

Spirit Grooves Archive

Dharma Writings — Book Five 2026

Articles 401–464

By Michael Erlewine

SpiritGrooves.net



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I intuitively and spontaneously respond to seeing art and graphics. I believe I got this from my mom who was a fine-arts painter and batik artist. In the Tibetan dharma system just as there is ‘Liberation Through Hearing” (Tibetan Book of the Dead), there is also Thongdrol, ‘Liberation Through Seeing’..... 164

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Becoming Perfect

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 29, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/77d2a200-5c83-4bd6-960e-ee2219f196eb_1024x1024.jpeg

What about the dharma idea that ‘being’ itself is at best ‘becoming’, much like the old use of the word becoming as in the sentence “Isn’t that a becoming dress she is wearing.” What if being has never actually ‘been’ but is at best becoming, coming to be, but not actual being as in it has been. Being has never been.

What this specific insight that “Being Has Never Been” points at is subtle and radical. Let’s consider this.

If being requires stability, completeness, and arrival at itself, at ‘being’, independence from conditions, then nothing has ever actually “been” in that sense.

Every apparent moment of being is already dissolving into the next moment, dependent on what preceded it, and shaped by conditions it didn’t choose. It is never fully itself because the “itself” is always moving. This means being is always promissory — always about to be, always just almost was, but is never fully present as a completed fact. Life is a process and never has been a state.

The dress that is becoming, the ‘becoming dress’, yet never is quite beautiful as in a frozen or static sense. In other words, it becomes beautiful in the wearing and living, in the movement, in the light of that moment. Freeze it or demand it be static or permanent and something is already lost.

Yet gathering together to have a good laugh, play games, and celebrate is only one half of the equation. We gather together as a family or group of friends to celebrate, yet what strikes me is that loudness and laughter and letting go together to have a good time is followed by what life means and what we mean to one another, and this maps remarkably well onto what the Kagyü masters describe as the natural maturation of awareness.

The mind, when it quiets, stops needing external confirmation that something is meaningful. It begins to rest in what Mahamudra calls the ordinary face of awareness — simple, undecorated, present.

In that tradition, what I’m experiencing at 85 wouldn’t be seen as a loss, learning more toward meaning and what we mean to one another. It would

be recognized as the path naturally clarifying itself about being, becoming, and that it has never been .

In the Karma Kagyü and Mahamudra view, this insight is not merely philosophical — it is liberating:

The self that suffers is the self that insists on being — on being fixed, recognized, permanent, and having arrived.

When awareness relaxes its grip on being something, what remains is not nothing — it is the open, luminous quality of becoming itself.

This is what Mahamudra calls the natural state — not a state that already is, but an ongoing, self-refreshing aliveness that never quite crystallizes into a thing -- anything,

The Tibetan term “rang jung” — self-arising — points at exactly this. Awareness doesn’t exist as a noun, something we ‘have’. It arises, fresh, moment-to-moment. It is perpetually becoming itself without ever having arrived and having been a fixed thing.

And perhaps most beautifully — in that perpetual becoming, there is something that is always fitting, always appropriate to the current moment — just like the becoming dress. Not being or having been but perfectly becoming.

At 85, having watched decades of what seemed or I hoped at as solid gradually revealing itself as fluid — I am experiencing this not as philosophy but as direct perception. Which, in the Kagyü tradition, is considered far more valuable than any conceptual understanding of it.

Everything changes but change itself.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Mother Chart and the Child Chart

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 30, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Heliocentric and Geocentric Astrology

by Michael Erlewine

Heliocentric and Geocentric Astrology [The article was put together with the help of Claude.AI which has become my chosen AI researcher, and I have stopped using ChatGPT and GROK.} When I first programmed astrology — and I was the first person to program astrology on microcomputers and share those algorithms with all astrologers, when found Matrix Software in 1977 — the way the computation worked was revealing in itself. Scientists program the heliocentric planetary positions first, as the physically real data, and then use coordinate-transformation algorithms to convert those positions to geocentric. The computational sequence encodes a truth: heliocentric is primary, geocentric is derived. The math knew before the interpretation did. When I first saw my own heliocentric chart I was astounded at how different it was from my traditional geocentric chart. After a couple of months of working with it interpretively, I found the heliocentric chart was more accurate — more essentially me. Before I knew it I had transmigrated my identity from the geocentric to the heliocentric chart. That personal discovery led me to a framework I have worked with ever since: the heliocentric chart is the Mother Chart, and the geocentric chart is the Child Chart. One Discipline, Then Two To understand why most astrologers today work only with the geocentric chart, we have to go back to the moment the split occurred — and understand that for most of Western history, there was no split at all. In Copernicus's period, astrology and astronomy were considered subdivisions of a common subject called the "science of the stars," and the terms astrologer, astronomer, and mathematician were virtually interchangeable — they generally denoted anyone who studied the heavens using mathematical techniques. [Britannica, Nicolaus Copernicus] There was one enterprise with two faces: the descriptive (where are the planets?) and the interpretive (what do their positions mean for human life?). The Crisis Before Copernicus Something important was already destabilizing the unified discipline before Copernicus arrived. A philosopher named Pico della Mirandola had launched a devastating skeptical attack on the foundations of astrology, arguing that because astronomers

disagreed about the order of the planets, astrologers could not be certain about the strengths of the powers issuing from those planets. [Britannica, Nicolaus Copernicus] Copernicus was partly responding to this crisis — trying to produce a more coherent, elegant model of the heavens that would give astrology a firmer foundation. The deep irony is that his solution ended up doing the opposite. Why the Model Didn't Immediately Settle Anything A crucial and underappreciated fact: Copernicus's heliocentric model was not obviously better as a practical tool — not at first. For his contemporaries, the ideas presented by Copernicus were not markedly easier to use than the geocentric theory and did not produce more accurate predictions of planetary positions. Copernicus was aware of this and could not present any observational proof. [Wikipedia, Copernican Heliocentrism] The split was not driven by one side being functionally superior. It was driven by something else: institutional legitimacy, the Church, and what kind of knowledge was becoming acceptable in the new universities and scientific societies. The Structural Reason for the Split The two groups that emerged from the Copernican revolution faced opposite relationships to the new cosmology. For those who would become astronomers, accepting heliocentrism — eventually, after Kepler, Galileo, and Newton — was the price of entry into the emerging scientific institutions. In the 17th century the work of Kepler, Galileo, and Newton built on the heliocentric universe of Copernicus and produced the revolution that swept away the ideas of Aristotle and replaced them with the modern view of astronomy and natural science. [University of Rochester, The Copernican Model] The new Royal Society, the reformed universities, the patronage of princes — all of this aligned with the mathematical-mechanical worldview. To participate, you had to accept the new framework. For astrologers, the situation was structurally the opposite. Astrology is based on our perspective from Earth — it is as though the Sun and all the planets are revolving around us. Ptolemy's mathematics and the ephemeris remained accurate when used with Copernicus's heliocentric theory and Kepler's planetary laws, and there was no difference when using Ptolemy's theory to create and interpret charts. But none of this seemed to matter. [Penny Walters, Why Astrology Fell Out of Favour] The geocentric chart was not broken as a tool. It worked. But precisely because astrologers kept it, they were branded as clinging to a disapproved cosmology — even though from a phenomenological standpoint, the geocentric frame is completely real and valid. You are on Earth. You look up. The Sun rises and sets around you. The ascendant — the degree of the zodiac rising on the eastern horizon at the moment of birth — is entirely a function of your position on the surface of a particular planet. That is not wrong. It is a valid observational coordinate system and I use it everyday to chart our karma. There were reformers who

saw the problem clearly. In the 1650s, Joshua Childrey was associated with a group wishing to reform astrology along heliocentric and Baconian lines that would make it compatible with contemporary natural philosophy, finding support from figures within the Royal Society. [Wikipedia, Heliocentric Astrology] The attempt failed. The new scientific establishment drew the line not just at the cosmological model but at the entire premise: that planetary positions correlate with human personality and fate. By the mid-17th century astrology was struggling to maintain its respected position, and a division developed between astronomy and astrology that still exists to this day. Astrology was gradually removed from university curricula. [Penny Walters, Why Astrology Fell Out of Favour] The Geocentric Chart as Projected Image The geocentric chart is not false — it is a projection. Like a shadow on a wall. The shadow is real, it has a definite shape, it tells you something true. But it is the shadow of a three-dimensional object, not the object itself. The geocentric chart is the solar system as refracted through the lens of Earth's particular position, velocity, and tilt at the moment of birth. This is why it looks so different from the heliocentric chart. Retrograde motion, for instance, vanishes entirely in the heliocentric chart — because retrograde is purely a projection artifact, an optical effect of Earth's relative position and speed. In the heliocentric chart, all planets move direct, always, because you are watching from the center of the system itself. The Karma Chart and the Dharma Chart Out of decades of working with both charts, I have arrived at names that capture their essential difference. I call the geocentric chart the Karma Chart. It is more a chart of our circumstances — the particular life we are born into, the patterns and challenges and conditions we have to work through. It is the chart of the experience of being alive in a particular body, on a particular piece of ground, at a particular moment in history. I call the heliocentric chart the Dharma Chart. It more represents the Tribe or Archetype that each of us is and belongs to — the essential nature that is working through the Karma Chart. It is the chart of who we are at the level of Dharmadd before the refraction of earthly circumstance. The Mother Chart and the Child Chart. The Dharma Chart is primary — the fiducial, the reference standard, the ground truth of our dhaena's actual position within the solar system. The Karma Chart (geo) is derived from it, dependent on it, and yet entirely real in its own domain. Together they form a complete picture: who you are, and what you are here to work through. A Personal Note on the Heliocentric Ephemeris When I began this work in the early 1970s, there were no heliocentric ephemerides available for astrological use. I used to copy heliocentric positions by hand out of the U.S. government's American Ephemeris and Nautical Almanac — a large and expensive volume that I purchased one year at a time. My first book, published in 1975, was The Sun Is

Shining — a 400-year heliocentric ephemeris covering 1653 to 2050. None existed before it. That book, and the programming work that followed at Matrix Software, put the heliocentric chart into the hands of astrologers for the first time in any practical form. The astronomers had always had both charts. It was time astrologers did too. [Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]
EMAIL

The Dharma Sharer

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

March 31, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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On Knowing One Path and the Urgency to Speak

There is a distinction that dharma communities rarely make, and the absence of it causes confusion. The distinction is between a teacher and a sharer. I am not a teacher. I have never claimed to be. But I have been writing about dharma since 2007 — over 6,500 essays — and the urgency behind that writing has never dimmed. Understanding why requires understanding what a sharer is, and what moves one.

The Teacher and the Sharer

A dharma teacher, in the traditional sense, has traversed many paths. They have studied broadly, received transmissions across a wide range of practices, and can guide students with different temperaments toward different entry points. The three-year retreat exists precisely for this purpose — so that the retreatant encounters many practices, many approaches, many doors, and emerges capable of teaching from that breadth. A teacher can say: here are the paths, now let us find yours.

I cannot say that. I know one path. The path I took, under the guidance of my own teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, over thirty-six years of direct transmission in the Karma Kagyu lineage. I attended thirty-one ten-day Mahamudra intensives. My wife and I drove 1,600 miles each year to KTD — Karma Triyana Dharmachakra — on Mount Meads above Woodstock, New York, often with our children in the car. Public teachings were always given in Tibetan with a translator, but our personal practice — the daily work, the actual transmission — was done in Tibetan directly, without the buffer of translation. I went through the Common Preliminaries, the Extraordinary Preliminaries — Ngondro twice — the Special Preliminaries, Deity Practice, and on into what are called the non-dual or non-meditation practices: Mahamudra and Dzogchen. I walked one road, all the way, for a long time.

That is not a teacher's qualification. But it is something. And what it qualifies me to do is share — honestly, specifically, and from the inside — what that one road is like.

Absolute Bodhicitta and the Urgency to Share

In Tibetan Buddhism, Bodhicitta — the awakening mind, the heart of compassion — is described in two forms. Relative Bodhicitta is the aspiration to attain liberation for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is cultivated, practiced, and refined. It can be developed by anyone willing to work at it.

Absolute Bodhicitta is different in kind. It is not cultivated — it arises. It is the direct recognition of the empty, luminous nature of mind itself, and with it comes something that cannot quite be called a decision: an undying urgency to share whatever understanding has been glimpsed with anyone who might benefit. Not from a sense of superiority or special mission. More like someone who has found water in a desert and cannot walk past a thirsty person without saying something.

This is what I mean when I say I am a Dharma Sharer. The 6,500 essays I have written since 2007 are not a project I undertook. They are the expression of something that arose and has not stopped. The writing is not work in the ordinary sense. It is what Absolute Bodhicitta looks like from the inside when it finds a person who spent decades in a world of words — music databases, software, archives, books — and turns all of that toward the one thing that seems to actually matter.

Why a Sharer May Reach People a Teacher Cannot

A teacher presents the full landscape — many practices, many approaches, many possible entry points — because that is their role and their qualification. That breadth is exactly what a teacher should offer.

But a sharer does something different. The sharer is not presenting a landscape. The sharer is telling a story — one specific road, one specific experience, what it actually felt like from the inside. The student doesn't have to choose from a menu. They simply listen to someone's account and either recognize something in it or they don't. When they do recognize it, that recognition lands differently than instruction — more like confirmation than guidance, more like meeting someone who has been where you are trying to go and is willing to describe it plainly.

There is also the matter of proximity. A teacher, particularly in the Tibetan tradition, occupies a role that carries considerable formality and appropriate distance. The relationship is precious but structured. A sharer sits closer to the ground. The conversation feels less like receiving teaching and more like talking with someone who simply went ahead on the same road and came back willing to talk about it.

In years of writing I have heard from many people who told me that something I wrote reached them in a way that formal teaching had not. Not because what I wrote was better than the teaching — it wasn't — but because it was personal, specific, and unguarded in a way that formal transmission rarely is.

The Limitation as Strength

I only know one way. This could be — and sometimes is — offered as a criticism. A genuine teacher knows many ways. A sharer is bounded by their own experience.

I do not deny the limitation. I would not send someone with a temperament entirely unlike mine down the road I walked and tell them it would fit. It might not. Each of us has what is called a yidam — a unique entry point, a practice or approach that fits our particular nature in a way that no other quite does. Mine is not yours. A teacher can help you find yours. I can only tell you about mine.

But what I can do is demonstrate something that may be equally needed: the reality of the path itself. Not as a concept or a tradition or a set of practices to be studied, but as something a specific person actually walked, with a specific teacher, over a specific span of years, with specific results that were confirmed by that teacher as genuine.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche — appointed by the 16th Karmapa as his representative in North America, a man who gave his life to the transmission of the highest teachings — told me that the Recognition I had obtained was genuine and not shallow. I do not say this to establish status. I say it because it matters to the question of what a sharer is. A sharer is not someone who read the books and found them compelling. A sharer is someone who went all the way in and came back with something real, and cannot stop talking about it.

That is the limitation. It is also, I think, the only qualification that counts.

A Note on the Writing

Since 2007 I have written and published over 6,500 essays, the majority on dharma and related subjects, distributed across Medium, Facebook, and SpiritGrooves — currently accessible through StarTypes.com while the site migrates to a new home. Over 500 free e-books spanning an unusually wide range of subjects are available there as well, which gives some sense of the range of what has accumulated across a lifetime of polymathic curiosity.

I do not mention this as a credential. I mention it as evidence of what Absolute Bodhicitta actually looks like in practice. It does not look like a

decision to write. It looks like not being able to stop. The urgency is not manufactured or maintained by will. It is simply there, the way hunger is there, and the only response that makes sense is to keep writing.

The nature of mind. Which is, in the end, the only subject worth writing about.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Beyond Recognition

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 1, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“You need to sustain Recognition by being undistracted because as soon as you are distracted, then you are completely ordinary.

“Ordinary here simply means that you are accumulating karma again. You are bewildered again because you are distracted from the nature.

“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.”

End of quote.

I understand the above from personal experience only too well. To my surprise, I first experienced ‘Recognition’, the Vipassana part of Mahamudra spontaneously out in nature and not sitting on the cushion as I always assumed it would be. And it was vivid awareness and immersive.

Yet, when I went home that same day from the experience, my mind was completely ordinary again, as if what happened never happened.

In fact, I had to go out (and did) the very next morning and I again slipped into the immersion of Insight Meditation, which was not ordinary at all. And as a testimony to how powerful this recognition experience was, I then went out every following morning it was not pouring rain from late May until late November when the winter forced my camera and me inside.

I had not watched the Sun come up for years, probably for decades, and suddenly I watched the Sun rise every morning for six months or more. That should say more than words can about how important this experience of Mahamudra Insight Meditation can be for us. It changed my life forever, which is why it is worth realizing.

As to how we continue to keep Recognition as to the nature of the mind fresh and not allow it to go fallow, something can be said. First and most important, the very experience of Recognition is self-fueling and illuminating. In my experience, it is more addictive than anything I know, so in that sense it is self-perpetuating.

The correct words are that as we naturally extend and expand what recognition we have, that itself kicks the can down the road.

And there is the simple fact that continued forward motion speaks against backsliding. I have no intention of not practicing Mahamudra because it is not only immersive, but like a torus, consistently turns everything inside out. There is no encouragement to regress and nothing in the past worth remembering much less re-instating.

And I imagine that continued practice of Mahamudra seeds our future rebirths as well.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Well of the Present Moment

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 5, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/06e26423-9bbb-4aa9-b4d0-735ab9a6833e_1024x1024.jpeg

My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“You need to search for the nature of your mind, but you realize it by resting in the present, even though the nature itself does not rest or abide in the present.”

Yet the nature of the mind is bounded and bound by the past, present, and future as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa made clear with his classic words of advice:

“Don’t prolong the past.

Don’t invite the future.

Don’t alter the present.

Just relax as it is.”

The above four lines each are a distraction that further obscures our consciousness from being clear. It seems pretty clear.

If we noodle in the past all the time or get on the train of every thought that crosses our mind and ride that for a day or two, or ride on the hopes of the future, or even try to alter the present moment, meaning try to setup the ‘Now’ just how we want it to be, these are all profound distractions.

Like the TV show, we have to learn to “Curb Our Enthusiasm” and whatever distracts or entertains us, or even just interests us for busyness sake alone.

All I know is the when follow Tilopa’s advice listed above, and also acknowledge and own my reactions, I have a lot more energy and clarity of mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

"Much Ado About Nothing?"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 6, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/d01c8926-1edb-4ae6-b197-3a6cc33c70b9_2048x2048.jpeg

My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

"The point of samadhi, the real way to meditate, is to allow your mind to rest in its own way. It is not to just relax your mind or rest your mind. It is not even to force your mind to rest. It is to let your mind come to rest in relaxation in its own way. Then simply look directly at the nature of that relaxed mind. When your mind is relaxed in that way, you can easily see its nature directly or nakedly. Maintain mere undistracted recollection. All that has to be maintained in order to sustain this recognition is to not be distracted from it. The only effort required is the amount of recollection that keeps you looking at your mind. Whatever thought arises, do not reject it, accept it, change it, or alter it. Do not do anything to it. Simply look at its nature."

Sure, try to do nothing. Not so easy because we are always, always, always doing something. We will never succeed unless we can immerse ourselves in full and join in the nonduality, where there is no subject and no object. As the poet said, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

Short of that, we are short of that.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Housekeeping

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 7, 2026

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My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“If we look carefully, every thought we have is either beneficent or maleficent.”

I found it unsettling when I actually examined my own thoughts. Even if I was just trying to be funny or make a joke, and it might appear harmless, it was not.

And I have less patience for what I call vitriol or maliciousness, folks that are just being mean for meanness' sake. I'm not looking for arguments other than the constructive kind. And I don't have time or inclination for what obviously is aggressive intent. These folks can keep their distance. I forget that attitude still exists on the Internet, and it has not been seen around this blog much.

Perhaps I'm just getting old.

One of the signs of getting old is that we keep imaging that if we just get through this or that, life will be normal again. Not likely. We are still trying to climb the hill of life, and it has become a downhill slide, unwelcome events are just waiting to occur and they will eventually pile up.

As for these recent days, they are not quite spring but promise spring. The green is starting to come back to the grass. Some of my time has been taken up driving 100 mile round-trips to a hospital in Grand Rapids, helping a close friend get surgery

As for around home, lately I have been going through a large 13-drawer flat-file cabinet, huge drawer-by-drawer organizing many hundreds of posters and illustrations. It is time I sorted through them all. I am also framing dozens of posters too and posting a lot on the walls of our center and our home. I

include four posters by the great poster artist Bob Frieded, which I am going to use to decorate our living room. I include a photo below.

And yes, there is a bit of an otherworldly quality to all this, but I don't have a handle on it enough to find words to express it. I will find the words and they are almost there or at least coming into focus.

When talking about flowers and plants, the common parlance when the flowers start to get old is that they are "finishing up." Well, at almost 85 I guess you could say that I am finishing up, yet what does that mean?

It's all about resting in place and letting go on a deeper level, meaning letting go, letting my grip go and open up enough so that what's been held down and suppressed can rise up, pass by, and head out.

Hot air rises.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me depicting the uphill climb that become increasingly more difficult with age..]

EMAIL

Tedium Is as Tedium Does

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 8, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/93a59952-345f-4609-9506-13a75721460b_1024x1024.jpeg

My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“Basically, when your mind is in a state of apathy, neutrality, or pronounced bewilderment you need to tighten up as was described in this morning’s teaching. I do not know that much about it because I do not use one, but having watched people work with computers, I think that the type of concentration that people employ in order to work on a computer is probably a good opportunity for looking at your mind’s nature. Judging by the demeanor and facial expressions of people as they work on the computer, it involves a state of concentration that is equal to that of a state of great pleasure or great misery [laughter], and therefore I think that if you want to see the nature of your mind you should look at it while you are working on your computer.”

Obviously, such a statement by Rinpoche linking computers and dharma is pause for consideration, because in my experience, Rinpoche never said anything for no reason.

And of course I have tried it. As an archivist of popular culture (music, film, astrology, and other studies), I was able to get beyond the fear of the tedium of prolonged concentration on clarifying data one item at a time, running into the many millions of items. To work in such an area, one must rest in the imagined boredom of sheer rote data accumulation.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Shocked Aware

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 9, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/0205649e-8c34-4a81-b7ee-a2559cb9e657_1024x1024.jpeg

My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“There are many stories about this. We cannot assume that recognition is going to happen only in some kind of elegant pleasant way. For example, there was a young tulku who was becoming very well educated. He was well-behaved and very impressive in every way. He was good looking and personable. He was charismatic. He was very, very smart, and he was becoming very much respected in his area. As he was often called upon to do, one time he had to give a large public empowerment where he would be seated wearing his finest clothing on a nice tall throne in front of a truly large crowd of people. He knew how to do his job very well. He could chant with a loud and pleasant voice, give the empowerment properly, and so on. As he took his seat and prepared to give this empowerment to this large crowd of people and adjusted his posture on the cushion, all of a sudden to his great surprise he let out a huge resounding fart. [Laughter.]”

“This is even worse in Tibetan culture than it would be in ours. Imagine, if the President farted during a White House press conference. It was that degree of, “Oh, oh!” Everyone laughed. This could have been a crowd of some 5,000 people laughing at him. They laughed because it was unheard of. He was incredibly embarrassed, and because he had been trained, his response to embarrassment and the only way he could deal with the suffering of his embarrassment was to look at the nature of his mind. That was the day on which he decisively recognized the nature of his mind.”

End of quote

This is a traditional story. In other versions of this story, it is noted that it was of some concern that a high ‘tulku’ or incarnate lama had not recognized the nature of the mind at his age.

I find it of particular interest that Rinpoche points out that the event of definitive recognition as to the nature of the mind is not precipitated by some grand epiphany or “pleasant” moment but can occur or be provoked by hardship and difficult times. This was true in my case and happened in one of the hardest and most difficult life experiences I have ever encountered.

In other words, it took a hardship like that to bring me down from my high horse and to my senses, just cruising along down to where the rubber meets the road.

And in my case, it did not occur sitting on my meditation cushion for 39 years or so, as I always imagined it would. It was like a complete non-sequitur, a break from ordinary life, and a hard one at that.

So, what I am saying here is that it was not the next ordinary step in my life path, but rather a complete break with my normal path, which of course makes sense. There is no way I could have anticipated “Recognition” because I had no inkling as to what it was like and no way to anticipate it. It was a clean break with everything I had known up until then.

And, as mentioned, even my carefully groomed and maintained practice of dharma by definition had no idea of what it was like, because in my entire life (and according to the Dharma texts, perhaps innumerable lives) I had never experienced what is called Insight Meditation (the Vipassana of Mahamudra) and all of my intellectual imagining what it would be like, that and a ticket would get me a ride on the bus.

Just as for the young tulku it took an extraordinary event to shock or jot him into recognizing the nature of his own mind, so for each of us we have no idea what it will take for us to experience recognition.

Being a “good” and dedicated practitioner as we imagine what ‘Recognition’ is like is just an idea we have, a conception we have concocted and it will be washed away at the first sign of actual recognition as to the mind’s nature.

And this is why all of the pith dharma texts say that shock, surprise, a jolt, or intense hardships are your friend, being perhaps the only way we will ever be popped out of the groove we currently float along in. When something untoward happens, something shocking, use that moment to look at the nature of the mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Familiar Face in a Crowd

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 10, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a6662db4-4d6a-46b1-9086-4eda58e5de7e_1024x1024.jpeg

My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“It is taught that one should rest one’s mind, one’s awareness, one’s cognition, naturally in a state that is beyond description and thought. In that way, one should rest at ease.”

“However, the notion of “to rest” something or to put or place something—this is just a word. Do not think that there is actually something you get hold of and put or place or rest somewhere.

“There is nothing you can hold onto in your mind and bring to rest or put or place somewhere. There is nothing you can pick up and then put down again. There is nothing you can fix or alter into a state of rest. We use the term rest or placement simply to mean allowing your mind to be what it already is, to be as it is.”

“Therefore, there is nothing to meditate on that is an intellectual contrivance. There is no deity to meditate on here, so there is no fear of the deity not appearing clearly.”

End of quote

When the Buddhists say there are 84,000 dharma, they are serious. Each of our dharma paths can be so different from that of an other. That’s why studying the extant dharma texts, while perhaps helpful, for me were not much help. More important, what was helpful is for me to start looking at and searching my own mind by myself. And this is because what I read in the pith dharma teachings and what I myself experienced were that vastly different. Anyway, all those accounts amount to is for each of us to actually search our own mind. So, it is much easier to start to look at our own mind than to read 1,000 dharma books, IMO.

All that is required is to stop only looking outward at the world of appearance and instead turn and look inward and begin to get to know and work with the mind itself. It’s the most familiar thing that we are yet to become familiar with. It has been described like recognizing a dear and familiar friend in crowd.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Karma Eating Itself

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 16, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1d5fc1c0-abf8-49fb-a5ad-88a514404b00_1024x1024.jpeg

I'm crawling out of winter, of course, and into the sun, and also out of a pile of things which I have to do that stand before me doing what I would like. So, that's progress of some kind.

I'm pretty much done with all the simple renovations of the 'Heart Center' dharma center next door. Moving on.

Actually, just moving to "Handyman Mike" mode and round-two in upkeep. I give up ever getting beyond the evergreen list of what needs to be done. It is much easier to make that list my agenda rather than imagine I will ever get all that stuff done. Age out distances youth every time.

Instead of finding time for my 'hobbies', it's far easier to just get in line with what demands to be done and feature that. And since I have the to-do list to look forward to, I might as well look forward to it.

What does it matter what I do. I carry my dharma practice with me, so that's no interference, and while I like to be creative, I can be creative in my attitude about whatever I do each day. Let's try that.

I've got to turn this inside out so that my karma eats itself rather than things I care about, like my 'time'.

I learn to enjoy what I have to do and am getting the hang of it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Sharing Dharma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 20, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/ffd911db-13fc-47fe-bb2a-c5ebfde2e9b0_1024x1024.jpeg

Bt Michael Erlewine

My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“The different stages and techniques presented here are not really successive techniques in the sense of one to be practiced and then discarded in favor of the next and so on. They are more like stages in the progressive clarity of recognition and familiarity. If you understand therefore that the relationship between these techniques is more organic than it is mechanical, then you will understand what it is that is to be practiced when you leave here. First, you recognize your mind’s nature by looking at it. Then, you sustain that recognition.”

End of quote.

The above quote is true. In fact, all such descriptions are accurate, just different ways of saying and going over what the nature of the mind is all about.

I can tell you a story or offer a quote from my dharma teacher or whatever. It’s all the same thing because there is nothing else to say or talk about.

Unfortunately for me, instead of many ways to do this, I only have this one way to express it because that was my own experience. To my embarrassment, I only know this particular way of coming to know the actual nature of the mind, so I cannot talk about anything but my particular way because that is all that I have to talk about.

It appears selfish or too personal to me, this I know, but I know no other experience. That is why I say that I am a dharma ‘sharer’ rather than a dharma teacher. I share my own experience in the hope that some of what I relate is clear and helpful. I apologize that this is all I know.

It’s not that what I relate is not authentic, but that I only know this one way of going about it. I believe we can’t recognize the nature of the mind without wanting to share it with others.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Cutting the Cord

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 21, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a5c5dfae-a6c2-4e45-8392-f9a959593798_1024x1024.jpeg

My Dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said this:

“He gives a second analogy for this same first of the four points—resting in freshness without alteration. It is like a bundle of grass or reeds or wheat grass, of which the restraining cord is suddenly cut. As long as the bundle of grass is tightly bound by a restraining cord, it will all stand up somewhat unnaturally because of the force of the binding. But when the cord is cut it all just completely flops to the ground. It flops to the ground without any kind of particular direction. It just falls where it will, without anything keeping it off the ground. It flops totally. In the same way, your relaxation has to be completely letting go, complete relaxation, complete suspension of any attempt to prop yourself up in any way.”

I have been to Tibet a number of times and seen the innumerable small barley fields and plots at harvest time. I include an image as to how they look. The barley once cut is stacked around the field in small sheafs, each bound together by a cord.

I have tried this myself. You would think that if we cut the cord of a sheath of barley straw, it would fly apart, but that is not what happens.

What does happen if you cut the cord very gently, the straw does not fly apart but every-so-gently just slumps to rest, almost imperceptively. As Rinpoche says, that is how I understand we approach ‘resting’ in the nature of the mind.

It is a release of tension, a letting go and resting. In my dharma experience, after a certain number of years of training, much of what is left is this release Rinpoche is talking about, our very gently letting go. Resting in the nature of the mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Elision

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

April 30, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The thing about effort is that we need to use less of it, at least in the long run and as we age. Effort is for the young and even then, it is misplaced because we don't know any better.

Just look around and it is easy to see that those who are adept don't need effort to get there, at least anymore. They are led by joy and skill because it is easier. I'm not saying they never used effort, because apparently, we all do... at first.

Yet, in time we learn to avoid effort and just do what comes naturally as if it were an art, which it is. There is nothing worth the effort. Or a better way to say this is that all things bright and beautiful are freely given and are not the product of undue effort.

Aikido is the way of this world, at least IMO.

I say this because the longer I live the less uncalled-for effort I can put up with. It's just obviously the wrong way to do things. And this suggests that there is a right way to do things, one that is easy or natural for us. All craftsperson and artists know this. They demonstrate this. I not only can see this, but I also sense and find my way to it.

And let's not be silly. Of course, we have to learn new things and there is effort in that. Yet if we are going to get good at it, we have to remove the effort and replace it with skill and skillful means. Take practicing dharma for instance.

And this is one of the hardest lessons I have ever had to learn. When I had my major stroke, in a moment what I call my Self was shattered and vanished. It was nowhere around and I could not find it for refuge. And this went on for days, weeks, and months to a significant degree.

What we call the Self, once shattered by an untoward event can take a long time to reanimate and reassert itself. And I struggled with this, yet for me the worst was yet to come.

It had to do when I recovered from the stroke enough to return to my daily practice of dharma, sitting on the cushion and meditating as I had done for decades.

To my total shock, when I sat back down and renewed my daily dharma practices what I would call the patina or outer result of decades of practice, exactly like the Self, was also gone and had disappeared. I felt naked like a jaybird.

Not everything, mind you, but certainly most of what I would call 'earned results' were now just absent, gone

As to exactly what was gone took me a moment to realize. It was the result of forced effort to practice dharma that was missing, call it my merit badges or hard-earned effort of accumulation that had vanished.

All of what I had accumulated through dedicated but undue effort amounted to naught, nothing. I had to start all over, go to the back of the line and begin again. This too was burnt up and taken out by my stroke. I literally sat there and cried.

There was little that could have hurt more than that. To repeat, all of the various dharma practices I had religiously and with great effort had done amounted to nothing at all, as if they never existed. They had been wiped out and where they used to be there was now like a void. Why?

Because of all the effort it took to accomplish 100,000 mantras or whatever I had put forth, in fact anything that I had not done joyfully, but with forced or undue effort were quite simply removed from the scale of merit. All of that unjoyful-effort was not meritorious.

On the other hand, anything I had done joyfully and with the ease of love, the effects of that remained. However, much of the effort I had made for some 32 years or so had vanished.

And the lesson hard earned was that any dharma practice that is not done with joy but just to complete a requirement left the mark or stain of effort and such effort has to be walked back because the intent was not pure but clouded by the forced effort itself it took to do it. My stroke had removed what was done with effort to complete the requirement and not the purest intent, yet unlike the Self, it never came back. Hmmm.

That was news to me. For example, there is no point in reciting 100,000 mantras if you do them because you want to finish them rather than because you wanted to do them. And it was not that there was any subtlety to all this.

Anything touched with forced effort drew a blank and anything done with joy did not. I had to put that in my pipe and smoke it.

And to be more perfectly clear here in writing this. I no longer had a memory bank of things I could draw upon as a response, like a script. Instead, I had to compose thoughts not from a script or residual memory bank but make them up on the spot as if for the first time. Period. End of story. And that is still true today. I have no scripts.

If I want to say something, express myself, I actually have to make up those words from scratch and say them. I can't recall a script or memory and just remember and recite it again. I have to create it again in my mind, and as horrific as that first appeared to me, given time I have come to cherish it because it brings life to any words I say or write.

And the dharma realization follows the same path. Any dharma practice I did out of effort and without the best intent simply did not add up and is not recorded as merit but rather accumulates as unwanted karma. And I had assumed that all dharma practice I did, with or without effort, would be meritorious. Yet, in my experience it was not.

Only that dharma practiced that I did with good intent, with joy, was accumulated as merit. That practice I did just to get it done left a stain that itself had to be removed farther on down the line, and I am still walking some of that stained effort back.

So, start now not to do dharma practice with effort just to complete and get that practice done so you can move on, like accumulate 100,000 full-length prostrations, mantras, offerings, or what-not. Either have the proper motivation and intent or don't do anything at all is my advice.

Undue effort not only does no good, but it creates unwanted karma that you will only have to walk back later on, if you in fact can get out from under it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Horse To Water

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 1, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/3834b57b-642a-4a3e-8901-902e10adcba2_1024x1024.jpeg

It's so difficult to kind of wake up and look around, but apparently that's what each of us has to do when it comes to dharma. Of course, everyone from the past in books and teachings, and anyone alive can help us as help can. However, dharma is a do-it-yourself proposition. We have to help ourselves.

Even if we are surrounded with help, we still have to enlighten ourselves, moment by moment and step by step.

We have to develop our own view no matter how many books, teachings, and teachers we have. There is no other way. And our getting around to changing our view, once again, is all up to us. And we may have no certainty, little insight, and not much confidence at all. It too has to come from somewhere, and that somewhere is from within each of us.

I can only tell you how it is for me, not how it is for you. You have to do that on your own and it's not something we can read, but always something within ourselves we have to become aware of and realize. Most of us are not familiar with how to do this.

And like the old chestnut "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink," in the case as to familiarity with our own mind we don't yet know how to do this. Yes, we may have been shown how, but we still have to ourselves do this.

And our own uncertainty and lack of knowledge finds us fiddling with dharma rather than taking steps to become familiar enough with our own mind to actually use and work the mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

What It Is!

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 4, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Nothing in this world is other than it is. It is what it is, yet what is it?

Recently I have reviewed dozens of framed art pieces I have in closets and flat-file cabinets, around the house and our center, and I have always been careful to separate framed dharma art from other art, like rock 'n' roll posters. I assume that dharma art is more precious than rock concert poster art because.... Well, just because.

However, if I ask my heart about this, beauty is beauty, whether it is dignified by dharma or by rock 'n' roll. And the whole world is like this. Beauty is what it is to each of us, much like our a yidam is unique to us in dharma. A yidam is our particular and unique path to recognizing the true nature of the mind that we must discover.

It kind of broadens my view as to what is precious, if only to me. As they say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." That much is true. And beauty for each of us is individual.

When it's warm enough to sit outside in the sun, I sit on one of our plastic lawn chairs and lean back into the grape arbor fence, since the grape leaves have yet to come out, the back feet of the chair digging into the now soft ground, which is unfrozen.

I just do that for a while, usually less than I imagined. And then I'm off wandering around the yard looking at this and that. I'm still waiting for spring, but this is it. The wind which today reaches 25 mph is not our friend.

The air is still a little crisp, but it won't be long before it's hot out and we have to go out walking earlier and earlier in the morning, before the sun gets us. This after six months of almost no sun on our skin.

What am I dreaming about, if not this. I have wished for the sun on my body and no cold wind in my face.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Halfway Does Not Get Us There

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 5, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a58dcbb8-de08-465f-93c2-ff40044a3ea2_1024x1024.jpeg

I want to draw attention to the similarity between resting the mind as pointed out by neuroscientist Andrew Huberman and the traditional dharma concept of resting in the nature of mind as it has evolved over the centuries in Tibetan pith dharma texts.

In this modern world of today the opportunities for anxiety and unrest are literally everywhere. We are badgered by thoughts and worries much of the time.

Neuroscientists like Andrew Huberman point out the need for intermittent rest wherever we can find it, and I'd like to distinguish rest like plopping down on the couch and putting our feet up to watch a movie from the kind of dharma rest pointed out in resting in the nature of the mind.

Even in Tibetan mind training, at least as I know it, when we reach the end of our daily sitting meditation practice, we are asked to rest for a few moments in the mind itself, not that we know how to do this or really understand what is required.

Kicking back and finding rest in a hobby, game, movie, or what-have-you is important to all of us, and it works for us as well as it does.

However, the kind of rest indicated by Mahamudra meditation, which is not actually a form of meditation, but a form of non-meditation should not be confused with the above secular couch-resting or watching a football game.

The difference between the two is subtle but dramatic. Resting in Mahamudra requires resting not in duality like me (the subject) watching a movie or a game (the object), but rather in resting in non-duality where this no subject or object, the form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) that is part of Mahamudra is non-dual, meaning there is no subject and no object, but instead just full immersion in the nature of the mind itself, even if only momentarily. How do we get there?

The important difference is that in non-dual rest (when we are all in), the chain of thought and thinking is broken, and true refreshment takes place. We

are cut off and freed from our usual choke-chain of thought and with full immersion we also stop generating further karma.

However, the problem is that with the Mahamudra type of resting in the actual nature of the mind it requires that the true nature of the mind has to be pointed out to us by an authentic guru or dharma teacher. We don't just stumble on such a person or find our way there by ourselves. This thought is a mindbender.

And so, this requirement is a massive stumbling block for most people because they don't have an authentic dharma teacher or know how to find one and little to no time to devote to this.

And so, to repeat, the kicker as I understand it is that few of us have the time and inclination to find and work with an authentic dharma teacher long enough to train in what is called the 'pointing-out instructions' as to the nature of the mind.

We can't just go halfway to our goal and also get there. We have to go all the way and that not only requires real discipline on our part but also that we find an authentic teacher. And that for most of us seems almost impossible.

The point here is that such a task would require that we put a lot of things we now do in life to the side and concentrate on finding a teacher and then working with them. Our life would have to change and that is hard to do.

What would it take to bring us to that fork in the road that we would alter our lifestyle enough to accommodate that?

Only we know the answer to that and I repeat, getting only halfway does not get us there.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Sea of Learning

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 11, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In the sea of learning dharma, that's where we find ourselves -- if we find ourselves at all. We are already at sea and apparently have been forever.

If the 1960s marked our freedom to learn, then the 1970s introduced us to the many spiritual disciplines out there.

Although I looked over and looked into several spiritual disciplines, I found the dharma most natural for me. It went along with my natural love of animals, critters, and Mother Nature.

What caught my attention is the "Common Preliminaries," what is called the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," which to me did not smack of religion at all, certainly not the Roman Catholic Church I grew up in, that was way too strict for me.

Also, dharma's "Four Thoughts..." were very close to what I had settled on for myself without any prompting and was already thinking on my own.

The "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma" are:

- (1) The Precious Human Birth
- (2) Death and Impermanence
- (3) Karma – Cause and Effect
- (4) The Defects of Samsara

Perhaps you can see the "religion" in these thoughts, but I never saw or thought that. I naturally had a deep wish not to have my life wasted. This human life was to me precious.

And the second thought, like many young people, I was aware of our eventual death and from my study of nature how impermanent and fragile life is. So, I had those first two thoughts down early on.

As for the third thought capable of turning the mind, Karma (Cause and Effect), I was less aware, but as a student of Newtonian physics (my study of

science). I knew that what goes up must come down, and of simply the obvious fact that reaction follows action. That's the way the world works.

As for that pesky fourth thought, about the defects of this world we call samsara, I had less certainty. I loved the world in all its beauty and knew nothing else, had never found an alternative. I will put that fourth thought on temporary hiatus and will come back to that later .

However, you get the general idea. I did not interpret the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind," properly called the "Common Preliminaries," as overbearingly religious at all. It was pretty much how I saw life all on my own, rather than indoctrination. To me, those thoughts were just how life was.

In other words, I was a Buddhist or into the Dharma long before I considered it a religion. I still don't. For me dharma is just how life is.

Are there fire and brimstone in the dharma, that old-testament laying down of the commandments? Having attended Catholic school, been an altar boy, learned church Latin, and been forced to go to church, that was everything I naturally was not. I don't like to be told or forced to do anything.

All I got out of my Catholic upbringing was a sense for the mystical and the spiritual. The rest was an imposition. I am not a fan of religion, in particular organized religion. The more imperative a religion, the less I like it and naturally find it repulsive.

The natural world, just as it has been my form of spirituality. The more a religion is commercialized and forced on you the more I avoid it. I like my spirituality... neat.

And that, perhaps, is the whole point. The dharma can show us the sea. But no one can swim it for us.

This is an introduction to what will be other articles about how we each must enlighten ourselves.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Recognizing Our Own Mind

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 12, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/5b12042e-0bf8-4433-ac1d-92fd86ec691e_1024x1024.jpeg

Reading, book learning, even teachings and intensives are only brushing the surface as to what is required to learn dharma or, for that matter, learn anything.

The stumbling block is always us, the fact that we are the ones who have to do the learning.

Other teachers and books can present the dharma, but when it comes down to where the rubber meets the road, the nitty-gritty, it all depends on our learning it.

Look around you. Just everywhere there are various dharma courses and teachings waiting to help us, even jockeying for our attention or trying to sell us something. As an older person, my phone rings all day long with people trying to get my attention and get me to sign up or subscribe.

My theme or reason for writing this article is with how it's all up to us what we learn. We can have the finest teachers in the world and still be unable to understand them to the point of learning. There is an argument that all of the world of dharma instruction begs for our understanding, for our actual experience, and eventual realization. That's what all the fuss is about.

In other words, when it comes to dharma, the world waits on our realization. And just like the old chestnut "No wine before its time," there is no understanding before understanding, and thus the beauty of a tautology.

It is what it is.

And so, I'd like to discuss the problem of learning dharma to the point of any useful realization. It's not as easy as we might imagine, yet it's not beyond our capability either. It is right on the edge.

The amazing fact to me was, as my Tibetan dharma teacher pointed out to all of us, we are the unenlightened, and the fact that we have never, not in innumerable kalpas, never been enlightened. It's NOT as with the original sin of the Christians, that we once knew but fell away and are trying to get back to some original state of grace. Buddhism has no Garden of Eden.

In other words, we never knew the nature of the mind, we don't know now, and we have yet to recognize the true nature of our own mind, much less become enlightened. As Rinpoche pointed out "We are the stragglers, the ones in all the time there has been, who never got it." That's not an easy pill to swallow, IMO.

If we believe or even understand that, what's the problem? How can we in this lifetime make an actual start toward enlightenment?. We've had all the time in history the world and time, apparently, and have not bothered or become able to become enlightened.

Again, I draw your attention to the massive amount of dharma teaching-information that surrounds us today in this modern world. There is nothing but advice being offered. There has to be a reason or reasons why this is so.

It's not because there are no dharma teachers out there. Aside from the quacks, those teachers who cannot teach, and the massive commercialization of the dharma, real teachers do exist.

What we are short on, what are rarer than hen's teeth, are the students ready to learn the dharma. Of course it is a two-way street, the students are not ready, and most teachers cannot get their student's attention enough to point out what must be pointed out.

And this dharma instruction is appropriately enough, called the "pointing-out instructions," yet most find it difficult connecting.

It's not just a question of who is to blame, the instructors or the students, probably both. And however we wish to phrase it, the bottom line is that very little is getting through and connection is rare.

There is a bottleneck and if that blockage could be removed, we might have a lot more folks who have at least recognized the actual nature of their own mind enough so that they can work the mind.

It's like driving a car and learning how to drive. When we learn to drive a car, we then can drive the car. When we become sufficiently familiar with the nature of our own mind then we are not afraid to use and work the mind proficiently.

Once we recognize that nature of our own mind, which is right in front of us all the time, we can see how to use it and the trajectory to enlightenment has begun.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Finding Our Yiddam

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 13, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/d02fb3d7-5ea0-44a6-9467-d00fc9638f41_1024x1024.jpeg

A yidam is a Tibetan word for a practice that leads to what is called “Recognition,” recognizing the nature of our own mind, which eventually can lead to enlightenment, our own enlightenment, and it starts out with an authentic dharma teacher pointing out to us how to recognize the nature of the mind itself.

And Yidams come in several flavors. Often a yidam is given to us by our root guru, with no choice on our part necessary, or we can choose our own yidam from a list of major divinities and follow that pattern, and finally, we can create our own yidam based on our actual dharma experiences, and create or form the recipe for our recognition.

Ultimately, looking back, our yidam is exactly what it takes to allow us to recognize the actual nature of the mind itself. It takes this and exactly that, not one iota more or less. The path we were treading at the moment of recognition, obviously, was exactly what it took.

I’d like to continue with how we become familiar and get to know our own mind in more detail. A key reminder is throughout the dharma literature a great deal is made of the statement that there are 84,000 kinds or types of dharma paths.

That means there are at least 84,000 different ways to become enlightened. Not many would know all of those 84,000 dharma paths. That’s why I do not consider myself a dharma teacher because I only know of one path, the path I am taking. And I am nowhere near enlightened. I just, with the help of my root guru the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, became familiar with one way to recognize the nature of the mind and I am still busy expanding and extending that.

However, what I can do is share something of what I have learned with anyone interested.

As pointed out earlier, the world is not short of qualified dharma teachers, although you may have to hunt one up that is to your vibe. What we are short

of is qualified students, recipients for those teachings. And that could mean you.

The teacher reaches out but the student has to be open to the teaching. It's like an electrical connection, the different poles of the conduit have to be matched.

In my own experience this involved being very, very alone until I could stand doing what had to be done because above all we each must enlighten ourselves, day by day and hour by hour. I was not used to that. I assumed that the dharma teacher would enlighten me, which was a big mistake.

To give you a clear example, as I moved through my practice for years and then decades, of course I would read of the many descriptions of the path various dharma practitioner's experiences took.

However, at almost every turn my own experiences did not match up to what I read in the teachings and pith texts. This did concern me. Why was I always the outrider, the one who deviated from the norm? I just wanted to fit in.

Yet, the truth is the truth and better to face it than to try to go around it because nothing is more true or beyond the truth.

And what I describe here was not an isolated incident but was consistently true year after year. Somehow, I was on my own path and it deviated or was different from all the other stories I read. Once again, I felt like the Black Sheep, the odd-man-out.

As to explaining just why this was so I may do later, instead I want to offer whatever information I can that may be useful to you right now.

An analogy might be that of a string of pearls or a succession of precious jewels or a series of correct moves or steps that combined become a path, our particular or unique path. Better our own path poorly than copy someone else's.

Just like when I was a little kid, I used to have these Chinese wooden puzzle boxes that only could be opened by a long series of very exact moves. In my experience, pointing out the nature of the mind so that we actually get it is similar.

As mentioned earlier, a key phrase and important concept is the particular path each of us must fashion to reach any kind of realization, much less enlightenment, and it is called the 'yidam'.

The Yidam is the particular dharma path that will work for us and perhaps no one else. And the kicker is that it is up to us to make those moves and take those steps to create our own yidam, taking up whatever tips or pointing out of the dharma that others share with us. Dharma teachers can do this, point out the way.

And to drive this home, even when I took those hints or advice and did the work involved, which took even more years, it took a longer time yet before I had the confidence to acknowledge my own individual truth as authentic, meaning that it actually worked! And it helped that my root guru blessed what I came up with. That's how uncertain I was until I was certain.

And so, we might ask how to use this pointing-out information to further our own dharma path.

The first and the most important step is to own our truth, whether that is good, middling, or disappointing. That first step in a string of experience-beads has to be owned and locked in before we can add a second.

If we don't accumulate the path of our yidam, we remain where we are. We have to turn the wheel of our own dharma. Our dharma path has to materialize and arise, step by step, because we have to create and maintain it as we walk it.

And if our experience does not follow the line of the dharma texts we read, don't discount or discard it. Your path, as was my own, may be strikingly different from the average and for the longest time I tried to discard it because it was not popular and did not seem to fit in. Own your own truth.

My advice is to protect it and wait for what your dharma-karma has in store for you. We each assemble our own personal yidam much like you would make a statue of clay. Yes, we can be given or choose a traditional yidam and use that, but in my experience I finally allowed one of my own making to arise and lock itself into place (step by step) and that turned out to be just perfect, even though it did not readily resemble one of the traditional 'storebought' yidams. Have faith in your own path.

My own yidam, which I finally allowed to accumulate, was different just as I am a bit different from the average dharma practitioner, but it fit me to a 'T'. I just had to allow it and give it my support SINCE it was my yidam, either way.

All I had to do was tell the truth, witness the truth of my own experiences instead of dismissing and belittling them because they did not meet the mold of what the textbooks state.

I've always wanted to fit in, go along, but almost at every turn I don't fit in and thus I can't go along and pretend to be part of what I am apart from. I had to dare to be different.

I believe that nature is always trying to grow us our yidam and we defeat it because it's not what WE had in mind or how the books read. It's comical that we don't know our own mind and yet we have opinions about what or what not it has to be like.

That's a problem MANY of us have.

We are trying to shape our future armed with no experienced information. We want to give advice when we don't yet know how to receive the teachings.

Learning receptivity is key.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Walking the Line

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 14, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1920d57b-74c3-47a9-9bf4-796375ba58fe_1024x1024.jpeg

[This is the last of four articles on what is called the “Yidam” in Tibetan Vajrayana dharma.]

If we can’t find a dharma teacher, the problem is rarely that teachers don’t exist. More likely, we are not yet in a state of mind to reach out and ask. To change our life we have to change our life.

Perhaps it is because we are shy or because such teachers seem rare or we are embarrassed. It’s up to us to be in a state of mind to reach out and go into the world and find a dharma teacher. I did it because I needed some guidance. We had better get ready for change.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, my root guru, pointed out to his students that in all the eons of time up to now, we (each of us) have never managed to do this, to find a teacher and request help and have the nature of the mind pointed out to us so we get it, and it is we who are not ready, if we are not yet desperate enough to even ask.

Today there is a sea of dharma training out there waiting for us to access it. And all of it may not fit our vibe or needs. And because dharma training is so individual it’s hard to say what each individual one of us requires to complete our yidam.

What person or teachings we respond to is difficult to say because while yidams are not secret, yidams are so completely individual. On top of this, we may be finicky about the vibe and climate for recognizing the actual nature of our mind. For example, take my case.

The day I first recognized the actual nature of my own mind was not a sunny day in May. In fact, it was one of the darkest times in my life. I had just been laid off by NBC as a senior consultant for Astrology.com. I was without a job to support my family and that popped me right out of the bubble I was living in and back out into the world of job seekers.

I was anything but happy.

In other words, it took that kind of event to pop my bubble. I was devastated, and that is what it took to get my attention so that something as subtle as the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind would take hold. My Self had been shattered and in the interim before the Self started to reanimate itself, I was able to see the Nature of the Mind and lock it in.

I had no way of knowing what I needed for such a recognition to take place. None. Whatever thoughts I had were misplaced. I didn't know what I was talking or thinking about.

Anyway, it took all that and more yet to position me so that I was in a frame of mind to actually recognize the nature of the mind, a recognition that by its very nature can only happen once – the first time.

That happened, and from that day forward, slowly of course, I deepened my recognition and became increasingly familiar with my own mind by extending and expanding the portal that I walked through.

The main result is that once we recognize the actual nature of the mind, we immediately can work and use it. And I did.

And now, many years later, I am still doing that, working my own mind with confidence, which is like learning to drive a car and then actually driving it.

The point of this series of articles has been to demystify all that is opaque about recognizing the nature of our own mind to the point that we can use the mind just as it is. Rinpoche would always say we become familiar with what is most familiar of all to us, our mind.

We learn all kinds of things in life. In this society we are not used to learning how to recognize the most familiar of all, the true nature of our mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Common Senses

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 18, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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By Michael Erlewine

The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“Another kind of shamatha meditation is resting in the essence. After meditating on an external object, then an internal object, we meditate by just resting in the essence. The mind is not focused on anything, but rests in a completely stable and unwavering state.

“When we say “mind,” we think of it as being just one thing, but the Buddha described mind as being a collection of six or sometimes eight different kinds of consciousness.

“However, the five ‘sense’ consciousnesses consist of visual consciousness, which perceives and experiences visual forms, auditory consciousness, which perceives sounds based on the ear, olfactory consciousness, which perceives smells and is based on the nose, taste consciousness, for taste based on the tongue, and bodily consciousness which perceives touch and physical sensations.

“These five consciousnesses are said to be non-conceptual. They just see, hear, taste, smell, and feel and are not involved with thoughts, such as this is good or bad.

“In his instructions to Naropa, Tilopa said that appearances do no harm, but attachment to them causes problems. The actual seeing or hearing of things does not harm meditation in any way because these consciousnesses are nonconceptual. What causes an obstacle to mediation is developing attachment to a form, sound, etc. So, there is no need to eliminate these sensations in meditation.

End of quote.

This fact is not often made clear, that our sense consciousnesses are wide-open pipes with no alteration or thought bound to them. In other words, they are pure as the driven snow, so to speak, and not automatically clouded with attachment or thought. You can’t think with them.

Of course, we can become fixated or attached to the different sense consciousnesses and set off karma creation, ending up going round and round over that.

I consider it a great blessing that the senses are open-ended and unclouded or in that sense remain raw experience. We can't mess them up, yet we can become attached to them.

On the home front, it its been hours of painting the small bathroom on the second floor, which needed a lot of work. Also work on the doorways of four other bedroom. Margaret's been putting up screens for four door in our home, me fixing one door-screen that needed repair, also one large framed piece that needed non-glare acrylic. Other stuff.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

A Rock and a Hard Place

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 20, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I notice that change does not stop changing, and who knows what's going to wash up on the shore of the present moment. Just when I think the good is fading, something positive pops up.

Do I believe that good actions create good karma? I do, but there is no guarantee when. It could be far down the line of time into the future.

These troubled and confusing times we live in are about as good a test as I have ever had regarding long-term turmoil. How else could the history of America, whitewashed as it may be, turn so suddenly south.

Yes, I can see it writ large in the current politics and ongoing wars or I can see it in my daily local life writ small, but clear enough to read.

I don't think facing all this is avoidable, or how (and if) some response on our part can be sidestepped. As the old saying goes, "As Above, So Below." The same message written in the heavens is also inscribed in life's tatoos in the fine print.

My forays into busy work as a place of refuge from the idiocy of politics, etc. gives only temporary relief, like dunking for apples. We always come up for air.

It's a good question whether the newspaper headlines are acted out by each one of us in our own life in proportion, yet never far from it and easily read.

And national karma, like buckshot, manages to catch all of us with its spread.

In other words, the common karma of today filters down into the least of us. Yes, I believe it's all stepped down and that there must be a way to purify it, if we only knew how.

I learn as much dharma as I am able, yet not enough to escape effects of the political turmoil we are all caught up in by birth here in America... or in this world.

If I try to walk the line, one foot in front of the other, as a way to escape our national karma, I might as well whistle as I walk because as they say, that and a ticket will get me a ride on the bus.

How often have I read in the dharma literature the phrase "... in this degenerative age." That's not some age down the road that will be degenerative. That is right now.

It is not wasted effort to stay close to our families and do our best to not pour fuel on the national fire. Yet, at the same time, sticking our head in the sand like an ostrich will not do either. As they say, we are stuck between a rock and a hard place.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Something to Let Go Of

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 25, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/6b9ada1d-8be0-4783-8ec7-330e4c5edb21_1024x1024.jpeg

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“In a commentary, Gampopa said, “Ordinary mind is unstained by any perceived forms, unmuddled by any existential projections, and unclouded by dullness, depression, or thought.” “Ordinary mind,” he continued, “is not polluted by the Dharma, not stained by worldly consciousness, and not wrapped up in a heavy mind.” Not polluted even by any aspect of the Buddhadharma means that our mind is not polluted by philosophical systems of reasoned analysis and inferential conclusions, such as thinking that something exists or that something does not exist. The mind is neither manipulated nor fabricated in that way nor is it affected by temporary experiences that occur when we practice.”

End of Quote.

This kicker is that we have to be familiar with the ordinary mind and as of now we are not. Of course, we have an “Ordinary Mind” but are not aware of it. Rather we are polluted by all kinds of things including even intellectualized dharma, and that’s where we are because that’s where we are.

The mind is not just about thinking but rather it is for resting in and we don’t know how to do that.

What Rinpoche is saying is that there is no subject and object when it comes to our ordinary mind. We are 100% all in, which means we are no longer a subject looking at an object. Instead, we are totally immersed in the present moment. That’s the sign of the ordinary mind.

And if we are too nervous or wrought up to rest in our own mind, we are just not familiar enough yet to let that happen and so it can’t and doesn’t.

That’s why we develop concentration or focus until we are bunched up to the point where we can do nothing other than let go and relax. We have to have enough of something to let go of it, breathe in before we can breathe out. It’s like breathing in and out, in and out.

From the moment we exhaust focus onward, it is all about letting go, letting go completely, resting in the essence and nature of our own mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

AMG: All-Music Guide History

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

May 25, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/499df0ba-f1e4-4a5c-a115-a018227e954a_2048x522.jpeg

AllMusic.com • AllMovie.com • ClassicPosters.com • Matrix Software THE
ACADEMIC CASE FOR AMG AS AMERICA'S MOST SIGNIFICANT POPULAR
CULTURE ARCHIVE Michael Erlewine, Founder

INTRODUCTION The All Music Guide (AMG) represents one of the most ambitious and consequential acts of cultural documentation in American history. Founded by Michael Erlewine and built over more than two decades with an extensive staff, AMG systematically documented popular music, film, and related cultural forms at a scale no academic institution has ever approached. This document makes the case — rigorously and on scholarly terms — that AMG is not merely a commercial database but a primary-source folk archive of the first order, deserving recognition alongside the great archival achievements of the 20th century.

PART I: WHAT AMG ACTUALLY IS Founding and Scale Michael Erlewine founded AMG in Big Rapids, Michigan, operating initially from the small office he still uses today. Erlewine was actively helping put on the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970, taking care of the performers and their families and interviewing scores of performers with audio and then video. He later went on to host the performers of the 1972 and 1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals and was designated as the official historian of those festivals. From those festivals, Michael Erlewine became increasingly concerned with music performers, especially as vinyl recordings segued to tape cassettes and as things moved digitally into CDs and beyond. Erlewine noticed that many albums never made it onto tape cassettes or to digital, or at least not for many years. Another concern was albums brought out on CDs that claimed to be the original recordings — albums that were indeed the original tunes, but not the original recordings done by the original performer. Often they were made 20 years later when the performer was no longer in their peak form. Michael Erlewine: "I had studied popular music, in particular blues recordings, and was concerned that if you wanted to know if you liked a certain performer, that you hear that performer at their best — not just a so-so later recording." The first edition of the All Music Guide was published in 1992. Before that, the guides (music and movies) were featured on CompuServe,

one of the first major online commercial services. And before CompuServe, AMG was available through what were called “Gopher Holes” (circa 1991) — the same year that AMG was founded. In 1999, the operation moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where it grew to occupy two floors of a large office building at Liberty and 5th Avenue. At its peak, AMG employed 150 full-time employees and 500–750 freelance writers and contributors. Somewhere around 2008, the database had grown larger than could be contained in print, and the operation shifted entirely to its electronic form. A number of the printed AMG books were over 1,000 pages long. AllMusic.com is the largest music database site on the Internet. AllMovie.com is one of the two largest film and movie databases in existence.

— THE PRINT ARCHIVE: 22 EDITIONS, 1992–2008 Before going fully digital, AMG produced 22 printed volumes spanning every major genre of popular music. These books represent a snapshot of the database at successive moments in time — primary source documents in their own right. All Music Guide, 1st ed. (1992) — 1,178 pages • 23,000 reviews • 6,000 biographies All Music Guide, 2nd ed. (1994) — 1,418 pages • 23,000 reviews • 6,000 biographies All Music Guide to Jazz, 1st ed. (1994) — 752 pages • 9,000 reviews • 1,150 biographies All Music Guide to Rock, 1st ed. (1995) — 1,232 pages • 11,000 reviews • 1,800 biographies All Music Guide to the Blues, 1st ed. (1996) — 426 pages • 2,600 reviews • 560 biographies All Music Guide to Jazz, 2nd ed. (1996) — 916 pages • 13,200 reviews • 1,144 biographies All Music Guide to Rock, 2nd ed. (1997) — 1,232 pages • 15,000 reviews • 2,500 biographies All Music Guide, 3rd ed. (1997) — 1,499 pages • 21,300 reviews • 4,100 biographies All Music Guide to Country, 1st ed. (1997) — 614 pages • 5,500 reviews • 1,000 biographies All Music Guide to Jazz, 3rd ed. (1998) — 1,382 pages • 18,000 reviews • 1,700 biographies All Music Guide to the Blues, 2nd ed. (1999) — 662 pages • 6,165 reviews • 965 biographies All Music Guide, 4th ed. (2001) — 1,495 pages • 20,000 reviews • 4,000 biographies All Music Guide to Electronica, 1st ed. (2001) — 690 pages • 5,000 reviews • 1,200 biographies All Music Guide to Jazz, 4th ed. (2002) — 1,472 pages • 20,000 reviews • 1,700 biographies All Music Guide to Rock, 3rd ed. (2002) — 1,400 pages • 14,000 reviews • 2,200 biographies All Music Guide to Soul (2003) — 900 pages • 8,500 reviews • 1,500 biographies All Music Guide to the Blues, 3rd ed. (2003) — 1,496 pages • 20,000 reviews • 4,000 biographies All Music Guide to Country, 2nd ed. (2003) — 964 pages • 10,281 reviews • 1,200 biographies All Music Guide to Hip-Hop (2003) — 646 pages • 3,100 reviews • 1,200 biographies All Music Guide to Classical Music (2005) — 1,608 pages • 15,160 reviews • 1,500 biographies TOTALS across all 22 print editions: 16,454 pages • 304,406 reviews • 48,619 artist biographies

AT SCALE After 2008, the database continued to grow electronically at a rate no print edition could track. The last available internal figures before the database passed out of Erlewine's direct ownership documented the following: • Albums: 2,902,596 • Individual Releases: 3,912,308 • Individual Tracks: 32,979,922 • Classical Compositions: 382,337 • Classical Performances: 1,953,356 • Artists: 3,285,348 • Written Documents: 765,257 • Album Reviews: 362,156+ • Artist Biographies: 95,974+ These figures represent the documented record of an entire century of popular music and film — the largest such record ever assembled by any organization, academic or commercial.

PART II: A

HISTORY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC DOCUMENTATION The Early Collectors — Field Recording Era The systematic documentation of American folk music began in earnest with Francis James Child (1825–1896), a Harvard professor who compiled the *Child Ballads* — 305 traditional English and Scottish ballads, many of which had migrated to Appalachia and the American South. Child worked from texts; the technology for field recording did not yet exist. The game changed with John Lomax and his son Alan Lomax, who beginning in the 1930s took portable recording equipment into prisons, rural communities, and remote areas across the South, collecting thousands of recordings for the Library of Congress. They documented Leadbelly, recorded Muddy Waters as a young man on a Mississippi plantation, and captured blues, work songs, and Appalachian ballads that would otherwise have vanished. The Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, founded in 1928, became the institutional home for this work. Harry Smith and the Commercial Record as Folk Document Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952, Folkways Records) deserves special attention in any argument about AMG's legitimacy. Smith — a self-taught archivist and eccentric genius — compiled 84 commercial recordings from the 1920s–30s into a six-LP set that became the foundational source material for the entire folk revival of the 1960s. Dylan, Baez, the Grateful Dead, Levon Helm — all traced their source material back to Smith's curatorial decisions. What Smith actually did was treat commercial mass-market popular recordings as serious folk documents worthy of preservation and study. He organized them into a taxonomy (ballads, social music, songs), wrote annotations, and released them as a coherent archive. The folk revival ran on Smith's anthology as its fuel. AMG did for the entire 20th century what Smith did for one slice of the 1920s–30s — at a scale Smith could never have imagined, with greater rigor, deeper taxonomy, and far more complete coverage. If Smith is a hero of American folk documentation (and academics universally treat him as one), then AMG is the logical completion of his project. The Folk Revival and Its Institutional

Legacy The first major folk revival was explicitly political — Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and the Almanac Singers used folk music as labor and progressive organizing music. The second wave centered on Greenwich Village in the late 1950s and 1960s, the coffee house scene, Bob Dylan, and the Newport Folk Festival (founded 1959). The institutional infrastructure that followed included Smithsonian Folkways (absorbing Folkways Records after Moses Asch's death in 1987), the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress (established 1976), and university ethnomusicology departments. The Blues Foundation, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame represent attempts to institutionalize more recent popular forms — an acknowledgment that popular music deserves archival treatment.

PART III: THE ACADEMIC

ARGUMENT FOR AMG AS FOLK ARCHIVE Reframing AMG in Terms Academics

Already Respect The academic world has a terminology problem with AMG because it looks like a commercial database from the outside. The argument requires reframing in language the scholarly community already uses and respects: AMG is a systematic ethnographic record of American popular culture at the moment of its living practice. That sentence maps directly onto what every major folklore institution claims as its mission. Substitute “AMG” for “Archive of American Folk Song” and the description is structurally identical. The difference is medium and subject matter — not purpose, not method, not scholarly value. The Lomax Parallel Alan Lomax's field recordings are now sacred academic objects. Consider what they actually were at the time of their creation: • Systematic collection by non-academics • Driven by one person's conviction that the material mattered • Dismissed by some scholars as journalism rather than scholarship • Built outside university walls with limited institutional support • Dependent on a large network of informants and contributors AMG is structurally identical on every point. The “field” was the entirety of recorded popular culture. The “recordings” are the reviews, biographies, taxonomies, and ratings. The “informants” were AMG's 750 freelance writers — themselves participants in the culture they were documenting, exactly as Lomax's informants were participants in theirs. The argument is direct: if Lomax's work is legitimate folk documentation, AMG is legitimate folk documentation. Anyone who accepts one and rejects the other must explain the distinction — and the only available distinction is class bias (rural poverty good, commercial culture bad), which is intellectually indefensible. The Taxonomy Argument One of AMG's least-celebrated but most academically significant contributions is its genre and style taxonomy. AMG did not merely document — it built a classification system for an entire century of popular music that had never been systematically organized. This is exactly what folklorists do. The Child Ballads are valuable not just as content

but as a classification system — Child's numbering gave scholars a shared vocabulary. AMG's genre trees, style descriptors, and influence mapping gave the entire field of popular music a shared vocabulary that did not exist before. Academics use controlled vocabularies as foundational scholarly infrastructure. AMG built the largest controlled vocabulary for popular music ever assembled. The Temporal Argument: Primary Source Value Primary sources are valuable precisely because they were created contemporaneously with the events they document. AMG reviews, biographies, and ratings were created in real time — or close to it — as the music was being made and heard. This is the gold standard in historical documentation. A review of a 1974 album written in 1991 by someone who was listening in 1974 is a primary source document of reception history — how that music was understood, valued, and contextualized at the time. Future musicologists studying American popular culture of the late 20th century will have very few sources that document how this music was received as it was happening. AMG is one of the only systematic ones at scale. That is an irreplaceable historical resource by any academic standard. The Oral Tradition Argument Folk music scholarship has always recognized that oral tradition is the primary vehicle of folk culture — the way knowledge, value judgments, and cultural meaning get transmitted through communities. AMG digitized oral tradition. The critical consensus captured in AMG — star ratings, review language, genre placement, influence trees — represents the critical and cultural oral tradition of popular music communities, written down and systematized before it could dissipate. Without AMG, much of that consensual knowledge — who influenced whom, what a record meant to its community, how an artist was understood in their time — would exist only in scattered magazine archives, individual memories, and out-of-print publications. AMG aggregated it, cross-referenced it, and made it searchable. That is preservation of oral tradition by any reasonable definition. The Scale Argument Academic folklorists respect scale as evidence of serious systematic intent. The numbers speak for themselves: • 150 full-time employees — this is a research institution by any measure. Most university folklore programs do not have this staffing level. • 500–750 freelance contributors — a distributed network of domain experts with deep community knowledge, exactly the model of participatory documentation that modern folklorists champion. • 22 print volumes across 16 years, totaling 16,454 pages, 304,406 reviews, and 48,619 artist biographies. • Millions of digital records spanning music, film, and related cultural forms — coverage no single academic institution has ever approached for popular culture. The Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, the Country Music Hall of Fame — none of them achieved AMG's coverage of 20th century popular culture. That is not a boast; it is a fact with serious academic

implications. ————— PART IV:

POPULAR CULTURE IS FOLK CULTURE — THE MOVING TARGET Folk Culture Has Always Been a Moving Target Michael Erlewine's core observation is that folk culture is not a fixed historical category but a moving target — and that academics in folk music are often a generation or two behind in recognizing what qualifies. The original meaning of "folk" (from the German Volk as used by Johann Gottfried Herder in the 18th century) simply meant the expressive culture of ordinary people, passed through communities, reflecting shared experience. By that definition:

- A 1973 concert poster for the Allman Brothers at Fillmore West is a folk artifact
- A regional AM radio playlist from 1968 is a folk document
- The star signs column in a 1975 magazine is folk belief in print form
- An AllMusic review capturing critical consensus about a now-forgotten regional band is oral tradition in digital form

The Concert Poster as Broadside Ballad Academics may be most resistant to the concert poster archive. They should not be. Concert posters are material folk culture in the most classical sense — community-produced visual artifacts created for local audiences, reflecting regional aesthetics, documenting communal gathering events. Broadside ballads — which every folk scholar venerates — were the concert posters of the 17th and 18th centuries. Literally. They were printed announcements with cultural content sold cheaply to common people. ClassicPosters.com is a broadside archive. Erlewine single-handedly organized concert music posters and wrote more than 336 books and e-books on posters. Astrology as Folk Cosmology Academic folklorists study folk medicine, folk religion, and folk cosmology as serious scholarly subjects. Astrology as practiced and consumed in American popular culture is folk cosmology — one of the oldest and most continuously documented folk traditions in human history. Documenting it is documenting living folk belief at scale, in the direct tradition of serious folklore scholarship. Michael Erlewine was the first person to program astrology on home computers, in 1977, and then share those programs with fellow astrologers. He went on to build the first astrology software company (Matrix Software), which according to Red Herring Magazine is the second oldest software company still on the Internet, the oldest being Microsoft. In 2026, Erlewine shared a terabyte of astrological data — the result of 50 years of research — with several major astrological non-profit organizations, to be made available to all astrologers free of charge and for their own use. The Generation-or-Two Pattern Erlewine's prediction that it will take a generation or two for this work to receive academic legitimacy is historically well-supported:

- Rock and roll was dismissed as disposable commercial product until the late 1960s when academics began taking it seriously.
- Blues was "race music" until white revivalists and then academics recognized it as a major American art form.
- Hip hop spent twenty

years being dismissed before university programs emerged around it. The cycle runs roughly 30–50 years before popular culture achieves academic legitimacy — long enough for the generation that lived it to age into positions of institutional power and demand its inclusion. AMG’s archives will likely be primary sources for researchers in 2050 the way John Lomax’s field recordings are primary sources today.

PART V: AMG SATISFIES EVERY CRITERION FOR SERIOUS FOLK

DOCUMENTATION The American Folklore Society and the Library of Congress have established clear criteria for serious folk cultural documentation. AMG satisfies every one: ✓ Systematic collection ✓ Contemporaneous with living practice ✓ Primary source documentation ✓ Taxonomic organization with controlled vocabulary ✓ Community-embedded contributors with domain expertise ✓ Preservation of material that would otherwise be lost ✓ Coverage of the expressive culture of ordinary people ✓ Scale sufficient to constitute a comprehensive record The only criterion AMG fails is institutional affiliation with a university or government body — which has never been a scholarly requirement, only a political one. Alan Lomax himself operated largely outside institutional structures for much of his career.

PART VI: STRENGTHENING THE

ACADEMIC CASE Several steps would help translate AMG’s significance into formal academic currency: **Formal Publication** — A peer-reviewed paper arguing the AMG-as-folk-archive thesis, submitted to the *Journal of American Folklore* or *Ethnomusicology*, ideally co-authored with a credentialed folklorist who can vouch for the theoretical framework. This is the single highest-leverage step. **Institutional Partnership** — A formal relationship with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress would carry enormous weight. Their blessing transforms the perception of the archive from commercial database to national cultural resource. The Smithsonian Folkways model is the relevant precedent. **Digital Humanities Framing** — The academic field of Digital Humanities explicitly legitimizes large-scale cultural databases as scholarly infrastructure. **Framing AMG in DH terms** — as the largest digital humanities dataset in popular music history — opens doors at universities that might otherwise default to skepticism. **Citation Accumulation** — The more AMG is cited in footnotes and bibliographies of academic work, the faster it accumulates scholarly legitimacy. **Encouraging researchers to cite AllMusic and AllMovie as primary sources** — rather than merely linking to them as reference tools — is a critical cultural shift. **Physical Archive Donation** — The 22 printed volumes, totaling 16,454 pages, represent a physical archive of extraordinary value. Donating or depositing these with the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, or a major university library would establish their status as archival materials and create an institutional custodian for their

long-term preservation. _____

CONCLUSION The academic world is slow, territorial, and biased toward its own credentialing systems. But the argument for AMG's scholarly significance is overwhelming on the merits. The work Michael Erlewine and his team built will be recognized as one of the great archival achievements of the 20th century. Alan Lomax waited for recognition too. Harry Smith died largely unrecognized. The arc of archival history is long, but it bends toward the people who actually did the work of preservation — while everyone else was waiting for someone else to do it. AMG did the work. The 16,454 pages, 304,406 reviews, 48,619 biographies — and that is just the printed work — plus the millions of digital records are the evidence. Aside from AMG, Michael Erlewine has donated his Astrological Library (over 16,000 books and magazines) to the library of the University of Illinois, his collection of 33,000 rock concert poster images (with detailed measurements) to the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan, written 336 free e-books on posters, donated 500 pen & ink drawings to the Ruben Museum of Himalayan Art, and donated a collection of thousands of audio recordings of Tibetan Vajrayana Dharma to the Karma Dharma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in New York. _____ AllMusic.com • AllMovie.com • ClassicPosters.com • Matrix Software Founded by Michael Erlewine

The Little Things

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 5, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/331d9747-3122-439c-ac3a-e9f8359f8b71_660x785.jpeg

The bullfrog had climbed onto a mass of floating vegetation. I was still quite a distance away and moving closer very slowly, so as not to spook him. For a long time, he was out there facing me, but in an instant, he suddenly changed position and sat looking away as you see here.

He was there for so long that I was able to switch cameras on my tripod so that I could use a camera with a 100 megapixel sensor and thus have a larger frame from which to crop down to just the frog, as you see here.

What I see and what you see are the same image, but also different. You are probably not familiar all that much with frogs. For me, frog watching goes back to when I was just a little kid in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, however, that little kid was still the same me, and from early on I very much loved frogs and all living critters.

When I was confirmed as a teenager in the Roman Catholic Church, I chose the name Saint Francis of Assisi as my confirmation name because both he and I loved animals... a lot.

So, when I see this (probably a male) frog sitting there, facing away, still wet from climbing out of the water on this 83 degree F day in the hot afternoon sun, me standing on a dirt road near a swamp, a turned-around baseball cap on my head so I could better look through the camera viewfinder... I see and feel something I have loved for probably some 80 years by now. And I celebrate this in the spring of every year.

For me frogs are benign creatures, who harm no one other than what they may find to eat.

My heart races and, as they say, it jumps for joy, just because the two of us are here and now alive in this swamp on this hot and sunny day.

I have caught and measured hundreds and hundreds of amphibians (frogs, toads, and salamanders) over the years. I have crawled through the caves of Texas and the southwest looking for blind salamanders, spent long nights in the dark of night with kerosene lanterns capturing and releasing hundreds of

salamanders (*Ambystoma maculatum*, etc.) while they migrated to the vernal ponds, measuring and then releasing them.

There is more to convey, yet it is inexplicable, beyond what words can frame in language. The frogs and I are kindred spirits although we cannot converse or even get close to one another.

Of course, as mentioned I have caught hundreds of frogs, toads, and salamanders in years past and taught each of my kids and grandkids how to catch frogs and amphibians, how to hold them in their hands without harming them, and then gently release them.

There is happiness that critters like frogs bring out in me. Just visually seeing them makes me happy, knowing they are there, and being with them. I feel the same way about dogs. Of course, I like people too, but with frogs, it just is a very simple joy.

And on this very warm spring day, the frog on his lily pad and I in my seersucker shirt standing on a hot country road looking into a swamp and sharing this day in space and time.

I need more days like these and to suffer less from the will of corrupt politicians and the waging of wars. I'm not ignoring the turmoil in the world around me, just trying to counterbalance it with something other than the shock of the daily news.

Here is a song written and sung by my daughter May Erlewine that fits right in.

May Erlewine "Tiny Beautiful Things"

[Photo my me.]

EMAIL

Visions: Lasting Imprints

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 6, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/6f2a34f2-0de9-42b6-98c4-a922fc7318aa_1007x1020.jpeg

Back in 1967, I had an epiphany, an actual vision. It wasn't like an image out there floating in the sky, but more like the spoken word or just 'knowing'. And the gist of the vision was that I was to have two gifts or abilities in this life.

The first was that I could move large objects through holes that were smaller than they were, and this has proved to be true. Several times this has happened. I remember one where about five guys were trying to get a huge stainless-steel commercial refrigerator through a doorway and it wouldn't go. I joined in, did something with my mind, and it sailed on through. On a more psychological level I found I could shrink what is called the Self or ego just by contact. Go figure.

The second gift was that I would write an epic poem, which I thought was pretty far out and very specific. Well, so far, I have not written an epic poem, but what I did write is of epic proportions, meaning lots of it. In other words I have written an 'epic' amount.

So do I believe in visions, at least as I define them. As to what they are, in my experiences visions are moments of great moment, like the equivalent of BOLD type to normal type.

At a time of vision, the imprint of that moment goes deep within us, like a die stamps or cattle-brand and emphasizes that moment by imprinting. And then that imprint functions almost like a road block; it signals us in our memory.

When we look back or remember, when we get to a vision point in our memory, we stop and sometimes can't think beyond that point or time. In fact, we go back to the vision time and time again to sample or drink from its depths. That, IMO, is what visions are, something that we drink from and absorb until we have assimilated all that we can or need to.

For me the two significant LSD experiences I had were also like visions. I spent decades trying to unpack them. I saw more on those two trips than decades of book reading, studying, or thinking could accomplish. Talk about influencers.

I brief, my two LSD experiences amounted to visions, because I saw in a flash truths of life that it took me years, even decades to unpack and absorb.

An example of such as truth I saw on acid is that much of what I saw around me in the world was my own projection and not something that was actually out there and 'other'.

On acid, the division or barrier between the two was dissolved, taken away, and I suddenly experienced myself and the world as one and the same. I was living in my own projection, lock, stock, and barrel.

This was not only a shock, but it also took me years to suss out and verify as real, as my reality. That was a vision and a half in my book. My second meaningful LSD experience produced more of the same.

Call it a vision or whatever you like, the upshot of that LSD experience is that what I assumed up until then was a duality, me as the subject and others and everything else out there was an object.

And I don't feel my tendency for visions has grown any less. If anything, they are more frequent, or to be clearer, the Vipassana (Insight Meditation) of Mahamudra training is total nonduality, which coupled with awareness is visionary or potentially so.

In fact, I've had to back off from the visionary experience of Insight Meditation, lest I drift too far from the shores of life. That started to happen until I pulled it back and centered it on the edge or border between duality and nonduality.

The value of any visionary experience is the balance between total immersion in nonduality and the reflection of that vision that our normal duality (subject and object) provides.

Over time, my experiences with this have settled into dipping into the visionary element and full immersion and coming back out of it and reflecting on whatever that non-duality experience can provide.

Both sides of this equation are momentary, and their combined experience is seamless. It's like looking into the future, if we can agree that the truth is always the future because the truth will last until then, while less than the truth fades away and passes.

Be aware at these times of intense experiences that rivet and involve us totally. They can sneak up on you. A "vision" is not an idea that you will simply grasp or that comes to you, but rather a total inundation experience that is beyond our understanding, one that envelops and absorbs our complete attention, and will only reveal its meaning to us over time.

This is where the concept of a sacred scroll and its unrolling come in. Personal visions are always totally absorbing and require time for us to absorb. In other words, visions have a future for us to work through and thus the idea that these visions are somehow prophetic comes into play.

It is not that they tell the future but that they will only reveal the future over time. Visions provide a glimpse or taste of the future for us. It takes time to assimilate their meaning or message. You get the idea.

The idea is that visions function as stations or roadblocks in memory — places we return to repeatedly and can't move past until we have absorbed them completely. Any vision has to be based around the truth because over what we call time, only the truth survives, while the rest (what is ephemeral) is swept away and eventually forgotten.

What is important in the visions are that it imprints. Visions imprint us with the truth of their message. And by definition that message is deep and may presage the future that is so concentrated that it will take time for us to absorb it.

We go back to these visionary imprints over and over, trying to absorb and incorporate its message into our daily life.

The core idea is this: visions are not supernatural predictions, but deep imprints that reveal themselves to us slowly over time.

The only thing we can eventually find in life is the truth for us 'as it is'. At the bottom and behind everything is the truth and in the future that will be what is true.

In essence the truth is the future because the truth is the only thing that will last until then, into the future. The rest is ephemeral and will pass away and be forgotten.

So, visions aren't supernatural predictions but deep imprints of the truth that reveal themselves to us slowly over time.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Wheel of Life and Death

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 7, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1d17c0bd-87ca-4fba-9a60-ea63746cf3a6_795x1032.jpeg

Waking up in the middle of the night, with the rain pattering on the roof gets my attention that it is there and coming down. And this is announced by far away thunder and some lightning.

It's hard to believe I am 85 years old and still on the planet. Aside from the aches and pains of old age, I feel inside the same as I was at 25 years. My mind has remained unchanged since then.

What this tells me is obvious, that the mind itself and our awareness of it is unchanged, and according to the dharma teachings, not only unchanged now but has remained unchanged forever. This is called being unborn. Just always there.

And so, the body is going to waste away leaving the mind bodiless and free to take rebirth, attach itself to another life and take rebirth.

Yet being born in the early 1940s in America, I became a victim of the old Schlitz beer commercial that "You only go around once in life. So, grab all the gusto you can!"

The only remedy for this view is time and personal experience and the growing sense that if the mind is unborn, so is any attachment to it with whatever body we happen to have.

The dharma does not teach that Michael Erlewine the person will be born again. That would be reincarnation, which some religions in India believe in.

In the dharma teachings it is our basic karma, not our personality, that moves from rebirth to rebirth. So, while the world may not see Michael Erlewine again, it could see the karma of Michael Erlewine, wrapped and living in a new body created by new parents and in a new time and situation.

That journey and view alone took me all this lifetime to get around to realizing and was hard fought.

Unfortunately, reading a book about rebirth and the unborn will not do it. This kind of knowledge requires personal experience for us to come to this

conclusion. Seeing is believing. I could not believe it was true for much of my life. It seemed too good to be true.

Although even a quick 'think' will tell us that apparently, we have been doing this for a very, very long time, still it is very uncomfortable because our person is not carried forward, which is what we most know and are attached to.

Lacking that Self or person, just who or what are we?

Somehow, we got to where we are now without a big problem, why do we not have confidence in whatever this process is we are living?

Where did this idea that we only go around once come from? Sure, Michael Erlewine is pretty much exhausted at 85 years of age, but my karma is not exhausted. So, who or what am I?

Am I the person of Michael Erlewine or the individual karma that I have generated? It's the karma that marches on looking for a new wrapper or body to encapsulate.

At what time in the bardos do I let go of Michael Erlewine and cast about for a rebirth, a new body and another persona and name? At some point it seems we throw our karma into the lottery for another body and rebirth. And at that point we can't write a letter back home to Michael Erlewine's relatives or to our Self or from our Self, because we have let go of that person and are a collection of karma seeking rebirth.

We all know how covetous and aware of bodies, ours or those of others, we are. The disembodied is what horror films are all about, so that precious ship of karma like a seed in fertile earth sprouts in the bardos and draws around itself another body, from new parents, and begins to form a new person, and create a new Self under a new name.

This whole process is termed the 'Storehouse Consciousness' or in Sanskrit the 'Alayavijnana'.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Dharma Is Not a Hobby

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 8, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/566af0b5-474e-4397-a445-319169bc0490_2016x2048.jpeg

What happens or has to happen when we get serious about the dharma. Dharma practice is not a hobby. It takes more than that. And I don't think serious dharma practice means we must lose that about us that is human.

We are not trying to rise above our human qualities, but just the opposite.

We become familiar with and get to know the nature of our own mind, what is closest to us and has always been there. However, this takes getting to know our gut feelings rather than to follow the conceptual high roads.

At least in my case, it has always been abandoning the ivory tower of intellectual conceptuality and trying to get down to where the rubber meets the road.

I read about Zen Koan early on, in the late 1950s. I could not claim to understand the meaning of koans back then, only that they were a doorway to some kind of realization.

"What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Who knows. I had no idea.

What's it all about? How does this work. Over the years since then (the late 1950s) the dharma caught on until today there are innumerable kinds of dharma practices and teachers available. Which is the best for me or for you is very individual. You will have to find it by trying whatever feels right.

It took me years to even figure out what the point of dharma practice was all about. Of course, I knew it was to eventually achieve some kind of realization and get on the road to actual enlightenment.

It took me still more years to grasp that recognizing and becoming familiar with the actual nature of the mind is required.

What's hardest to understand is that we each must turn the wheel of our own dharma because dharma realization is a do-it-yourself project. It waits on us, forever if needed.

For example, it was hard for me to admit and grasp, as Rinpoche explained, that in all the time in history up to this day, we (few of us reading this) have ever recognized the actual nature of our own mind, even though it is right here now as it always has been.

Apparently, it's just too close to see, like the eye that can't see itself except in a mirror and even then, it is reversed.

And it is a stated fact that using our dualistic conceptual mind we will never grasp the nature of the mind because it's not something understanding and thinking can determine.

Realizing the nature of our own mind is something we have to personally experience without thought, but rather by nondual complete immersion beyond both subject and object. It's like bobbing for apples.

That is the experience that is required and even that can only be verified by reflection on each completed moment of immersion.

There seem to be an almost infinite number of paths or practice that may bring us to realization of the actual nature of our own mind. How are we to choose?

It's easy but it is difficult because to achieve Recognition we have to ourselves explore the mind until we recognize its nature. That means we stop waiting for someone to do this for us, to teach us, when only by doing it, ourselves will we ever come to recognize the mind's true nature.

That's right, we have to give up being passive and waiting to be rescued and rescue ourselves because we are NOT used to having to do spiritual things for ourselves.

How long before we are urged to get off our duff and learn to do this ourselves? Apparently from eternity until this moment, we have never managed to become familiar enough with our own mind to recognize our mind's own nature. That's a hard sentence to accept, but true.

It is not that we once knew the mind's actual nature and have lost that. It's not like the Christian 'Original Sin' that we once were pure and have fallen away from that. According to the dharma, we have yet to recognize the nature of our own mind.

And this because until now we have not dropped everything and gotten familiar enough with our own mind even though it has been right here and now for eternity. The teachings say we have been 'distracted'.

All of the many different dharma practices exist for this one purpose, to help us prepare ourselves to recognize the nature of our own mind. It's a smorgasbord of practice techniques and we have to find which practices fit us and which don't work for us.

Why do you think this is so difficult that very few can receive the pointing-out instruction as to the nature of the mind and actually get it?

In my own case I was certain that I would find a shortcut to recognizing the mind's true nature and after many years of hoping I would luck on to the way to do this, I came to the point where I could admit to myself that I was or had been unable to find a way.

For me it was like a patchwork quilt I had assembled. Yes, I understood here and there but there were a lot of empty patches on my quilt. The dharma texts had told me for decades that NO ONE can recognize the actual nature of the mind without having it pointed out to us by an authentic dharma teacher. Apparently I had to test that.

Some of the very difficult practices such as the Ngondro (The Extraordinary Preliminaries) which I laughingly said were medieval and that I would NEVER do, began to seem doable. For the first time I considered them, because on my own recognizance I was not getting the job done. I wasn't as smart as I thought.

And that led to asking Rinpoche for permission to do Ngondro and I was eventually read-in (took the lung), received the instructions, and began the long journey of doing this practice. When after years I finally completed the Ngondro and went to Rinpoche and said I was ready to move on to the deity practices, Rinpoche said to me, "Do you want to know what I would do if I were you?"

Well, of course I wanted to know, and Rinpoche then said "Do another round of Ngondo, from the beginning." And I did.

By that time, I was beyond my arrogance that I didn't need to do what seemed like medieval torture and had become flexible enough that I could listen to instructions and trust Rinpoche to know what was best for me. I took a deep breath and started my second round of Ngondro. My wife Margaret did the same. For me it was more like "once more, with feeling."

I recently bought a large piece of denim, true indigo, 100% organic cotton that was 13 feet long, 64" wide, and a hefty 14.25 Ounces.

The cloth was so thick I could barely bend it. I washed it and it still was unusable. I have washed it 3 times now with vinegar and it is now flexible enough to use, and I plan to wash it again.

The Ngondro is just like that. The extensive repetitions, 100,000+ full-length prostrations and recited prayers, 100,000+ 100-syllable mantras, 100,000+ mandala offerings, and 100,000+ guru yoga practices helped to take the starch out of me. And doing the whole thing a second time only made me more flexible.

For me Ngondro was a blessing because it took a lot of time, time needed for me to loosen up and become more flexible. Dharma waits.

I am not saying you have to do this, only that if after some time passes (years) and you have not received the signs of progress you were hoping for, you may need a more vigorous practice like 'The Ngondro', which is like a dharma boot camp. I know I did. I came full circle from declaring I would never do this to asking to do it. I had been tamed.

With dharma practice many start out doing the minimum and hoping for the best. When it becomes clear that the 'best' demands our best effort, we gradually settle down into a greater and greater willingness to do what it takes to achieve success in dharma practice.

Dharma is not a hobby, but requires everything we have to give to get results, at least that is what I found. We don't dabble in dharma and expect results.

I am not talking here about having a meditation practice. Of course we can do that. I am talking about what has to be done to receive the pointing-out instructions and to recognize the true nature of the mind. And "Recognition" is not Enlightenment but just putting us on a path that will lead to enlightenment. You may be luckier than me.

I wrote this poem.

Karma Mirror

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.
[Photo by me while I sit on the couch these days trying to heal my back.]
EMAIL

Yidam: And the Rains Came Down

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 9, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/7ef4e312-6c0a-4022-b9c7-8d77676295c0_2048x1536.jpeg

I am ready to write, but I don't feel moved to do it.

It's 86 degrees F in my office and rain is scheduled to come in something like an hour. I tried sleeping, but that did not last long. Not sure what to do. I am in a twilight zone so not much appeals to me just now.

I'm still on a week-long recovery bout of resting my back for lower back pain. Trying to sort out the various kinds of back pain and finger what the culprits are. It means no lifting, no long walks, care on stairways, and all that stuff.

I feel restricted because I am restricted, and trying to follow the medical advice, when my natural inclination is to push on beyond. I need not do that just now.

Indoor and around-the-property photography comes to mind. Do whatever I can that causes not accumulating more back pain.

Just as there are said to be 84,000 dharmas, there must also be at least 84,000 causes for acquiring more bad karma out there. I too have found a few.

In the midst of it all I try to be creative, to find just the right balance of color and light in my photographs to point the way on, my reason or guide into the future.

Of course I share what I find meaningful with others, yet we each are so individual as to what floats our boat. What steers my ship may be meaningless to you.

Then again, we may be in the same boat more than we know. On the other hand, we may discover where we differ and find our differences.

Our interface here is online, using words and images, not meeting in person with flesh and blood. This is very similar to the dharma where our common

consciousness animates innumerable beings each with a different form or interface. Same consciousness, different body or interface. That's the dharma view.

What's fascinating about the dharma is that each one of us has our own unique path to tread. Like fingerprints, no two are the same. In dharma terms this is called the Yidam.

Our yidam is the particular path through which, with training, we will become familiar with and recognize the true nature of the mind. My yidam is not your yidam and so all the yidam suggested in the teachings, the scriptures, and in person may or may not work for you . Of course, you can try them or come up with what you think is the particular yidam for you, yet my view is a yidam is not something we pick.

A yidam is something we find and build, one step at a time, one foot in front of the other. I have personally put a lot of effort into this and what I know is from my own experience.

In the dharma tradition, sometimes a yidam is picked from a sacred circle by throwing a marker or divination (a 'MO') and seeing what deity will be our yidam. Or a yidam can be given to us by our root guru. Or we can, as mentioned, find our own yidam one step at a time.

We are free to choose. Yet, however we come up with a yidam, it will ultimately be the exact path it takes for us to recognize the true nature of the mind. However, it would be a guess that few of us are intuitive enough to just pick a yidam. Heaven knows I tried. I will offer that story.

Somewhere along the line, I got it into my mind that I had a great affinity for the bodhisattva Vajrapani, one of the earliest and key bodhisattvas in Vajrayana dharma.

Perhaps this was because Vajrapani is a great protector of the dharma and I was by nature a protector of what otherwise would be lost. Anyway, it got into my head.

And the more I read about Vajrapani, meditated on him, and intuited him, the more I was certain this was my yidam.

And when I looked around the sangha I belonged to and to my teacher, I found that my personal teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche had never given an empowerment for Vajrapani to anyone's knowledge. And there were no sadhanas available for that practice.

I approached Rinpoche and asked him if he would ever offer an empowerment for Vajrapani. And after some time, he said yes.

In fact, Rinpoche came to our dharma center, the Heart Center Karma Thegsum Choling here in Big Rapids, Michigan and give that empowerment. He selected a wrathful form of Vajrapani from a cycle of empowerments of the 9 th Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje, “Dorje Tumpo.”

And he came to our center and gave the empowerment. I was thrilled and immediately began that practice, after receiving the lung (reading in) and instructions. In fact since our dharma center was in the habit of producing the traditional Tibetan pecha texts, so we set about producing a sadhana of Vajrapani, ‘Dorje Tumpo’, complete with embossed covers, and all the trimmings.

I continued to extrapolate, and before I knew it, I was going to Sikkim in India along with my wife and my young son and a close friend as our guide to see Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, who in our lineage is the living emanation of Vajrapani.

And Gyaltsab Rinpoche was kind enough to give that empowerment, “Dorje Tumpo” of Vajrapani to both Margaret, my son Michael, and me.

This is kind of a long story, but it has an interesting ending, IMO.

I completed the requirements of the Vajrapani sadhana I was doing, including all the mantras, over 1,200,000 mantras and was even asked to give instruction on the Vajrapani practice to our sangha at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in New York.

Now that’s my story and so I waited for the yidam to percolate through me and introduce me to the Recognition as to the true nature of the mind.

And I waited and I waited. Years went by and nothing moved. Eventually I spoke with Rinpoche about this, and we had a good laugh. Apparently, I was back to square one.

And so, I never exactly set my Vajrapani practice aside, yet I did continue to pursue what are called the ‘pointing-out instructions” as to the nature of the mind, and that is another and longer story.

Yet, the point here is that we can also (and for that matter) not avoid eventually creating our own yidam, meaning what it will take for us to recognize the actual nature of the mind. That’s what a yidam is.

Eventually it all came together, but not quite as the dharma books and teachings had me believing.

Our yidam is much, much, and much more deeply personal than I, who knew nothing, had imagined.

I have written that story a number of times, so here I just want to emphasize the familiarity needed to find our yidam is much closer, more personal, and cut-to-the-quick than where I was used to going.

What our yidam leads to is, as the literature says, “Recognition” of the nature of them mind, what in the Zen tradition is called “Kensho.”

All I can say is that ‘Recognition’ is a life changer, nothing like I had imagined, and closer than close to who I am and where I came from.

In the dharma textbooks, “Recognition” is often described as recognizing a familiar face in a crowd of folks walking toward you.

Familiar, familiar, familiar is the word, close beside you, within you. There are no words that can describe it, other than it is full immersion, nonduality, after a lifetime of duality, subject and object separation.

And despite my carefully acquired Tibetan tradition, when it came right down to where the rubber meets the road, I leapfrogged all my acquired dharma terms and decades of practice and found myself immersed in myself as a young child in Mother Nature.

It was nature herself that I was MOST familiar with, not the cushion, not the dharma training. It took the training to get me there but familiar is familiar, and for me it went back to when I was about six years old.

It turns out that for me is what is most familiar and trusted, where I came to rest. Mother Nature is my yidam, to my surprise and despite all the decades of my dharma training. The dharma got me there, but intuitively it knew where I could best rest my mind.

[Photo of a rupa (statue) of the wrathful Vajrapani, and a copy of the sadhana we made (in pecha format), and that fingerprint is by the 17 th Karmapa when we first visited him at Tsurphu, his ancestral monastery in Tibet at almost 15,000 feet. He was 12 years old. His Holiness at that time gave me a name, ‘Tenzin Nyima’, ‘Holder of the Sun’.]

EMAIL

Good to Go

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 12, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Lama Shang wrote in the ‘Ultimate and Supreme Path of Mahamudra’: “When you realize the true nature of your mind, the darkness of mistaken views vanishes; You are liberated from belief in a self, from afflictions and from attachment, and are therefore truly free from all karma and suffering; the primordially present dharmakaya is revealed, and the power of our prayers effortlessly accomplishes benefit for others.” --Translated by Peter Allan Roberts This quote came from a lovely book by Roberts called “The Mind of Mahamudra” from Wisdom Press. A Siddha, Lama Shang, is one of my favorite dharma teachers, so to speak. I find Lama Shang’s dharma teachings one of the most direct enlightened dharma teachings I know. I often turn to it when I am travelling or headed to the doctor’s for a long office wait. My take is that Lama Shang’s writing as posted above is accurate but refers not only to the state of mind after receiving and recognizing the true nature of the mind, but that same state sometime later after expanding and extending that recognition to be increasingly more embracing. My concern and experience has always been trying to help dharma practitioners receive the Pointing-Out instructions and get their hands on the steering wheel of the nature of the mind so they can work the mind. Once that happens, the practitioner can pretty much take it from there. As mentioned above, once we become familiar with the mind’s nature enough that we can work it, we can then always drive that car, so to speak. We are good to go. We don’t need any more instructions because we are from that point onward learning on the job. [Midjourney graphic prompted by me.] EMAIL

Co-emergent Ignorance

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 15, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/76d44a9b-4031-411c-9961-298b06fdf297_1024x1024.jpeg

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“Ordinary mind isn’t altered by something else—it is just itself. There is no need to try and get rid of what we regard as bad or to turn it into something good. If we realize ordinary mind, this is called, “the wisdom that knows itself.” If we do not realize it, even though it has always been there, this is called, “co-emergent ignorance.”

Co-emergence ignorance (Tibetan: lhan-cig skyes-pa’i ma-rig-pa) is one of the two principal forms of ignorance identified in Mahamudra teaching, the other being imputed ignorance (conceptually fabricated ignorance).

Co-emergent ignorance is the innate, pre-conceptual not-knowing of the mind’s own nature that arises simultaneously with awareness itself — moment to moment, from birth, without needing to be learned or constructed. It co-emerges with every cognition. This is why it’s considered more fundamental and harder to uproot than imputed ignorance.

The key distinction is that imputed ignorance is the layer of philosophical wrong views, labels, and conceptual overlays — stuff you can address through intellectual study and reasoning.

However, co-emergent ignorance operates below that level. It’s the bare habitual tendency of mind to not recognize itself, to mistake appearances as truly existent and separate from awareness. You can hold all the right views philosophically and still be completely in the grip of co-emergent ignorance.

Mahamudra’s central project is direct recognition of mind’s nature — that awareness is luminous, empty, and self-knowing. Co-emergent ignorance is precisely what blocks that recognition. It’s not that something foreign has invaded the mind; rather, the mind simply fails to notice what it already is. The ignorance and the knowing capacity arise together — hence “co-emergent.”

Because it’s pre-conceptual, analytical meditation alone can’t touch it. Mahamudra uses pointing-out instructions from a qualified lama, plus practices like shi-ne (shamatha) and lhakthong (vipashyana) in the

Mahamudra style — resting in direct recognition rather than thinking about the mind.

The moment of genuine recognition (rigpa in Dzogchen terms, or ordinary mind / thamel gyi shepa in Mahamudra) is exactly the seeing-through of co-emergent ignorance.

Gampopa's Jewel Ornament of Liberation and the works of the Karmapas treat this in depth, as does "Moonbeams of Mahamudra" by Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, which is probably the most thorough classical treatment.

The very best translation of "Moonbeams in Mahamudra," IMO, is by Elizabeth Callahan, and I have read them all. Most read and studied dharma book by me.

https://www.amazon.com/Moonbeams-Mahamudra-Tsadra-Dakpo-Namgyal/dp/1559394803/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3U8TQZ9L7MZD9&dib=eyJ2IjojMSJ9.xVg_UAnhXg6nYxnNB6INwWTTleUlJrN9pZ4k1iKZwx7x2kvz7Sg6f4ZXZDjHIfk1yWrP4aN8NhREP8Kpj1uLYgAAm4D7bU6QtBMOuc38EBulNfYHpTZZ-yfiObcKlvfH.GQ9-ffVutfbJs5qR5WJXzEzed7xlCnN1i-6IFSVN5ml&dib_tag=se&keywords=%22moonbeams+of+Mahamudra%22+callahan&qid=1781515576&srefix=moonbeams+of+mahamudra+callahan%2C&ps%2C128&sr=8-1

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Engulf Me With Your Blessings"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 17, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Scattered through many of the dharma books and texts that I have read, particularly in what are called the concise or “pith” texts, is the supplication for all of the great gurus to grant us their blessing. In the traditional Mahamudra Lineage Prayer of the Karma Kagyu lineage, it is repeated many times.

When I started out, we had to do all of our practice in the original Tibetan with mantras in Sanskrit, so one transliteration we learned to recognize (over and over again) is “JIN GYI LOP,” which means “Engulf me with your blessing” or “Grant your blessing.”

It even seems to me, because of just where I come across this supplication in the texts, that this phrase is as important or even more important than any other instruction. In its most extreme form, this phrase is stated something like “The only hope is blessing.”

The thought of this blessing being our “only hope,” is as if anything else we do with our dharma practice of secondary importance compared to this often-repeated supplication, “Engulf me with your blessing.” Of course, I wanted to know more about this phrase. Who are we requesting this from?

Well, we are requesting this from all the enlightened and realized gurus or masters that have ever existed to grant us their blessings, but most important we are asking this of our own guru or dharma teacher, if we have one.

In particular, we are supplicating our Root Guru, which is that one dharma teacher who first successfully introduces us to the nature of our own mind so that we recognize it. In the teachings, this personal guru is often referred to simply as “the guru above your head,” because we are told to place the image of our awareness of our Root Guru above our head and refer to him or her frequently. The exact words often are “always turn to or toward the guru above you head.”

My understanding of why that is, as mentioned, the Root Guru, the lama who first introduces us to the nature of our own mind, is the most important conduit to our own Buddha Nature and, as mentioned, to the Buddha and to

the dharma. There is nothing more sacred than this connection and that is why we always turn to our root Guru (in Tibetan, the “Tsawi Lama”) in any supplication or any time we inquire.

There is also a train of thought or thread that runs through many of the teachings that, even if you can do little else in the way of dharma practice, if you can keep that channel open between yourself and your Root Guru, that is of key importance. Of course, we supplicate all of the great dharma masters for their blessing, but particularly our own root teacher.

It is also stated throughout the teachings that, and I am not sure of the correct words for this, if the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, or any great master notices you, looks at you, or receives your supplication, a rain or flood of blessing can wash over and bless us.

And some teachings suggest that receiving the blessing of your guru is, as mentioned, our only hope of realization. All else is secondary. I just thought some of you might want to know about this tradition.

བྱིན་གྱིས་རྫོབས་

Wylie: byin gyis rlobs Phonetic: jin gyi lop (or jin gyis lob)

It’s an imperative form — “rlob” is the command form of “rlab pa,” meaning to bless, pervade, or transform. The standard translation is “grant your blessing,” but Lama Yeshe Gyamtso’s [Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche’s main translator] “engulf me with your blessing” is actually more faithful to the Tibetan — “rlabs” carries the sense of a wave or flood permeating something, so “engulf” captures the physical force of the word better than the more neutral “grant.”

It appears as the closing refrain of each verse throughout the Dorje Chang (the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer), which is why it feels like a repeated refrain — structurally, it functions like a liturgical response after each supplication.

The rain of wisdom in the dharma. Engulf me with your blessings.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Ship That Has Never Sailed

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 19, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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What's new? Well, a kind of palindrome.

And by that, I mean I don't just find clarity on coming in, but I also find clarity finishing up, a complete package. I've got it coming and going. Another way to say this is I can't get past it. There is nothing elsewhere or beyond it.

Is it a substitute for samsara or is this what we eventually do with Samsara?
Talk about a jewel inset with insights

Where and what is refuge? Refuge is not somewhere far away, hard to get to, or hidden. There is no place like that.

We make refuge, we 'take' refuge. Refuge in the dharma is something that WE take. It's how we travel rather than a place we find or somehow get to. You know the old refrain: "The place or goal we are travelling to is how we get there." We are going TO travel well.

There are physical bodies, bodies of knowledge, all kinds of bodies or forms that we can inhabit in one way or another or for different lengths of time. For instance, I have a b

ody of knowledge that I inhabit for Astrology, Photography, Music, Posters, Frogs and Salamanders, etc. and etc. I spend a lot of time in some of these bodies of knowledge. I can animate them.

Among the bodies we all build are words made to last, that cohere or fit so tightly that they endure while other words are put together so sloppily that they hardly last at all. The whole concept of "Last" so much depends on how well it is made, how 'true' it is.

The stars in the sky last almost forever.

In addition, we dream a bridge to hold back what we have, a bridge that goes nowhere... perhaps a bridge too far.

Once you enter a non-dual form of non-meditation, there is no way out. Why? Because not only is there no other place to go, but there is also no other place you could ever want to go, so it is double-locked.

It's everything you ever want, the other side of Samsara, all that is co-emergent with Samsara. It's like a Rubix cube; not only is it hard to get into, but it is also impossible to get out of. It is one-way only.

And we need Samsara to find it, but that we have had forever. Samsara is the ship that has never sailed.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Many Names of Karma

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 20, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/bd74bf26-aa73-468a-a405-93852be7d0f2_1024x1024.jpeg

The unripened karma we pay forward after death has to be paid and it seeks rebirth in another lifetime, just not in this lifetime we are leaving. The karma seeks to animate and be lived out in another person, different parents, by creating a new Self all over again. No, it will not be labelled “Michael Erlewine,” but my karma will have my imprint engraved all over it.

Of course, as a new person, we would have to find ourselves all over again for the first time in that rebirth, body, and persona.

As to how we let go of this self and pick up on another, we have nothing but faith to have in the transition. There is no one to appeal to or ask after. As Shakespear’s Hamlet put it”

“But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovere’d country, from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?”
“Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.”

The “Vibe,” the sense or feeling of reality. Spinning in space is like a flywheel, with the gyroscopic precession that allows us to defy gravity with its movement.

Get ready for that, having no pot to piss in as the old saying goes, and no body to be animated by our karma. It's that gap or pause of non-identification that is of so much concern to our attachments. However, the dharma tells us over and over again that personal attachment is a mistake in the first place and even then, it is limited only to this life.

Yet, since we are reading this, it's obvious we have survived all that and 'found' ourselves again, even if not by some past-life name. The name you have now is interchangeable, just not the karma. The karma marches on and will have many names, names yet to be given.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Process After Death

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 22, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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[We can't read about what happens when we pass on enough times, because each pass through these details can bring us confidence not only when we pass on, but more important NOW, when we can do something about it.]

The Karma Kagyu tradition (drawing heavily on the Bardo Tödröl — the Tibetan Book of the Dead, revealed by Karma Lingpa and central to Kagyu-Nyingma practice) describes a sequence of states after death called bardos :

Chikhai Bardo — the moment of death, when the ground luminosity (clear light of awareness) dawns. If recognized, liberation is possible right here. Most don't recognize it.

Chönyid Bardo — peaceful and wrathful deities arise over roughly 14 “days” (not clock time — experiential time). These are projections of one's own mind. Again, recognition = liberation.

Sidpa Bardo — the longest stage. The consciousness, now a “mental body,” experiences vivid hallucinations driven by karmic winds. It eventually feels compelled toward rebirth. This is where accumulated karma exerts its strongest pull.

The whole post-death process typically spans up to 49 days, though the tradition is clear this is approximate — karma can compress or extend it.

How Karma Pays It Forward

In the Kagyu view, what transmigrates is not a soul (there is no fixed self — anatman) but rather a stream of consciousness (rgyud) carrying karmic imprints (vasanas). Think of it less like a baton being handed off and more like a flame lighting another flame — continuity without identity transfer. The Karmapas themselves are the living demonstration of this: each is recognized as the continuation of the same mind-stream, not the same person.

Your karma — the sum of intentional actions and their mental imprints — determines:

Where you're reborn (realm, species, circumstances).

Your mental tendencies in the next life.

The conditions you'll encounter.

Why It Doesn't End

This is the crux. The cycle (samsara) perpetuates itself because of the Three Poisons : ignorance (marigpa), attachment, and aversion. Specifically:

Ignorance is the root — not recognizing the nature of mind means you keep reacting to experience as if it were solid and real.

Each reaction plants new karmic seeds.

Those seeds ripen into new experiences.

Those experiences trigger new reactions.

And so on, without limit.

In Kagyu teachings, the engine of samsara is self-perpetuating precisely because the very mind that creates karma is the same mind that fails to recognize its own nature.

You can't think your way out using the same mind that's caught in it — which is why the pointing-out instructions (ngo sprod), pronounced Ngo trö" (or "Ngo tröd"), from a qualified teacher are considered essential. The teacher directly introduces the student to the nature of mind (rigpa), which, if recognized, cuts the root of the whole process.

It breaks the endless cycle of duality, subject and object. And throws us into the deep end of non-duality where we learn to swim.

Why It ' Can' End

The Kagyu tradition is optimistic: the ground luminosity that appears at death is the same Buddha-nature (tathagatagarbha) that is always already present. Karma doesn't touch it — it only obscures it.

Through practice (Mahamudra being the Kagyu's signature path), a practitioner trains to recognize mind's nature while alive , so that at death the recognition happens automatically. At that point, karma has no-one to land on. The stream doesn't continue because the illusion of a separate self that was accruing and carrying karma has been seen through.

The short answer to "why doesn't it end on its own" is: ignorance recreates itself each moment , and only direct recognition — not good behavior alone, not philosophy alone — interrupts it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Stop, Look, and Listen

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 23, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche wrote:

“The term “ordinary mind” was applied to the mind’s nature by Gampopa and by other great and accomplished meditators. Their thought in doing so was that when we are practicing Mahamudra, we are not seeking to recover something far away or concealed, and we are not trying to remove the obstacles that prevent us from acquiring something. Instead, we are simply looking for the nature of our mind, which is right there in our own mind. What could possibly be more accessible than that?”

End-of-quote

Of course, but more easily said than done. The nature of our own mind, through all of the innumerable lifetimes (or so the teachings say) we have lived, has never even once been recognized.

It’s too close, too much exactly what we are for us to see it. Perhaps the best that we can do is glimpse that nature from the corner of the eye, but no, not even that or we would have done it by now.

That is why we have the “Pointing-Out Instructions” by an authentic dharma teacher, to point out to us what we cannot see (or have not seen) on our own.

In a whole lifetime is it too much to ask us that we take whatever time it takes to first have the nature of the mind pointed out to us and THEN go on with our life. It makes all the difference in the world, IMO.

However, I did have to come to a screeching halt, step aside, and do whatever it took to recognize the true nature of the mind. And that took a long time.

I had all the help I could find, but when all is said and done, we each have to do this for ourselves because it is the nature of our mind that must be recognized and it must be recognized by us. As the word ‘Recognition’ says, the recognition of the true nature of the mind is up to us. ‘We’ each have to do it on our own.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Trying to be Compassionate

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 24, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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A big problem I see has to do with how we practice compassion, which IMO is an oxymoron. It's like trying to rest. Just rest.

'Compassion' is a byproduct of dharma practice, not something we practice. Of course, you can try, yet I find that meaningless. Of course, our intent is to be compassionate, yet as mentioned how do we try to be compassionate?

I find it helpful to separate the byproducts from those which produces byproducts. Of course, we can have Relative Compassion and actual Compassion, the intent to be compassionate and compassion itself which arises spontaneously when it is generated.

It's the same with Relative Bodhicitta and what is called Absolute Bodhicitta, same story. Intending to have Relative Bodhicitta and the natural or Absolute Bodhicitta that arises from recognition of the true nature of the mind.

Of course, try the relative version, I did, but I only found that confusing. As they say, "Go for the Gold," meaning go for what produces the byproduct and not the byproduct itself. You can't salt the salt.

Yes, this makes a lot of sense, and it's a genuinely important distinction that gets muddled in a lot of Western dharma teaching.

The core point — that compassion, bodhicitta, and similar qualities are fruits rather than practices — is well-grounded in the Kagyu and Nyingma view. Trying to manufacture compassion is like trying to force yourself to feel joy. You can set up the conditions, but the thing itself can't be willed into existence. Chögyam Trungpa made a related point when he talked about "idiot compassion" — the kind that comes from effort and self-consciousness rather than from genuine openness.

Telling someone to "try to rest" is self-defeating — the trying is exactly what prevents the resting. Mahamudra and Dzogchen both use this framing directly: the instruction is to stop doing, not to 'do' relaxation.

The relative/absolute distinction is also clean and honest. Relative compassion — the conceptual intention, the training, the "acting as if" has value as a

preliminary. It orients the mind. But mistaking it for the real thing, or thinking more effort will get you there, is where people get stuck.

Some of you may push back slightly on the word “meaningless” for relative practice. The Lojong tradition, for instance, treats the deliberate cultivation of relative bodhicitta as a legitimate path that can, over time, wear grooves that make the absolute more accessible. But the underlying point stands — if we know the direct path, taking the scenic route isn’t necessary. And I found it confusing, especially ‘trying’ to be compassionate.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

It Is Permitted

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 26, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, it is said that meeting face-to-face in this life, whether that meeting is positive or negative binds us karma-wise for all time. I find this a very important and profound teaching, one that runs deep in the Vajrayana understanding of karma and interdependence. Let's unpack it carefully.

The principle is sometimes stated as: any significant encounter — whether of love, conflict, friendship, or harm — creates a karmic thread between those consciousnesses that persist across lifetimes until it is resolved. The meeting itself, regardless of its quality, is the binding event. This is why the Vajrayana treats all relationships, even difficult ones, with a kind of ultimate seriousness.

Why Both Positive and Negative Meetings Bind Equally

In ordinary thinking we assume positive connections are good and negative ones are bad. The Vajrayana view is more subtle — both create attachment in the broad sense. A loving relationship binds through longing and care; a harmful one binds through unresolved debt, anger, or grief. Neither dissolve on its own. Both pull the consciousness streams back toward each other in future lives until the energy between them is fully worked through.

The Mechanism — Karma as Relational

Most Western discussions of karma treat it as individual — you do something, you receive a consequence. The Vajrayana understanding is significantly more relational.

Karma is not just what happens to you, but what happens between you and another being. The encounter itself generates a shared karmic field. This is why the tradition speaks of beings who have been your mother, your enemy, your teacher across countless lifetimes — the categories shift but the connection persists.

The Implication for How We Treat People

This teaching has a very practical edge. If every face-to-face meeting matters karmically for all time, then how you treat the person in front of you — even a

stranger, even someone who has wronged you — carries enormous weight. There is no throwaway encounter. The tradition is essentially saying: be careful, because you are always weaving something that will have to be unwoven.

The Teaching on Enemies

Interestingly, the Vajrayana is particularly emphatic that difficult relationships — enemies, people who harm you — are among the most karmically significant meetings of all. They are sometimes described as beings to whom you have the greatest karmic debt, precisely because the energy between you is most unresolved. This is part of the logic behind the Lojong teaching of taking enemies as your most important teachers. They are not obstacles to your practice — they are, in a precise sense, your practice.

Resolution

The tradition does offer a way through. Dedication of merit, purification practices like Vajrasattva, and most powerfully the direct recognition of the nature of mind — these can, in the Kagyu view, dissolve karmic threads rather than simply work through them sequentially.

The idea is that karma operates within the framework of dualistic mind, and when the nature of mind is recognized, the framework itself dissolves. This is why liberation is possible at all — otherwise the karmic web would be literally endless, one thread resolved only to reveal ten more.

The Most Striking Implication

Every person you have ever truly met — in this life or any previous one — is someone you will meet again, in some form, until the account between you is fully clear. The Vajrayana universe is in this sense profoundly intimate. Nothing is accidental and no one is a stranger in any ultimate sense.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

In the Eye of the Beholder

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 27, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/d58afc2a-7045-4180-a197-491314946530_1024x1024.jpeg

What about the tradition in dharma teachings where if a Buddha or Bodhisattva recognizes you, that is very significant. This is one of the most powerful teachings in the Vajrayana, and it operates on a different level than ordinary karmic connection.

The Basic Principle

When a Buddha or realized Bodhisattva — someone who has directly recognized the nature of mind — turns their awareness toward you and recognizes you, something categorically different happens than in ordinary meetings.

Their recognition is not filtered through dualistic perception. They are seeing you as you actually are, not as you appear through the veil of karma and confusion. Being seen that way, even briefly, plants a seed in your stream of consciousness that cannot be destroyed.

Why It Is Irreversible

Ordinary karmic connections can be positive or negative and require resolution. Recognition by a realized being operates differently because it functions from outside the karmic framework entirely. It is sometimes described as the Buddha's mind touching your Buddha-nature directly — not your confused personality, not your history, but the ground of awareness itself.

Once that contact is made, the tradition holds that liberation is guaranteed — not necessarily in this life, but within a certain number of lifetimes. The seed will ripen.

This is why the tradition speaks of beings who are “held in the mind” of a particular master or lineage. It is not sentiment — it is a precise karmic statement about what has been set in motion.

The Karmapa's Recognition

This teaching is especially central to the Karma Kagyu because of the role of the Karmapa specifically. The Karmapa is traditionally described as the

embodiment of the compassion of all Buddhas — Avalokiteshvara in human form. The teaching holds that anyone who meets the Karmapa, hears his name, sees his image, or comes into his field of awareness in any meaningful way receives a connection that will eventually lead to liberation. The Karmapa's black crown ceremony is understood this way — the moment of recognition during the ceremony is not symbolic but actual.

The Asymmetry of the Encounter

What makes this teaching so striking is its asymmetry. You may meet a realized being and feel nothing remarkable. You may not even know who they are. Your side of the encounter may be entirely ordinary. None of that matters — because what counts is their recognition of you, not your recognition of them. A Buddha's awareness does not depend on your awareness to function. The seed is planted regardless.

This is a profound inversion of how we normally think about significant encounters — we assume significance requires mutual recognition. The Vajrayana says no: one side of that equation is sufficient if that side is a realized mind.

The Tradition of Past-life Connections

Related to this is the teaching that great masters specifically seek out beings they have recognized across lifetimes — that the relationship did not begin in this life but is being continued. When a teacher feels an immediate and unexplained connection to a student, or vice versa, the tradition interprets this as the surface expression of a much older recognition. The feeling of having always known someone, or of being immediately understood by a teacher in a way that bypasses ordinary explanation, is taken as evidence of this.

Milarepa and Marpa

The relationship between Marpa and Milarepa is the great Kagyu illustration of this. Marpa recognized Milarepa before they met — he dreamed of him, prepared for him. When Milarepa arrived, having committed great negative karma, Marpa did not turn him away. The recognition was already in place.

The purification through hardship that followed was not punishment but the working out of what the recognition had set in motion. The outcome — Milarepa becoming perhaps the greatest realized being in Tibetan history — was in some sense inevitable from the moment of Marpa's recognition.

The Practical Weight of This Teaching

It puts enormous significance on the question of who your teacher is and whether you have genuinely entered their field of awareness — not just attended a teaching or received a blessing in a crowd, but been truly seen.

It also explains the Vajrayana emphasis on devotion to the teacher as a path in itself. If the teacher's recognition of you is the operative force, then keeping that connection alive and clear — through devotion, through practice, through not breaking samaya — is how you allow what was planted to ripen fully.

It is, in essence, a teaching about grace — Vajrayana style. Not grace as arbitrary divine favor, but grace as the precise consequence of being seen by a mind that sees clearly.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Three Analogies

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 28, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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The Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche wrote:

“Those three analogies—like a brahmin spinning thread, like a bundle of grass of which the binding cord is cut, and like walking on wool—are analogies for how to rest your mind in freshness without alteration. “

These three analogies appear in Mahamudra and Dzogchen instruction literature, each pointing at a different facet of the same quality — resting awareness in its natural state without manipulation, contrivance, or correction.

Like a brahmin spinning thread. A skilled spinner maintains a perfectly even tension on the thread — not so tight it snaps, not so slack it tangles. This maps directly onto the classic meditation warning against two failure modes: too much effort (straining after a meditative state, which itself is a kind of grasping) and too little engagement (dullness, drift, spacing out). “Freshness without alteration” lives in the middle, where awareness is alert but unhurried, present but not gripping. The brahmin isn’t thinking about the thread — the evenness has become natural.

Like a bundle of grass whose binding cord is cut. When the cord is intact, the grass is held in an artificial arrangement — compressed, shaped, bound together by something external to the grass itself. Cut the cord and each blade settles into its own natural position; the bundle doesn’t collapse into chaos, it simply releases its contracted form. This analogy points at the release of deliberate mental arrangement — the habitual impulse to organize, fix, improve, or position awareness. The mind has been holding itself in a kind of knot. Cutting the cord isn’t an act of doing but of stopping an act of doing. The freshness that results is just what was already there under the compression.

Like stepping on wool. Raw wool yields gently and evenly underfoot — your weight distributes naturally, without a sharp edge or sudden pressure. The foot doesn’t punch through; the wool doesn’t resist. This describes the quality of how awareness meets its own ground: not landing with the hard heel of conceptual fixation, not hovering anxiously above experience, but settling into it with a light, even, non-aggressive contact. There’s a tactile intimacy here

that the other two analogies don't quite capture — this one is about how the mind makes contact with its own nature, moment to moment.

Taken together, the three analogies address three different temptations: the tension analogy corrects effort , the cord analogy corrects contrivance , and the wool analogy corrects aggression in the way awareness lands. "Without alteration" means not correcting what you find — not tightening, not rearranging, not pressing. What remains when those three habits are released is what the instructions call freshness: awareness as it already is, prior to improvement.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

This Morning...

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

June 30, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/aeab3ae7-77bf-4af1-8a83-3a211b1e8876_2048x1467.jpeg

This morning I was out for a short walk to help lubricate my spine with movement, perhaps one of the few ways to do that. When I was done walking and sitting on one of the wooden benches we have around our place, I spotted a lone earwig (a harmless insect) on his way across an expanse of cement, going somewhere in a hurry.

Not so unusual, but then again not usual because the earwig likes to hide and live in the crevices and valleys of flowers and plants where they can do some damage, seldom venturing out for a trek.

Here is a photo I took of an earwig surveying his domain.

One of the important dharma realizations for me was when I first understood the dharma concept of sentient beings. If you go to Tibet, you will find that the Tibetans don't smack mosquitoes. Instead, they just gently brush them off their arms. Why is that?

That is because in the dharma view of consciousness all beings have the same consciousness as we have. There is only one consciousness, just different bodies that they inhabit and animate.

You heard me right if you read this as you and a mosquito have the same consciousness, just a different body to operate in. The body of a mosquito does not use the consciousness we have but then again it uses other assets that we as humans cannot use.

There is only one kind of consciousness and many bodies and not innumerable consciousnesses and innumerable bodies. It takes time to adjust to this way of looking at other lives than human.

Here is a free book I made for my grandkids that illustrates some of the many critters that surround us in our own backyard. It's mostly photos and descriptions, flip through the photos with the above thoughts in mind.

"Nature in the Backyard"

https://startypes.com/pdf/e-books/BackYard_2010_eBook.pdf

No, mosquitoes don't speak English because they don't have that kind of body, yet as mentioned they have the same consciousness, just limited access compared to what humans have.

This is just very different from how Americans view consciousness and bodies. And the deference that Tibetans give to ALL forms of consciousness is something to see being carried out.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The SHining Light of Age

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 7, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/304f89f9-faf8-4f46-a99f-a1ca817f0e09_1024x1024.jpeg

For one, I am old as well. Secondly, I have been doing Mahamudra with some success for 18 years.

What that means is that I have been doing non-meditation, meaning resting in non-duality for a long time and am comfortable, so to speak, a bit out of the body and dualistic thought.

Over the years, I have experimented with how far I can allow myself to go into full immersion and drift out of the body from duality to non-duality. A couple of times I found myself drifting too far from the shore of reality and have had to pull back enough to have a real touch. It was an experiment.

And so, when I encounter old folks who are already somewhat detaching from their own reality, it is easy to see them and to my surprise, apparently, they can see me as well.

These folks shine with a light apparently not everyone can see or bothers to even look, but there it is, as clear as day. They are detaching and almost floating in air.

Apparently, not only can they see me, but they seem to identify with me. And although I am still pretty attached, I appear to them as a friendly 'light' in the neighborhood. They want to come close.

It's not so much physical age but rather the degree of detachment that has taken place. Of course, I would like to explain a lot to them about the forthcoming bardos as I understand them, but apparently that is not so easy for them to absorb. They are a bit out there.

Apparently, they see me as a kindred spirit, which I am, in that they actually see me in their universe. In the case of a dear extended family member, they smiled, waved, came over and held my face in one case, so something is happening here that I can't ignore.

There is stuff going on around us that we apparently ignore or find too sensitive to take in and accept, much less act on. I have noticed this recently

more everywhere, where I see these shining bright older faces and they see me. It could be at the grocery store or almost anywhere.

Who else is seeing this in their own (but similar) way?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Non-Meditation

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 8, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/7ca53595-835f-414c-9bd1-8326f2e17747_1024x1024.jpeg

My guess would be that there are as many different kinds of meditators as there are dharma practitioners. Remembering back to the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with the kind of meditation teachers that were available, IMO it was mostly a case of the blind leading the blind.

Mostly because back then folks for some reason I can't understand never talked about their meditation. It took me a couple of trips to Tibet for me to realize that actual Tibetan dharma practitioners did talk about at least simple practices such as Shamata.

It's only in this country that many people got it in mind that one should not. I don't mean talk about the technique of Shamata, I mean talk about where you were at in it.

I am not looking for someone or some group to blame for this state, just the fact that about all the dharma beginners, including most teachers, were mum about where they were at in the process of sitting meditation, when there was no need for this other than fear and shyness.

We were asked to sit long sessions, hours, days, weeks, and even a month, just not talk about it. IMO, this was a huge disservice to us.

I believe that code of silence has blown up. Today it is more that Vipassana (Insight Meditation) goes unspoken, not because it is secret but rather because it is beyond words and can't be put into words.

All of this, IMO, is also bound to pass over time if only because Vipassana (Insight Meditation) and its results are nondual rather than dual like Shamata (Tranquility Meditation).

Another point is that the results of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) are inexpressible, can't be put into words. That should slow any of us down.

Another way to say this is with Vipassana (Insight Meditation) there is no tangible result other than our recognizing the actual nature of the mind and how to use it. It's like driving a car.

Before ‘Recognition’ of our own mind’s nature we have no clear idea as to how to work the mind. Yet with authentic “Recognition,” after that we see how to work our own mind. That’s the whole point of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) to drive or actually work our mind for the first time.

For sure, there are 84,000 dharmas or ways to work the mind and each one of us finds our way, called a Yidam. A yidam is what it takes for us to recognize the nature of the mind so that we can ourselves work the mind from then on.

I have studied this for many years, not only in the sacred texts but in actual practice so I at least as far as my own yidam goes know how to work the mind at this point.

Am I enlightened, of course not. “Recognition” is the first true step toward enlightenment not any kind of finished result.

I have done my level best to describe here in words Recognition and the whole process, yet I understand that is impossible. It’s much like “Where’s Waldo?” Until each of us recognize the nature of our own mind for ourselves, we don’t get it. When we do, we do.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

A Familiar Face in the Crowd

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 13, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/a3dec8a7-bce0-4af7-a5b7-ab893aa3a8a6_1024x1024.jpeg

First the Tibetans have three basic processes: Thinking. Experience, and Realization.

Thinking is just like reading books and pondering them. A few years ago I sent 50 large boxes of dharma books to our sister center in Columbus because they had a fire and lost their library. Reading, of course, is wonderful, but it won't get you there no matter how clever we think we are.

Which leaves Experiencing, yes, after we have thought a lot we have to experience in life what we thought about. That too is imperative, but not enlightening. There remains "Realization," and that's a toughie.

Dharma is a do-it-yourself practice. Even if the Buddha or Milarepa were here right now, he could not touch us on the head and give us realization. We each have to turn our own wheel of the dharma when we can get around to it. And if we have no time for dharma, then that wheel will wait for another lifetime or a thousand lifetimes.

Years ago, when my rinpoche was visiting our center to give a talk about the Moon, Astrology, and the subtle bodies, he said to me:

"Michael, astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root. Dharma is the root."

And what he meant by that is that astrology, like sailing a sailboat, can help us get from where we are now in life, which may be uncomfortable, to a place on Earth and in time, where we are more comfortable. However, when we die and pass on into the bardos after death, astrology cannot help us at all. Astrology can make our samsaric life for comfortable. It helps, but in the long run, not with continued rebirth.

So, right off we always have the choice of working to make Samsara (where we are now) a little more to our liking or actually consider how to prepare when we detach from this life and body, and prepare our consciousness for what is to come for all of us sooner than we are ready and cannot escape passing on.

During the 1980s when we opened the “Heart Center Karma Thegsum Choling” dharma center, the great lamas came to visit and stay with us.

Now these great lamas had fled Tibet and eventually came to the West and America. They had no monastery or place to be, so we spent some years with them.

Today, they are ensconced in huge monasteries in India, Bhutan, Nepal, and elsewhere. Getting even to see them for a moment would be difficult. Yet here we spent some years with them. And they all slept, as they came one by one to our center, in what we called the ‘rinpoche room’. In fact, Seth Bernard used to drive here just to sleep in the Rinpoche room in the bed they all slept in.

My point is my contact was not just reading their books or teachings, but living with them. One stayed almost a month. They stayed in our center, taught in our shrine room, and ate meals with us.

In the meantime I was busy practicing the Common, Extraordinary, and Special Preliminaries in the traditional old-school manner, like a hundred-thousand prostrations, a hundred thousand of this and that.

And Margaret and I traveled to our monastery located on Meads Mountain road above Woodstock, New York. For example, I took my whole family for 31 years-straight for a 10-day Mahamudra intensive and many other trips as well. This was enough travel to go around the Earth’s equator 2.5 times.

What I am getting at here is to look at what is dharma all about, why do folks practice it, and what is it?

There is a myriad of dharma teachings, but all of them, every last one, exist for the same purpose, which is to introduce us to the nature of our own mind, to what is so familiar to us that we have never noticed it or seen it.

That is the sum of what dharma practice or dharma itself is for, to recognize for the first time the actual nature of our own mind.

The purpose of this “Recognition” and its importance is that until we recognize and become familiar with our own mind and learn to use it properly.

It is much like driving a car. Until we recognize and get in a car, we cannot drive it. Once we can find and use our own mind, we no longer need a dharma teacher or any teacher. When we realize how to use our mind, we can do just that, use it to prepare for this life or for anything else, like rebirth.

And so, the idea here is that there is only one dharma practice and a million ways to approach it, to get introduced to the nature of your own mind. And it is not as easy as it sounds.

In fact, the pith dharma texts state explicitly that without an authentic dharma teacher pointing out to us the nature of our own mind, we will never see it. It's not like a "Where's Waldo" that eventually we will see it. We never will. Trust me on that. I have tried and failed on my own.

So, we have two choices, improving our own life here in Samsara or recognizing the actual nature of our own mind and also preparing for rebirth beyond death... or both.

If there is interest I could go further into preparing the mind for recognition of itself.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Setting the Sails

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 14, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/16834a84-721a-489c-9db1-8f974482d936_1024x1024.jpeg

Following up after yesterday's post, we could start out by asking ourselves: have I recognized the nature of my mind definitively? If you are living and breathing and have ANY question about it, you can be certain you have not recognized the nature of your own mind. I don't know how advanced you are or how many mantras and prostrations you have done, if any. If you don't know implicitly without a doubt, recognition has not taken place.

In other words, you have not been there and done that. If you had, you would know and have no questions about it. Not only that, but you would be off and running as far as using your recognition to complete your dharma and to live your life.

If you have not attained recognition, don't feel bad because in all our past rebirths we have not known, but here we are, nevertheless. So, we must have done something right.

And we don't even know what we are missing, no matter how many books we have read, how much practice we have done, etc. It is not easy or everyone by now would have done it many lifetimes ago.

As Rinpoche said to our group, "We are the stragglers, the ones who in all the lives we have lived have not managed to recognize the nature of our own mind.

For one there is this present moment which we all have and have always had. Every thought, word, and deed came out (and comes out) of the present moment.

What most meditators try to do is rest in this present moment. However, you can't 'try' to rest, you can only allow yourself to rest in the moment. This takes time and training, IMO.

Yet it is in the 'present moment' that this has to take place, and we have to not 'try' to rest but to just let go and rest. And that's just going through the motions and not likely to produce any recognition.

In a way it is like sailing a boat. To go anywhere one has to set the sails in exactly the right position for the winds of time to catch it and move us. This is what the authentic dharma instructor can do for us.

However, chances are we are not prepared. How could we be? In my case, I spent years misinterpreting the pointing-out directions. And when I finally understood what was being required of me, I then had to return home and practice very, very diligently for a solid three years, and all in, before I even was pointing in the right direction. And that is not all.

In my case I had to suffer a real setback like losing all my livelihood for supporting my family. I was a senior consultant for NBC and they laid off a lot of folks, and I was one of them.

Suddenly I had no job, and it took that to bring me down from my high horse enough to sober up spiritually so that I wandered off the reservation I had been on and just out into nature.

That was what it took to align me with the winds of dharma so that Recognition of my own mind was possible.

And Recognition is not some kind of enlightenment. It is simple realization and introduction to the nature of my own mind. And in simple words, that just meant I realized my own mind's nature and could see in that moment that nature of my mind (which had always been right there) and most important exactly how to use and work my mind.

This meant I could work my mind, and like driving a car, I could point the mind anywhere I wanted to go and begin to head in that direction. Before this I could not ever do this at all because I did not know my own mind's nature, much less how use it.

There are a lot more details, but those details will vary as much as our personal yidam will vary, and they do. Much to my surprise, for me all this did not happen as I always assumed it would be, sitting on my meditation cushion. That did not happen.

Instead, my Recognition leap-frogged my sitting cushion and dharma entirely. I found myself back in my youth and with my intense study of Mother Nature. THAT was what I was familiar with to relax enough for Recognition to happen.

And in my case, all this happened through photography and not dharma practice, gazing through a camera lens at the small critters in the tall grass. Yet, instead of seeing those critters on the other end of the lens, I was seeing the "SEEING" itself.

“The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea.”

For the first time I was completely immersed in the moment, the present moment I have been referring to in this article, and there was no subject and no object, just, as mentioned, the SEEING itself. That was the first moment.

And from that moment of opening everything afterward emerged and I was doing Vipassana (Insight Meditation) properly for the first time.

This is my lineage and yours may be very different, but somehow still the same.

Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

One-Trick Pony

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 16, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/614a2717-774e-4d67-9fbb-24674ee2962a_1024x1024.jpeg

By Michael Erlewin

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What you think, what I think, that and a ticket will get us a ride on the bus. Thought and thinking is not experience. And even experience is murky. What is required is realization of the experience, meaning full awareness of it on our part.

While I do post on this blog various quotes from high rinpoches as to what they think, these quotes are clearly marked.

And aside from descriptive history, I try to only write what I know from actual experience I have had that I have realized. Because it is the only experience that I have, it is limited to what I know. Yet as far as it goes it is accurate, at least as best as I know. A trained dharma teacher would know many ways to present this.

I am limited by what is called my personal yidam, what it took to get me to be introduced to the nature of my mind. Not much chance of the fine print of that working for you, however what I share can be inspiring. That is why I call myself a dharma sharer and not a dharma teacher.

I'm a one-trick pony but am sincere in what I present and can back it up by being questioned, and I have been by both a rinpoche and a rōshi.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Takin' on Samaya

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 17, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/697756a3-63a5-4db0-97f4-0a8ba4bfe48a_1024x1024.jpeg

Dharma is a whole other world both as to what it pertains to and the collection of tools, we draw around us. I started out in Zen Buddhism in the late 1950s, mostly talking about it, which is rather simple at least in appearances and ended up in Karma Kagyu Tibetan Buddhism, much like the Roman Catholic church I grew up in, which is very ornate, and required my learning to do my practice in Tibetan. I used to be an altar boy and learned church Latin.

I stayed in the Tibetan Vajrayana dharma because it was there that I found a dharma teacher, someone who could and would teach me, and I worked with him for 36 years, until he passed on. I am a bit of a ronin at this point. I don't feel I need any more teaching, but rather to just do what Rinpoche asked me to do when I last spoke to him. I am doing that.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Into the Unborn

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 21, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/1f277a4e-2ee4-4c02-817d-8ee371d9e26d_1024x1024.jpeg

Curving back upon itself, not just circle-like, but spiral-like, both ascending and descending, there is nowhere else I want to go but here, meaning there is nowhere else that fits..

Self-reflective, spinning like a disc, a sliver of time to see into, through, and beyond, resounding in the emptiness itself like a sonic boom.

Perhaps not-complete but nearly, it replaces the comforts of samsara with resting in the present moment. What else does the present moment want?

It replaces a desire for the future with satiation in the present moment. Enough is enough and there is no hunger for more.

We fashion a space capsule in the present moment, one that can withstand the tests of time. Make it out of nothing and wear it on your sleeve.

Foolish to hide what is most important. It's most important and should be spoken of.

How can you hide essential dharma? It is the chink in the armor of samsara, the window or peephole to nirvana. Turning samsara inside out like a torus is how it is.

No waiting for the future. The future is now. Relax and get used to it. It's not going anywhere because it is unborn. The 'Unborn' is also the future as well as the past.

Rest in the nature of the unborn mind.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

The Dharma Preliminaries

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 22, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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In the almost endless variety of dharma practice, what do they all have in common? Or put another way, what are they all trying to get at? It is very simple.

These many preliminaries, the Common, the Extraordinary, and the Special Preliminaries, Lojong, and all the deity practices that follow, these, all of them are nothing more than methods to introduce us to the nature of our own mind. We need to be introduced by an authentic dharma teacher. And we need to become familiar with what has always been there.

And when once introduced to the actual nature of the mind, all of that kind of preliminary practice is then discarded, and non-meditation practices take their place. Perhaps I should not call these practices because they are not.

Once we are introduced and become familiar with our own mind, the only thing we do from then on is work the mind, are able to use it ourselves, and drive it like we drive a car once we know how to drive.

Although we may enjoy added dharma practices, we no longer need an external guru or teacher, although we may be lucky enough to have one.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

"Trying" To Be Compassionate

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 23, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/7785624f-c523-4f1b-b5ea-fbaf3e901bda_1024x1024.jpeg

It always makes me a little uncomfortable when my fellow dharma practitioners talk about 'Compassion' or Bodhicitta." Talking about trying to be compassionate or trying to extend Bodhicitta to others. It is not that I don't understand what they are saying, but rather that such things like Compassion are not a product of 'trying.'

We can't 'try' to be compassionate and expect compassion. Oh course, we try to be kind and I get that. I do it too, but I know that my 'trying' to be compassionate is not Compassion.

In my experience, both Compassion and Bodhicitta are byproducts of recognizing the true nature of our own mind. That is why there are terms like 'relative compassion' and 'relative bodhicitta', both meaning 'intending' to be compassionate or having relative bodhicitta. My forcing a smile is not a real smile.

We all know intending or trying to be kind and what that feels like, yet IMO, although it can help, it is not actual kindness or compassion, but simply our good intention when we give that kind of attention to another.

I don't want to quibble about this, yet I feel we should be clear.

When we are finally introduced to the nature of the mind, and are able to work the mind on our own, it is then that Compassion and Absolute Bodhicitta arise quite naturally. It is quite different than an intention to be kind, although that can also be somewhat beneficial to both parties.

As mentioned, Compassion and Bodhicitta are qualities that are natural 'byproducts' of achieving Mahamudra and being introduced to the true nature of the mind.

Don't forget the real deal.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Is the 'Self' the Ventriloquist, the Dummy, or Neither'

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 24, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Is the Self the Ventriloquist, the Dummy, Or Neither?

The Karma Kagyu Case That the Self Is a Pure Construct

With Wylie transliteration and English pronunciation

Many of these more technical dharma articles are for the very few, if I read the response well. I am giving the depiction and phonetic pronunciation of many Tibetan terms so you can at least be exposed to them. Yes, I know, we tend to not look at strange words, but you can just ignore them. And for those who are not reading further, here is a short easy-to-read summary as to what you can do to de-emphasize the reification of our Self, what is called 'Gilding the Lily'. You can read this.

As for the Self and what to do with it, start out by discounting it. Years ago, I gradually put what I call my Self out to pasture like an old cow or bull. Give it lots of sun and plenty of hay and retire it. Don't treat your Self harshly or scold it. All that does is strengthen it. Treat it kindly as you would another but unknown person is best.

I found the Self just fades into the distance and quietly disintegrates. Of course, fighting with our Self, scolding, hating, and any kind of action that will bring reactivity only makes it stronger. Here is a traditional dharma treatment.

Framing the Claim

The ordinary, unexamined assumption is that there is a solid "Me" behind the scenes — watching, deciding, feeling — that operates the body and mind, the way a ventriloquist operates a dummy. Thoughts, sensations, and actions are the dummy's mouth moving; and 'me, myself, and I' am the one throwing the voice from behind the curtain.

The Karma Kagyu position, inherited from Madhyamaka analysis and confirmed through Mahamudra's direct looking at it, inverts this completely: when you actually search for that operator, the "ME", you never find it — not behind the dummy, not inside it, outside or anywhere.

What you find instead is the so-called dummy or Self is moving on its own, propelled by causes and conditions, with no one inside pulling the strings at all. The feeling of being the ventriloquist is itself just one more movement of the dummy's mouth — an effect, not the source. This discussion lays out the independent lines of argument the tradition uses to establish exactly this.

1. The Analytic Search: Looking for the Self Among the Parts

Chandrakirti's sevenfold reasoning (rdo rje gzegs ma'i rigs pa [pronounced: DOR-je ZEK-may RIK-pa], "the vajra sliver reasoning"), originally developed for a chariot and extended to the person, searches for the Self (bdag [pronounced: DAK]) among its aggregates (phung po lnga [pronounced: PUNG-po NGA], the "five heaps": form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) by asking seven questions:

Is the Self identical to the aggregates?

Is the Self entirely different from, and separate from, the aggregates?

Does the Self possess the aggregates, the way an owner possesses property?

Does the Self depend on the aggregates, the way something rests on a support?

Do the aggregates depend on the Self, the way a support depends on what rests on it?

Is the Self merely the shape or configuration of the aggregates?

Is the Self merely the collection, the mere sum, of the aggregates?

Each of the seven fails under scrutiny — there is no Self identical to the parts, none separate from them, none owning them from outside, none that the parts depend on as a foundation. This is a direct search for the ventriloquist inside the dummy's own machinery, conducted position by position, and it comes up empty at every location checked.

2. Dependent Origination: No First Mover Anywhere

rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba [pronounced: TEN-ching DREL-war JUNG-wa] (dependent origination) is the broader principle behind this search: everything arises in dependence on causes and conditions (rgyu rkyen [pronounced: GYU-kyen], "causes and conditions"), with nothing standing outside that web as an uncaused starting point.

A real ventriloquist would have to be exactly that kind of exception — something initiating action from outside the causal chain rather than being

one more link within it, a first mover unaffected by, and independent of, everything leading up to the present moment. The tradition's claim, extended consistently across every phenomenon it examines, is that no such exception exists, anywhere, for anyone. The dummy's movements trace back to prior movements, and further prior movements, indefinitely — never to an uncaused controller standing apart from the chain.

3. Mere Imputation: The Label Isn't Hiding an Owner

What we call the Self is said to exist only as *btags yod tsam* [pronounced: TAK-yö TSAM] (“mere imputation,” or “existing merely as a label”) — a convenient designation applied to the aggregates, the way the name “chariot” is a useful label for wheels, axle, and frame assembled in a particular working arrangement.

The label works perfectly well at the conventional level — you can still say “I am walking to the chariot” without confusion or contradiction. What the analysis rules out is the further assumption that underneath the label there must be some additional, independently existing thing the label is naming — a hidden owner or operator the word “Self” secretly refers to, standing behind the curtain of the aggregates it labels. The label is doing all the work the Self was ever actually doing; nothing further is concealed behind it.

4. Shantideva's “No Owner of Experience” Argument

In the *Bodhicaryavatara*, Shantideva runs a version of this same search on suffering specifically. When a thorn pricks the foot, is there a single, unified experiencer receiving that pain — or simply a causal sequence (nerve signal, brain event, sensation) with no additional owner standing behind it to collect the experience? His argument is that pain, like everything else examined above, has no proprietor: it is process without a possessor.

Elsewhere in the same text, Shantideva describes the body itself in explicitly mechanical terms — closer to a jointed apparatus running through causes and conditions than a vehicle steered by a Self seated somewhere inside it. This is the same conclusion as the sevenfold reasoning above, reached through a different route: examine the experience of suffering closely enough, and no owner turns up, only the suffering itself, arising and passing through causal conditions.

5. Mahamudra's Direct Confirmation

This is where the Karma Kagyu goes further than argument alone. Rather than only reasoning toward “no findable Self,” the pointing-out instruction (*ngo sprod* [pronounced: NGO-trö]) has the practitioner look directly for the one

who is looking. Where is the watcher of this thought located? What color, shape, or size does it have? Does it stand behind experience, or is it findable anywhere at all?

LOOKING AT “LOOKING AT”

I’m looking at “looking at.” I’m not looking at what “looking at” is looking at. No, I’m just looking at “looking at.” That is: I’m Trying to. You see: When I’m looking at “looking at,” It’s not “looking at” I’m looking at, Because: What I’m looking at is also doing the looking at. So: Am I “looking at” or the looking at?

I’m looking at “looking at.”

I’m not looking at what “looking at” is looking at.

No, I’m just looking at “looking at.”

That is: I’m Trying to.

You see:

When I’m looking at “looking at,”

It’s not “looking at” I’m looking at,

Because:

What I’m looking at is also doing the looking at.

So:

Am I “looking at” or the looking at?

This is conducted in the same spirit as Chandrakirti’s sevenfold search — checking position after position — but through direct looking (*Ita ba* [pronounced: TA-wa]) rather than syllogism. And, as with Tilopa, no hidden watcher is found standing behind the watching. What is found instead is ‘watching’ itself, vividly present, clear and cognizant (*gsal ba* [pronounced: SAL-wa]), with no separate watcher discovered operating it from behind.

Analysis and direct experience converge on the identical result from two different directions — one argued, one seen directly.

What This Does to Self-Cherishing

This is the sharper point folded into the ventriloquist-and-dummy image: Self-cherishing (*rang gces ’dzin* [pronounced: RANG-che-dzin]) spends enormous energy defending, protecting, and promoting a “Self” it assumes is the real

operator behind the curtain — the one actually at risk, the one that actually needs protecting, praising, or advancing.

If the fivefold case above is correct, Self-cherishing is a bodyguard standing watch over an empty room. There remains a functioning process genuinely worth caring about — the aggregates, other beings, the real causal consequences of actions — but no separate, hidden ventriloquist inside that process who needs a bodyguard in the first place.

Seeing this clearly, according to the tradition, is exactly what is meant by removing reification (bden 'dzin [pronounced: DEN-dzin]): not concluding that nothing exists, but discovering that what exists was never the kind of thing Self-cherishing assumed it was protecting.

As mentioned above, for the Self and what to do with it, start out by discounting it. I gradually put what I call my Self out to pasture like an old cow or bull. Give it lots of sun, plenty of hay, and retire it. Don't treat it harshly or scold it. All that does is strengthen. Treat it kindly as you would do another but unknown person is best.

I found it just fades into the distance and quietly disintegrates. Of course, fighting with our Self, scolding, hating, and any kind of action that will bring reactivity only makes it stronger.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Illuminating Writing

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 25, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Just ask your mind gently by resting in it. Often the answer is obvious.

In my case, what comes back is this: it's not only that something has to be written because I am a writer, but that the process of Insight Meditation — and the instant dualistic reflection that comes with it — has to be used to the max for me to feel comfortable each day.

That's the process I keep returning to and can't seem to get enough of, not meditation itself, but what I've come to call non-meditation. Slipping into vivid, non-dual clarity — even for a moment — resting there, and then, as I come back into ordinary duality a moment later, reflecting on what that moment showed me. Then, doing it again. And again, until the moments string together into something seamless, like a mala or rosary. A string of illuminations.

That's where the happiness is. That's where, as the poem says, 'The dewdrop slips into the shining sea,' not just once but countless times, one after another.

That elision — that slip-sliding into the present moment and reflecting on whatever realization comes out of it — is how I know I'm headed in the right direction. Most of the time, this process is entirely self-confirming. I need no other reassurance or verification. Yet, what is it?

I've tried other approaches — cutting back on non-meditation, or mixing it with better organization — but neither has worked as well. What I actually need, it turns out, is as much non-meditation as I can handle.

To be honest about the risk: I have, a couple of times, slipped too far into immersion and had to pull back. But that's the exception. Most of the time, this is simply what I do and I like to do with my time.

What comes out of it may just be me, flashing it down the line — or, if I'm doing something like writing these words, then what I write is illuminated by the process itself.

“Illuminating Writing” sounds like a lofty name for it. But the truth is, this is the most basic, ordinary, down-to-earth process I know: illuminating what I write by touching into non-dual Insight Meditation and reflecting on it as best I can a moment later, and repeatedly.

The above article on illuminating writing speaks for itself.

However, it leaves me with what to do when I am finished with that?

Or should I fill my day with many hours of doing the same, writing in the illuminating process and logging more and more time half in and half out of this nonduality process.

What I ask myself: is there is any next step I should be finding beyond verifying my dharma practice by this illuminating writing process – this Mahamudra variant.

It seems that I have to be doing something with the immersion of what is a Mahamudra process of non-meditation in order to be clear.

I can't just go into immersion and not come out of it, for obvious reasons. I would not come out of it. And it seems that this process is built on moments like beads on a mala are strung.

I suppose that I can point this process that I use in writing elsewhere, and I probably already do... like point it at simply living itself.

In the writing process I am doing something very particular. I go in with words in mind and come out with words altered by the immersion process. And I write them down. And I do it in like a continuous stream for hours at a time.

Now if I go sit on the couch in my living room and look out the window, how does that work? Yes, I am seeing what's there, on the couch and out the window, and I believe I can rest in the mind, but I am not looking for or seeing a reflection to modify the immersion going in with something other than the mind and then write something down. I don't do that.

And so, if not writing or modifying than I am kind of at a standstill.

As long as I sit by my computer and I'm writing, I am good to go. Stop doing something, like writing and I am gradually at a loss. Sitting by the window with the breeze blowing in, for some time, what do I learn?

I learned that I can also rest in the nature of the mind, no doubt, but there is no immediate reflection or obvious stop so that I am aware of or anything to write down, like words. Instead, there is more like a going out and coming in like a miniature tide, and nothing to note floating in the water. I more like just

‘surf it’, going out, coming back, a gentle surge but nothing to remember like words to write down. I will try this more often and see what I get.

Your thoughts?

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Expand and Extend

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 26, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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One of the imperatives of Mahamudra and Dzogchen is that after you have been introduced by your dharma teacher to the actual nature of the mind, that's not the end of the story. Yes, you are in charge of your own dharma at that point, but you also are in charge of your own dharma.

You have to keep your awareness (the clarity) fresh all the time. In fact, the last words my Rinpoche of 36 years said to me before he passed was for me to keep expanding and extend my recognition of the nature of the mind. Otherwise, I will not be extending and expanding the nature of the mind, and it can fall fallow.

The point here is that the practice of non-meditation like Mahamudra needs to be continually refreshed. This requires that we practice it. There is nothing I know of more pleasurable. The good news is that resting in the present moment of nonduality automatically does that for us, refreshes the mind and clarity. Of course, there are different ways to do this.

In my case since my original breakthrough and discovery of Insight Meditation was not while sitting on the meditation cushion (I sat on the cushion for over 30 years and learned very little), but this was not true out in nature watching the sun come up and crawling on my belly in the wet morning grass, peering through a camera and fine lens at small critters and plants.

That's where Insight Meditation first took place in a 'moment', the moment I stopped looking through the camera lens at a small critter and instead saw the seeing 'Seeing' itself for the first time. It was then that, as the poet say, "The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea." And I never before had experienced this.

And ever since then, I have had to keep my awareness fresh, vivid, and crisp.

The chief way for me to do this is by writing a daily essay or article out of thin air, based solely on my own experience rather than on books and quotations from other dharma practitioners.

Sure, I can quote the classics, and I do, but what I write inspired by that quote has to be from my personal experience, otherwise it is not fresh and vivid.

It is the personal dharma experience and my take that is important, not on something I read or came across in a book or teaching. As I often state, that is why I am a sharer of dharma, and not a teacher of dharma.

I share what I personally know and can stand behind and be questioned about my experience, and it is not some old chestnut, even if it is classic dharma. I always give my personal experience, even about the classic dharma quotes.

In order for me to continue with Mahamudra non-meditation, what I write must be vivid and fresh, using by my own experience.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Beyond Time

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 29, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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We are still caught between the past and the future in what is known as the present moment of unknown length other than forever.

For me at 85 years and a stroke or two, memory is not what it used to be, not that it ever was something to write home about.

As for plans for the future, what plans? I stopped planning some time ago. I am gradually removing or smoothing out what I call my Self, sanding it down or letting it float away from the shore of the mind and out to sea, at least I notice this happening.

Sure, if we talk, I will try to be clear but left to my own devices the differences just don't add up or make a difference to me. Who is counting? No longer me.

The crumbs of the cake have to be swept up too.

I don't know what is special anymore. No need. Every day is special and also more of a hassle. I don't have to explain this to anyone. There is no one to impress and nothing to impress them with.

I was born into the 'Silent Generation' (Born 1928-1945) and was in my teens in the 1950s, a Baby Boomer. I'm not even on anyone's radar anymore.

All of the above is just dust to be blown off an old book.

I have no interest in reading fiction and reality videos give me a chance to look around.

What do I like to do these days? Mahamudra non-meditation tops the list as the most useful and enjoyable thing I do every day. 'Practicing' meditation sucks IMO, while actual non-dual non-meditation is a joy beyond time.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Summer Nights

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 30, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Cooler nights, a harbinger of Autumn and the turn of the year. After all this time I finally have gotten around to writing the story and history of AMG, the All-Music Guide and the All-Movie Guide. I wanted to write it but had so many difficult memories as well as the good ones, I hesitated to put it on paper.

I am now doing that and will see where I want to publish it

I am still perusing PT for my lower back, but the exercises are piling up faster than I can do them. Actually, the PT visit and the exercises I was put through hurt my back. I am still hurting from those, and can't even get around to doing them at home. I have to go in today but I believe I will tell them I have more exercising than I can do and don't need any more sessions, at least for a while.

As for my 'mind', As mentioned I have been writing versions after version of my story of AMG and all that went with it. Lots of memories, coupled with summer turning colder and autumn beckoning, I want to get out my flannel shirts and put my seersucker summer shirts away.

Some 'family' stopped over for a day and a night and that was great. The Mahamudra nonmeditation is still there and I was right with it. Tripping the light fantastic is nice work if you can get it. Mahamudra is the road for that.

I like to sit outside on a plastic lawn chair as close to our milkweed garden as I can get and watch the milkweed finishing up, now covered by all manner of flies, bees, wasps, and hornets getting some sap or resin from the milkweed. And butterflies, yes, some, never enough.

20 minutes of that and who needs a movie.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Full Buck Moon

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

July 31, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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A big orange Full Moon today, known as the ' Buck Moon ', reached peak illumination on Wednesday, July 29, 2026, at 10:36 a.m. Eastern Time.

I stood on my side porch watching it rise. And I reflected on the many conferences we held here at our center or at one of the major astrology conference. Here are just some of them, astrological and dharma. This includes the first two Hindu Astrology Conferences in the U.S., today would be called Vedic astrology.

ACT Conference at AFA in New Orleans in 1980

Act Conference at AFA Chicago in 1982

Act Conference at AFA 1984 in Chicago

Tibetan Astrology Conference June 22-23, 1985

Heart Center Retreat Conference, Sept. 1, 1985

Tai Situ Rinpoche at the Heart Center, September 1985 Heart Center Meditation Retreat Fall1985

Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche at Heart Center, Jan 1986

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at Heart Center, Jan 1986

ACT Conference at UAC June 26-July 1, 1986

San Diego AFA ACT Conference in LA July 15-20, 1986

Matrix Hindu Astrology Conference Aug 9, 10, 1986

Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamptso at Heart Center Aug 25 & 26, 1986

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at Heart Center, Dec 12-14, 1986

Family Dharma Weekend, July 3-6, 1987

Act Locality Conference June 30-21, 1987

Act Hindu Astrology Conference, Aug. 8-9, 1987

H.E. Shamar Rinpoche at Heart Center, May 8, 1987
Matrix Computer Software Workshop, June 22-23, 1987
Meditation Workshop at Heart Center, July 12-13, 1987
Calm & Clear Mind Workshop, July 18-19, 1987
Matrix Computer Software Workshop, Aug 10-11, 1987
Natural Cycles Conference Jul 30-31, 1988
Eastern Astrology Conference June 18-19, 1988
Matrix Computer Software Workshop, August 1-2, 1988
Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche at Heart Center. Fall 1988
Neo-Astrology Conference, July 21-23, 1989
Matrix Astrology Software Workshop, July 24, 1989
Second Neo-Astrology Conference, Jun 23-24, 1990
Act Conference AFA in Chicago, July 1992.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Shel-Drak: Crystal Cave

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 1, 2026

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Here is a long but perhaps interesting story from our first trip to Tibet.

One pilgrimage spot that everyone tried to talk me out of going to is the legendary Crystal Cave (Shel Drak) of Guru Rinpoche, on Crystal Mountain at 13,320 feet, a key pilgrimage site for Tibetans — in particular for those of the Nyingma Lineage.

This site is said to represent Guru Rinpoche's Buddha attributes. After all, this was Guru Rinpoche's first meditation cave in Tibet. It was here that he bound the demons and the Bön influences under oath. Many terma were hidden and later revealed here — to practitioners such as Orgyen Lingpa and to others as well. I felt I had to go there.

Both of the experienced Tibetan trekkers I knew said it was too hard and that neither of them had ever been there themselves. Even the local guide who lived right there had never been, and he suggested that anything I had read implying it was doable had probably not been written by someone who actually knew how difficult the journey was.

My will to reach the Crystal Cave was not as strong after hearing this — my resolution wavered.

But then, we visited Traduk Temple in the Yarlung Valley, some 7 kilometers South of Tsetang. As we wandered through this beautiful gompas, we came across a room which had a striking gold statue of Guru Rinpoche within. I remember reading that the original statue of Guru Rinpoche had been removed for safekeeping from the Crystal Cave and placed in a nearby

monastery. This had to be it, and, as the monk at the temple soon explained, so it was.

Guru Rinpoche Statue

It was perhaps the most inspiring image of Guru Rinpoche I had ever seen. And right next to it was an image of Guru Rinpoche's consort, Yeshe Tsogyal and it was incredibly lovely. Seeing these two rupas (statues) rekindled my will to visit the cave to where it had once been. I again resolved to reach Shel-Drak. Something inside of me just had to go to the Guru Rinpoche cave at Crystal Mountain.

I informed my guide I was going, even if I had to hire a separate vehicle and go by myself. Resigned, our guide turned his attention to helping us figure how to do it.

One thing I did know is that we would have to start out early, as it would be an all-day hike. Most of our party elected not to even attempt the journey, preferring to stay in the Tsetang area, where our driver would shuttle them from gumpa to gumpa.

Those of us who would attempt to reach Shel-Drak included myself, my wife Margaret, our 15-year-old daughter May, and our Tibetan guide.

As for directions, all we knew was that we would have to drive to the Tsechu Bumpa, a well-known stupa in the village of Kato, on outskirts of Tsetang, and try and find a local guide there, perhaps hiring a tractor to carry us part of the way.

Now the Tibetan (or Chinese) tractor is not the beast we all know by that name here in the U.S. What they mean by a tractor in Tibet is more what we would call a large Rototiller, a small 2-wheel, 2-cycle engine that can plow a field and, in Tibet, pull a cart. These tractors fill the streets and side roads of Tibet, pulling carts filled with vegetables, brush, and more often — people.

Our driver found the Tsechu Bumpa Stupa, one of the three main stupas in the Yarlung Valley area, whereupon we began to knock on doors. We located one man with a tractor; however, since it was the harvest time, he had already agreed to work elsewhere that day.

Things did not look so good. But then he suggested there might be one fellow, a newcomer to the area, who might be free. Knocking at his house, we aroused his fierce dog and brought his wife to the door. He was still asleep, but she would wake him.

After some time, he came out, rubbing his eyes. Our guide gave him the pitch. I cannot understand Tibetan, but I could see by the way he was shaking his head that things were not going the way we had hoped. I told our guide to up the ante until he could not afford to refuse.

This tactic worked; he agreed to take us, and our own driver left us standing in the road, waiting for this tractor man to get his machine. Although a building nearby seemed, from the outside, to be a garage, when the man opened what we thought was a garage door, it actually opened into a courtyard (with no roof) where the tractor was kept.

Then there was the starting of the tractor and the fact that the cart (where we would ride) was filled with water, which had to be drained. That done, we climbed into the cart, sitting on empty feed bags and blankets that his wife had brought out just as we had been about to get our butts wet.

She tucked a small bottle of butter-tea and some tsampa under the driver's seat (his lunch) and off we were, although at what seemed to be a snail's pace.

The idea was to ride the tractor as far up the mountain as it would go, saving our legs for the really hard part. As it turned out, there really wasn't any road to where we were going. None.

Instead, we followed the dry bed of a stream uphill, moving very slowly toward the mountains. After a mile or so, it became difficult for the tractor to pull us on, due to the soft mud: we all had to get out and push. Pretty soon, we were spending more time pushing than riding and it became apparent we could go no farther.

So, we left the tractor, and the driver, who would wait for us, perhaps for the whole day. I have no pictures from the first part of the trip because we were shrouded in a mist, and then in clouds. I can tell you that it was tough going though, even from the start, as in all uphill and steep at the same time.

Our first goal was to climb to the small village of Sekhang Zhirka, which was perched on a ridge, and call that our base camp, from which we would push on up the mountain to the Crystal Cave — a hard 3-hour climb.

Yet reaching the village of Sekhang Zhirka was a long haul from the valley floor, perhaps 5 kilometers and always going up, up, up.

Even though I don't generally use caffeine, I had mental images of arriving there and having a nice warm cup of butter-tea, knowing that the long climb would burn off any of the bad side effects of the caffeine. At last, we reached

the village, which was more like a bunch of houses strung together — but there was no tea.

Everyone had abandoned the town to move back down to the valley for the winter. By this time, we were breathing pretty hard. After a good sit, we got up and moved on.

From here on out, it got really steep, something I thought it already had been. It is hard to describe, but in many cases we were just scrambling up steep slopes of boulders or discovering that what was called the path was just a wide staircase of strewn rock and boulders.

My so-called (by me, earlier that morning) light day pack soon began to feel very heavy indeed. My wife and I kind of dropped behind, while our daughter and the guide went on ahead. After a while, the two of us just gave up any pretense of being tough and began to sit down whenever we needed to — which was all the time! At the worst, we were resting every 20 or 30 feet, and I mean taking off our pack, sitting down, and resting.

What can I say? I am getting old, etc., but it was tough. Our guide met a local man who was up on the mountainside looking for lost yaks, hoping to drive them back down for the coming winter. He and the guide went on ahead, but our daughter May quickly passed them, leaving us all in the dust.

One of the guys had taken Margaret's pack, to make it easier for her. We were walking in the clouds or at least were surrounded by them. After a time, we climbed above the mist and clouds and began to be able to see more of the mountains around us. We were essentially walking up the spine of a great wide ridge on the side of a mountain, with a deep canyon across from us. Aside from all the heavy breathing, this place was gorgeous.

Lumo Durtrö Naga Cemetery

From the little I had read, the next place we would arrive at would be Lumo Durtrö, a female naga cemetery, dedicated to Tamdrin, the horse-headed deity. This was a place of

traditional Tibetan sky burial, where the bodies are cut up with sharp tools and fed to the vultures. The place was not, however, readily forthcoming.

We climbed and climbed and climbed. Somewhere along in here we met an old man, with skin like leather, coming down from the mountain; he motioned for us to come close and took what looked like a piece of quartz crystal from his pack.

Beginning to hack away at it, he eventually handed each of us a small piece — it was rock candy, sugar. We thanked him and moved on. Those small pieces of sugar, something I would never normally eat, turned out to be just the thing — that little bit of energy meant a lot at that point.

On we went, and after a very long time our guide pointed through the mist to a distant stupa high on the mountain. Groan. That was the place we should have reached an hour ago, and it was just a stepping stone on our journey. Panting and struggling, we moved on.

One of the strangest experiences in this kind of climbing is that, sooner or later, you do reach those far-off glimpsed places. It just takes time — and suffering. We finally reached the sky burial place, and, sure enough, there were human bones and meat cutting tools scattered around. A wrist and hand were lying under a small bush. And clothes were everywhere.

Apparently, it is the custom to scatter the clothes of the deceased nearby. The place looked like a Good-Will store after a hurricane. This stupa, however, was just a way station for us. We did kora (circumambulating around the stupa) and looked to see if there were any more human remains (fascinating), and then marched on.

Walking in the Clouds

After a very long time, the trail began to even out some, and there were even sections offering almost — but not quite — level walking, and short sections, at that. Margaret offered to help carry my pack, and we took turns with that for a while.

We began to have glimpses of a monastery across a canyon that, believe it or not, our guide informed us we would have to get to. It seemed so far away from where we were now! By this time, we were high up, and our yak herder was beginning to find some of his yaks, but they were always on the other side of the canyon from him. He had a sling and was very adept at winging rocks across the canyon to land near the yaks. They hit with a pinging sound, but the yaks did not pay too much attention.

Meanwhile, I couldn't even look around me half the time — I was breathing so hard. It was all I could do to look at the ground in front of me and put one foot in front of the other.

Above Shel-Drak Monastery

Just before we reached Shel-Drak Monastery — dedicated to the famous Nyingma tertön, Sangye Lingpa — the path turned into what was almost a

rock staircase. We scrambled up this staircase and into a wide courtyard. The monastery had a single large door in front, but it was closed, and the monastery looked for all the world as if it were abandoned. “What to do?” I asked our guide. “Try opening the large door,” he said, and, sure enough, it swung open.

We pushed inside and collapsed on a porch in a sunny inner courtyard. There we had lunch and butter-tea. Lunch was only hard-boiled eggs, some bread, and a few cookies, but it tasted like ambrosia after that long hike. We were so tired. As it turned out, this gompa marked the end of any “easy” ascent. From here on up, it was almost straight up — rock stairs. The good news is that this last stretch involved less than an hour of climbing before, if all went well, we should reach the cave.

Starting out, we crossed a small natural rock bridge above a rushing stream. This was the Terchu, or ‘Rediscovered Water’, a spring sacred to Guru Rinpoche. From here, the way was indeed steep, with sheer drops on one side and a rock face going straight up on the other. The building and the cave high above us seemed far away, protruding out from the mountain side. We climbed on, with both Margaret and me plopping down often to rest.

We stared out over the valley or dared to look down the steep drop. As we hiked, we began to come across bright strings tied to objects hanging from the rocks. Many pilgrims had been here before us, and they must have taken this very same path, as there was no other. I imagined perhaps Khenpo Rinpoche (not to mention Guru Rinpoche) had once climbed on these very same rocks.

Inside Guru Rinpoche’s Cave

Exhausted but exhilarated (and proud of ourselves), we finally made it to the top and entered a small level area next to the two-story building that houses the Crystal Cave (Shel-Drak Drubphuk) and a small gompa and shrine. From here there was an incredible view of the entire Yarlung Valley far below.

Next, we climbed some steep ladder-like steps to our left and entered a tiny room, which contained a few more steps to an even tinier place, the cave itself. The cave was almost full, with three other pilgrims plus a monk from the monastery below.

They were in the midst of doing a Guru Rinpoche puja, complete with tsok, the ritual feast offering. There was just enough room for the four of us to wedge inside. Here was the cave, with rough walls, containing a tiny shrine on which was a statue of Guru Rinpoche, with butter lamps before it. We brought with us a photo of the young Karmapa we had just taken, which the attending monk happily put at once in the center of the shrine.

When the puja ended, the monk handed around pieces of tsok torma to everyone; then the pilgrims (and the monk) withdrew from this small cave room. At this point, we were able to do our prostrations and whatever other practices we felt like offering. It was special to be there, and each of us asked for Guru Rinpoche's blessing in our own way.

Looking Out from the Cave

Afterward, we visited the small gumpa next to the cave and the excellent shrine there. We looked out over the entire Yarlung Valley, knowing we had come all the way up from the very bottom. This valley, which stretched out far below us, is said to be the place from which the entire Tibetan civilization arose. It was indeed vast and beautiful — 'awesome' would be a better word. I could not imagine how in the wide world we would ever get from where we were now (so high at the top) back to the plain below. It just seemed physically impossible.

But back down we went, and it only took something over two hours (and, for me, a bunch of blisters) to reach the abandoned village. My shoes could not take the constant pressure of the bracing needed for the downhill climb, and my toes suffered. I could feel it happening, but there was nothing I could do about it — down and down we went, mile after mile.

The hike had been some 1300 feet above the Stupa, where we started. Our tractor was still waiting, and we rattled back down the riverbed and into town, arriving just as the rains rolled in from the mountains. After some tea at the tractor driver's home, during which the rains slowed, we climbed back into the tractor and were driven to and through Tsetang, to the amusement of everyone who saw us.

Perhaps they had never seen westerners ride (as Tibetans do all the time) in the back of a tractor before. It was a slow cross-town ride through sporadic rain and lots of huge puddles.

Once back, I took a hot bath, changed my clothes, and went down to one of those meals you just inhale. Beyond exhaustion, I was almost euphoric at having actually made, despite obstacles, the climb to the Crystal Cave on Crystal Mountain, and also at having made an aspiration to Guru Rinpoche, and on his home turf.

"Meanwhile, Back in the Jungle"

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 2, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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Since I wrote about the high altitudes of Tibet, I might as well write about the low altitudes and heat of the Nepalese jungles.

In the early summer of 1997 Margaret and I made our yearly trip to the mountains above Woodstock, New York where we did 31 ten-day Mahamudra meditation intensives with our dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at his Tibetan Buddhist monastery (Karma Triyana Monastery).

2019 was the 31st year we did that intensive. Khenpo Rinpoche speaks only Tibetan, so there we were in 1997 in the midst of having a short personal interview with Rinpoche, speaking with him through a translator. I always ask him if there is anything special he wants me to do, and he always answers "Nothing special, just keep practicing."

Yet in 1997 I had just asked that question and some others, and Rinpoche had begun to answer. But after less than a minute, he just stopped, looked at us, and declared that he was not going to answer further, and that, instead, we should take these questions to His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, who is the head of our lineage. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the head of one of the five main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Margaret and I looked at each other in amazement because His Holiness could only be found at Tsurphu Monastery (at 15,000 feet) on the other side of the world, deep in the reaches of Tibet. I mumbled something to Rinpoche about, well, perhaps next year, next spring or someday maybe, but Rinpoche looked right at us and said: "No, this summer, as soon as you can arrange it."

By this time Khenpo Rinpoche had a great smile on his face as if he were very, very happy for us. I was speechless. He then went on to speak about impermanence, how life is short, and that none of us know the time or manner of our death. I gradually realized he was seriously directing us to go to Tibet, and soon, like that very summer, and I am the kind of person who takes

a day or two to decide if I really want to go to the grocery store. You don't say no to your guru. Now that trip is a long story, and you can read the whole thing at this link ("Our Pilgrimage to Tibet"), but here is what happened on one leg of that journey. <http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf> At that time, we were in Kathmandu and on our way to India, to West Bengal and Sikkim to visit our monasteries there. We were going by plane to the edge of Nepal, where it joins India. When we originally arrived at Kathmandu international airport, we knew nothing about the small domestic airport (right next door) from which we were now about to fly out from to Bhadrapur, a tiny town in southeast Nepal, very close to the Indian border. From there, we planned to cross over into India by jeep at the dangerous border town of Karkavitta and on to Sikkim where we were to visit more Karma Kagyu centers. Karkavitta was a place where you never let your car slow down because people were routinely robbed and sometimes killed trying to pass through there. I was traveling with my wife Margaret, my two teenage daughters, and young son Michael Andrew. All five of us had elected to go and having arrived at this small domestic airport, we managed to wrestle our own luggage away from the army of touts who wanted to "help us," and pile it in front of the tiny office of the Royal Nepal Airlines, who had our tickets. And for the umpteenth time, I confirmed our tickets and managed to weigh our luggage and present it for inspection. As usual, the guards demanded we open up this bag or that one for inspection, only to tell us to forget it the moment we began to comply. I had no idea what kind of plane we would be on, but I suspected (from the size of this airport), it might not be a DC-10.

We waited for our flight to be called, with me checking every time any plane was boarded to make sure we were not somehow missing it. Finally, it was time and we climbed aboard the small bus that would drive us out to where our plane was waiting. We kept going farther and farther out until we were at the very edge of the airport, passing jets and larger transports, eventually stopping in front of a tiny propeller plane that seated maybe 16 people. Gulp. The small hatchway of the plane had a 3-4 rung ladder hanging down to the tarmac, no ramp. Climbing on board, we wedged ourselves into the tiny wire-frame seats and held on. The single flight attendant offered us a tray with cotton for our ears and a piece of candy to help us swallow at higher altitude.

Then, with the few people from the bus on board, the pilot climbed in and we took off at once. I couldn't see much from the tiny porthole windows, but I could see the vast green Kathmandu valley unfolding beneath us. In about an hour, we prepared to land. I looked hard to see the airport but could see little. We dropped lower and lower. I still could see no runway, only a grassy field

where cattle grazed, which of course turned out to be the runway. After some people ran the cattle off, bumpety-bump, we landed, swinging around in front of a small ochre-colored building that had a bunch of people in front, and came to a halt. Outside we climbed. It was very hot as my family and I watched the growing pile of our baggage being tossed from the back of the plane. Already pouring sweat, I went to try and find a taxi to drive us the short distance from the airport to the Indian border town of Karkavitta, said to be about half an hour's drive.

I was hoping to find a driver who might take us across the border and all the way to our destination of Mirik, a small town in West Bengal. "How far to the border?" I asked one driver. "What border?" he replied. "Why, the Indian border and Karkavitta, of course." "It's a ten hour drive," he curtly responded. Now there was one confused taxi driver, I thought. The border is no more than one half-hour from here. "No," he said, "the 'Indian' border and Karkavitta are at least 10 hours from here by car." I didn't get it. "This is Bhadrapur, in eastern Nepal, is it not?" "No my friend, this is Bharitpur, in western Nepal" he replied, some ten hours from the border and in the opposite direction from where we thought we were going. I began to get excited and the airport attendant said in his best Hindu-English accent, "Sir, there is no problem. I can stop the plane," which had begun to taxi away. "I HAVE the authority to stop the plane."

"Do stop it," I stammered, "We have to go back to Kathmandu right now!" So much for that idea. The plane just took off and vanished into the shimmering heat, leaving us (along with our 5-foot pile of baggage) standing in a field in one of the hottest parts of Nepal, right at the edge of a tropical jungle. What a deserted feeling that was. The Royal Nepal Airlines ticket agent had misunderstood our destination and interpreted "Bhadrapur" as "Bharitpur." Ouch! After milling around with any number of Nepalese, all trying to speak English, which they could not, we were finally helped by a Brahmin, often the only Nepalese who actually can speak English. There was very little we could do, he gently explained. We would have to wait at least one day for another plane. That was that. I looked around at the sad state of the town we were in. Twenty-four hours here? Because of space, I will cut out the part of this story where I rent two taxis and attempt to drive ten hours to India, at which time the taxi with a young Nepalese driver with our two girls in it disappears, and the Nepalese state police organize a manhunt to find them. That was a heart stopper, but the long and the short of it is, we found them safe, but we were right back where we started from, in tropical Nepal and waiting for the plane back to Kathmandu and another day. Anyway, at the Royal Nepal Airline office I fumed and spouted, refused to pay the young renegade driver much of

anything, and arranged to find the most expensive hotel in town, which everyone warned was way too expensive. It was called the Safari Hotel and rooms there went up to \$65 a night. It sounded like a deal to me and we packed up all our gear (and girls) and headed for the Safari Hotel. Well, the 'Safari' turned out to be a huge (mostly empty) resort, with a pool, a vast dining room, the works, all built around taking safaris into the middle of the Nepalese jungle, wild tigers and all. After weeks of marginal hotels, we all hopped into the pool and cooled out. And cool was needed, for this was a tropical climate – just plain sweaty-hot. The entranceways and even some rooms had geckos (lizards with suction-cup toes) all over the walls, which were great fun to watch as they caught insects. As we (half starving) waited for dinner to be served at what seemed a very late 7:30 PM, we discovered more about what the Safari Hotel was really all about, which of course (like its name suggests) was taking trips into the nearby jungle straddled atop an elephant. That's a new thought. Since we had nothing to do but wait for the next day's plane, the whole family resolved to set off on elephants the following morning, starting out for the jungle at 5:30 AM. It was our first non-pilgrimage act, and it seemed like the right thing to do. And sure enough, at the crack of dawn there we were, hurtling down back roads in an open jeep, heading toward a jungle. All around us were grass huts and shacks with people and animals, all starting their day. Everywhere along the way were flowers and plants, long roads filled with blossoms in the dawn light. We finally arrived at some kind of a hotel camp overlooking a wide river, on the other side of which was the main jungle. As I peered through the haze I could see herds of deer or antelope moving along the jungle's edge on the other side. After being offered tea, and warned about deadly snakes on the camp paths, we were guided down a path to a high landing where, one by one, several elephants moved in close and allowed us to climb into the wood-frame baskets securely mounted to their backs. It was four people to an elephant plus the elephant driver sitting way up front on the elephants head. Once on the elephants, they proceeded to walk right down to the river, drank their fill, and began to move out into the mainstream current itself. The river was maybe a quarter mile wide and it had crocodiles. We clung to the small wooden frames which bobbed and weaved as the current got stronger until the elephants finally turned sidewise (facing the current) and began to slowly sidestep their way toward the distant shore, which was a little scary. But gradually we crossed the expanse of the river, climbed up the other shore, and began to move into the jungle proper. It was good to be high up on the elephant because the grass we walked through (appropriately enough, called "elephant grass") was at least a good 5-6 feet high. And we had not forgotten that there were tigers in this jungle. In the beginning there were narrow

paths, along which we saw all kinds of deer, wild boar, and, most important, wild rhinoceros. What an experience! Riding high up on the elephants and walking right into a group of three rhinos – a mom, pop, and three year old baby (not so much a baby anymore) standing in a tiny stream. There they were, just that close, having breakfast. And then the elephants left the paths entirely and began crashing on through the jungle itself, blazing new trails by tearing off limbs with their trunks and smashing foliage down with their feet. As we made our own trails, hundreds of red insects and torn leaves rained down from the canopy-foliage above. And the elephants would make this deep shuddering sound whenever they smelled or heard something ahead of them in the jungle that they were not sure of. That shuddering sound sure got our attention. And steep-banked muddy narrow streams were forded, with the elephants often having to get down on their knees to climb up the other side after making the crossing. I must say that the jungle was an experience that I won't soon forget. We sure got right in the middle of a real jungle. It was something. And on the way back, I saw a large crocodile eyeballing us as we came back across the river. Not a time for a swim. After eating breakfast at the camp at the jungle's edge (playing with giant six-inch millipedes that crawled over our hands and arms), we got back to the hotel about 10 AM, grabbed our bags, and hightailed it to the airport, only to stand around and wait in the heat.

The sun was fierce and I was soon soaked to the skin with sweat that later dried, actually leaving salt residue. At last, an air-raid siren sounded to get the cattle off the runway so that the plane could land. As the siren went off, boys with sticks swarmed onto the runway and drove the cattle and water buffalo away from the landing strip. The plane was able to land and we climbed aboard, stuffed cotton in our ears once again, and were on our way back to KTM to catch the correct plane to Bhadrapur, not Bharitpur. However, after this experience, our two girls elected to not go to India with us, but to spend the next week in KTM, just doing whatever they felt like. We could not really blame them and, although we hated to be separated, we said goodbye to them at the airport and went on to India. [Photos by Margaret and me.]

EMAIL

Shamata and a Spot on the Wall

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 4, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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It slowly dawns on me that my very early years as a young boy working with Mother Nature were very formative, in particular as to my ability to give full attention and drill down on fine details.

We lived far out in the country in a house my folks had built, with no others around. I had younger brothers but no neighborhood or kids to play with. So, I spent all my time studying nature and free time back then was what I had.

And my attention to detail only heightened as time went on, and to me this became just normal.

What's hard to a price and difficult to know how it happened is my detailed focus. Where did it come from?

Yes, I paid complete attention to nature for many years, until my later teens. And later, as a programmer, that demanded all the attention I had. And it got worse. When I began to catalog and archive music and film data, that had no end.

You start out with a performer like "Little Richard," with all his songs, and then there are the lyrics, the albums, the sideman, who wrote the song, and you are in a downhill slide that keeps extending. Do this for hundreds of thousands of artists and albums, and you are up the creek with no paddle.

The reason I recount all these details relates to learning to practice Shamata, also called Tranquility Meditation. I did that, attempted to 'learn' to do Shamata mediation where I focused on a pebble, a spot on the wall, or something.

Only, I did not learn. And I did this for 32 years and never got anywhere. Now, that's a big pill to swallow, not getting anywhere. I did not give up but neither did I get anywhere. How is that possible? That I can now explain.

When I finally succeeded in invoking Vipassana (Insight Meditation), which is an essential part of Mahamudra, to my complete surprise Shamata rose to meet Vipassana 100% successfully, this after not working for me for all those years. And slowly it dawned on me what the problem had been.

I did not respond to “trying” to practice Shamata when my whole life or most of it had been working in extreme detail in real life with almost everything I did, as a naturalist, as a programmer, and especially as an archivist of music, film, rock concert posters, and Tibetan teachings, all things that I loved to work with and focused on very successfully.

Trying to watch a spot on the wall just did not make my grade of interest, which is why it did not work. I quite naturally learned Shamata doing things in detail I loved and cared for, which told me a lot about doing anything by rote and force instead of with a natural interest.

Yes, rote is one way to learn Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), looking at a spot on the wall; it just did not work for me. We can't get around being naturally interested in fine detail work on our own.

If you have that natural interest, watching a spot on the wall probably won't be something that works is of interest to you.

So, all those years sitting on a cushion I was just bored, because my natural interest in fine details was taken up by all the things I did for a living that I love.

My takeaway: Love and natural interest can't be matched by rote imperatives like being instructed to stare at a stone or pebble. I tried it and it never worked for me.

You may have a different experience, but after 32 years of trying I came up with a big fat nothing, while my natural interest in what I loved gave me a very functional Shamata (Tranquility Meditation).

And years later when it became time for me to invoke Vipassana (Insight Meditation) as part of Mahamudra training, as the Vipassana arose, Shamata was 100% already there with it, because the two, Shamata and Vipassana, are two ends of the same stick. You can't have one without the other. They are connate.

I had learned Shamata from love not imperative.

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

Eric Pema Kunsang

By Michael Erlewine, *SpiritGrooves.net*

August 5, 2026

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

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I've been studying dharma since the late 1950s, back then it was Zen, and seriously have practiced Tibetan dharma since at least 1974 when I met both Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and the 16 th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje up close and personal.

Of course, from early on I knew about Erik Pema Kungsang, if only from his Tibetan dictionary when I was trying to learn Tibetan and of his 60 or so Tibetan texts he had translated. However, I don't remember seeing any videos of Erik Pema Kungsang on YouTube or anywhere else.

However, in the last few years that has changed as he now has a number of videos and some of them an hour or more in length. Recently I watched at least three of these longer videos and several shorter ones.

They were incredibly good. Although Erik Pema Kunsang is Danish, his English is excellent and his idiomatic mastery modern.

I can hear his deep realization of Dharma because I find myself learning from him; if nothing else his words confirm many things I myself know and I feel embraced and supported by his videos.

At 93 years of age, he is considerably older than I am as I just turned 85 in recent days. I have done all the dharma preliminaries including two rounds of the Ngondro (what amounts to dharma boot camp), and I completed 31 years straight of 10-Day Mahamudra Intensives with my root guru Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra), plus 2 years of Mahamudra training with His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, a total of 36 years with my root guru and my personal practice for many years is Mahamudra non-meditation.

Erik Pema Kunsang knows all of the above, thoroughly, and as mentioned I feel supported by his YouTube videos. The only other westerner that has struck me so deeply is Daniel P. Brown, the Harvard psychologist, and I have mentioned Brown on this blog a number of times.

Erik is married to Marcia Binder Schmidt, director of their project Rangjung Yeshe Translations and Publications, and she is a force in herself.

Erik's English is great, and his kindness and compassion speaks for itself. So welcome! He is very well balanced in his training, IMO. I feel it is safe to mention these videos to beginners and advanced dharma folks alike. I wish I had found them earlier, but I have them now. Thank you Erik!

Here are a few.

Bardo Song of Reminding Oneself - presented by Erik Pema Kunsang

The Goodman Lectures 21: Key Points of Timeless Value

Q&A For Young Translators with Erik Pema Kunsang

[Midjourney AI graphic prompted by me.]

EMAIL

What Are Aspects?

By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net

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By Michael Erlewine

What I have found important, important to me and also important to my clients is what I call ‘context’, although perhaps a better term could be ‘story’, that if reading a chart, whether to myself, or for others tells a story or is somehow organic, it communicates better. It’s out story.

With that in mind, here is a interesting way to look at aspects, using the same astrological tools you have always been using. There is nothing new added from outside, just some rearranging of what we already know. When I came across it, I was amazed, as chart after chart told me its story.

All of these years I had been playing with the various aspects, like most astrologers, and then one day they began to fit together in a new way, like pieces in a crossword puzzle. Before I knew it, all of these parts I knew so well came together, and before me was a picture or the story of my own chart I had never seen so clearly.

I want to share that technique with you, and it is all about how to use the aspects. This article makes it easy for you to learn to look at aspects in a new light and see for yourself. This article is, however, for astrologers, yet see for yourselves.

Most astrologers have a particular set of aspects and orbs that they use. Some just use the standard Ptolemaic aspects, and others of us add to that list, even to the point of wandering into the various harmonic series.

The aspect orbs that we use determine whether that aspect is going to show up on our radar screen when we look at a chart, especially if we are using a

computer. Obviously, the tighter the orbs, the less aspects that show up on the screen, and with wider orbs, we, of course, see more aspects.

What Are Aspects?

Before we go any further into this, let's agree what we mean by aspects. Take any two heavenly bodies; it does not matter if it is the Sun or Moon, or a couple of the planets. One of any two bodies is moving faster and the other moves more slowly. The net effect is that the faster-moving planet describes a 360-degree circle or cycle of aspects to the slower moving body. The faster-moving planet goes from a conjunction with the slower body through a circle/cycle of 360-degrees and back around to the next conjunction. This is called a synodic cycle. That is called the aspect cycle, and is what aspects are all about. Let's take the familiar solunar cycle as an example.

The solunar cycle (and astronomers is also a "synodic" cycle) begins with the Sun and Moon conjunct in the same zodiac degree at the moment of the New Moon.

The Moon, being the faster-moving body, then begins to move away from the conjunction with the Sun and starts to form aspects (angular arcs of separation) with the Sun, the most familiar being the First Quarter Moon (90 degrees), the Full Moon (180 degrees), and the Fourth Quarter Moon (270 degrees), after which the Moon moves to conjunct the Sun again, for another New Moon. The cycle continues on around, month after month.

This same type of synodic cycle of aspects takes place with any two heavenly bodies; it makes no difference which two you select. There is always one that moves faster, and one that moves more slowly. Aspects are formed, endlessly. It is happening now in the sky above. Each planet out there is in the process of forming or separating from one aspect or another with all the other planets.

In fact, the Sun, Moon, and planets are always involved with one another in these various aspect cycles, some 45 pairs of them (geocentrically), all going on at once. Astrologers are aware of these.

Why These Points?

Perhaps because there are so many aspects to consider all at once, astrologers have over the centuries picked certain points on the 360-degree aspect cycle and found them to be especially significant. We mentioned (using the solunar cycle) the 90-degree points (Square), and the halfway point (Opposition), which is the 180 degree point in the circle. Most astrologers add to this list, the 60-degree points (Sextile) and the 120-degree points (Trine).

Still others want to include the 45-degree points (Semi-Square), and so on it goes.

If we kept adding points along the circle or cycle, we would eventually have all 360 degrees marked out. Some folks do, and the Sabian Symbols by Marc Edmund Jones has an interpretation for all 360 degrees of the zodiac. But let's back up a moment.

We mentioned the 90-degree or Square points on the cycle, but there are two of these in any cycle. In the solunar cycle, there is the 90-degree point that marks the First Quarter Moon, but there is also the 90-degree point after the Opposiotn that marks the Fourth Quarter Moon. Each of these aspects is 90 degrees, and few astrologers would want to confuse a First Quarter Moon with a Fourth Quarter Moon. One leads to the light of the Full Moon, and the other to the dark of the New Moon. The same is true for the 60-degree (Sextile) and 120-degree (Trine) aspects. There are two of these in each cycle, as well. What are we to do with this fact that there are two of most aspects?

The Other Shoe

In modern astrology, almost all astrologers treat the 90-degree or square aspect as the same thing, whether it is that first 90-degree aspect (the waxing Square) or the second 90-degree aspect (the waning Square). The interpretation is the same. Yes, many astrologers would perhaps make an exception with the familiar solunar cycle, and differentiate between a First Quarter Moon and a Fourth Quarter Moon, but when it gets to the planets, in all their various combinations, there is usually only one interpretation given.

A Square is a Square is a Square, and so on. However, not everyone agrees. I certainly don't.

It is true that a very few astrologers have pointed out to the rest of us that, reasonably speaking, we ought to interpret a waxing Square differently from a waning Square, just as we do in the solunar cycle, most notably L. Edward Johndro and in particular Dane Rudhyar. Both of these authors writings have made it clear that we are missing something very important by grouping all squares, all sextiles, all trines, etc. together and interpreting each pair in the same manner. What are they trying to tell us?

The Message about Aspects

If we read these authors (and I have), and others on this subject, here is their message to us. I will paraphrase and summarize what they have said:

These cycles are living events in the heavens above, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, starting at the point of the conjunction of the two bodies,

extending to the opposition, and then back to the next conjunction. It can be important for us to know, when we speak of an aspect like a Square, whether we are referring to the square at the beginning or the square at the end of the cycle.

If you asked me to help you plan a social outing, and I told you to have your social event “after” the Square aspect between the Sun and the Moon, it would be important, according to the tradition of astrology, to designate that it is the waxing Square we want, after which you should hold the party, and not the waning Square. If you threw the party after the waning Square, you would be holding it right before the New Moon, and the dark of the Moon in both Eastern and Western astrology is more of a time to hunker down, and not a time to celebrate.

Everyone knows that the Full Moon is when to get together. You get the idea, and I believe most of you would agree. We have this discrimination for the solunar cycle, but we don’t extend this to the planetary aspects. Why is that?

Waxing and Waning Aspects

The point here is that, according to Dane Rudhyar (with whom I have personally talked and he has been to my home) and others, we should discriminate in our interpretation between what are called waxing and waning aspects. An aspect is waxing if it occurs after the Conjunction and before the Opposition point (180 degrees), and it is waning if it takes place after the Opposition and before the next Conjunction. There is the going out to the opposition, and the coming back from the Opposition, Waxing and Waning..

Therefore, we would have a waxing Square and a waning Square, and same goes for Sextiles (60 degree), Trines (120 degree), Semi-Squares (45 degree), Sesqui-Quadrates (135 degree), Inconjunct (150 degree), and any other aspects you might care to use.

The only aspects that are not mirrored in this way are the Conjunction (zero degrees) and Opposition (180 degrees). They are the beginning and midpoints of the cycle, and, in that sense, they stand alone.

Discriminating between waxing and waning aspects takes us a long way to re-invigorating our astrological interpretations. The question of how the interpretations differ between waxing and waning aspects is something I want to get to, but first there is a more important point to be made about the wholeness of cycles as they relate to individual aspects.

Inconvenient Aspects

While it may have been a great convenience to astrologers over the centuries to have fixed upon a series of aspects, like the Square and Trine, and to have more-or-less ignored whatever takes place in between those aspects, we now need to take a good look at what we have been ignoring, and that is: the essential wholeness or continuum of these planetary cycles, a process.

If we use aspect orbs and most astrologers do, then no matter what orbs we use, there will always be the case where a planet is just one degree out of the orb we have set, and that aspect will not be taken into consideration by us. This is particularly true if we are using computerized astrology, which will simply not list an aspect if it is out-of-orb. What are we to do with these unlisted aspects?

We do know by looking at the chart that the unlisted aspect is either an aspect waiting to happen or an aspect that has just happened recently. It certainly is not any other aspect, and the fact that the aspect is very close to the particular aspect we have set orbs to, we can know it is at the very least in the same ballpark.

Regardless of what orbs we may have set, each and every planet is somewhere in its journey or relationship with every other planet. It is never “not out there,” and it never somehow drops out of the cycle, but it always continues, degree by degree, on its appointed round of the zodiac. In the entire 360-degree orbit, every degree is essential. We can’t get along without each one of them because they are there.

An Analogy

Here is a simple analogy that will point out two areas where we, as astrologers, may be missing out. Suppose I was to send one of my daughters on a round trip to Ann Arbor, by way of Kalamazoo on the outgoing leg and Flint Michigan on the incoming.

Let’s say that Kalamazoo, Michigan is one of the stops (aspects) she will make along the way that I want to designate as a key point, like an aspect. We have placed that city at the 120-degree aspect point from Big Rapids, which is the Trine aspect in traditional astrology. But if she calls me on the phone and is having car trouble and I say, “Where are you?” I don’t only want to know when she is in Kalamazoo; I want to know where she is any time in between. This is analogous to setting absolute orbs on aspects and completely ignoring the planet and aspect if it falls just outside of the orb.

My daughter tells me she has broken down just outside of Kalamazoo, even though she is not within the orb for Kalamazoo I had planned. The place she has broken down, no matter where that place happens to be, is information I

need to have and that is useful. It tells me a lot, for example, if she is still on her way to Ann Arbor (waxing) or already on her way back (waning), and closer to Flint, Michigan. If her car breaks down somewhere in between, that too is important. “Where” is always important, not just at some predefined points or aspects. You get the idea. Got it? Let’s move on.

While we have this analogy up, let’s look at the other problem, the fact that astrologers generally fail to interpret between waxing and waning aspects. To most astrologers today, as mentioned, a Trine is a Trine is a Trine. In the diagram, this would be equivalent to only wanting to know if my daughter was in Kalamazoo or in Flint, each of which is a Trine or 240-degree aspect from Big Rapids. We can all see very clearly that these two places are in very different parts of the aspect cycle. In the first, Kalamazoo, she is still on her way to Ann Arbor, and with the other, Flint, she is already on her way home. Both of these points are addressed with full-phase aspects.

As an initial step, I stopped using strict orbs with aspects decades ago and, instead, began to ask myself: where is this planet on its 360-degree journey in relation to the planet it is aspecting? After all, it is not nowhere. It is always somewhere, and that somewhere, no matter where it is, is important.

My daughter may not be in Kalamazoo, but if she is on the outskirts, I have learned a lot about her situation, for example that she is in a heavily populated area. I find it similar with all the aspects and no longer find orbs meant to help that useful. I would rather just look to see how close the planet is to a traditional aspect, and this helps me to see where the planet is in the overall aspect picture. It is never “not” doing something, so to speak.

The Standard Aspect Cycle

I do not argue that the various points of exact traditional aspects (90, 60, 120, etc. degrees) are not important. Of course they are, but there is no degree or point in the aspect circle/cycle that is not essential, although it may have a different kind of importance. Perhaps we have never inquired about the kind of importance of each area of the cycle.

In fact, after a short while, I found myself doing away with the concept of there being “any” point in the 360-degree cycle that is not somewhere in the vicinity of a major aspect, at least the ones that most astrologers use. For example, using what I consider the most commonly-used aspects, and as the author of scores of astrological programs, you can be sure my users have told me what aspects they want in their software, and they are:

The Standard Aspects

000 Conjunction
030 Semi-Sextile (waxing)
045 Semi-Square (waxing)
060 Sextile (waxing)
090 Square (waxing)
120 Trine (waxing)
135 Sesquiquadrate (waxing)
150 Inconjunct (waxing)
180 Opposition
210 Inconjunct (waning)
225 Sesquiquadrate (waning)
240 Trine (waning)
270 Square (waning)
300 Sextile (waning)
315 Semi-Square (waning)
330 Semi-Sextile (waning)

What about Orbs?

These are the sixteen most commonly used aspects. And if you have to have orbs, let's just divide the space between any two of these 16 aspects in half, and use that midpoint in space as the marker as to the end of one aspect and the beginning of the next.

And, for now, we won't play favorites, giving some aspects more space (greater orbs) and others less. For instance, I find that the Semi-Squares are very, very important, and yet most astrologers used reduced orbs when considering them. Why bother? Just look at the chart.

Using this method, there are no un-aspected planets. A planet is always in the general area or ballpark of one of these traditional aspects or another. If it is not right on top of the aspect, then it is forming or coming to be, or it is past the exact point and in the process of fading away. Either way, there is still the flavor of that aspect around them.

Looking at a chart this way, each planet is always at a very natural point in relation to every other planet. It is never un-aspected. We can see at a glance what phase of the cycle a planet is in as it relates to any other planet. We don't even have to measure, for we can just look at the chart and get a ballpark idea of each relationship. If a Square (90 degrees) is quite wide, then it is still like a Square. At least it is 'Square-ish'. It has an effect.

This is perhaps some kind of holistic way of looking at aspects.

Thanks for your patience; we are almost there, but there is one little twist I want to present to you, and I hope it does not throw you off the track, yet I'm afraid it will.

Phase Relationships

What we are looking at so far here is what is called the "phase relationship" or angular separation of one planet to another. We can divide the cycle of aspects between any two bodies into as many phases or parts as we wish, but we will always want to know if the faster moving planet is in a waxing phase or a waning phase to the other, as in: is the angular separation between the two bodies progressing to the opposition (the equivalent of the Full Moon in the solunar cycle) or is it progressing back toward the conjunction (the equivalent of the New Moon in the solunar cycle). In the first case, the angle is waxing, and in the second, waning. That is what we need to know.

Looking at the chart, it is not difficult to examine any pair of planets and decide which is the faster moving planet, and which is the slower moving planet. And, by "faster" or "slower," I don't mean is it faster or slower on a given day. A fast moving planet like Mercury might be retrograde on a given day or stationary, meaning it appears to not move at all. What we mean here is "faster" or "slower" in the traditional sense of the speed of the planets. Here is the list, from fast to slow:

Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. That is the order, in terms of speed, to use, not whether at any given moment it is stationary and not moving, or even moving retrograde and backward.

The Open-Wheel

I find it most helpful to view the planets in what is called the "Open Wheel," the chart wheel of 360 degrees, where each degree is given equal space. In that way, we can better see the various arcs or angular separation separating any two planets or bodies.

However, it can be tedious looking at each planet pair and having to remember which is the faster and which the slower, because only that will tell us if the aspect is waxing or waning, and therefore which phase the planets are in one to the other.

To make this easier for myself, I made a very simple program that does this for me, and lets me look at any planet, one at a time, in relation to the rest of the planets. I simply place the planet I am interested in at the top of a 360-degree wheel and place the other planets around the wheel, but in their various angular relationships to the selected planet, the one in focus. But there is a twist.

If you have a PC, the program Blue*Star made by my brother Stephen Erlewine and myself is available that does all this for you. It was the last program I designed before I retired, and I put in it all the special techniques that I use and would want to be available in my retirement. I have no monetary relationship with Matrix Software any longer, which I founded and built. I just need the techniques myself. Here is the program I use:

“Blue*Star”

<https://astrologysoftware.com/pro/bluestar/index.html>

The chart wheel shown here represents the 360-degrees cycle of any two planets or bodies. If I place any single planet (the slower planet of the planetary pair) at the top of the chart at what we can call the zero-degree point, and then watch the aspects the faster planet makes to that point, you have the diagram above. Only HERE I have placed all of the planets on the chart wheel, each in the particular angular relationship (aspect) they have in my natal chart.

For example, Venus was separating from the Sun in my birth chart, and Mercury was applying toward to Sun, about to conjunct it. But don't be lulled into thinking this is just my natal chart with the Sun place at the top point. It is a little more complicated than that, but not much.

This method of charting places the waxing planets on the left side of the chart, and the waning aspects on the right, just as they aspect each other in the actual chart.

This kind of Full-Phase Wheel is very easy to read, although (as mentioned) you must be clear that we are no longer looking at the arrangement of the planets as laid out in my natal chart. Let's look at an example, using my geocentric natal chart, with the Sun selected, and placed at the top of the

chart, which we will call the zero, Conjunction, the equivalent of the New Moon point.

Full-PhaseCharts

The 360-degrees of the Full-Phase Chart Wheel starts at the top (Conjunction) and moves counter-clockwise in a circle. At the bottom of the wheel is the Opposition or 180-degree aspect, and so on, around. This constitutes a cycle or circle.

You can see all the other nine bodies arranged with the same angular separation as in my natal chart, but NOT exactly as they are in my natal chart. Here, we are interested to see which planet pairs are waxing or building in strength, and which are waning or lessening in strength, and this chart does that, by dividing the two types and placing waxing planets on the left and waning planets on the right half of the chart wheel, displayed by their angular separation or aspect. I have even drawn in 6-degree orbs on either side of the traditional aspects in pastel colors, for those who might find it helpful. You can see at a glance if a planet falls within a colored orb.

As you can see, the Sun is at the point of the Conjunction (zero degrees of separation) at the top of the wheel. We can see that the planet Venus has moved away from the Conjunction and is nearing the 30-degree point, what is called a Semi-Sextile.

Next, note that Jupiter is almost an exact Semi-Square (45 degrees) to the Sun. However, please notice that the Sun and Jupiter are “flipped” in this chart, to preserve the ability to show the phase. In my actual chart, it is the Sun that is out ahead of Jupiter, by about 45 degrees. Here the two symbols have switched places to maintain the phase relationship, and to keep the planet in focus (in this case the Sun) at the top of the chart. I hope this does not confuse you. Once you understand it, it will not bother you again, so take time to think it through.

You can see my Moon is in the Fourth Quarter, some 300 degrees (Sextile) to the Sun.

Phase Cycles

Before you can understand this next part, you need to read and study the basic phases of any cycle.

Now let’s look at the Sun Full-Phase Wheel again, and do some interpreting, based on our understanding of cycle phases. It does not matter what the cycle is, for the phases of any cycle are all the same. Here we are looking at the cycle of the Moon’s aspects to the Sun.

For one, the planets as they relate to the Sun (the Sun stands for the concept of the Self in traditional astrology) are almost all within the upper or inward hemisphere - the top half. Only one planet, Mars, has crossed from the upper (inner) half of the chart into the lower or outer (public) hemisphere.

This would suggest not only that Mars is very important in my chart (Sun) expression, but is perhaps the only or main way I reach out from within to the outside world.

Therefore, Mars or ambition is very pronounced in this chart. My ambition is very visible, we might say. Little else is.

The other planets are equally divided between waxing and waning hemispheres, but they are all inward, in the upper or inner hemisphere, so regardless of how I might try to be outward, that is: no matter what I may think, I am by nature a very inward or deep person.

The Four Hemispheres

Now let's see how a chart, all by itself, will tell us a story that is useful. Let's look at the meaning of the four hemispheres or halves of the aspect chart, before we go further into this, as they are important. Two of the halves are, of course, the upper or inner half, and the lower or outer half. The other two are the left or waxing side of the chart, and the right or waning side.

If you have taken the time to read the material above on cycle phase interpretation and the various correspondences between the phases of any complete cycle, you are ready for this discussion. If not, now would be a good time to go over that material.

The outward-moving, building, or forming half of the phase wheel is the waxing part of any cycle, where an impulse or idea builds or forms into something physical, into some kind of experience and the Opposition aspect. The inward-going, deconstructing, and dissolving half of the phase wheel is the waning part of the cycle, where whatever was built up at the Opposition aspect is now taken down, and we absorb whatever meaning or value we can from the experience. Again: this is all covered in the material about phases or by looking at any synodic cycle, like the phases of the Moon..

The lower or outer hemisphere constitutes everything out in the open, physically visible, and in this world to be seen - everything that matters, so to speak. The upper or inner hemisphere is all that is not physical, whatever does not matter yet (waxing) or does not matter still (waning), within our mind and experience. The left side of the inner hemisphere holds that which is not

yet manifest, and the right side of the inner hemisphere holds that which is not manifest any longer - going out and coming back.

The Waxing Aspects

I am not suggesting here that this information I am pointing out is not found in all the various pieces of traditional astrological technique. Of course it is, but here the pieces fit together in a slightly different way, like a picture jig-saw puzzle, to provide what for me is a clearer picture of the natal chart, a picture that anyone can read, after only a brief introduction.

Again, using my Sun Phase-Wheel as an example: We can see at a glance that the concept of my Self is very inward, call it mental, subjective, secret, private, deep - what have you? The point is that there is only one planet, Mars, that is in the outer hemisphere, and it is at the Aries or First House position. We can see I like to start things and, as an entrepreneur who has started many businesses, this makes a lot of sense.

The planets in the inward half, those on the waxing side, are where I am taking inspiration or ideas and building them into plans to make into reality, trying to make my dreams come true.

Let's look at them, using traditional astrological interpretations. We can see that Venus is very near the cusp of the Semi-Sextile aspect, corresponding to Aquarius or the 11th house of community, therefore I have dreams and plans to build a community. As a child of the 60's, this is so true.

The sometimes-troublesome planet Saturn and close by, Uranus, are positioned at the Sextile aspect, giving great energy and freedom of movement or ease. It is easy for me to do things, to get things done, and very inventive things at that, like this technique.

This leaves Jupiter, exactly at the 45-degree or Semi-Square aspect, and this is definitely one of the challenge points in the wheel. The Sanskrit word for Jupiter is "Guru," so Jupiter is our path or way through life. In my case Jupiter is my career, and suggests that my life path or career is not a slam dunk, but may involve a lot of obstacles or challenges.

However, if you read the phase article, this particular Semi-Square is one where we don't take "no" for an answer, but press on, suggesting that gentle movement forward will remove any career blocks and ensure steady progress.

The Waning Aspects

Now let's look at the waning side of the chart, in my case all the bodies are in the upper inner part of the chart. The waning right-side hemisphere of the

chart tells us about the returns of our life, how we receive from life, we could even say our “destiny.” This is where life presents things to us, without our having to do anything.

Doing is the waxing left-side of the chart, where we GIVE or put out. If we were talking martial arts, we would have to say that the waxing side of the chart is Judo, and the waning side of the chart is Aikido. With Judo, we strike outward, with Aikido, we passively use force and momentum already in play to our advantage. One is aggressive (Giving), one is passive (Taking). One hand places and the other hand takes away.

The Moon is my leading or most outward planet, along with Neptune, which is a very tight Sextile. Both of these planets are strong Sextiles, so, again, this suggests ease and facility. However, both of these planets are inward, rather than outward, so this points to a more private sense, and perhaps more internal activities, not reaching out, but reaching in. In dharma cycles, Neptune and the Moon are at the Dakini part of the monthly solunar cycle, as well, somewhere around 300-degrees.

It is a fact that I played music for the public, but always from a very inward or shy stance. You get the idea as to how I am interpreting here. Mercury and Pluto are much more inward, deep, with Pluto being my most inward planet on the receptive side. My interest in occultism and initiation on a somewhat inner or deep level might be indicated here.

Astrologer’s Heaven

I have always hated the part of astrology where each astrologer I meet or read begins to delineate their own or some famous person’s chart (usually that of Hitler), point by point. I have never done that, until now. All I can say in my defense is that, until now, I have shown great restraint, and waited some forty years before doing this, and only do it now because I feel this

technique really is special, at least for me, so please forgive me for going on a bit. I am not the first astrologer to do this. We are legion.

And there is something else: When I first looked at these Phase Wheel charts, I was, of course, fascinated, but I also gave in to what I believe is an ingrained habit with many astrologers, of trying to make the various planets and aspects fit my preconceived idea of what things should mean, in particular when it comes to looking at my own chart.

What I learned, gradually, was that this habit of preconception removes all the opportunity to really have your mind open, that is: when I pigeonhole

every factor, shoving it into the nearest available interpretation box, and thus avoiding any new thoughts.

Gradually, I found that if something did not make sense or fit in with what I felt to be the “way I was,” I would just leave it alone, and let the factor tell me the story of what it has to say. These charts don’t lie, and the planets are just where they are, not where I might like them to be. We don’t even need a birth time to use this technique, although it helps with the fast-moving Moon.

On the waning hemisphere of my Sun full-phase chart, we have Neptune and the Moon in the Sextile phase, both very close. These are my most outward-oriented planets, and being waning, this is where I reap or where things come most easily to me.

Remember, that the waxing hemisphere is where we build and invest, and the waning hemisphere is where we deconstruct and get our returns. One hand puts the rabbit in the hat, and the other takes it back out. Give and Take.

The Moon Full-Phase Wheel

Now, if we look at my Moon’s Phase Wheel, we have a very different story. Mars is the only planet in the waxing side of the chart, and it alone must carry my investment or outreach. All the other planets are on the waning side, and have to do with returns, with the Moon or supportive environment bringing things to me. In other words, as far as the Moon (supportive environment) in life, things should come my way.

And here, Neptune is the sole planet out in the public or outer hemisphere, so my Neptune is very conspicuous. Perhaps it makes sense that I was a musician when I was young, founded the largest music database on the planet, and am, even today, a very “Neptunian astrologer.” My Neptune is very outwardly prominent. Also, Neptune is exactly conjunct the North Node of the Moon and my Midheaven in my natal chart of houses.

This is even more clear if you look at my Mars Phase Wheel, where Neptune is right in the middle of the house of experience, right out there for everyone to see, and indicates how I manifest myself to the public - through Neptune. Neptune is my way to manifest outwardly, and it is interesting that I founded the largest music database on the planet (allmusic.com) and one of the two largest film databases (allmovie.com), both topics connected to Neptune.

Also, what is remarkable about the Mars Full-Phase chart is the equal spacing of the planets. To me, this means that Mars is stable, dependable, giving me great energy to accomplish things. The spacing of planets, the space between them, is very important to interpret, and it seldom has been done.

This is how this technique can work. Of course, you will each have your own astrological associations. Here is a free e-book for those who want to look into this technique.

“Astrology’s Mirror: Full-Phase Aspects”

<https://www.startypes.com/pdf/e-books/FullPhase%20Aspects.pdf>

[Graphics by me]

EMAIL

I intuitively and spontaneously respond to seeing art and graphics. I believe I got this from my mom who was a fine-arts painter and batik artist. In the Tibetan dharma system just as there is ‘Liberation Through Hearing’ (Tibetan Book of the Dead), there is also Thongdrol, ‘Liberation Through Seeing’.

By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net

THONGDROL: ‘LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING’

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I intuitively and spontaneously respond to seeing art and graphics. I believe I got this from my mom who was a fine-arts painter and batik artist. In the Tibetan dharma system just as there is ‘Liberation Through Hearing’ (Tibetan Book of the Dead), there is also Thongdrol, ‘Liberation Through Seeing’.

For instance, it’s the main way I first responded to Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche by the cover designs of his first books which he did. In particular his book “Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism,” with a single dorje image in a deep red circle on a saffron orange background. It captured me before the text of the book did.

In other words, my mind is excited or stirred-up by graphics of all kinds. For example, I created probably the largest single database of rock ‘n roll concert posters, some 33,000 images and then wrote 336 separate books and booklets on these posters. That’s how much I was struck by the art in them. I went on to create an enterprise-level web site called “ClassicPosters.com,” which is still going but not run by me, although a lot of my images and poster data is still there.

It’s not that words are not powerful, they are. Yet, at least for me, images, color, and ‘seeing’ them are equally or an even more powerful stimulus on my consciousness. You know, the refrain, “An image is worth a thousand words.” I believe that. I’m sure each of us has our own images that we respond to.

I eventually had almost all of the most famous of the 1960s San Francisco psychedelic posters, all of the ‘Family Dog’, all of the Various’ Bill Graham’ posters, scores of the ‘Armadillo World Headquarters’ in Austin, TX, all the postcards and posters from the ‘Grande Ballroom’, except the St. Louis Pop Festival, and on and on, hundreds more. They were so expensive that I had to keep them in an 800 lb. safe and after a while I never looked at them because they were locked away. I eventually sold them because I had photographed them all, etc.

It was easy to love them because much of the art was so beautiful, and I also interviewed scores of rock poster artists. I’m now writing a book on the artist

Gary Grimshaw for a project, probably my favorite artist from the 1960s period.

And these posters were expensive. I had one poster worth 20K, for example. That's a fascinating world, but money part of it, the trading and the middlemen, taking advantage of each other, and so on eventually was disappointing.

In fact, to go a littler further into this, there is a form of dharma called "The Lama of Appearances," where this natural world of Nature is an equal teacher and way to learn of the dharma. I subscribe to that as well. Just as there is the "Lama of the Lineage", the 'Lama of the Scriptures', and the 'Lama of the Dhamadhatu', there is 'The Lama of Appearances.'

All four are equal ways to view and learn the dharma. My guess is that many of my readers also respond to "The Lama of Appearances" as a way into the dharma.

[Some examples for me of Liberation Through Seeing.]

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Seing Through A Lens

By Michael Erlewine, SpiritGrooves.net

PHOTO LINK BELOW:

https://substack-post-media.s3.amazonaws.com/public/images/52858612-a758-4f9f-bdaa-282f17ec25a8_2048x1491.jpeg

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anyway, I'm working the problem.

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

That was when the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea.

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

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

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

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