understand. The white light was not a light at all, but in reality, it simply was the stark nakedness I felt because I was denied the cover, closure, and the refuge of my normal haunts, my sense of Self, entertainments, and the shadowy darkness that had always shielded me from being exposed as I suddenly was. I was now naked as a J-bird.

Like a hermit crab who had lost its shell, I was moment-by-moment forced to endure full exposure to vulnerabilities that had never been exposed to the stark reality of what I was experiencing. And there is one very important fact to declare.

You might think that when the stroke took place, the mind was confused. Well, yes, there was all the confusion I just described above as to the hospital, etc. However, the mind and its native awareness was crystal clear and just totally there as usual, but actually clearer than I had ever experienced. And my sensitivity was excruciating. Pristine. Of course, medically I was having a stroke, but the mind itself, being unborn, was as vast and clear as the midday sky

“On a clear day you can see forever.”

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

And this was not like an instant, a few minutes, or even an hour, but went on for days and weeks while my totally shattered sense of Self desperately tried to reanimate itself and yet could not. It was like a stuck vinyl record. That’s what a major stroke can do, wipe that all out, just like someday, when we die, our very death will do to our persona and Self, strip us naked. After death we will suddenly be fully exposed as I was then.

That surprise at death is why I am writing all this.

One has to clearly separate the physical effects of the stroke, and all the tests and busyness taking place around me, from the utter clarity of the mind, which is unlike anything I had ever known.

The natural awareness within us is infinite and clear as a bell. We see everything because without our Self and our Samsaric obscurations we have no closure, no cover, and no history for an undetermined length of time.

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

That’s what happened to me with the stroke, my history and Self were just wiped clean, and yet there I was, one with the awareness THAT IS. And that was excruciatingly painful, but completely eye-opening at the same time.

I struggled with all my might to get back into the shadows of Samsara that comforted me, but once my Self was eventually reanimated, I can think of

little else than what happened when I was exposed to that brilliant light. It brought a message.

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

There are so many ramifications to this experience, so many reflections that it's like a kaleidoscope, so I won't trouble you with them just now. This blog was just to get the blunt truth of reality expressed and allow folks to react to it as they will. And you may wonder what we can do to prepare what certainly will happen to us at death.

The answer as to what to do is so simple as to be laughable. All that we have to do is maintain our good presence of mind each moment until we come to the moment of death and that good mental state will just be the last in this life AND the first in the bardo. There will be no upset, disturbance, or struggle to maintain any composure as we just pass into the bardo.

It's like a balanced gyroscope that is not wobbling or teeter-tot but smoothly spinning as we go from life to death and beyond into the bardos. That's what would be helpful if we want to prepare to exit this life we are now living and transition into the next, the bardo.

It is easy for me to contemplate because all I have to do is compare my stroke experience with the above ideal composure to know after my stroke I had no composure other than blind panic, and that tells me all I need, which is, I am not now of a mind composed enough to just slide into the bardo and continue on. No way near that. That is why I write this, to alert myself and possible other.

And thus, my urgency to get my mind right to do that, I could do just that, transition peacefully into the bardo after death, if I could get my mind right. And that also explains why I'm standing on the street corner of life and shouting this to anyone who might want to listen.

Most of us are NOT yet ready for that transition, without undergoing something like I went through after my stroke and that was just a glimpse of the reality. And even then, after things calmed down and I was back to normal, I was right back in Samsara tucked into my bed of comfort and as far away as I could get from that blinding light.

Yes, I had a lot to consider and think about it, still do, yet I am looking at it from my hidey hole in Samsara, and not on the plains of being exposed and

present to the shock of exposure. I would be no different if I suddenly transitioned into the bardo after death. I'm not ready.

And I am doing everything I dare to do to harden off and get used to that kind of ultimate exposure, yet I am doing it from the false comforts of Samsara, still not brave enough to go out into the blinding light of the dharma and just endure. I am still figuring out how to do that, exposing myself by degrees to the brilliant light of the Mind. By writing this, I take a baby step in that direction and hopefully elicit others who realize that we are all in the same boat.

I am not imagining that just words from me will be that convincing as to what we must do to prepare to enter the bardos at death, so here are a few thoughts from reputable sources:

Anam Thubten Rinpoche:

"Where you are going into the future can be known by looking at the color of your mind now." So, I don't think there is a preparation for death separate from that of life."

My advice is to become awakened as soon as possible, then at the time of death everything is taken care of. There is no advice separately for death and for life."

Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche :

"At death, we lose everything . Everything that you created, anything physically, verbally, mentally is being taken away. All of it, suddenly, you need to give up. There is nothing you can take with you."

Namkha Drimed Rinpoche :

"One has to practice a great deal, starting from the preliminary practices (ngöndro) all the way to Dzogchen. These are very necessary to do as a Buddhist. Don't skip, don't jump to Dzogchen. Do the stages properly and thoroughly, step by step. If you practice like this, it will be very beneficial. If you practice in a really good way, you will be prepared. You will be content at the time of death."

Dzogchen Ponolop Rinpoche:

" If we live every moment the same, in a positive, peaceful, and kind way, then death is also another moment—the same. So, there's no difference."

"How can we expect something positive to happen in one instant, at some point in the future, when we are not living that in every moment."

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche:

“So, the best way to prepare for the bardo is to place good tendencies on your mind now. If you have a good heart, and a very stable mind right now, then that will naturally extend into the bardo.”

Take this to heart and respond as you can.

[This is a batik that my mother did of me back in the 1960s.]

For a limited time, I am doing a few Zoom astrology readings. If interested, please email me with the subject “READINGS.”

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Sensible Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 4, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I also continue learning more about the dharma and often it is not what I expected or imagined. Let me give some examples.

The first is about “Karma”, an important topic that we should be aware of. I was in the midst of reading and learning about all kinds of methods to remove karma from our lives, mostly various practices that if practiced lessened or help remove karma.

In the midst of what I was learning came the advice of a number Mahasiddhas, each suggested that very best way to remove karma was not to accumulate it in the first place. And these great teachers went on to say that karma, once accumulated, is virtually impossible to remove and it just has to ripen. That took me back but made perfect sense.

A second example is recent when I have been studying, as to the possible shock when we die and enter the bardos, once again the great rinpoches came across with the following.

Instead of complex methods to equalize the shock on entering the bardos after losing our Self and our samsaric closure, was, again, very simple.

It is to live each moment in such equilibrium that the moment before death is identical to the next moment when we die and enter the bardo.

I’m not sure why I can’t come up with such suggestions myself, yet I agree that the best way to have equilibrium is to have equilibrium, something of a tautology at that.

And so, I am happy to be humbled and gladly accept such suggestions as the above.

It reminds me of a line from Franz Kafka’s diaries I read some sixty years ago which said something like “Each sentence I write, it already has perfection.” I thought for years about that until I realized that what Kafka was pointing out is that instead of practicing to become a better writer, Kafka worked on having a more pure mind and consciousness, so that anything he wrote already had the perfection of a perfected mind.

That concept was a gift to me. Much of the dharma does the same.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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"What, Me Worry?"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 5, 2025

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Meanwhile, those who credit the expected shock of entering the bardo, which we must each eventually face in our own way, while currently ignoring and agreeing to forget what we find so hard to remember. I am right in there too, rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic as is everyone else.

What's behind the curtain of the Self and remains for the bardo to expose and shock is still there for that future day and time. We skirt around it, certainly don't feature it, even though, according to the pith dharma texts, it is true, yet it seems to remain a mystery to most.

Of course, for us there is beauty in the art of Samsara arranging and we have each arranged Samsara just so. I have my hand in that too and play the game. However, my stroke jolted me out of it for an extended time and the impact of that sunk in.

As to what we can or should do about getting serious about all this bardo shock, I've had my say. It is hard enough to glimpse this out of the corner of our eye, much less give it serious consideration, yet I am quite concerned about getting ready for the inevitable.

The question always is how to do that. It's not like we can just drop and give it twenty and then keep on walking through life. This life may be all we have but it is not all there is. What we do to prepare for our passing very much affects our rebirth. At least, this is what the pith dharma teaching tell us.

And it's not like much, if any, thought is given to this topic by modern society, especially if it 'IS' important to us how we take death and what happens afterward if we are not up to the task. There are volumes of Tibetan teachings on the bardos after death and our helplessness at that time. And there is more than lip service required for us to be prepared for our own passing and how important that is for our future rebirth.

I mean, here in America there is little credence for rebirth, much less the intimate details of it. It fascinates me. Certainly, we are not into banging the drum slowly on this topic. And it's not that I like wearing a sandwich-board announcing that the end of our personal world is coming, yet coming it is.

I was busy doing my dharma practices these many decades as best I could and suddenly the stroke opened my eyes, and I instantly became some kind of evangelist as to being shocked or surprised when we eventually enter the bardos, and are not up to the task. I don't like those kinds of surprises and witnessed that firsthand very clearly and in real time.

You may discount my account because it was a stroke, but Rinpoche did not. He went on to tell me that he had some eleven or so smaller strokes himself and that what I described was accurate as to what will happen to each of us upon entering the bardo after death. We can whistle in the dark if that is our wish, yet that and a ticket will get us a ride on the bus.

And yes, what I saw through my stroke was unforgettable and sobered me right up. And to repeat, the clincher for me was checking my experience out with my Tibetan rinpoche who I had worked with for 36 years, and the fact that he assured me that I was not mistaken. He said exactly what I experienced through the stroke will be waiting for me when I pass on after death and enter the bardo. He even said that the stroke experience was good practice for entering the bardos after death.

Had he not pointed that out to me, I might well have rumbled on down the line and figured that when the time of my passing came, I would be up to the challenge. I now question that.

Remembering how I clawed and fought to find refuge and a place to hide in the shadow of my Self and personal history, I felt the absolute panic that came over me to get back into Samsara and that had better be addressed now while I have the strength. I'm working on it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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Mandalas, A Personal Note

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 5, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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These notes are from some years ago:

Margaret and I are slowly getting ready for our yearly trek to KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) monastery in the mountain above Woodstock, New York to attend the 10-day Mahamudra intensive taught by our teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. This will be the 31 st year in a row and we have been to each one. We have driven to this teaching enough miles to circle the equator of the earth almost three times.

AFTER THE MAHAMUDRA INTENSIVE

These last eleven days here at the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery located high on a mountain above legendary Woodstock, New York have been extraordinary. I have been here many times, many long trips from Michigan and back. This series of 10-day Mahamudra intensives alone have gone on for 31 years and Margaret and I have not yet missed a one. And we have been here many other times as well, in the early years with all of our kids, 800 miles, each way. Imagine that!

The teaching ended yesterday afternoon and before I knew it, one after another, my fellow dharma brothers and sisters were streaming out of the complex, loading up their cars, and heading home or to an airport. This was such a gathering of senior students. Margaret and I stayed on for another day, since tomorrow is a holiday and we decided not to drive the thirteen or fourteen hour trip when the highways are so packed. So, I sat outside on one of the lovely teakwood benches and watched folks leave. Many hugs were had. This elaborate mandala was breaking up.

THE STORY OF THE THREE-YEAR RETREAT

I am reminded that extended teachings like these, themselves, are precious mandalas. Mandalas are offerings. We have all seen photos of the elaborate sand mandalas that the Tibetans create and then sweep into a river when they are completed. Why destroy such a lovely creation? I guess it is that impermanence dictates that all “things” created in this world must end, with

their components scattered to the four elements. Mandalas are no different, and many do not understand what the actual mandala is.

The key part of the elaborate sand mandalas is not the colored sand that is gathered up and thrown into the water. Dust to dust... or sand to sand. No, the mandala is the act of offering the mandala itself, the process of creation and not so much what is created. The mandala is the concentration, intent, life, prayers, and mantras we pour into the creation of the mandala, not just the resulting sand image which is destroyed just as we will die.

In each case, it is the process or offering itself that is the result, the mandala. And, as mentioned, this holds true for gatherings like these 10-day teachings as well. The offering itself, these precious teachings, in which we all share, unlike the sand, is not destroyed, but the merit of them are dedicated to the eventual enlightenment of ourselves and all sentient beings.

I remember one previous teaching, as it came to an end and all of the participants, my fellow dharma practitioners, began to file out and head for home. Margaret and I stayed for an extra day, so we were just hanging around.

Later that day, as I sat in the daily Mahakala puja, a practice offered to the fierce Dharmapalas (the protectors of the dharma), the sky just opened and it poured rain. In Tibetan teachings, it is considered auspicious if it rains during the teachings or at the end. Well, indeed these whole ten days had been auspicious. Many of the most senior students present said that this teaching was the most profound and glorious they had ever attended. I felt the same way. This was something we will be talking about for years to come, as I say, like the finale at the fireworks.

And these recollections remind me of an important event in my life that occurred at the very first 10-day teaching, back in 1989.

Monday July 10, 1989, in the morning.

I have told this story before only to a few, but I am getting old and there is no reason it has to be a secret other than my own vanity. Anyway, as it turns out some of my FB friends right here are among my dearest friends, at least those I interact with the most.

This event happened at the end of the first ten-day Mahamudra Intensive teaching in 1989, It was on that last session, when Rinpoche was saying goodbye to the group of us. There we were, sitting in the newly constructed great shrine hall which took so much effort and time to complete.

Rinpoche was thanking all of us for coming, many from great distances. And he reflected on the original plans for this center, which came from his guru, the great 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, whom I was fortunate to meet in 1974.

And Rinpoche spoke that day of the yet-unrealized plans of His Holiness the 16th Karmapa to also build a retreat facility, a place where men and women could be trained in the traditional Tibetan closed-retreat that lasts three years, three months, and three days. In such a retreat, the retreatants never lie down to sleep for the entire time. They sleep sitting up in a special box. And as Rinpoche spoke, tears flowed down his face as he explained that he had not yet been able to fulfill the plans to build such a retreat as His Holiness had requested.

I can tell you, Rinpoche does not speak like this often, and there was not a dry eye in the place. When Rinpoche stopped speaking and we all filed out of the shrine room, I was in a kind of shock.

To this day, I can remember the exact moment and place where I was as I walked around the corner and side of the monastery near the Tara shrine room. I was very moved by Rinpoche's sharing with us his dreams. And it had been so difficult (and exhausting) just building the new monastery shrine-hall that I had no idea how we would ever be able (so it seemed at the time) to build a whole additional retreat complex.

I cast about in my mind to see who among the students that I was just sitting with would be capable of enabling such a project and came up with only one option, and it took me by complete surprise. Perhaps only someone like me could do such a thing, if I really put my heart into it.

This realization found me kind of stunned and terrified at the very thought, but at the same time I knew I had to do it. My memory is not so good, but I must have sent a note or signaled somehow to Rinpoche that I was willing to try to help make this retreat center a reality, because I got a message later that day that Rinpoche wanted to see me.

When I got to his room in the monastery, there was no translator and Rinpoche speaks no English. Rinpoche was waiting for me, and he approached; he had something in his hand, coming quite up-close.

There were just the two of us. He placed into my hands what I now saw was a mala, the rosary-like-beads that Tibetans use for counting mantras. And he was saying something, something that I at first did not understand because of his English. He was saying "Mala, my mala."

As I looked down, I saw that he was handing me his own personal mala, giving it to me. Of course, I, and probably all of his students, had seen this incredible mala that was worn down from use like none I had ever seen. I was speechless. Rinpoche was entrusting me with his own mala and at the same time the responsibility of furthering the retreat project. That was all that was said that day, those few words and the placing of that precious mala in my hands. I was overwhelmed.

When Ngodup Burkhar, his long-time translator, learned of what Rinpoche had done, he was dumbfounded. He pointed out that Rinpoche had used this mala for as long as Ngodup had known him, and had this mala from before he ever came to this country, and had used it in the countless sessions and empowerments that Rinpoche performed. Ngodup says Rinpoche likes to do at least 10,000 mantras before an empowerment.

And this translator said he had hoped one day to inherit it, but he was probably just kidding me. I was humbled by it all and hoped I could carry through with Rinpoche's intention. At this point, for me it was choiceless.

Well, that's my story and I am glad to have finally said it openly. As for the retreat center, my wife Margaret and I actually helped to create that center, working hard to raise the funds and help to organize and advertise the whole thing, along with the totally generous help from the Chinese Buddhist community in and around New York.

Our Chinese community is so incredible, so generous and so diligent. Americans are just beginning to learn how to support the dharma, if we want it to flourish, but the Chinese are raised in this ethic. I am so thankful for their support.

And so, the three-year retreat center was built and the first retreat was undertaken in 1993 and has been active ever since, turning out dozens of lamas, those who complete the three-year retreat.

A retreat lama undergoes very strict training, where they remain in silence except for functional talking at lunchbreak. There are no phone calls, no drinking coffee, and no personal computers, phones, ipods, etc. The retreatants do not leave their small rooms during practice sessions except to go to the bathroom. They sleep in their meditation boxes and while sleeping at night, They do not lie down.

It has been explained to me that the main purpose of becoming a lama after the three-year, four-month retreat is so the newly empowered lama can teach all of the main dharma practices of the Karma Kagyu Lineage:

- Ngöndro (four months)

Ngöndro (four months)

- Mahamudra (one month)

Mahamudra (one month)

- Karma Pakshi (one month)

Karma Pakshi (one month)

- White Tara (one month)

White Tara (one month)

- Guru Yoga of one of the following: Marpa, Milarepa, or Gampopa (three months)

Guru Yoga of one of the following: Marpa, Milarepa, or Gampopa (three months)

- Vajrayogini (nine months)

Vajrayogini (nine months)

- Six Yogas of Naropa (seven months)

Six Yogas of Naropa (seven months)

- Chakrasamvara (seven months)

Chakrasamvara (seven months)

- Amitabha (two months)

Amitabha (two months)

- Gyalwa Gyamtso (six months)

Gyalwa Gyamtso (six months)

The retreat is called Karmé Ling and it is in Delhi, NY, and now is finishing its seventh three-year retreat, turning out fully-trained lamas. Today, it is a whole complex, with a separate retreat house for men and woman, a lama house, shrine hall, fully-equipped kitchen for events and a great many separate retreat buildings for individuals, not to mention what are called the “long houses,” rows of small retreat houses strung together. It also has a columbarium where the ashes of the sangha are placed. Karmé Ling is a wonderful place indeed.

Later on, during a visit by Rinpoche to our center, he went over his mala with me, almost bead by bead showing me where all of the parts came from, this bead from the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche, another from the previous Thrangu

Rinpoche and so on. Aside from the dharma and my family, that mala is my most precious possession.

“Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol”

The above is my Bodhisattva name. I was given the Bodhsattva vow many years go as part of a large group, but we did not receive individual Bodhisattva names. Years later, I asked Rinpoche for a Bodhisattva name. He thought about it for a while and then give me the one listed above. Translated, “Sempa” means intention, “Chönyi” means Dharmata (true nature of the mind), and “Rangdrol” means self-liberating, so the name means “self-liberating nature-of-the-mind.”

When I first took refuge in 1983, I was given the dharma name “Karma Dhondup Dawa,” which translates as “Moon of Accomplishment.”

As mentioned, during a visit to our center here in Big Rapids in early May of 1991, KKR told me about the various parts of the mala. First, the bodhi seeds were perfectly round at the beginning, as were all the corals. The seeds were never stained but became the deep brown glossy-color they are today through use. Neither the corals nor the seeds were filed, flattened or treated in any way.

Referring to the enclosed image, the red coral guru bead, the green slider stone next to it, and the red coral bead on the opposite side of the mala belonged and were used by the previous Thrangu rinpoche (not the current one), the two side red-corals belonged and were used by the Thrangu Rinpoche, we have known that died not long ago..

The mantra counters were a gift from the current Thrangu Rinpoche. The tiny white bead on the red string was given to KKR by the monk about whom he tells the story that he had a dream in which almost all of the pus and abscess that was wracking his body vanished, all except a small part in his toes. The 10,000-Counter is an ordinary counter that KKR added to the mala.

Notes on Malas”

The Tibetan “rosary” or mala consists of 108 beads strung together around a central “guru” bead. Aside from the 108 beads, many practitioners (most) add three additional beads.

These three marker beads are often of old red-coral from Tibet. Originally, they were mined on the Southern coast of Italy and got to Tibet via the ancient trade routes – the Silk Road. In modern times, those beds died out, due to pollution, so there is no more of this kind of coral, I am told.

If you want to add these three marker beads, this will necessitate that the mala is restrung, which is kind of complicated. You may want to have someone who knows how to do it restring it.

These three beads should be placed as follows, starting with the bead after the guru bead:

(1) One after the 27th bead.

(2) One after the 54th bead.

(3) One after the 81st bead.

In other words, one bead is opposite the guru bead. The guru bead is the bead at the end with the tassel. The two other beads are placed so to mark the quarters. These three extra beads are called counter or “marker” beads and most lamas string their malas this way. The extra beads are considered auspicious, because they cause us to do a few extra mantras, etc., in case we messed up on any of the 108. They are also, IMO, pretty.

[Photo of Rinpoche’s mala by me.]

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American Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 6, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“One might think that it is possible to practice only shamatha or practice vipashyana without doing any shamatha. But in fact whatever Buddhist practices one does, one must practice both shamatha and vipashyana meditation together. This is illustrated by the example of a butter lamp, which Tibetans used in the past to illuminate the darkness. A butter lamp’s light is very clear and bright. For a lamp to give light it must have the qualities of being steady and not blown around by the wind. If the flame is not bright or steady, one won’t see things in the dark. “ “In the same way, to see the true nature of phenomena, one has to have a clear understanding and be able to focus the mind on the object for as long as is necessary. If either one of these is missing, then the true nature of things cannot be perceived. One needs to have both shamatha (the unwavering light) and vipashyana (the bright flame). “

End of quote.

My way of speaking about these two, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is that it is like the process of threading a very fine needle. Shamata allows us to hold the hand steady while Vipassana sees to it that we thread the needle.

In my own experience, these two, Shamata and Vipassana are two parts of a single mudra and not really separate. I had a lot of trouble learning Shamata, and spent 31 years trying to learn it, only to find out that I already had excellent Shamata due to my working with very detailed projects like programming and archiving. I was trying too hard. LOL.

In fact, when I finally broke through and managed Vipassana (Insight Meditation), Shamata arose with it, fully realized. We cannot have one without the other, and you can’t practice Mahamudra without the two of them acting as one.

Our growing up spiritually stops when we stop growing and lose track of our vertical component and just find ourselves spreading out horizontally like on a

flat plain. In other words, the tip of the top is equal in all directions. Of course, it's all in our mind. Where else would it be?

We have to feel all this out by ourselves. Our dharma teachers can point out what they can to us, yet we have to do the work and turn the wheel of our own dharma.

And the hard part to realize. IMO, is to become familiar enough with our own mind that we can actually use and work with it. That is the sine-qua-non of dharma training without which no realization can take place, familiarity with what we have always been familiar with already, but just lacked awareness of.

Of course, it's a Catch-22 or whatever you want to call it, a koan or meditation prompt that if used recursively can force us out of our Samsaric groove.

And it's embarrassingly simple, just too close to get a handle on. Remember that the great Mahasiddha Tilopa hit his student Naropa so hard between the eyes with his sandal that it knocked him out, which sounds oddly Zen like.

What worries me, worry wort that I am, is that in today's world where both Zen and Vajrayana are increasingly fading from access, that some adventitious awareness will arise that facilitates this process of what in our Karma Kagyu tradition is called "Recognition" as to the nature of the mind.

It's not that fire is not racing through the common mind like a lit fuse. It already is. Only how to fashion a vehicle to contain it like we are trying to contain fusion. The traditional pointing out instructions by a guru or an authentic practitioner may remain in place or perhaps will be imploded by these modern circumstances in favor of another approach. I'm sure I don't know, but I can feel the pressure to bend or forge the will of past traditions into something new. It's just beneath the surface.

Remember how the dharma changed when it went from India into Tibet, a process said to take some 300 years. Well, the dharma is coming into America, so look for changes that are bound to be there.

Here in the U.S., as time passes, the chinks or gaps in the armor of dharma practice seem to be filling in themselves and moving not only ahead, but forging the diamond-vajra, the union of compassion and wisdom. It's happening.

We may be both annealing and melding the heat of the interest in dharma in America, forging something new that will retain the traditional values of the dharma with the particular qualities innate in the nature of America's roots. It is my impression that the growing heat of the need for realization is going to

blow open some kind of avenue to what has been called “Recognition” as to the nature of the mind.

Of course, now it’s America’s turn.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

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The Yidam

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 7, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In Vajrayana Buddhism, the yidam is considered the route of accomplishment or siddhi, providing the blessings and methods or actual path for spiritual realization.

The yidam is essential to understand in Vajrayana dharma, and is not as many believe, any kind of secret. It's not secret, but rather unique to each individual and thus not applicable to anyone else.

The best I can offer is to share my own personal experience and give a critique of how yidams are often described. This highlights a common tension between conventional explanations and the lived reality of practice. I am not saying this is the only way, just that it is my experience.

Many standard accounts inadvertently externalize the yidam, framing it as something "out there" to be selected or invoked, like picking a deity from a catalog (e.g., Vajrayogini or Chakrasamvara). Of course, for starters, I did that many decades ago. For fun, here is my story.

I decided and picked the Bodhisattva Vajrapani as my Yidam. I got all serious about it and asked my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche where I could get the empowerment. Rinpoche had not ever offered that empowerment, at least in this country.

Yet, kind that he is, Rinpoche agreed to come to our center (Heart Center KTC) and offer that empowerment, which to my surprise he did. I was so grateful. Along with the Vajrapani empowerment, rinpoche also gave instructions. The empowerment was from a cycle of empowerments by the 9th Karmapa, in this case "Dorje Tumpo," a wrathful form of Vajrapani that had a 12-syllable mantra.

When one takes empowerment that we are very serious about it is customary to do 100,000 mantras for each syllable in that mantra, which I promptly did, some 1,200,000 mantras and with that I dug in.

Rinpoche took note and we made a special pecha (Tibetan style practice book) for Vajrapani. Khenpo Rinpoche even had me come to KTD our monastery

(Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) and instruct our Sangha in the Vajrapani practice, and in the main shrine room.

And to top that off I went, with my wife, and young son to Ralang Monastery in Sikkim where one of the four Heart Sons of the Karmapa lived, Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, said to be the emanation of Vajrapani in the Karma Kagyu Lineage.

Gyaltsab Rinpoche gave the empowerment to me, my wife, son, and our dear friend Ngodup Burkhar who had been the translator for Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for twelve years. And so that is my experience in picking a yidam from outside.

I did this practice for years, but over time I came to understand that no matter how much I loved and revered Vajrapani, and I still do, something was still missing. Khenpo Rinpoche and I had a good laugh about this when I was ready to admit that I still had a ways to go as to find for me a true yidam. I did my best, but no go. So much for my picking one out of a hat.

What followed was many more years of practice until more to do with fate than fancy, I actually found a natural yidam that led me to at long last Recognition, recognizing the true nature of my mind. There is no room here for that story, but I will tell it if there is some request for it.

Anyway, picking a yidam from the outside, at least for me, got everything backward. To me this can indeed feel like putting the cart before the horse, especially if it overlooks the organic, step-by-step discovery process where the true path emerges retrospectively through what actually works for us in our direct experience, i.e. we discover it from within.

In the Karma Kagyu lineage and broader Vajrayana traditions, our perspective aligns closely with deeper teachings on the yidam as an inherently internal process of realization, rather than an external object of focus. It comes from within and not from out there. We don't take it in but turn what is within us into a path toward realization.

In other words, the yidam is not fundamentally an external deity to worship or "choose" in a preconceived way but rather an expression of our own enlightened nature, our buddha-nature or clear-light mind that unfolds for us through actual practice. It's a method for transforming ordinary self-perception into enlightened awareness, discovered experientially by us rather than being imposed or selected from the outside.

Yidam' is an Internal Expression of Our Own Nature

At its core, in Vajrayana dharma (including the Karma Kagyu), the yidam represents the inseparability of pure awareness and form, emanating from our own innate potential rather than existing as an independent, external entity. It is discovered or revealed to us through our own internal practice.

Traditional texts and teachers emphasize that the yidam should not be regarded as an “external god who will save us,” but as manifestations of our true, enlightened essence finally revealed. This “godless” or naturalistic approach avoids supernaturalism, instead treating our yidam as a tool for internal self-transformation, much like relating to a mythical or fictional figure for inspiration, without literal belief in their external reality. Yidams are a means, not an end in themselves.

For instance, yidams aren’t limited to divine forms; they can be historical humans (like Machig Labdrön or even the Karmapa in Karma Kagyu), living people, or even us visualized as enlightened, as long as we can confidently merge our mind and become one with that enlightened quality.

This internal framing addresses the concern that the yidam isn’t something we “know” upfront by naming an external deity, but a dynamic bond that reveals itself through the actual practice of purifying the mind, leading to the realization of emptiness and the true nature of reality.

In deity yoga (the heart of yidam practice), we don’t just focus on something outside; we visualize and become the yidam because it is our path, gradually replacing our ordinary mind and self-image with our more enlightened faculties as we discover them. This process activates our inherent potential for qualities like wisdom or compassion, transforming disturbing emotions into constructive energy without relying on an external savior. We do this ourselves!

The analogy of arriving somewhere and then looking back to describe how we got there captures the essence of yidam practice as a “lightning path” or swift method in Vajrayana, simply meaning it finally works because we work it. Our path is revealed as we go.

It’s not about predetermining the route by selecting a deity in advance but instead allowing within us a workable path to emerge through guided experimentation and continuing direct experience. All natural.

This can begin with a teacher’s empowerment (wang), which plants a seed by introducing a yidam form suited to our karmic inclinations or obstacles—not as a fixed external choice, but as a starting point for us to explore. Often contemplation of the ‘Common Preliminaries (The Four Thoughts That Turn

the Mind Toward the Dharma) is again required to jump start our learning the practice of Mahamudra.

In Karma Kagyu specifically, this internal discovery is amplified by the lineage's emphasis on guru yoga, where the lama (often the Karmapa) or our guru serves as the source of the yidam, embodying the path itself. The yidam emerges as a "heart bond" through our actual practice, not intellectual selection, aligning with our view that it's about finding what actually works for us experientially.

As mentioned, a view that is misleading deals with externalizing the yidam from outside, and introductory teachings or cultural adaptations, where yidams are presented as deities to make them more accessible, yet to me that has it just backward.

Advanced Vajrayana instructions clarify that at best this is provisiona. Yidams have no inherent existence and are inseparable from our own mind, which we must discover each for ourselves. Our Yidam is that path that ultimately will work to bring us to realization or at least Recognition.

Choosing a fixed form like Vajrayogini isn't the end goal but only a provisional scaffold—much like if we had a map we adjust as we travel. It's our way to go.

The real "workable path" we describe arises through trial, refinement, and realization, where the yidam reveals itself as our own nature, not something imposed or taken in from outside.

This avoids the cart-before-horse trap by prioritizing direct experience over conceptual labeling.

[A rupa of Vajrapani that is on my shrine.]

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The Wild Horse of the Mind

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

October 8, 2025

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/65273df9-4a4c-4b5a-b122-db4376a0ae6c_918x613.jpeg

There comes a point in our life, in our discovery of dharma and submission to training, where an authentic master points out the nature of our own mind to us so that we actually first recognize it. And this event is appropriately called "Recognition."

Anyway, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, my Root lama, said in this particular teaching:

" 'Recognition' is like a herd of wild horses thundering across the plains. At some moment, if we are fortunate, it is pointed out to us so that we recognize it, one particular wild horse in the herd, a stallion perhaps, and as Rinpoche put it "... covered with dirt and unkempt hair, and of this color and not that color, with this amount of wildness and not that, and so on. This recognition point is when we first realize that this particular wild stallion is OUR wild stallion, and that we and we alone must tame it, and that we have this stallion to ride now. That is the idea or point of Recognition."

And Khenpo Rinpoche said further. " To start with, in other words, it is important to have a recognition of your mind's nature through its being pointed out and so forth. However, you must not think that gaining that recognition is the culmination of the path. It is the starting point of this phase of the path. Remember, recognition of your mind's nature when it is pointed out and realization of your mind's nature are different. Recognition is the starting point of the practice of resting in your mind's nature. The culmination of that is realization."

The quotation continues: "For example, imagine that someone owns a horse but for many years that horse has been allowed to run wild and free. After many years, even the owner would not recognize it, but the herder points out the horse to the owner and says, 'This is your horse. This is the horse that you had and lost track of so many years ago.' That is very much like the situation of somebody who has had their mind pointed out to them. That which was always yours but had been unrecognized has now been pointed out or introduced to you."

“However, just as in the case of the horse, simply knowing that this wild horse is your horse is not enough to enable you to ride it. You have to methodically tame the horse and get it to where it can be useful to you, where you can actually ride it and ride it safely. In the same way, simply having your mind pointed out to you is not enough. It having been pointed out to you, your mind is still wild, still habitually prone to distraction”

” Therefore, beginners must cultivate a recollection or mindfulness that is free of distraction. In order to continue to work with your initial recognition of your mind’s nature, you must intentionally cultivate the state of undistractedness, and you must intentionally meditate. As long as the wild horse of your mind has not been tamed, you have to continue to tame it diligently through the enforcement of undistractedness.”

“Just as would happen if you simply got on top of an untamed horse once it was pointed out to you and would either not be able to get on it in the first place or would be thrown off it and perhaps injured. In the same way, if you do not tame your mind, if you do not cultivate undistracted recollection, then you will be thrown off of the recognition of your mind’s nature by the habit of distraction.”

I don’t know how to put it as well as Rinpoche did. It took all of us by surprise, and at some point, I took it to heart and did something about it. I even ended up volunteering to do the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), those medieval exercises, all 555,555 of them (111,111 refuge prayers, 111,111 full-length prostrations, 111,111 100-syllable mantras, 111,111 mandala offerings, and 111,111 guru yoga practices).

And even then, when I finally finished ‘The Ngondro’ and told Rinpoche I had finished, and asked should I start the deity practices, his response was this. “Do you want to know what I would do if I were you?”

Of course, I said yes. And Rinpoche then said, “I would do another whole round of the ‘Extraordinary Preliminaries’ practices,” another ‘Ngondro.’ And I (and Margaret) did just that, because we trusted that Rinpoche knew what we needed. And that he did.

For a limited time, I am doing a few Zoom astrology readings. If interested, please email me with the subject “READINGS.”

EMAIL