

Dharma Blogs
And
Stories
2015
by
Michael Erlewine

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A YIDAM STORY

November 23, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

No, it's not a Barbra Streisand movie. Yidam practice is what many dharma practitioners do when they have finished what are called the Preliminary Practices. There are at least three forms of preliminary practice in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, often termed the Common, Extraordinary, and the Special Preliminaries, but they are preliminary to what? And what happens after the preliminaries are completed?

The answer is that every practice in Tibetan Buddhism is preliminary to our recognizing the actual nature of our own mind. However, that "Recognition" of the nature of the mind is not something that we can just fall into or come by naturally on our own. It requires what is called Deity Practice (or the equivalent) and working with a realized lama, and that's where the selection of a yidam comes in.

The concept of the Yidam does not have a simple corollary here in the West. Perhaps what is called your "power animal" or totem in the Native American tradition comes closest, and the Patron Saint in Catholicism is vaguely similar, but we don't have a word for "Yidam" in the English language.

Functionally, a Yidam might be defined as whatever method it takes to get us to drop our endless conceptual expectations, snap out of it, and just realize the true nature of how the mind actually works. In other words, there has to be some way or

method for us to shift from our habitual fixation on conceptualization to grasping or realizing the actual nature of the mind itself and how it works. As I understand it, that is the function of the Yidam in Buddhist practice.

Whatever the particular method of liberation that can reveal the actual nature of the mind to us can rightly be called our yidam. The range of possible methods is endless, thus the many stories in Zen Buddhism, of the teacher doing whatever is necessary to pop the student out of their conceptual bubble or in Tibetan Buddhism what is called “Crazy Wisdom,” which is the same general idea. And Tibetan Buddhism has the Pointing-Out Instructions, whereby a realized lama points out to us the true nature of our mind so that we can see it. And there is, of course, Deity Practice.

In Tibetan Vajrayana practice, the choice of a yidam comes after all the preliminary practices have been completed and we are ready for what is called Deity Practice. There are three kinds of Tibetan deities: peaceful, wrathful, and semi-wrathful, and they represent different internal qualities within ourselves. In Tibet, it was traditional for the teacher to select the proper deity (method) for the student to use in Deity Practice, but the student can select his or her yidam on their own, if they had a special feeling for one or another deity. I thought I was of the second type, that I could pick my own yidam, and thus this somewhat humorous story.

When I finished the Extraordinary Preliminaries and was ready for what is called Deity Practice, I cast about in my mind to see what deity I felt drawn to. I felt a special kinship to both Guru Rinpoche and to

Vajrapani, in particular a wrathful form of Vajrapani called “Dorje Tumpo.” Vajrapani is traditionally connected to enlightened activity, and I have always felt that of the five Buddha Families, that I belong to the Karma Family, known for its activity and all-accomplishing wisdom. I may not have had the wisdom, but I had some of the ability to accomplish. I have always been very active, and Vajrapani is known for enlightened activity. And since my Buddhist Refuge Name is “Karma Dhondup Dawa,” which translates to something like “Moon of Accomplishment,” that was another sign of this connection. So, you see how my mind was running... accomplishment, activity, Vajrapani, and so on.

Anyway, I felt this strong affinity for Vajrapani and decided this must be my yidam. I looked around, but there was no sadhana (practice-text) available for this deity, much less an empowerment being offered. In our lineage (the Karma Kagyu), aside from H.H. Karmapa, there are four main regents, and one of those regents is said to be a direct emanation of Vajrapani, His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche. And all the stories I heard about His Eminence said things like that he was very direct, seldom smiled, and just was right there and very present. I identified with that too.

Well, of course I wrote letters to H.E. Gyaltsab Rinpoche, who lives in Sikkim, India. He seldom travelled. I wanted to know when he might come to America and give a Vajrapani empowerment. And I would eventually receive a response, signed by His Eminence, but written by his secretary saying he had no plans to visit the United States anytime soon, but thanking me for writing.

I eventually asked my Rinpoche where I could take the Vajrapani Empowerment or if he would ever offer this empowerment, which I understood that he had not ever offered in this country. And to my surprise, he agreed to give that empowerment, and he did. He actually came to our center here in Michigan and offered that empowerment for the very first time in this country, which of course I attended. And afterward, with the help of my dear friend Sange Wangchug (who was staying at our center helping me translate Tibetan astrological texts), we made a Vajrapani practice text in Tibetan, transliteration, and English. It was in the Tibetan “Pecha” style, and had a dark blue cover with foil stamped imprinting.

Then, in 1997 my wife Margaret and my young son Michael traveled all the way to Sikkim and, with the help of a very close (and dear) friend, Ngödop Burkhar, we requested His Eminence Gyaltsab Rinpoche to please give that empowerment. And he was kind enough to do it, just for us.

I was thrilled and I did the Vajrapani practice for a number of years, including completing the mantra repetition cycle (twelve syllables). In completing sadhanas, a common measure is to recite 100,000 mantras for each syllable in the mantra. As you will soon hear, this is no guarantee of anything, of course.

And my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche even asked me to teach the Vajrapana Sadhana to a number of senior students in the main shrine room at our monastery. That was an honor. I tell you this, not to brag, but because there is a kicker to this

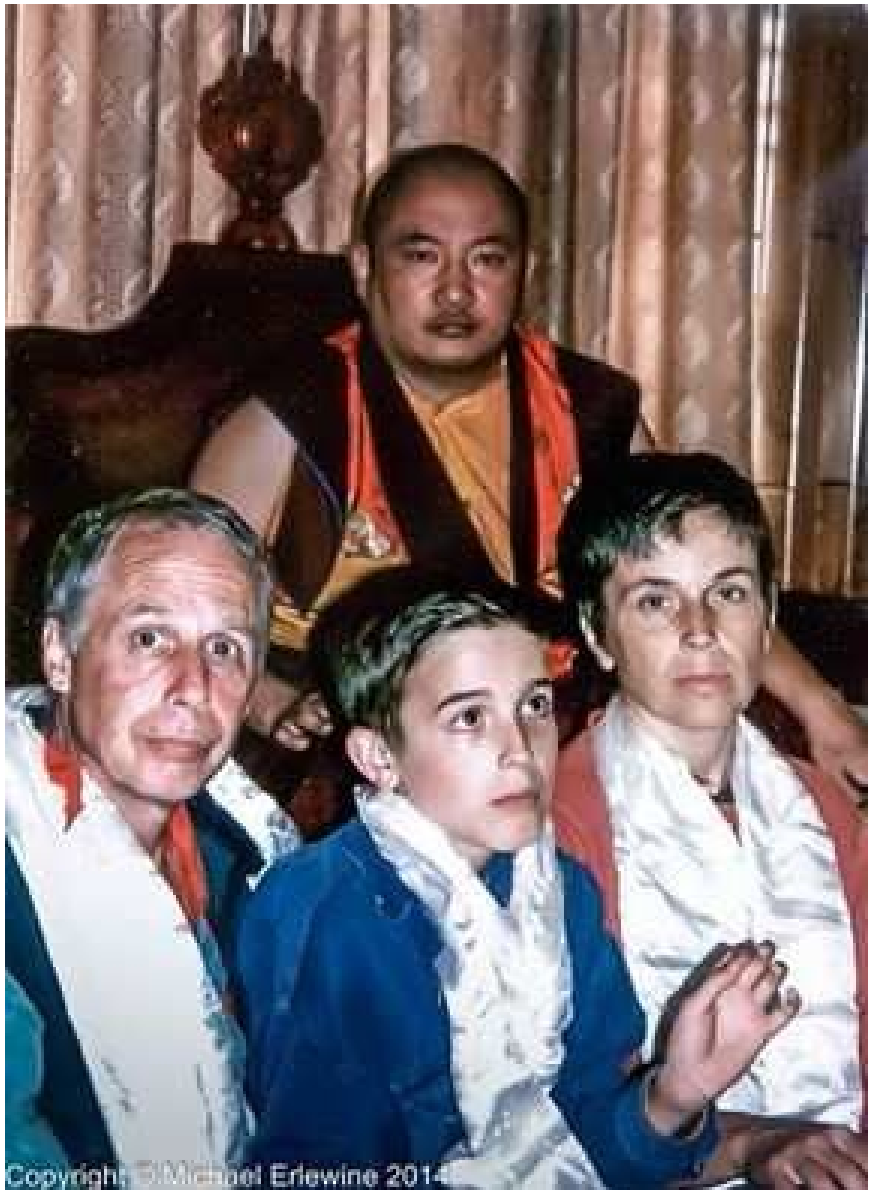
story, which is coming:

After all that busyness, the empowerment, trip to India, the mantras, the extended practice, some years went by. I finally had to admit to myself (and to Rinpoche) that no matter how great I felt about my connection to Vajrapani, it was not the ticket for me as far as realizing the true nature of my mind. All that I managed to realize was that I had no realization, despite my devotion to Vajrapani. Rinpoche just chuckled about my pursuing Vajrapani, and my fancying on such a fierce dharma protector, and all of that. He knew all along that this fixation with Vajrapani on my part was just that, one more fixation, something that I thought up and then reified to beat the band.

Yes, I still have a real affinity and the deepest respect for the Bodhisattva Vajrapani and, because I have done so many of his mantras, I still find myself automatically saying his mantra every now and then. However, I eventually recollected when I first met His Holiness the 17th Karmapa in his ancestral home, high in the mountains of Tibet. There, in the presence of His Holiness, I actually deeply realized that in my heart of hearts was none other than Chenresik (Avalokiteśvara), the essence of compassion. That is as much a yidam as I know in that sense. So, that's my story.

I was later to find out that there is another very different way and path to realize the true nature of the mind other than selecting a yidam and doing deity practice, and that is called Mahamudra Meditation. And, to my surprise, Mahamudra practice is what turned out to be the most natural for me.

[Photo of Margaret, myself, and our son Michael Andrew after receiving the Vajrapani Empowerment in 1997 in Sikkim, India. Behind us is His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche. My dear friend Ngödup took the photo.]





His Eminence Gyaltsab Rinpoche in 1997 at our visit.

AMERICAN DHARMA

October 31, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We know there is an American Buddhism forming out there, but what will it be like? I can remember asking my Rinpoche why we had to do our practice in Tibetan, rather than English, and his response was that he did not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, should there be something embedded in the Tibetan form of dharma practice that we need to have at this time. And he also pointed out that we must wait for Americans to become realized and we will write our own sadhanas and give our own teachings in English. Tibetan Buddhism is from Tibet. American Buddhism will be from and for Americans. This is just the beginning. They say it takes 300 years for Buddhism to enter a country.

As American Buddhism appears, I am sure there will be different threads, but the teachings of the great Tibetan teacher Khenpo Gangshar has to be the thread that I belong to. Khenpo Gangshar was one of Chögyam Trungpa's primary teachers and reputedly even wilder than Trungpa. You can read more about him on Wikipedia, but I will mention here just some highlights.

At one point Khenpo Gangshar became very sick and died. After death, Gangshar's corpse was sitting in Samadhi, a pose called Tukdam. Chögyam Trungpa was saying prayers in vigil near the body of his teacher, when one of Trungpa's movements made a slight breeze and at that moment Khenpo Gangshar came back to life. This is a true story.

Just as amazing, when Khenpo Gangshar came back to life, he was a changed man. He was totally on-fire with the dharma and after he died (and was in the bardo state) he received teachings from two great lamas and a premonition of the coming invasion of Tibet by the Chinese. At that time, when he returned to life, he gave up his monks robes and in the summer of 1957 proceeded to wander throughout Eastern Tibet teaching not only at monasteries, but to lay people as well, including women and children. He said there was no time to learn dharma gradually (as in the traditional way) because of the coming invasion and he proceeded to give the “Pointing Out Instructions” as to the nature of the mind to anyone who would listen, people he met just walking along the road, etc. Many became realized. His influence on Trungpa Rinpoche cannot be over-emphasized. My own teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche also received those same teachings from Khenpo Ganshar himself at that time.

For me, Khenpo Gangshar (and his particular teachings) is as much a premonition of the American Buddhist mind as I can imagine or have touched upon. I have had the good fortune to hear these pith instruction teachings of Khenpo Gangshar twice in person from my teacher, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and I also transcribed and studied two other times they were given, as well as similar teachings from the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche. And these teachings were very much fresh in the mind of both Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche and Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. While those teachings have not been released to the public at this time, much of what is in them can be found in the wonderful book by the great meditation master Thrangu Rinpoche in his book “Vivid Awareness,” which is on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Here is a brief excerpt from a teaching by Khenpo Gangshar called “A Song to Introduce the Unmistaken View of the Great Perfection.”

“You may analyze meticulously, but when a wind blows it naturally disperses the clouds and the sky can be seen. Endeavour to see empty clarity, mind itself, in the same way – there is nothing greater than this understanding. If you don’t stir up the silt, the water will remain clear; as such, don’t analyze. Simply rest without contrivance and you will come to see the emptiness of mind itself. There is nothing greater to see than this!?”

If you would like to read more, here is a link:

<http://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/khenpo-gangshar/song-to-introduce-unmistaken-view>

As for realized Americans, I am on my toes and waiting for them to appear. Sometimes there are a couple of drops before the rain begins.

[Photo of the Ven. Khenpo Gangshar.]



ASTROLOGY AND THE DHARMA

November 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I continue to get questions, remarks, and comments, some of them even aggressive, not to mention a few private messages that are just rude, about why I don't write more about astrology and less about dharma training.

Although I have, in my own way, been a leader in astrology for a long time, even would-be friends wish that I would do what they suggest rather than what I have always done, which is what my heart and mind tells me is the truth for me. As mentioned, some are private emails, some are comments or suggestions, some nudges, and some regrets about what they remember that they like about whoever they think I am. To all of them, I respectfully apologize; perhaps it would help if I tried to explain how I view my relationship of astrology to the Dharma. To do this, I have to backup to when I first discovered astrology, so bear with me.

I came out of the 1950s, with all of the complexities and shortcomings of that time period, like cowering under my desk at school (with all the other students) during the endless air-raid drills of that time in fear of the Soviets dropping nuclear bombs on us. Of course, as students we didn't fully understand what was going on, how serious or not serious that was, but it made a deep impression.

Even worse was the brainwashing that came from the emerging psychological trend of replacing the various traditional human attributes like Bravery, Honesty,

Fairness, Loyalty, Patience, and so on, with labels like Paranoid, Manic-Depressive, Bi-Polar, Schizophrenic, and the like. Our fathers and mothers grew up with the first set of attributes, but my generation (when we were finding ourselves) was labeled with the second set, if only because that was the trend at the time. Our parents enjoyed it, but we were not in on the joke. You have to realize that like any young adult, my generation was trying to find out who we were, to build self-confidence, and to identify ourselves. This psycho-babble of labels being pinned on us (and everyone), was not helpful. Enter astrology.

So, when I encountered astrology, I found a view with another set of attributes, thankfully a “second opinion” and another view of who I was and what I was good for, perhaps far out (in the heavens), but one more dignified and respectful of the human condition. It was certainly better than to label myself and those I met as paranoid or schizophrenic and all that stuff. With the astrological labels I was able to build a persona, an idea of who I was, other than the psychological mumbo-jumbo that society was offering.

I mean, after all, we come into this world not only naked but also empty of a persona, the mere shell of a self that we then proceed to create, pulling around us the mask or cloak of a persona based on the labels and attributes available to us. Well, I rejected those psychological labels, and borrowed from astrology’s rich history of descriptors. Astrology allowed me to create a positive idea of myself, that I was in fact someone after all, and a unique individual on top of that. In other words, I could distinguish myself from the mass of everyone, from my Moon. Remember in astrology that the mystery of the Moon is that she is both our mother and our child.

The important point here is that astrology allowed me to identify and differentiate myself from others, something I had been unable to successfully do under the psychological climate of the times. Every young adult must do this – individualize. I took to astrology. I became expert in astrology. I did all I could to bend and use astrology as a way of seeing life, a positive view. And I also went into my mind and found astrological techniques that should be of interest to others. After all, astrology is a language to express our lives, just as good any other language, and for me just what the doctor ordered.

I not only learned astrology, but I was the first person to program astrology on microcomputers and share those programs openly with my fellow astrologers. I went on to create an astrological center that produced more than 36 conferences and events. In addition, I created or gave meaning to a number of techniques, some of which are now being used by astrologers. These would include Local Space relocation, Heliocentric Archetypes, Deep-Space Astrology, Planetary Nodes, Full-Phase Aspects, A new view of Retrogrades, and many others.

I worked very hard to weave all that I learned from traditional astrology into what I was finding fresh from mining the depths of the astrological mind that we all share. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition states that astrology entered our world-system when the Bodhisattva Manjushri appeared in the form of a young adult and from the top of his head emanated the 84,000 astrological dharmas, most of which are still there today, embedded as mind treasures to be eventually found by people like ourselves.

When I began to meet the Tibetan Buddhists, I found that they had yet another system of labels, one which included astrology within it as a mother might carry a child. The Buddhist path to greater awareness, which is called The Dharma, is a meta- or super- system, inclusive of my beloved astrology. I instantly felt at home and had found my tribe.

And the most amazing thing was that the Buddhist mind-training methods completed areas of self-building that I had never been able to satisfy, despite all of the astrology I had managed. In the dharma, I found a better language. And dharma was not just a descriptive language, but a series of very effective techniques to greater awareness. We cling to what we know, so I understand when astrologers lecture me about how astrology is able to do this or that. Yes, but... there are things that astrology is not designed to do.

And to use that old phrase, before I knew it, the dewdrop (which was my astrology) slipped into the shining sea of Dharma and they became one. And this was during those very special years when the great Tibetan rinpoches had no real place to go and so they travelled America, willing to visit wherever they were invited. And I asked them, one after another, what was the role of astrology in Buddhism?

And my dharma teacher, a very high rinpoche, was kind enough to point out to me that in the Tibetan teachings, astrology is considered one of the limbs of the yoga, as he put it, but not the root. Dharma is the root, and astrology is a branch. That made a lot of sense to me. He explained, by way of analogy, that astrology is what is called a relative truth. It can take us from here to there in life, adjusting our attitude so that we take the winds of change more effectively. This rang true to me.

This is what I did as a counseling astrologer.

And Rinpoche went on to say that the Dharma was an absolute truth. To perhaps make this clearer, imagine a great sphere or globe. Astrology can help us get from one point on the surface of the globe to another, hopefully (for us) a better place or point, but not toward center. The Dharma can take us toward the center.

With the Dharma, each step of training (when it is realized) takes us to greater awareness. Astrology is useful in the mundane or relative sphere as a way to better set our sails to more aerodynamically take the winds of change. Astrology can be used for good or not-good.

And while at times I can be a bit of a wizard in the relative world (and my ego loves it), every sudden shift of awareness toward the center (greater awareness) attained through dharma training brings forth more compassion and generosity of spirit that humbles me in thankfulness. The dharma is a life saver.

In summary, while I could (if asked) teach you many things about esoteric astrology in this blog, much of which I have written out in my free books, I would be doing you a disservice if I did not put astrology in perspective, by sharing with you its mother, the Dharma. Astrology can give us relative control of this world of Samsara, but it will never show us how to realize Enlightenment. Before you say it, I know, astrology can be twisted, like seeing through a glass darkly, to see everything, but it is much easier just to see dharmically, which I have learned to as best I can.

And the two, astrology and the Dharma, are not opposites, but are like mother and child. They naturally

love each other and fit, like hand to glove.

If you ever take one thought of advice from all that I have written here, it is that nothing on the earth approaches the value of even one step toward the center, one step toward Dharma. And, if you want an analogical proof, the closer one gets to the center, the more the entire periphery of our life can be realized effectively.

So forgive me if I appear to drone on about the value of Dharma in my life. From my point of view, I am sharing what I find as most precious. The Dharma is not true because I say it; I say it because it is true.

ASTROLOGY AS MIND TREASURES

October 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Well, I see that you like the astrology. I totally understand. I have been an active astrologer for over 50 years. And liking astrology is nothing new. I hope you will permit me to tell a little story that should be at least interesting. In 2004, I had the rare privilege to travel with my Tibetan dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (now in his nineties), to Tibet for some special events, and we also took a side trip to mainland China to visit a very sacred place in China called Mt. Wu-Tai Shan, a series of five mountains in the shape of a #5 die, four mountains in the shape of a square, with a large mountain in the center.

Most of the world's religions have monasteries around Wu-Tai Shan, including Tibetan Monasteries. We made a point of reaching the top of all five mountains in a single day and doing puja (prayers, practices, etc.) on each peak. What has made Mt. Wu-Tai Shan so sacred also should interest astrologers, which is why I share this story with you now.

It is said that Wu-Tai Shan was the place on earth that Astrology first entered our world system. It was here, so the story goes, that the great Bodhisattva Manjushri appeared in the form of a youth and from the top of his head emanated the 84,000 teachings on astrology, which were received by the people of Earth. In fact, we humans liked astrology so much that we began to ignore the dharma and to slip more into our day-to-day distractions. This seemed not a good thing (for us) to Manjushri, who then withdrew all the 84,000 teachings

from the world.

We humans greatly missed the help that astrology offers and were very unhappy. Finally the great being Guru Rinpoche (sometimes called the Second Buddha) agreed to go to Manjushri and plead the case, that the astrological teachings might be returned. Manjushri finally agreed, but instead of just giving them all to us as he had, instead he hid or secreted them in various places, including the mind itself, so that like time-release capsules, they would appear as needed throughout history. These teachings are called Terma, and those who eventually find the hidden teachings are Tertöns. So that is the story. The terma hidden in the mind itself (like your mind) are called, appropriately enough, “Mind Treasures.”

As for my two-cents, after I returned home from Wu-Tai Shan I went through a deep time of astrological discovery. Many of the books and techniques, the food for some of these blogs, came out of my own mind during that time. I just found them deep within myself. I feel that my time with Rinpoche in Wu-Tai Shan was very fertile. Also, in 2005, about one year after I returned, I also had a similar event in my own dharma practice, which you can blame for my endlessly writing of all these dharma blogs.

I hope to write some more about astrology tomorrow if all is equal, but here are a few words today on the subject.

The astronomy of astrology is all science, when a planet or heavenly body does whatever it does in whichever part of the zodiac. We can predict these celestial events as far into the future as we care to look. So just what then is astrology? In a nutshell, astrology

is simply cultural astronomy, what all this science of astrology means to us individually, the meaning of the technical astronomy. And the sky overhead is rich with celestial events just now, and therefore potentially rich with meaning for us collectively and also individually. Recently the planet Mercury turned from retrograde (moving backward in the heavens) to direct, moving forward through the zodiac.

The Mercury retrograde, turning direct, suggests that although we are stuck in our mental habits and probably can't do much about it right now, we now have our mind right and are looking toward the future once again, although it is quite a distance from now. So, we now are aware that we have been stuck in the past recently, but things are looking up and we probably have a plan for the future, although, as mentioned, it will take patience and time to carry it out. Wait for the New Moon Monday evening... coming up.

My dharma teacher explained to me many years ago the difference between astrology and dharma. All Tibetans use astrology every day, at least the monks do. What Rinpoche said to me was that "Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but the Dharma is the root." Astrology is what is called a relative truth. It can help us get from here to there in life, adjust our attitude, but the dharma is the root, where we are ultimately headed. I will detail this tomorrow if there is interest.

AT LAST, FIRST

October 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is further comment on what I consider the greatest obstacle to making progress in training the mind, and that is our own expectations, what we manage to think up to expect. And in that regard, life is just too ironic, actually more than a little funny.

I have been working on meditating for many years, over four decades, and finally have made a little progress. During all that effort, when I was obviously pushing the wrong way, I longed for effortless meditation (I am always worried about something or other). When I finally figured out how to take joy in my meditation, of course I had to find something else to worry about. So, these years I'm worried about why I don't want to go out, find a cave, and then sit in it for years, you know, like other meditators have done in old Tibet. So, to save time and words, here is some commentary on that, probably more than you want to know.

Up until now in my meditation training, what I expect and look for as to results has never (not even ever!) been the reality, as in: it's not what happened. What actually does happen kind of sneaks up on me, despite myself. Thank God (or whomever you wish) for that! Otherwise, I would still be lost, fumbling around in the dark reaches of my self- created expectations. It's not like I know what the results of meditation (greater awareness, etc.) would be like. As the kids say, "As if!" Rather, it's that I can't help but gather information on the future of my mind-training, read books, listen to teachings, talk with friends, and come up with some

idea of what I “think” greater awareness is supposed to be like, and, of course, I then promptly proceed to reify it, and then begin to follow it like a road map. I soon forget that I made it all up and, certainly, as mentioned, it never works!

So, I have spent years watching for some sign that I want to go sit in a cave and meditate, as opposed to whatever else I do now. I have seen no sign of that at all. However, I ‘have’ gotten increasingly involved in the various non-standard (or are they?) ways that I practice Mahamudra meditation, through photography, of course, and lately through the need to write, and I see (in my peripheral vision) other activities starting to come into view that will also work. So, my particular kind or approach to meditation is gradually expanding.

As to my worry about why I am not meditating all of the time out there in some cave, there is this. How amazing would it be if I do end up meditating all the time, but just not how I have always imagined it! After all, none of the other expectations (zero) I came up with about meditation and mind training have come true. Why should this one be any different? I watch for my imagined expectations regarding meditation to come true, while my actual meditation (in reality) overtakes and eclipses what I expected would happen. I am reminded of the famous quote by the poet Gertrude Stein “Before friendship faded, friendship faded,” only here it would be something like “Before meditation happened, meditation happened.” While waiting for meditation to occur, meditation occurred. How fitting! It is simple logic that we can expect expectations to take forever. And there is no doubt that I am a victim of my own expectations once again, my own personal version of “Waiting for Godot.”

I blame my Self (and my fixation on myself) for much of this, which is just another indirect way of keeping me at arm's length from reality. The Self is the ultimate tar baby; the more I struggle with myself, the deeper I'm stuck. Above all, it's hard to forgive myself for just being me. How funny is that!

As mentioned, so far, my expectations about my own spiritual progress have been 100% wrong. I am so vigilant in this that any actual increase in awareness has to sneak up on me, overtaking me from behind, despite my Self and all my efforts to see it coming. What a sorry way of learning!

Meanwhile, my desire to meditate, as I understand meditation, goes unabated. I want to do it more of the time, and have already managed to do just that, despite my mixed-up expectations. Perhaps I will end up meditating all of the time, not in a cave out in the woods, but in the solitude of wherever I happen to be.

And if I end up doing something right, I am sure I will be the last to know about it for the first time, if that makes any sense. Realization takes its sweet time, but once it dawns, that Sun never goes down.

BEYOND TECHNIQUE

October 7, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Any technique, like the technique of learning sitting meditation, is just a skeleton of the actual experience, the bare bones of what must be articulated into a living experience by each of us. Techniques are usually presented as a series of instructions to step through, and the intent is to get you into the general ballpark of the actual experience, wherein you can experience it. There eventually comes a transition stage, once we have learned the rudiments, a point where we stop following the instruction steps, mechanically, and realize for the first time how to actually meditate, to let go of the handlebars and just go for a ride, a “Look Ma, no hands!” moment. At that point, we no longer need the instructions, except perhaps as a reminder of how to get into meditation each session. We have arrived at meditation.

At this point we realize what the instructions and practice have been pointing at all along, but which we did not grasp until then, the actual experience of meditating. And here is an important point: When we finally achieve it, the actual experience of meditation is its own reward and also an impetus to want to meditate more often. It is more pleasurable (or meaningful) than non-meditating. This is particularly true for Insight Meditation, but also true for Tranquility Meditation to a lesser degree.

However, and in my own case it was a big “However,” I got stuck somewhere in the instructions and was unable to reach the transition stage, the stage when I would

normally stop just iterating the instructions and actually begin to meditate. IMO, this situation is much more common than folks let on. I was not able to intuitively or instinctively grasp what meditation was all about, and got stalled for many years at the rote-repetition of the instructions level. It was like a stuck record. I was making a lot of effort, but getting no results. This was very dispiriting, and I didn't really know that I was not yet actually meditating.

It is my belief that a great many people who practice Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) are actually doing some form of relaxation therapy, rather than developing the concentration and focused mindfulness that defines what is called Shamata or Samadhi. The word "Samadhi" is a generic term for the various kinds of tranquility meditation, of which Shamata is one technique.

When I ask myself what was missing in my approach to learning Shamata meditation that would cause me to take years to develop it, the answer comes down to two main qualities that I did not have in sufficient quantities, that of devotion and enthusiasm. We commonly associate devotion with religion, but there is no special reason for that. A mother is devoted to her children and if we have a hobby that we really love, we can be devoted to that as well. And devotion of any kind brings enthusiasm.

For me, learning meditation was like trying to pat my forehead and rub my tummy; I just couldn't get the hang of it. For one, since I had never experienced meditation, it was all Greek to me. I had only an abstract idea as to what meditation was about and why I should do it. As it turned out, that was not enough.

I was later to find out that devotion to meditation and the enthusiasm it brings is not just an option, but rather a requirement for success in learning meditation. I certainly had neither, because I did not yet know anything about it, except that I thought I wanted to learn it.

This is why, when I talk with those who are having trouble getting into Tranquility Meditation, I suggest the following. Look through your life for those things that you have already mastered that require intense concentration “and” that you enjoy or love. Those qualities are half of what tranquility meditation is all about. It could be tying flies, playing chess, quilting, embroidery, or what-have-you?

Then, simply use the technique of Tranquility Meditation with that hobby or skill. Since you already have the devotion and enthusiasm, marching through the instruction steps on meditation may be much more fruitful. Apply the technique for Tranquility Meditation to your hobby, doing your best to focus on whatever you are doing. When you get distracted, gently bring your focus back to the activity at hand and start again. Do this for the entire session. Traditionally, the object used to focus on can be a stick, a pebble, a spot on the wall, a statue of the Buddha, and most often the breath. There is no object that is not suitable, so a hobby that includes concentration will do just fine.

What you are looking for while you are doing this is not whatever expectations you have gathered along the way. They don't help and only delay success at meditation. Instead, allow yourself to rest in the repetitive practice, but remain aware of any contextual response you might be experiencing. A sign of beginning success is when you find yourself

increasingly wanting to meditate, even though you may not be able to quite put your finger on the reason why. This is a good indication that you are transitioning from rote practice to actually meditating.

DHARMA MEMORIES

November 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

My back is sore from sorting through paper files. I have about 16 large file drawers packed to the brim with folders, and in each folder are all kinds of stuff that has to be kept or recycled. And many more file cabinets in other places. I went through eight drawers so far today, and am taking a rest because of back pain... bending over, carrying too much at a time, etc. I never learn.

A lot of what I sorted through was dharma related, the remainder of when we ran a bookstore and dharma practice materials mail-order service called "KTD Dharma Goods." This was back when our monastery could not afford to run their own mail-order business, which today is probably the best in the country. I believe we ran it for six years or so, importing malas, statues, and publishing many texts and practice sadhanas:

<http://www.namsebangdzo.com/Default.asp>

I was humbled to come across letter after letter from great rinpoches like H.E. Tai Sit Rinpoche, Thrangu Rinpoche, H.E. Gyaltsab Rinpoche and many, many others, some actual letters written to me with signatures, like the three mentioned above. Then there were the photos, some of them heartbreaking to see after all these years.

Below is a photo taken at our center of the great Tibetan yogi Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, looking really young. And standing next to him, with Rinpoche's hand on her shoulder, is none other than my daughter May

Erlewine, now a wonderful singer.

It reminds me of how much my kids' lives were steeped in the dharma, even if they don't realize it today. We had rinpoches, lamas, monks, and nuns here constantly for the last 30 years or so. What a rain of blessings they have been exposed to.

I am afraid my file sorting easily turns into some kind of nostalgia-fest, with photos like this spiraling me off in a cascade of memories. I wake up moments later and find myself just standing there. Where did I go?

Anyway, I have (as Donald Trump would say) a HUGE amount of "stuff" to sort out before I move somewhere else, pass-on, or whatever. Since I am not getting any younger, it is better to deal with it now, while I have the energy, rather than ten years from now. Make sense?

[Photo of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche and May Erlewine. With rinpoche is a translator, but I apologize for not remembering his name. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso speaks little English, and when I kept running into him here or there around the country, he would suddenly point at me and very loudly proclaim "Big Rapids, Big Rapids!" He could not remember my name, but he did remember our center. LOL]



EXPERIENCE: THE PRODUCT OF CHANGE

December 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am still stuck in that bardo-like state between Christmas and New Years, so forgive me sharing a few thoughts and a little stream of consciousness.

I had an unusual dream the other night, not a nightmare, but something a little more interesting and less demanding. I was at a large gathering of very aware people from all over, small groups from here and there around the country and the world. And instead of being homogenized, the groups were for the moment staying each by themselves.

The get-together had not yet gotten together.

And for some reason I was moving around through these various smaller groups asking a question. And I was trying to find the most alert, most awake and aware individuals to ask them about “change.” And then I woke up, but was still in the dream space too. I was not yet here or there, neither fully awake nor still dreaming, an in-between state.

I found myself asking each group who among them were the philosophers and could they please describe what change really is about? Popular wisdom says that change is the only constant, in that things are constantly changing, yet still remaining the same, like treading water or dancing in place. Obviously, understanding and working with change is something we would all do well to be aware of.

So, I was asking: please describe change. Tell me how

you see change. Where is it leading? What does it point to? What can we learn from it? What is its purpose or product? Of course, the answer (which I don't quite remember) was something standard like change was everything and nothing.

"Does change bring anything really new? I asked." I almost always greet a friend by asking: What's new? Any news? The classic answer is that nothing is new or everything is new. "News" itself is never news. News is the messenger, not the message. And the message is always old-news, ever repeated, as in "there is nothing new under the Sun." So, there IS a messenger, but no message, thus: no news.

As pointed out, "change" is not about to go anywhere soon. It is the one constant and it constantly iterates. But what is the result or meaning of all this change? What persists or comes of change? What is its reason?

And the answer that rang true is perhaps our "experience" in time itself is the result of change, what the Buddhists call Samsara, with our ever-changing consciousness the fruit of all that time and experience. Like the circus acrobat, lying on his back with his legs in the air, maneuvering a ball with his feet. Our consciousness is like that ball, changing, but not changing.

Time leads us on, but to where? Well, anywhere and everywhere would be my guess. I know; it's not WHERE we are going that is important, but HOW we are going there, and that because in reality there is nowhere to go but here, as I wrote so many years ago in this little poem, which is a wee bit dark. I was young then:

“Look at yourself!
First, yet first,
No better,
And yet,
Not worse.
Now,
Get yourself together,
In a bunch,
And call what carriage,
As you may,
Your hearse.”

Aside from the philosophers, when it comes to truth-telling, we also have the poets, artists, the singers, their songs, and our five senses. We depend upon their creativity to keep us awake in life. It is their function to tell the truth, as if truth could be told. Anyway, everything else aside, their creativity is the oracle and well of truth, an open door through which absolutely nothing at all can be seen, a doorway where we can stand and gaze from, feel the winds of time fresh on our face, and feel every small change in our heart first-hand.

The truth is that the “truth” cannot be told; kindly, it is unutterable or as the Tibetans say “beyond elaboration.” Truth is an experience and must be experienced, and finally, more importantly, the truth must be realized. That’s the kicker.

P.S. The Tibetan teachings are all (and only) about the realization of experience. They have such a way with words, and the way they phrase this is: from out of the midst of experience, realization can arise.

So, in summary:
The product of change is experience, continued endless

experience. Experience, as the Buddhists point out, goes up and down, in and out. It is impermanent, by definition. The only thing permanent about experience is that it is ever changing. Experience does not evolve, or if it does, it also devolves just as easily. It is what the Buddhists call a “relative truth”. It can be useful, but will never get you anywhere absolutely. It is endless.

Where we in the West might refer to evolution as to what is to be hoped for from experience, the Buddhists would see that as wishful thinking, and point out that the absolute resolution of experience can only be achieved by Realization. It is the change- changer.

FACING OUR OWN IGNORANCE

October 3, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I find it ironic that of the three poisons (and causes) of suffering, Desire, Anger, and Ignorance, “Ignorance” is said to be the root cause of suffering. Ignorance of what? Well, the lamas would say ignorance of the nature of our own mind, the very mind that has always been right with us all this time, the same mind you are using to read this sentence.

And I would add, in support, that the thing folks hate most of all is to come face-to-face with ignorance of any kind, particularly their own ignorance. It is embarrassing at a profound level. There is an old axiom in the advertising trade, to never confront anyone with their own ignorance. It is the worst thing you can do and it drives people away.

I would hazard to say that our own ignorance of the dharma, what it is about and how to practice it, is a major stumbling block for many people when it comes to learning the dharma. Let’s talk about it.

Yesterday’s blog was pretty tightly worded, so today I will try to loosen it up a bit, but I hope you will stay with me. If we have not yet had the dharma introduced to us to the point of realizing how benign and useful it is, how can we do that? It actually took me some years to discover that Buddhism is not just another religion in the normal sense of that word. It has no god or creator, is not other-worldly, etc., but it simply is a method or path to greater awareness for us. In other words, the dharma is as secular as we want to be... or not.

I have maintained for years that in the future, perhaps the most important part of our job resume will be the degree of mind-training we have accomplished. Having hired many hundreds of folks over the years, the various college degrees, etc. were never all that indicative or helpful. I would have hired a skilled meditator in an instant, if there was some standard certificate for it. At least those who can actually meditate (and I don't mean those just "practicing" meditation) have a reality-check built-in, which is more important to me than a college diploma.

All the trappings that have grown up around Buddhism in this country (and elsewhere) are just that, exactly what happens when any "good thing" exists. They all come. And this is why it is important to separate the core of the dharma from all of the various forms of Buddhism out there. Like everything else, anything goes, or seems to. In fact, we are in the process of building our own trappings for an American Dharma, even as we speak.

A first step into knowing dharma for ourselves, for using it, might be to shed all of our preconceptions about it, if we have any. It is better to know nothing than to know something we have more-or-less just made up out of whole cloth, so to speak. So, if you don't know, then just please know that. It is better than assuming you know what you can't possibly know, which is what enlightenment (or even greater awareness) is like. As my first true dharma teacher, who had been a traveling Rosicrucian initiator, used to say: Don't say that nobody knows; just say "I don't know."

The next barrier, and I am not sure how to say this politely, is for us to get down from our high horse. It is a

common comment that everyone walks around as if they are going to live forever, which may in fact be true, but not in the form we are currently in and used to, i.e. this body. So typically, we have to kind of sober up, as in “get serious” about waking up, about becoming more aware.

There are many ways to do this, but in Buddhism, at least in my experience, the easiest way to get serious about the dharma are “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” which might as well have been called the “Four Thoughts for Sobering Up,” for getting serious. I have written about this for years, so a Google search with my name and “The Four Thoughts” might bring plenty to read, but here is one article:

<https://plus.google.com/+MichaelErlewine/posts/KHuiZRNwWhe>

Anyway, the “Four Thoughts,” when brought to (and kept in) mind can lead to our actually practicing dharma. In fact, the Tibetan Buddhists also call these the “Four Reminders” or “The Four Reversals,” because their contemplation can cause us to reverse our direction and take a more useful path. They can turn us around. These four thoughts are also called the “Common Preliminaries,” simply because they have to be grasped before we can entertain anything dharmic seriously. Their sincere contemplation (and taking to heart) goes before any serious practice. That is why they are called preliminaries. Be that as it may, these four thoughts effectively serve to bring us out of the clouds of our daily distractions and down to earth, where things actually can get done. When I first encountered the “Four Thoughts,” it was like reading my own mind. It was already so familiar.

I won't detail them here, but briefly, the "Four Thoughts" are that this human life we have is precious and should not be wasted because it is an opportunity to encounter and learn the dharma, that death is inevitable and our life is as impermanent as a soap bubble, that karma is determined by our every action, and that, no matter how hard we try (or how bright we are), we will never get all our ducks in a row in this world of ups and downs that we live in. Another way to say this might be the old adage "You will never get out of this world alive!"

Now, these four thoughts have not only to be contemplated (brought to mind), but their effect on our attitude must be taken to heart. For example, most of us don't just grasp the concept of our impermanence, except rather abstractly, until, perhaps, someone close to us dies. It seems that is what it takes to pull us out of the clouds and into a bit of reality. That's the idea here.

To energize or awaken our innate sense of dharma, we have to somehow get to where the rubber meets the road for us, as in: make it personal. Unfortunately, that's just what it takes to get our attention these days. Most of us seem to prefer sailing on in our day- to-day sea of distractions, do we not?

In other words, something or someone (a mentor) has to move us to action, to wake us up at least enough to grasp the problem and decide to do something about it. Otherwise, here we will sit, just as we are now, thinking about things quite abstractly -- an observer at our own eventual funeral. I love the line in a song by my daughter Anne "I want to be there when I die." Yup, me too, but how to do that?

If you are like me, you have probably already read too many books on meditation or the dharma, and perhaps

would rather read one more than begin to actually practice dharma, which means facing our own ignorance of what it is all about. I wish I had a nickel for every person who hovers on the verge of meditating, going through the motions, “practicing,” but not actually able to meditate. Teetering on the brink of actual meditation captivated me for some thirty years or so, and now that I actually understand something of what meditation is about, it makes me cringe. What a colossal waste of time! And, all for the lack of proper instruction on a one-to-one basis.

As I look back, for me, a lot of the problem was my temerity, the fact that since I did not know (had not experienced) the results of meditation, I had no idea what to expect. To make it worse, all that I had read or talked about with my friends, coupled with what I heard at teachings, conspired to create a hologram-like image of what I imagined the results of meditation should be like.

And I had slavishly used this image that I had created out of my own ignorance as a measure of what I was (or was not) experiencing on the cushion, and to no good end. The truth is that I not only did not know what I was talking about, I had no idea. And later, when I actually begin to experience meditation, it was nothing like I had imagined it should be all those years.

So, as clumsy as my words may be, trust that I am trying to be helpful and that I very much would like your journey to learn meditation to be much easier than my own. Any questions would be appreciated.

FINDING NOW

October 2, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Change is always to be found only in this very moment. We all know that. As things flow into the past, they get increasingly complicated until they become just a blur, literally, what we call a memory. And we only have a memory from the present. That's what memories are about, but how good is our memory?

The Tibetan rinpoches make a HUGE deal about pointing out the teaching of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa called the "Six Words of Advice," but this teaching (In Tibetan, just six words) is so concise that I'm afraid we just read through it and move on; the words go in one ear and right out the other. Yet the great Siddhas call these six words of advice Tilopa's Mahamudra Upadesha, his "pith" instructions, intending for us to especially take them to heart. By doing this, they are sharing something they consider of pivotal importance and they go on to frame this advice as precious, precious, precious. So, we might want to give this teaching all the attention we are capable of. And the first of these six words of advice translates to:

"Don't Prolong the Past."

I believe that the "imperative" tone here is not some moralistic demand, but the suggestion that we best not waste our time rummaging in the past or, if we do, we should not expect to realize what they are here pointing out to us. These are not some senile aphorisms that we can just ignore, but essential or pith instructions for all time. And the advice is to not hold onto the past, but to

let it go. Anything older than the present is the past.

Tilopa's second word of advice is: "Don't Invite the Future."

Same idea, but this time regarding speculation and expectations. Don't hold onto the future; in other words, don't waste time hoping. Don't speculate.

So that pretty much confines us to this present moment. There are innumerable philosophical explanations as to how the past and the future are so close to one another that the present moment is hardly there at all. That leaves us with a pretty tight schedule for being on time in the moment. The future becomes past so quickly that we can't even put our finger on its presence. And many philosophers come right out and say that the present has no existence at all, and they claim to prove it. I can't say that I understand all those arguments, but I get the drift, that the past is an ever-increasingly dimmer reflection of the present and the future is speculation as to the probable as seen from the present, etc., which leaves the so-called actual present moment.

I take it on faith that the various Asian-oriented admonitions to "Be Here Now" or "Be in the Moment" must refer to something useful that I may not fully get. It's axiomatic that the present moment is as fresh as it gets or, as Shakespeare said, "Ripeness is all." And the Buddhists say that the sum total of Karma ripening is the present. And the third of Tilopa's words of advice is:

"Don't Think about the Present."

Just as Tilopa said to let go of the past and to not be attached or have expectations of the future, he now says to let go of the present too. Experience it, as best

you can, but don't think "about" it. And finally, Tilopa sums all of the above with his final word of advice:

"Relax right now, just as it is."

My take away from all of the above (if we are looking for the freshest inspiration) is to, without making any artificial effort, just remain present. Sniff the pure oxygen of insight through the means of the immediate moment, that trickle of intuition and inspiration that we call "change." Tilopa points out that it's not to be found by attempts to prolong the past or by trying to rob the cradle of the future. It's not even about conceptualizing the present moment. It is all about "now," but just what are we supposed to do in this quite intangible now?

Certainly the present moment has been viewed as a wellspring or sacred drinking fountain for ages. Nothing older than or newer than this very moment can be experienced directly. Both the past and the future are indirect. Check it out for yourself. Wander in the past or speculate in the future and see how real that is. It is not as real as right now. Straying from the present reminds me of a poem I wrote some years ago:

REST HOME

My thoughts,
Like birds aboard a ship,
I let go free,
As they fly away with me.

No need to follow on,
And here's the perfect test:
There is no place to go,
All thoughts come back to rest.

The stock-ticker of the present moment is where all our results first appear in their fullness. Things of the moment age into the past and, as to the future, it is not yet fully ripe. As my first dharma teacher would say “Michael, This is it!” There is some truth to the statement that those who live too much in the past are masochists and those who live too much in the future are sadists.

We imagine “Being” in this moment. Perhaps we even struggle to wake up and be here in the present, but to do what? Witness it? Watch it? Observe it? Perhaps this is where a disconnect occurs. Observing is, by definition dualistic, so that can’t be the recommendation of the Siddhas. Obviously, we are supposed to rest in the present, “just as it is,” but what is that like?

As mentioned, it is not like sitting on the dock of the present and watching time go by. That’s dualistic. It is more immersive than that, immersive to the point of having no watcher or what is being watched. Advanced meditation is not about following a train of thought through the river of time, as it goes from the future, through the present, and finally disappears into the past. Rather, it is about realizing the true nature of those thoughts that arise, including our train of thoughts, and resting “as it is” in that. And “That” is not past, present, or future. In fact, the teachings state that the nature of all thought is identical to the true nature of the mind itself – Clarity and Luminosity.

Therefore, “being in the moment” has really nothing to do what we call the “Now” or, for that matter, time itself, but rather it is about realizing the nature of the mind. It is not something we see or will ever “get.” It is not “something” at all, but is beyond objectifying or elaboration, including words. I don’t want to belabor

this, so I will close with this thought that I consider the “key” to what is being discussed here. Please humor me by following this.

All words and language point to something beyond themselves, by definition. Words are pointers. Another way to say this is that all words indicate, “point at,” and ultimately depend on their meaning – what they mean. And all meaning depends on the sense it makes to us. If something does not make sense to us, it is nonsense. And sense is, again by definition, sensual, an experience that we each have to have individually. Shakespeare understood this when he wrote in the 13th Sonnet, “O, that you were yourself! But, love, you are no longer yours than you yourself now here live.”

And the great poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said “The words are wild. Suck any sense from that who can.”

So, when the Tibetans say that “realization” is beyond elaboration, they mean (as mentioned here) that words can but point-at or indicate the true nature of the mind, which nature has to be experienced by each one of us, not only until it makes sense, but finally until the nature of the mind itself is realized in its full actuality -- to the exclusion or beyond any reference whatsoever. This gives new meaning to the phrase “all inclusive.” The buck stops there. This is similar to (but distinct from) Jesus Christ’s statement “I am that I am,” and for no other reason.

What we can’t talk about here, can’t put into words, can’t even imagine, but can only realize, is the result of what the Tibetan Buddhists call Mahamudra Meditation, nothing less than the true nature of the mind itself.

Note. There are two other words of advice I did not

mention, because IMO they just are adjectives to the first two. And they are “Don’t Analyze,” which goes with the Past, and “Don’t Attempt to Control,” which goes with the future.

FOG OF THE PAST: HINDSIGHT IS NOT 20/20

December 15, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Well, we just had a couple of heady blogs touching sensitive topics like rebirth and the bardo. Now for one of the more bread & butter subjects: dealing with our own past.

So much energy and time is wasted trying to patch up the holes in our past, cover our mistakes, make things right, figure out why whatever happened, and generally deal with that which we are unable to forget and still not yet prepared to cope with. If Buddhism has a hidden secret, this has to be it, as the great lamas have said: "Don't Prolong the Past." Yet as I look around, most folks don't get it. Almost everyone does just that, attempts to prolong the past by messing with it, trying to make it alright. It's like sticking our finger in an open wound. And the ironical part is that what we mess with most is the worst of ourselves, not the best.

It would be one thing if we spent time trying to relive the best parts of our past (and we do that sometimes too), but what we really lavish attention on is trying to figure out just where we went wrong, what I call "rejiggering" the past, trying to make it come out right, when it has already come out wrong. And "trying" to make the loose ends of the past meet will never work. The ends already met and it came out wrong. As they say, two wrongs don't make a right. So, what's the big secret?

Well, the secret is only "big" because it works, actually works big time; on the face of it, it must not look like much, because no matter how often I share this

concept with others, they never seem to get the idea enough to actually make use of it. Yet, the highest lamas sing its praises and lamas are not foolish people in my experience. I am embarrassed to even run it past you again, but the thing is that is a solution for a lot of what ails us.

We spend entirely too much of our time rummaging in our past, regretting things, looking to see if we can rethink things in our mind and make them come out right (so that then we can forget them), and so on. Paying more than a modicum of attention to past events only underlines them and extends them into the present, i.e. keeps them forever on our mind.

Yes, yes... If we don't understand the past, we can't make our way clearly into the future. But how many times do we have to look back? And that is the least of it. Many anguish over the past, review it a hundred times a day, and literally can't put it to rest. We reanimate it like some kind of Frankenstein that then, proceeds to follow us around. You get the idea.

What the Tibetans say about this is that obviously we are not able, not yet trained to transform the mishaps, run-ins, and mistakes of our past and be alright with it. We don't know how. Otherwise we would have dropped it by now. What can we do about that?

Well, as mentioned, the Tibetans say "Don't Prolong the Past," an aphorism with great profundity, but one apparently masquerading as a cliché to most folks because they won't (or can't) act on it. And the Tibetans don't just mumble the phrase out of the corner of their mouth; it is the first of the Six Words of Advice to people like us that the great Mahasiddha Tilopa taught.

Rejiggering the past from an increasingly more remote present is an exercise in futility, made even more difficult by the ever-shifting goal lines of what we remember, as fueled by our imagination, expectations, and fears. It's like trying to hit a moving target that is bobbing and weaving in the fog of the past. And the worst part is that our continued concern with the past only underlines our fixation on it and creates more karma. It is a lose/lose situation. What to do?

It is very simple: concentrate on what you can do that is beneficial in the present. Put one foot in front of the other and walk forward. By improving our present, we turn over a new leaf, create a new and cleaner past, and put emphasis on the now rather than the way-back-when, the past we would like to forget. If we keep doing this (accentuating the positive), we gradually transfer our identity from the past (and what we might like to forget) into the present, i.e. who we are now.

If we do this persistently, before we know it, the old vampire-like past is not worth worrying about because we are no longer identifying with it as "Us." We can finally let it go and just forget about it. It's like we stop scratching that itch from the past and let it heal.

An additional benefit (first pointed out to me by the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche) is that by not attempting what is too difficult for us at this time, like re-plumbing our past (which is virtually impossible)... if instead we concentrate on positive and beneficial actions here in the present (things we know how to do), this is an excellent way to change our selves so that we can eventually deal directly with the past and its shortcomings. Traleg Rinpoche makes a big point of saying that we neglect improving our selves (through gradually accumulating positive actions) at the expense

of struggling with rearranging the deck chairs of our past.

Let the sleeping dogs of the past lie. Instead, get involved in the positive things that you can do in your present situation and gradually build up confidence and wellbeing until the specter of the past subsides and no longer demands our attention. The past is just not very important and certainly not worth feeding with our precious energy, throwing good money after bad, and adding insult to injury.

This very simple concept has enormous implications with respect to the myriad of counseling and therapeutic techniques for dealing with the past that are out there. It's not that these techniques don't have some value. There just is a much simpler, inexpensive, and safer way to get the job done. Work on accumulating merit through positive actions in the present, and as for the past? Acknowledge it, of course, and then forget about it.

The Bottom Line:

Sorry for the crudity, but fixation and worry on the past has to be a form of necrophilia, like putting lipstick on a corpse, as if that is going to make it look better. Whatever it is in the past that we regret or are ashamed of is damage done; however, continued fixation and worry about our past is the real karma here, like adding insult to the original injury, throwing good money after bad. Our past may haunt us, but fixation on the past is at the expense of our future.

The answer is to simply make a new past from right here in the present. And when that accumulates to something worthwhile, stop fixating on the past and

transfer your identity to your present accomplishments, and finally let go of the past. This is the secret hidden in plain sight; it looks “plain,” but it is not.

HELPING YOUR SELF

November 26, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I was part of the whole-foods and/or organic food revolution that started in the 1960s. In 1969 (as an astrologer) I picked the date when Eden Foods first opened in Ann Arbor, Michigan and even designed their logo, which they still use today. Our basement was full of wooden casks and kegs full of various miso, tamari, omeboshi plums, bags of short-grain brown rice, organic soy beans, wheat, corn, and so on. We were ready for all these products to make it mainstream.

As it turns out there was about a 30-year wait for mainstream America and the food mavens to take heed, and they mostly ignored the idea of eating non-processed foods as well, and so on.

When did they show an interest in organics? That was when they finally figured out how to make a buck from it. There was not one gene in their corporate bodies that was entrepreneurial. They were the last one to get on the train, but unfortunately their ilk were the drivers of the train. Meanwhile, we waited, made our own Tofu, made our own Mochi rice, our own Tekka, Gomasio, and so on. Time went by. American continued to eat pesticides, antibiotics, additives, and who-knows-what else.

As mentioned, we all waited until the large food companies saw that it was to their advantage to carry un-processed and organic food, which finally they are now doing and, so I see from their falling stock, this is sending the “Whole Foods Market” supermarket chain

into a tailspin.

The point of this elaborate introduction was not to talk about food, but rather to talk about self-interest and what it takes to get our Ego or Self engaged in our spiritual behalf. Food, here, is just an analogy. It is as simple or difficult as putting self-gain between us and whatever goal we would like to attain, and this includes (to a degree) greater awareness and enlightenment.

The Self is defined by, of course, being selfish -- selfishness. If our ego and its selfishness is our most ingrained habit, why fight it, if we can instead make use of it? Take a clue from commercialization in general, and put the Self to work supporting your spiritual progress.

The way I look at it is that the Self does not have to always be Top Dog; It just wants to “be in that number,” to belong, to be included. We can offer our self something short of everything to placate it, without allowing it to have it all, no? I learned this lesson many years ago:

Instead of struggling with my tar-baby Self, I simply put it out to pasture like an old cow, and made sure it had plenty of hay, water, and sunshine. I learned to like myself and treat it like I would treat any other person, with some kindness and a little tolerance.

Remember the old tune “Little Bit of Everything” and the line “I don’t need a whole lot; I just want a little bit.” I found it easier to tithe my self, to offer it some social security, rather than to declare war on it and try to stomp it out.

In other words, I do my best to take advantage of my Self’s “selfishness” (what did you expect?) and put it to

work. We all know that the Self is a tireless worker in its own behalf. Sure, it wants to have credit for as much of everything as it possibly can. I don't need my Self to take me off in a wrong direction, but if it is willing to go my way, I could use the help.

I am not suggesting here that this is the perfect solution, but the Self ultimately is our own creation and we have no one to blame for it other than me, myself, and I. And, as we continue to change, so does our Self and the things we decide to fixate on. The Buddhists point out that the Self clearly has no permanent existence as an "entity," but rather is entirely made up of our personal attachments, our fixations. In other words, the fact that we each have a Self is not about to go away, but will remain a permanent part of us. The Self is composed of our endless changes and attachments, and how the Self changes is to a degree up to us. While the Self is composed of nothing other than our constantly changing fixations, we can learn to exert control over what we fixate on. That's the whole idea of self-control.

And while this may be a rather slow way of changing, it works. Therefore, I am for gradually thinning my Self out until it is increasingly transparent, so that I can begin to see through my self more and more of the time; in this, what we call our Self becomes more benign and less of a problem. Yes, if you insist, you can focus on my Self and point out its defects (or I yours), but over time you will find (as I have) that with care and kindness the Self becomes increasing transparent. We can see through it more and more of the time. Since I have taken this attitude, my Self is fooling me less, and I am taking advantage of it more.

If my Self wants to share in the credit or take more

credit than it should, and this looks embarrassing, I really don't care. Yeah, it can look bad if I appear to like my Self more than you "think" I should, but it's no big thing. I am not fooled by the Self. I am the ventriloquist and my Self is the dummy, at least most of the time. When I start taking directions from my Self, I am in trouble. If you seeing me over-exercising my self, to your taste, I am just taking it out for a walk or something.

What is a big deal to me is the increasing transparency of my Self, learning to see beyond myself, to see through my Self into the clarity of the true nature of my mind that is beyond it. Now, that is something to realize.

KTD DHARMA GOODS

December 18, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I am, as most of my Facebook friends already know, an enthusiast. I seldom do things half-way, but tend to throw my heart into whatever it is I am doing. I'm even working on that approach with housework! Although I was interested in Buddhism since the 1950s and active in the 1960s trying things out, it was not until 1974, when I met the Ven.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche that I grasped what the dharma is all about, which is doing instead of talking. That is also the year that met His Holiness the 16th Karmapa Rangjung Rikpe Dorje. Meeting those two great beings definitely turned the wheel of the dharma for me. However it was not until the fall of 1983 that I met my personal guru or teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. That's when everything quickened.

That was the year when Margaret and I first made the trip to KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock New York. There was no monastery built at that time, although they were working on pouring the foundation.

Margaret and I immediately became part of all the development of the monastery, as best we could. I served on all kinds of project boards at KTD, became fundraiser for this or that, including Karmé Ling, KTD's traditional three-year retreat center, and so on.

KTD at that time was housed in an old, many-room hotel or retreat house, and they had a small dharma goods shop full of wonderful statues, malas, books, and all kinds of dharma-related items. However, they really

were not set up to do mail-order business, and so if you could not get there in person, you missed out on a lot of dharma-support materials.

I can't remember exactly how it came about, but somewhere in the later 1980s Margaret and I volunteered to operate a mail-order dharma support-item business out of our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan, and do it under the auspices and name of the KTD Monastery. It was called, appropriately enough, "KTD Dharma Goods," and it was no small undertaking.

And it was not possible to do it just by ourselves; we had the help of several most valuable friends and dharma experts. Chief among those was Ngodup Tsering Burkhar, who had served for 12 years as personal translator for our teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Ngodup was partially raised with His Holiness the 16th Karmapa and knew the whole scene, both in this country and in India and Nepal.

In addition, Sange Wangchug and his wife Tseten had come to live and work at our center, and they became very involved in the project. Sange, who spoke seven languages, had been a monk for many years, and was a brilliant calligrapher and dharma artist jumped right in. Both he and Ngodup went to India, Nepal, and so on in our behalf, seeking out the finest statues, the very best incense, and on and on. Without them, trying to run a business like that would have mostly been a joke. We did not know enough, but Ngodup and Sange knew it all. With their help, we had some of the finest dharma items you can imagine.

KTD Dharma Goods ran for many years, until KTD Monastery could afford to take it in-house and run it from the monastery itself, whereupon we turned the

business back over to them. We were very careful to make no profit on it ourselves, but to turn everything back into the business and many other projects for KTD. I once did the numbers for the project and I believe we invested \$250,000 in running it. Of course, that was over many years.

In addition to Ngodup Burkhar and Sange & Tseten Wangchug, Bob Martinez worked as manager, and my dear friend David McCarthy ran the company for some five years, followed by Robert Walker, and finally by Clarke Fountain.

And, of course, this catalog would not look like this except for the brilliant work of my brother Tom Erlewine, who is a graphic artist and did all the photography and layout work. The catalog was a great success in building the business.

I want to describe, as I have time, some of those many dharma-related projects, but I thought that, for starters, you might like to see our original catalog that was sent out when we first started up. At the time, I believe it was the nicest dharma catalog around. It still does not look bad.

Anyway, here it is so that you can browse through, see what it was like, and it also contains some valuable information on dharma practice, as well. If you want to download it as a PDF, I include a link for that too. I hope you enjoy it.

<http://spiritgrooves.libsyn.com/ktd-dharma-goods-catalog>

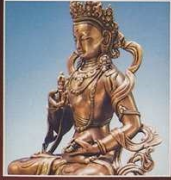


Tibetan Buddhist
Meditation Materials





Chenrezik
The quality of compassion.



Vajrasattva
For purifying the mind.



Manjushri
The quality of mental acumen.



Tara
For health and well being.



Milarepa
The cotton-clad yogi.

MORE KHENPO GANGSHAR

November 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I came across this piece I wrote some time ago (Jan 2012) about Khenpo Gangshar. Those of you who are interested may get a little more detail from this.]

The particular take on Mahamudra meditation that Rinpoche taught this last weekend was first presented in Tibet around 1958, just before the diaspora in Tibet, the Chinese invasion of that country that sent Tibetans fleeing their homeland. This resulted in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism all over the globe.

The particular person who first taught this special teaching was Khenpo Gangshar Wangpo, an abbot from eastern Tibet. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was there, on the spot, and heard this teaching from Khenpo Gangshar himself just prior to his own escape from Tibet. There is no space here to properly describe Mahamudra meditation or Khenpo Gangshar's particular take on it. It is available for those interested in a book entitled "Vivid Awareness" by the Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche from Shambala Publications. Here I will just try to communicate to you how precious and singular this particular teaching is. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche this last weekend told two personal stories that might help to bring this home to you. The first story is about how Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar.

Khenpo Gangshar appeared at Thrangu Monastery, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's monastery, and all the monks there were struck by his presence. It was clear

that Khenpo Gangshar was teaching from a rarified mental space and that he was singularly dedicated to sharing his insights with everyone present, both monks and lay people.

Khenpo Gangshar could see that the Chinese were about to invade Tibet and that there was no time for gradual or progressive methods to learn this particular dharma practice. Instead, he presented a direct method for gaining awareness, knowing that everyone in Tibet might need it very soon. He cut to the chase.

I asked Khenpo Rinpoche how he gained confidence in Khenpo Gangshar at the time and he told this story. One of the things Khenpo Gangshar did was to take one of his personal robes and cut it into many small pieces, offering a piece to every monk present in the monastery, over 400 of them. He went around presenting these patches of cloth to everyone without exception. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche thought to himself that it was the dharma teachings of Khenpo Gangshar that were most valuable, not the bit of cloth. And sure enough, Khenpo Gangshar gave every monk in the monastery a piece of cloth except Khenpo Karthar. He was the sole exception. This struck Rinpoche.

Then Rinpoche thought that, well, having a piece of cloth from such a high teacher might make a wonderful memento to keep. As soon as he thought that, Khenpo Gangshar gave Rinpoche a piece of the cloth. This was one reason Rinpoche gained confidence in Khenpo Ganshar. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche stated that after Khenpo Gangshar's teaching at that time, all the monks present were visibly changed, having seemingly become more compassionate and gentle. And there is more.

The great teacher Chogyam Trungpa was also present for these teaching by Khenpo Gangshar and considered him his main teacher. He personally told this story to my teacher concerning Khenpo Gangshar:

Khenpo Gangshar had been invited by Trungpa Rinpoche to teach at his monastery Surmang Dutsi Til in Kham (eastern Tibet), which he did. At one point Khenpo Gangshar became very ill and died. As is the Tibetan custom with high lamas, Khenpo Gangshar died in meditation posture and was left sitting in that posture for several days before disposing of his body. Often high lamas show signs of warmth and continued presence for a number of days following their death and a kind of vigil is kept.

Chogyam Trungpa kept such a vigil with the body of Khenpo Gangshar for several days, separated only by a very thin cloth curtain. Every once in a while, Trungpa Rinpoche would peek behind the curtain to see if the body of Khenpo Gangshar had collapsed from the meditation posture or was still in it. As mentioned this went on for some days.

At some point Trungpa noticed that a puff of air somehow moved the curtain, so he peeked behind to curtain to see what had happened to the corpse. At that moment the eyes of Khenpo Gangshar suddenly opened and there he was staring out at Trungpa. Khenpo Gangshar had come back to life.

Of course this was amazing. When he had regained consciousness Khenpo Gangshar described that after death, while in the bardo, he had been visited by two great lamas, including Jamgon Kongrul the Great, who had inspired him with this particular Mahamudra teaching and told him to return to life and share it with

certain monks and others who needed to hear it at this time. And so he did.

When Khenpo Gangshar returned, he was ablaze with fervor to share this particular concise or direct method of realization with all he encountered. And that is how he happened to travel to Thrangu Monastery where Khenpo Karthar was living at the time. Khenpo Ganshar traveled and taught this special Mahamudra teaching widely throughout Kham in eastern Tibet just before the Chinese invasion.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche then explained that after some years, Khenpo Gangshar stopped giving this particular teaching and once again became the person he was before he first died. He did not mention the special teaching any longer. That is the story and this from my memory of this last weekend, so I hope I have not missed anything essential. Why relate this?

I share this with my Facebook dharma readers just to point out how very, very special this particular teaching was to hear. It not only was absolutely concise, but it was direct to the point of being almost incendiary. It condensed an enormous amount of dharma training or teaching into very few words, words that struck at the heart of confusion and made clear what each of us could do or have to do to become more aware – to wake up.

I won't attempt to paraphrase the teaching itself, only to say I have never experienced a teaching like it and I believe that many present would probably agree with me. It makes me want to wake up out of whatever confusion I am tolerating and just be present. That is about all I can say for now.

[Khenpo Gangshar on the left, Chogyam Trungpa on the right.]



ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER

November 25, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

While rummaging through some files, I came across this bit of writing from the 1960s about my rather grim take on life under Saturn's Seal before our first Saturn Return at thirty years of age. It is a little poetic, so you have been warned. It reads:

"The psychological experience under Saturn or "time" is to know only total fear for our life. The external world sulks, looms ominous, threatening disaster and accidents at every street's crossing. We are wrapped in the rush of time, tearing at hour's hearts. Every single thing, every outer edge and hard person, only serves to cause us to put off our life, to postpone real living, and sends us scurrying fast into the future, hoping, hoping, hoping ... someday, somewhere, to find the chance to be ourselves, to have the time and space to live. Living in this state of fear, we put off endlessly until tomorrow what we find just too hard to do today."

I had forgotten what it feels like to have so little confidence and reason to hope that we postpone living itself until we find something more solid to stand on.

This reminds me of a song written and sung by one of my favorite Michigan songwriters, Robin Lee Berry. It is called "Bloom," and it contains this refrain: "Everyone is searching for a safe place to bloom." Here is the song in a video I put together to help more folks have access to its stark beauty. Give a listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaTxU7mccnw>

Anyway, all of the above jogs my memory enough to remind me how tenuous life can be, at least psychologically, for many of us. I remember when Margaret and I travelled to West Bengal, India to meet the chief meditation master for the Kagyu Lineage, the great Bokar Rinpoche. When we were leaving the monastery and saying our goodbyes, Bokar Rinpoche looked me in the eye and said “Tomorrow or next life, whichever comes first.” Bokar Rinpoche was the most like my own teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche of any other rinpoche I have ever met.

It seems like confidence in the dharma can be slow to arise; it does arise, but perhaps is barely visible far back in the wake of our chaotic journey through life. And dharma teachers point out that, without confidence in the dharma, little is achieved. How’s that for a Catch-22?

And one last analogy: When winter begins to come and the snow starts to fall, as it has this week here in Michigan, I watch the thick snowflakes pouring from the sky and hitting the still-warm earth only to vanish in an instant. After what seems like a very long time, the snow finally takes to the ground and begins to accumulate. That is like the building of confidence from dharma practice. It takes time. How can we encourage it?

Having come from no knowledge or confidence in the dharma to having confidence, I have learned at least something about the process. One thing to be aware of is the law of karma. It took me many years to grasp that everything we do creates karma, good, bad, and, to my understanding, there really isn’t something like “indifferent” karma. It is either, as I have been taught, beneficent or maleficent, one or the other. And little

things count.

Progress and certainty in the dharma depends on the accumulation of merit on our part. Perhaps we are not always strong enough to make grand gestures, great offerings, and the like. However, we can learn to say a lot with a little, to make small gestures, but many of them. It is like pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, confidence by degrees.

And I used to feel foolish, perhaps by self-consciously whispering the mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum” here and there, while all around me the mess of my life was saying otherwise. It seemed to me such a paltry and futile gesture on my part given the odds I was going up against. But that attitude itself is the main problem.

Over many years and many teachings, I finally got it into my head that every action, however small, counts, just as the Tibetans love to say that even a single match can dispel the accumulated darkness of eons.

An analogy I pointed to earlier, that of the difficulty of seeing our confidence building in the chaotic wake of our passage through time is a good one. We can't always control the flow of events surrounding us, but we can usually control our micro-efforts to create beneficent karma, and it adds up. I always loved that phrase encouraging women to persevere in having equal rights, “You've Come a Long Way, Baby!” It is the same with karma and certainty. We all have such a long way to go, but we've already come such a long way to be even hearing about the dharma or reading this page.

It seems to be one of Murphy's laws that when we no longer need it is when we get the encouragement, acknowledgement, and certainty that would most help

us progress.

And the worst is when we just start out, trying to overcome our own mountain of past ignorance. Of course, that is when we need confidence the most, when we have the least of it. That is almost like a natural law.

I can only say from my experience that confidence will come. I have always loved the line from Psalm 91:12 “They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” Well, I have indeed struck my foot against a stone or two,” and cried out in my heart for some kind of sign of progress. This is just how it is (or has been), at least for me.

I say to my kids when they run into troubled times, just as I tell myself: place one foot in front of the other and keep walking forward, right out of the situation. This is why I love astrology, relative truth that it is. With its proper use, we can set and reset our sails to a better attitude and just sail on out of harm’s way.

Confidence is knowing that, by our actions, we are building a bridge, beyond our struggles, into clarity and awareness. And there is no better sign of internal progress that I know of than when our karma affords us the opportunity of finding a living dharma teacher, one from whom we can actually learn, one that appears personally in our own lives. That’s when confidence snowballs and begins its exponential curve, like a rocket, streaking toward the heavens.

Confidence is crucial in dharma practice, and we can build it by degrees. The teachings say that a single “Om Mani Padme Hum,” said from the heart, and with the intent that all beings may benefit can accumulate great merit.

OTHER SENTIENT BEINGS

December 30, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We are well aware of physically-challenged individuals like Helen Keller (deaf and blind), Steven Hawking (motor neurone disease), and many other human beings with physical disabilities. For example, Hawking has gradually deteriorated until today he can only communicate with a single cheek muscle attached to a special speech-generating device.

Despite Hawking's disability, we have no trouble recognizing that we are dealing with a consciousness equivalent to our own. Yet, when I was growing up, we did not customarily extend to other sentient beings like mice or mosquitoes the assumption that they had equivalent consciousness to our own. We didn't (and still don't) do that.

I am not sure that I have ever heard what we actually do think is the case with other sentient being like dogs and cats, insects, bacteria, and on down the line to the smallest size that we consider a sentient being. We certainly do not assume that they have a consciousness equivalent to ourselves.

This assumption on our part makes it difficult to understand why the Buddhists go to such great pains not to harm other, and smaller, sentient beings, both harmless and harmful. Is it that we figure that we have a great big papa-bear sized consciousness, that dogs have perhaps a mama-bear sized consciousness, and insects have something like a baby-bear sized consciousness? It must be sort of like that. More likely,

we have never even thought about it.

So, it can be amazing for Americans to watch Tibetans gently brushing mosquitoes off their arms or carefully blowing them off. And I like to tell the story of when I took one of the four regents of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, who was visiting our center, out to our cottage where the Gypsy Moth caterpillars by the millions were destroying our trees.

And before I knew it, His Eminence was down by the lake blessing all the caterpillars. We never thought of such a thing.

Or watch a lama walking down a country path being ever so careful not to step on even the tiniest of ants or picking up every errant worm or slug off the hot pavement and carrying it to the shady grass to the side. That kind of thing.

Here in the West, we don't tend to do those things. Yes, we love little kittens and puppies, but we don't extend that cherishing to ants and bees, much less to whatever is wiggling in the pond scum. And we will never understand the Tibetan approach without understanding how they approach sentient beings other than ourselves.

To the Tibetan Buddhist, consciousness comes in only one size, instead of one size for humans, and lesser or smaller sized consciousness for other sentient beings. The Buddhists view the consciousness of all sentient beings as the same as our human consciousness. Consciousness is consciousness. The consciousness of other sentient beings (large or tiny) is the same as ours; only the bodies and the capabilities of other and "lower" sentient beings are different.

Just as we see that the Steven Hawkings of the world are identical to us in consciousness, but limited in what that consciousness can do with a particular body, the Tibetan Buddhists extend this concept to all sentient being, human or otherwise, large and small. They see one size of consciousness and many sizes of bodies, some more capable than others in human terms.

This is why the Tibetans will tell us that every last sentient being, no matter how small, could easily have been our mother in another life, and we theirs. And this because of the tendency while in the bardo (between lives) for beings to be driven to find a womb to enter by their karma, by the thirst for an immediate next life. It is the “any port in a storm” philosophy. In a moment of obscurity, we may find ourselves animating the body of a dog or a worm. Now, how foreign a view is that for Westerners? As Larry David might say, “Pretty, pretty foreign.”

Again, in the Buddhist view, the consciousness of all sentient beings is the same. It is just the way it is shoe-horned into different bodies that differs. So the great consciousness of a Mozart or a Gandhi could be manipulating the tiny body of a gnat for a time, and perhaps doing it brilliantly at that.

This view clearly explains why great lamas like Kalu Rinpoche would go out of their way to bless any being they come across as an equal to themselves, because in their eyes it is. Christian saints like St. Francis of Assisi did something very similar.

So, in Tibetan Buddhism, it is very much the view that one size of consciousness fits all bodies, no matter how small, as opposed to the Western view that different bodies have different levels or sizes of consciousness, if

that's what we think. With the Tibetan view, one consciousness does what it can with whatever limitations their current body has. The two views are similar, but apparently subtly different. The Tibetan Buddhist view IMO makes a lot more sense. I find this worth thinking about.

PRAYER FLAGS AND THE WIND

December 1, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The threads of our future are here right now, visibly embedded in the present. If we can't see intuitively, it is because of our signal to noise ratio. We can't tell what is intuition (and the future) and what is just noise.

In other words, the doorway to the future is constantly open; it beckons us through a variety of signs that compete for our attention, if we can read them. It is much like prayer-flags waving in the wind; they cannot be read until the wind dies down. I have learned that.

In the same way, we cannot find the threads of our intuition until our mind can stand to be still. Living by intuition, rather than by my intellect, is something I have had to learn. My natural intuition was always strong, but my courage to listen and follow my internal insights was weak.

My point is that our intuitions of the future are always right there and working. Like the pain of bodily symptoms that protect us from ignoring what will eventually hurt us, our intuitions exist to lead us gently into our future, if we can hear them. They protect us from ourselves, because the Self, for the most part, is blind to intuition.

Just as the mud that settles into clear water when the pond is not stirred up, we learn to allow our mind to naturally settle out, which is why we practice basic Tranquility Meditation. Meditation is not an alternative spiritual practice, but rather a necessity, and not

necessarily spiritual. It is just the same thing to do if we want our minds to clear up (and our intuition to be amplified), so that we can clearly recognize it.

Otherwise, it is like feeling our way in the dark, not knowing what is intuition and what is just white noise. We have victimized ourselves in all of this, failing to develop intuition, our natural way of seeing. We end up grasping and guessing at things that we should be sensing intuitively. We should just know.

Unfortunately, they don't teach "intuition" in the classroom from an early age. Even adult spiritual training does not have a real handle on what is needed for getting in touch with our intuition. For that, the mind must know peace.

The analogy of the Tibetan prayer flags and the wind is accurate. As long as the winds of the mind blow the flag around, we will never read the prayers on the flag. First, we must remove the wind and then we can read the flag. First we must settle the mind; then we can begin to see by our intuition. This is no hypothetical; I have done this.

Here is a poem I wrote some time ago, about poems.

MY POEMS

Poems,
A home for my thoughts,
Dear thoughts,
The very best of me,
All that's precious and kind,
Now sealed in words,
Like insects in amber:

Prayer flags endlessly waving,
In the gentle chalice of the mind.

READING BEYOND THE END OF BOOKS

October 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Many of us have read and read and read in the ever-increasing number of books on Buddhism, which has the effect of forming in our mind an idea of what Buddhism and enlightenment is all about. Better than books is listening to live teachings from the Buddhist masters themselves. And perhaps best of all is working one-to-one with a realized dharma teacher.

Yet, there is one byproduct of all of the above that has to be negotiated to achieve realization for ourselves, and that is the difference between our expectations of realization that we have built up in our mind and the actual realization itself. One precedes the other and it is sad, but true, that our expectations of what enlightenment is (or is like) eventually become the greatest block to our attaining that realization itself. How ironic.

Like scaffolding, which must be removed once a house has been built, our accumulated expectations about realization must eventually give way to the realization itself, with all the attrition that entails. And by “must be removed,” it means that our own expectations actually block any realization from taking place.

Our expectations (and speculation), however helpful and inspirational in the beginning, become the single greatest albatross around our neck as we get closer to achieving any kind of realization. To put it another way, once we achieve a realization like the recognition of the

mind's true nature, those expectations vanish instantaneously and are seen for what they are, mistakes we have (pardon me) mistakenly fallen into.

Once we “realize” something, we also realize at the same time why (and how) our ideas about it coming-in were mistaken, that they were just something we cobbled together to serve as an imagined carrot dangling at the end of the stick.

But the instantaneous realization at an event like the “Recognition” of the mind's true nature is not the only kind of realization. Realization also comes in other flavors, including the slow dawning of light like the Sun coming up. And this is quite different from the sudden insight of Recognition, but the discrepancy between our expectations and the reality remains the same.

It is human nature that we all build up concepts and expectations about what the result of all our dharma practice is supposed to be like, yet, if we think about it, that is exactly what we don't know, what realization is like, because we have never experienced it. In fact, it is what we are trying to achieve. And, as the Bard sang, “But you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones.” We don't know and we should know we don't know, but we habitually form our expectations, nevertheless. Those expectations, by definition, eventually become an obstacle to realization itself, and we should be aware of that and take steps to adjust for it.

Now comes the subtle part. It reminds me of when I was learning to ride my first two- wheel bicycle, and my mom let go of the bike, leaving me just riding on my own for the first time.

What we don't realize (and perhaps just can't) is that

until some realization takes place, we are guiding ourselves purely with our expectations, using only our intellect. This, to us, is all the reality that we know. And I will give a simple analogy.

If you have ever been instructed to perform a specific technique, but had not yet realized how it actually works, and keep making attempts at it based on your own understanding and expectations, but still have not realized what it was about, that is what I am pointing to here, but at the more elevated level of a spiritual realization. There is no blame, but there is consistently not-getting it.

That is exactly what the Tibetan masters are pointing at here, that, up to now (in all the time there is) we have never “gotten it,” as it relates to realizing the nature of how our own mind works. We are going through the motions, and maybe even getting some heat, but still no fire. That is the general idea, yet it is way more subtle than that.

The expectations about our dharma practice that we derive from books, teachings, friends, and fellow sangha members crystallize into how we imagine or expect things to be like. And we continue to hold those expectations in mind, while standing right there beside us is the reality, and we still don't realize it. This is why there exist what are called, appropriately, the “Pointing Out Instructions,” whereby a realized teacher points out to us what has been right there next to us all along. The teacher jogs us into letting go of our expectations long enough to settle on or grasp the actual reality of what our expectations have been imagining all this time.

Once that happens, when we switch from our hologram-like virtual set of expectations to the reality it refers to,

this is called “realization.” It’s like when our mom finally takes her hands off the bike and we are just riding on our own. “Realization” is, pardon me, when we actually realize what we have been talking, thinking, and imagining about all this time. We get it; we are it. Our expectations implode and the duality of all that collapses into a non-dual hands-on sheer realization that is crystal clear. At last, we know what we have been talking “about.”

Now, all of the above are just words that can but attempt to describe the reality. You will immediately incorporate them into your current set of expectations, and, with an updated version, on it goes. The fact is that in this very moment, within us, next to us, etc. is the true nature of the mind waiting to be realized. We are but a heartbeat and a glance away from that realization, but are still bound by our habitual mental habits and expectations. I trust that you get the idea here. That scaffolding must first be removed or we must be jarred out of our fixation on it. Both methods can work.

Most, if not all, of the various dharma practices exist only to enable us to eventually recognize the true nature of our own mind. Recognition (of the mind’s true nature) is not Enlightenment, or anything near it. What “Recognition” is, however, is the end of our beginning dharma practice and the beginning of the end of that practice, which will eventually be Enlightenment, although that is still far in the future.

In short, we practice dharma to remove as many of our obscurations as we can until, with the help of a realized lama, the true nature of the mind can be pointed out to us and...we get it!

[Just to show that I am no stranger to book learning, here is a photo taken today of one of the libraries here at our dharma center. This is what we call “Rinpoche’s Room,” where a great many high lamas, rinpoches, regents, etc. have stayed over the years. In fact, sometimes guests ask to stay there, just because it has been reported that great dreams happen there. We have other smaller libraries around the center, but this is the mother-ship. My first dharma teacher used to, repeatedly say to me when he saw me reading this or that book: “Michael, someday you must be the book!”]



REALIZATION THROUGH ASTROLOGY

November 16, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Astrology can itself be empowering. In this blog I want to relate the most mind-altering astrological empowerment that I am aware of, which I will now describe. I invite my astrological friends to take this in and to comment on it. I have written about this concept many times and for decades, but it has been like a cry with no echo, nothing coming back. So please do join me now for this discussion.

This astrological empowerment is about mapping our personal dharma so that we can visually see it astrologically. Is that radical enough? As far as I can tell, realization of what I call the “Dharma Chart,” an actual chart and map of our Dharma-archetype, has not yet arisen within the astrological community. It will eventually arise, of course, as ultimately there is no avoiding it, but when that will take place is another question.

Before I begin, there are three stages in this empowerment:

(1) UNDERSTANDING: We are so used to grabbing anything said (or written) with our intellect, seeking to understand statements conceptually, that the reality of what is pointed out with language, the true meaning, seldom occurs. Intellectual understanding is not enough.

(2) EXPERIENCE: In other words, if we grasp something only intellectually, we can easily miss the point of it all, which is that the “meaning” of any words

always depends on the “sense” they make, and sense (by definition) has to be sensual, an experience we have and a command to live it and not just “think” on it. We have to experience life for ourselves. That’s the second step, experiencing in the flesh.

(3) REALIZATION: The third step, which is the rarest, is that out of the fullness of a living experience, eventually a true “realization” of the nature of that experience itself may arise. This is why we have living teachers, to demonstrate what realization looks like and is in real life. In other words, we don’t just understand it intellectually (and taste it experientially), but we realize the nature of it fully, what it is actually all about.

With that in mind, I will once again go over this realization very briefly, in hopes that a few (even one) of you reading this might (A) understand it conceptually, (B) experience it existentially with your senses as the fact of life it is, and (C) realize the true nature of the experience, which is an empowerment that triggers in each of us a transfer of consciousness within us from a relative or purely self-centered view to one that absolutely changes or alters our mind to a more global view, one that includes (and affects) everyone.

The wonderful thing about astrology is that we have traditionally had a natal birth chart, a visual component, through which we can actually see a map of what can only be called our Karma, the circumstances into which we are born. What I am presenting here (in addition to our traditional natal chart) is a second natal chart, but with a different perspective that amounts to a map of “who” it is that is having our particular karma, our archetype. This I call the Dharma Chart. So, if you can follow this concept, experience the reality of it, and permanently realize its import, you will (astrologically

speaking) be like that proverbial dewdrop that slips into the shining sea. Here goes:

Time, which is as old as recorded history, was originally measured by the ancients through the movements of the Sun, the Moon, and the planets. In the beginning, astrologers were also astronomers and the outer facts of the heavens were interpreted internally as to what they might mean for us. In other words, astrology was essentially cultural astronomy. As I understand it, traditional astrology remains largely unchanged to this day. However, a very important event took place some 450 years (or so) ago.

Nicolaus Copernicus, a Renaissance mathematician and astronomer/astrologer, developed a viewpoint that was revolutionary. It flipped the essence of the astronomy (and, by reflection the astrology) of our solar system upside down. He changed our mind for us (and thereby our view) in one fell swoop by pointing out to the world that the Sun does not go around Earth as everyone thought, but rather the Earth orbits the Sun.

To put this crudely, contrary to popular thought, Copernicus pointed out that everything does not revolve around us as we had always assumed, but rather we revolve around something vaster than just ourselves. We are the satellite, not the center. Now, this concept did not precipitate an “Aha!” from the world, or even an “Oh my,” but was at first largely ignored, or worse, was even condemned as blasphemous and just an outrageous thought, and this notion ultimately and permanently split the existing astronomer/astrologers right down the middle on this issue.

One group of astronomer/astrologers took the Copernican revolution to heart and gradually forgot

about astrology. These became the astronomers. The other group of astronomer/astrologers ignored Copernicus and continued on, as they traditionally had, with the view that everything revolves around us and the Earth. They remained as astrologers only and basically ceased to progress as astronomers. Each group went its own way, astronomers (along with Botany) becoming the oldest academic discipline and astrologers remaining as the sometimes soothsayers they are to this day.

The astrologers refused to accept the fact that it is the Earth that orbits the Sun or, if they did accept it, it was only seen intellectually and then set aside. Astrologers never internalized it as a living experience in their lives, as the truth it is, and never realized the import of the Copernican revolution to the point of empowering themselves with that concept. They never triggered the transmigration of their view from thinking that everything revolved around them (geocentric) to something broader (heliocentric) as did the astronomers. Ever since, astrologers have suffered from a serious identity crisis.

Each group lost something. With astronomers, their astrology withered, and with astrologers, their astronomy became of secondary importance, a mere sidebar. Now let's look at the physics of it.

Traditional astrology is geocentric. The standard astrological chart is a snapshot taken from Earth of the entire solar system. Earth is one of a group of what are called the Terrestrial Planets (Earth, Venus, and Mercury) that are deeply embedded within the solar system and relatively close to the Sun. In other words, the traditional astrology chart is a highly skewed perspective of the solar system (and the Sun) as seen

from Earth. It is, as mentioned, geocentric – Earth centered.

Astrologers have studied this chart of an Earth-centered perspective for centuries, but have never really inquired what is this Earth perspective a snapshot of, in its own right? What does our solar system look like overall, and not just as seen from Earth's limited and skewed perspective? We have the geocentric (Earth-centered) chart, but what does the heliocentric (Sun-centered) chart look like and how do the two charts relate or triangulate? And, more important, what does the helio chart represent or “mean” to us? If the Sun embraces the Earth as part of its system, what does that mean?

Now, I find it embarrassing to have to point out to readers that the Sun is the complete source of warmth and light (and thereby life) on this Earth. You think about it. I have.

And I want to point out that although we gladly credit ourselves with having a “Soul” or spiritual consciousness, we persist in thinking of the Sun (scientifically, materialistically) as a big ball of hot gas, and not as having any spiritual significance. It is as if Earth has Soul, but the rest of the solar system and universe has none. How is that possible? I am not going to try to convince you, but you might owe it to yourself as astrologers to follow the above train of thought to its obvious conclusion. You can figure this out, if you care to. I certainly did.

Instead, I will close by saying something about how I discovered all this for myself, and the personal repercussions of that discovery.

I was brought up in traditional astrology, learned to cast charts by paper, pencil, and tables, until such time as

pocket calculators came along (1972), and later when home computers arrived (1977), I just happened to be the first astrologer to write astrology programs and share them openly to everyone interested. That is history.

However, as I began to extend the astrological uses of the computer, I naturally tried to program many different techniques. Well, one of those techniques was to take a look at what a heliocentric chart looked like. And, of course, I went into that process with my traditional geocentric point of view, the same view that astrologers have used for centuries. That's all I had. At first, I was lost in the heliocentric framework because there was no Moon, since the Earth and Moon are considered as one heliocentrically. And there were no houses or significant points like the Ascendant and Midheaven, and so on. And no retrogradation, but only the very constant forward motion of the planets (including Earth) around the Sun. I thought "How boring!"

Yet, without knowing it, I had stumbled onto something for me that was entirely new, and that was that suddenly I had another (and quite different) chart of myself to compare to my standard geocentric chart. It was a chart of the same moment in time, the same planets, the same "Me," etc., but from a different perspective. And lo and behold, in that heliocentric chart I saw another take on myself, one that I always felt inside, but never could quite find in the traditional geocentric chart.

There is a great jazz tune sung by Les McCann (with sax by Eddie Harris) called "Compared to What?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jv0fnSBf0Do>

I had never had any way to compare my astrology chart (i.e. myself) to anything else, and suddenly I found one in the heliocentric chart. And the helio chart was a “Meta” or more encompassing dimension or coordinate system from what I was used to in the traditional geocentric astrology chart. The Sun and its solar system embrace the planets like a mother her children.

There is not room here to go into depth about how I compared the two charts, but I have given more details in the free e-book “Dharma Chart, Karma Chart: Astrological Empowerment in the 21st Century” at this link:

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

I will, for the sake of space, jump to the chase and condense what I eventually found. And what I say here in a few words was for me an extended magical adventure that changed my life, so keep that in mind.

Through this process of discovery, which turned out to be self-discovery, I found that the traditional geocentric astrology chart that I had identified with all those years was quite simply a chart of the life circumstances in which we find ourselves, basically a chart of our Karma, what we have to go through in external life, and so eventually I called this traditional natal chart, with which I was already familiar, the “Karma Chart.”

And simultaneously I found out that my newly discovered Helio Chart was a chart of who I was deep inside, the “One” I had always known was there, but could never fully find in my Karma Chart. Yes, I could twist my geocentric chart and peer through it as through a glass darkly and see something of my “Soul,” but once I discovered the Helio Chart, I saw that here was a

clear and easy-to-read chart of my soul, my archetype, my tribe and life path. I ended up calling the heliocentric chart the “Dharma Chart.”

I refer you to the above link (and book) for chapter and verse, but I just want to say, in closing, something very important that would benefit astrologers if they can realize it, rather than just “think” it.

I am describing here in words, very abstractly, what is in reality an incredible life- initiation. This is not just one more astrological technique to add to our bag of tricks as a professional astrologer. The helio chart is another whole coordinate system, another (and meta) dimension, i.e. one of a different order of magnitude than what we know, the traditional natal chart.

It is possible (and I did it) to transmigrate our view of ourselves from the more limited geocentric perspective to the greater perspective of the heliocentric viewpoint. This is the empowerment that the astronomers took centuries ago, and it remains viable today for any astrologer willing to make the change. And I will give an analogy.

Years ago, with the advent of LSD, the rumor was that here was a mind-altering drug, one that could permanently alter our mind. This was a very scary thought, until I realized that what they called an “alteration” was, in reality, only discovering the true nature of our mind, and finally setting it right, where it had been wrong all that time. It would be more correct to say that we un-altered our mind. There is a similar un-alteration with the transformation from geocentric to heliocentric viewpoint, and I have realized this from my own experience.

Once we discover our Dharma Chart, our mind just flips and replaces (in our mind) our traditional geocentric natal chart (Karma Chart) with our heliocentric natal chart (Dharma Chart), which immediately becomes the chart we identify with as “us,” as who we are. We are our Dharma Chart inside, and our Karma Chart or persona outside.

This transformation is life-changing and irreversible, because it is a simple realization of a truth that has always been there, but one we never “realized.” Once you realize your Dharma Chart, you are changed forever, and cannot undo the transformation. It is a one-way change. You can’t go back.

To be clear, I transferred my identification, my identity and who I think I am, from the traditional geocentric natal chart to the heliocentric natal chart. I began to think of myself from the heliocentric perspective rather than the geocentric perspective. I stopped primarily thinking geocentrically, and instead identified with who I was heliocentrically, making my traditional geocentric natal chart secondary.

All I can say is that this simple process has been waiting for astrologers for more than 400 years. Today’s astronomers took this initiation centuries ago. It is absolutely empowering and is equivalent to what is called “Recognition” in Tibetan Buddhist mind training, only here, instead of realizing the true nature of the mind (as the Buddhists do), we are realizing the true nature of ourselves, astrologically speaking. And we even have a chart of it!

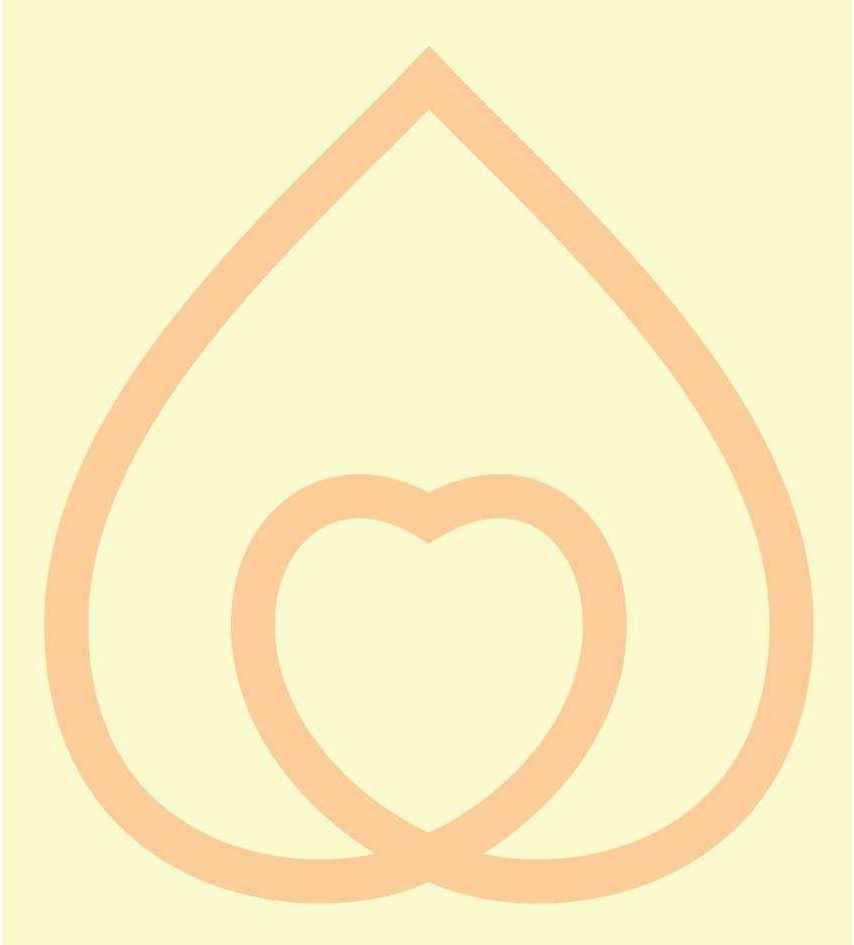
As Copernicus pointed out, everything does not just revolve around us, but we are part of something greater than our personal Self and, when we realize that, like

polarized magnets, our consciousness flips around to the way things naturally are (and have always been) for us. We just had it wrong all this time. The world around us has already made that change; it is past time that astrologers did the same.

I ask, if you can, not to be satisfied with just understanding intellectually what I have presented here, but to experience it fully as the reality that in fact it is, and I hope that at least some of you can make the transmigration from identifying primarily with your geocentric natal chart to identifying primarily with your heliocentric natal chart. The Dharma Chart is the key to your Karma Chart, just as the Sun is key to life here on Earth

Your comments please!

[The graphic here is the logo for the Heart Center, a communion center establish in 1972 when I experienced a spontaneous kriya that threw me into a physical experience, out of which came this symbol, the flame and the heart, the young and the old, the inner and the outer. This expresses the relationship of the Dharma Chart to the Karma Chart.]



REALIZING EXPERIENCE IS NOT REALIZATION

October 17, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Something that amazes me, even if (metaphorically speaking) I only experience it in my peripheral vision, is that the inertia of dharma practice (once set in motion) has a way of creeping forward, much like the idea of that old Neil Young album title “Rust Never Sleeps.”

My own spiritual lack of confidence is soothed when I repeatedly discover that, despite my habitual backsliding ways, the momentum of any realization I have keeps extending itself throughout my life, pushing the envelope of my realization-boundaries forward with it. Gradually, I am discovering this to be true, and this I find very comforting.

I believe the Tibetans call this “stabilizing” our realization, extending realization, much like when we drop a pebble into a still pond, the resulting concentric ripple-rings extend themselves outward away from the center. My initial efforts at stabilizing what little realization I have had gave way to the effect I am describing here. And what for me is most interesting: those conscious efforts on my part to stabilize my realization were eventually overtaken by a gentle tsunami of ever-increasing realization that sweeps all before it. I had never expected or imagined that, which, once again, just shows me how undependable my expectations have been.

Much has been written trying to describe the difference between having a spiritual experience and having a spiritual realization. There is a big difference, one we all

should understand. Usually, it is pointed out that spiritual experiences come, reach a certain height, and then are gone, leaving us with a memory of the experience, but no certainty of repeating it. In fact, subsequent attempts to repeat or match a spiritual experience we have had become a major obstacle to its ever happening again, and less likelihood for that experience to become a permanent realization. The Buddhist texts on this say things like “realization arises in the midst of an experience,” and so on. The difference between experience and realization is really quite simple. I will give an example.

The initial experience of turning on a light switch and having the lights come on becomes a realization when we realize that pressing the switch makes the light appear. The connection between the switch and the lights appearing is a realization. We can never have that initial realization again, because realizations are a one-time “Aha!” that cannot be repeated; we already have had it and that realization remains with us from that point forward.

On the other hand, an experience would be like switching on the lights, which we see shining brightly, but we never realize that the switch was responsible. With an experience there is no realization that the two are connected. Now, spiritual ‘realization’ is a little more encompassing than just realizing how to turn on a light bulb, and harder yet to define in words. We might say that an “experience” is like standing at a train station, having a train arrive, and then standing on the platform watching it go on down the tracks. A realization would be like standing at the station, having a train arrive, and then getting on the train and departing on the train. What we call the “Self” or “I” gets included in a realization (or is completely forgotten), whichever

makes the most sense to us.

Realizing what a light switch is (and does), which is a tiny part of our life circumstances, pales in comparison to a spiritual realization, which by definition encompasses all of our life-circumstances at once, including our Self. Turn that inner light of realization on and it never goes out. That is the mark of a realization, its permanency.

That being said, while realization endures and does not fade away, it can (and must) usually be extended or, as they say, stabilized. And the visual model I use to convey how that works is the one given earlier, where from a pebble dropped into a still pond, spreading circles open and extend increasingly outward, gradually involving anything they can reach. And while this stabilization of realization seems to benefit from my efforts to facilitate it, this may not ultimately be a requirement, i.e. that we need to act in the behalf of our realization.

The lasting or permanent effect of ‘realization’ seems ultimately to go viral and, over time, to extend itself to include our entire life, bit by bit. Again, this process is often called “deepening” or “stabilizing” the realization.

While experience takes the time needed to have the experience, realization is instantaneous. We just get it; we “realize.” I have tried to make the difference between a spiritual experience and spiritual realization clear, that an experience does not last, but passes, while a realization is instantaneous and, once had, never dims or goes away.

REBIRTH OR REINCARNATION?

December 9, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I was raised Catholic, so the idea of Heaven was always very much on my mind, even as a child. And as a young adult, beer commercials like the Schlitz ad with the line “You only go around once” were looming in the background. And while I very much wanted to believe in the idea of Heaven, with my training as a naturalist, comparing Mother Nature to the way Heaven was presented by the priests and nuns got to seem more and more like a cartoon. I drifted away from hoping on Heaven. Mother Nature was much more real. And back then, when I finally encountered the terms, I didn’t dare hope that exotic ideas like reincarnation and rebirth could be true. Death, as materialists consider it, seemed the ugly end we all face.

Yet, very gradually, as I increasingly verified that Buddhist concepts stood up well to the natural reality I knew, I came to believe in the Buddhist approach, rather than in Heaven or the beer commercial. I figured that I trusted the Buddhist teachings on everything I could verify; why not go all the way, and trust them on the rest. You know, “in for a penny, in for a pound” kind of thing. However, I was for many years confused about the two words “Reincarnation” and “Rebirth,” and how they were the same or different.

Over time, I have developed at least some understanding. First, these terms are not identical; they do not mean the same thing. The term “Reincarnation” is a Hindu term that suggests that our personal eternal “Soul” (and Self) leaves one body and simply

reincarnates as the same soul in a new body. This is a very popular concept in the East, and to some degree also here in the West.

On the other hand, the Buddhist concept of “Rebirth” does not support the concept of the eternal “Soul” changing bodies, or of our personality transferring to a new body and continuing on with business as usual. The Buddhist concept of rebirth states that we drop the clothes of our personality at death’s door and none of that personal Self persists or continues on in any next life we live.

The Buddhist way of phrasing this is that the Self has no true or permanent existence. They do not say (as common misunderstanding would have it) that there is no Self, but only that whatever Self we have is impermanent. It is always changing. If we did not have some sense of Self, we would have to invent one, just to serve as the general secretary of our life.

I repeat: if you see a statement by a Buddhist that there is no such thing as a Self, what they mean to say is that the Self has no true or permanent existence, not that we don’t have a Self at all. We already know we do have a Self, as we can plainly see.

According to the Buddhists, what propels us to rebirth is karma, basically our desires and the continued wish to be involved in matter and life. Buddhism, unlike the Hindu notion, does not hold the view that our entity or “soul” here in this life becomes that same soul in the next life, and so on. Rather, the Buddhists see our consciousness as a never-ending stream of desire that just continues on, unbroken, like a raft of karmic propensities floating down the river of life, reborn again and again in an attempt to exhaust our desires.

Accordingly, all this will never stop, as long as our desires persist in creating ever-more karma, which compels us to be reborn again and again until such time as that karma is fully exhausted, which basically means never. And that, because we continue to create more and more karma as we go along, we have a real Catch-22 here. We would have to stop creating karma in order to leave, as they say, Samsara, this wheel of life and death.

If Buddhism does not recognize an eternal entity being reborn, again and again, what does it claim travels between lives and is reborn? That really is the question. While Buddhism does not entertain a “soul” or any kind of permanent unique entity passing between lives, it does allow that a collection of different impressions and memories does move beyond death called the Samskaras (imprints on the mind), in particular the Five Skandhas (aggregates), being Form, Feelings, Perception, Impulses, and Consciousness. It is the last four skandhas (excluding form, which is our new body) that create and constitute a Self in any given life.

Therefore, we can consider ourselves as a nexus or loose group of many desires and propensities that are not yet fulfilled, but are forever pushing us on to be reborn, like the motion of the waves (when swimming) can push an inner tube forever beyond our reach. There is no end to rebirth as long as we keep extending our desires beyond our realization.

It may sound a little like science-fiction, but our own desires search for ways to fulfill themselves, grasping on to matter and incorporating it however it can. As for personalities, the Buddhist concept is that personality does not persist, but is made up anew with each rebirth

we undertake to live. It is always of the present, and never passed on from the past life. It is, so to speak, fresh made and ever-changing. Is this perhaps why, when it comes to our Self, we are seldom bored?

Hindu texts like the Bhagavad Gita speak of laying our personality down at death and going on to take on a new body as Sir Edwin Arnold captures in his translation of the Bhagavad Gita:

“Nay, but as when one layeth His worn-out robes away,
And taking new ones, sayeth, ‘These will I wear to-day!’
So putteth by the spirit, Lightly is garb of flesh, And
passeth to inherit a residence afresh.”

The difference between the Hindu version and the Buddhist version of this is to be found in the line “These will I wear to-day!” and the word “I” in that sentence. This goes along with the Hindu concept of Soul, which is very much like the Western concept of soul or Self. In Buddhism, there is no “I” that is reincarnated, as in: the same “I” we have today being the same “I” we would have in the next life.

In Buddhism, that “I” or soul is surrendered at death, just like our entire personality (person) is left behind. However, our karmic desires and propensities of consciousness (those four skandhas) do travel and reach once again into this Samsaric world to create a new body, which precedes to create a new Me, Myself and I (personality) based on the nexus of desires and impressions that continues on downstream from life to life.

Losing control of our “I,” in the Buddhist style of transmigration, is much scarier than the Hindu style, where our soul or “I” simply takes up where we left off in the next life, but with a new body. In the Buddhist

version, we don't have the same phone number. If you really think about it, the Buddhist approach is much more spontaneous and "of the day," and does not drag the dregs of the past into the future.

In summary, the Hindu concept of reincarnation believes our soul or Self persists into a new body, i.e. the same soul "reincarnates," body after body, with no loss of identity, while in the Buddhist view, we abandon at death all personal reference to a personality or soul, and the sheer mass of our impressions and desires continue on down the stream of consciousness (like a raft) until it can manage to grasp or draw about (entangle) itself a new body through which to continue in an attempt to exhaust those deep-down karmic desires. That mass of desires and propensities, as mentioned, does not have a personality, except as it builds one afresh each life based on the possible conditions of the particular rebirth. What we call the Self is nothing but the sum total of our fixations, our coat of many attachments. In other words, we build our Soul or Self afresh with each rebirth. Our personality is evergreen.

I once tried to drill down on this with my Rinpoche, and his response to my question as to what level of personality might persist between rebirths, was that the propensity for liking hot sauce might persist. I don't know whether he was teasing me or not, and my only thought was that hot sauce alone does not make a personality. So, I'm going with the Buddhist view that we build anew each life what we call our Self or Soul.

Now, I have only barely mentioned the view of what the Buddhists call the "Nihilists," what we might call the scientific materialists who believe that the mind and the brain are the same thing and all there is. That is the

“You only go around once” crowd.” We already are aware of the notion.

So, the good news is that our desires and karma persist, floating en-masse on the downstream of consciousness; the bad news (if it is bad news) is that we don't remember our previous personality, but the sum total of our karmic inertia requires us to create one afresh for each rebirth. Our personality can be described as the sum total of our attachments. However, I believe we all know well how to maintain a consciousness of the Self that we so painstakingly service. No?

And I have not mentioned here, but I do often, the value of Tibetan mind training, which serves to clarify our mind and thin out our karma, which makes the whole process of rebirth that much easier.

[P.S. More details on this kind of information can be found in the wonderful new book from the late Ven. Traleg Rinpoche, “Karma – What It Is, What it Isn't, Why It Matters,” probably the very best new dharma book I have read in years. I will write a review of this incredible book soon.]



REBORN AS A HOUSEFLY

December 12, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We've all heard someone say "I wish I could be a little fly on the wall, when so and so, etc." Well, if you want to badly enough, perhaps you can.... and already have! One of the hardest Buddhist concepts for Westerners to grasp (and I found this true!) is that we could be reborn as a rat or a cockroach, rather than a human. The very notion seems crazy. What's happening here?

The confusion, IMO, arises from a misunderstanding of what just part of us goes on beyond death to our next rebirth. That "part" is said to be made up of four of the five Skandhas (feelings, perception, impulses, and fluctuating consciousness) excluding only "form," since form is what the rebirth is all about, i.e. taking on a new form or body.

Every living critter, no matter how small, is animated by a consciousness to the degree possible as dictated by the nature of the body of the sentient being in question. The key point here (and a wake-up call!) is that it is always the SAME consciousness; it is just that the bodies have different capabilities. In other words, consciousness can do more with the body of a mouse than with that of a gnat, and we all know what it can do with the human body because we're doing it right now!

The way I understand this is that the karmic desire (driving the urge to be reborn) can be hard to control and, driven by urgent desire, consciousness seeks to enter any womb possible and at the earliest opportunity. This is, as I understand it, what separates average folks

like us from the Tibetan tulku, very high lamas who appear again and again. High lamas have control of their mind and consciousness enough to be able to resist jumping into the first body that comes along. They are said to carefully pick their rebirth, examining the mother, the father, their relationship, the situation, and so on while in the bardo state. Don't ask me how they do this; I am not a high lama or even a low lama.

In either of the above cases, or in the case of the tiniest fly or bacteria, it is the SAME consciousness that we have that seeks rebirth. Take that in carefully! This is perhaps why Tibetan Buddhists treat all beings with such care, trying very hard not to step on bugs, gently brushing mosquitoes from their arms, saying prayers for all beings they meet, great and small, etc. And this explains why the Tibetan Buddhists keep telling us that everyone we meet has been our mother (or our child) in a previous lifetime. Grock that!

And the reason why, as mentioned, is: that same consciousness can (and will) attempt to animate anybody, as in "any body" in its thirst for rebirth. I don't want to be crude, but just as males struggle not to ejaculate too soon, the drive for rebirth is like that. Driven by desire, it is hard to wait to get that rebirth. Given the right karmic drive, we take whatever comes along. Any port in a storm!

According to the Buddhists, we are mistaken if we think that we humans have a great big consciousness and the common housefly has a little bitty consciousness, when the reality is more like that there is only one kind of consciousness and many different kinds of bodies. Like cars: there are big racing cars, little mini-cars, bicycles, and even scooters, etc. The same person could drive all of them, but with different results,

because the mechanics of the machines differ. Bodies are like that and Consciousness is like this: the same.

I imagine our death to be like wiping a hard drive clean, and rebirth to be like reaching deeper into the hard drive (which experts can do) where the impressions and memories are still available (the storehouse), and using what is there to create a new form of the personality as driven by a combination of our residual karma and our accumulated skill at dharma practice.

Hopefully, by this point, you get the idea. Buddhists respect the consciousness in all sentient beings, large or small, because the consciousness is identical to their own, subject only to limitations of the body used for rebirth. Rebirth as a fly is a big handicap compared to rebirth as a human, but the consciousness of the fly wants what we want, to be happy and not to suffer. Both have Buddha Nature and both have the same consciousness. This needs to sink in.

If you keep this concept in mind, you may find yourself being more compassionate and loving to animals and other sentient beings. I can remember when one of the four regents for the Karma Kagyu lineage visited our center and we took him out to our lake cottage, which was at the time being ravaged by Gypsy-Moth caterpillars. They were eating every bit of foliage from our trees. And there was His Eminence, down by the edge of the lake, blessing all the caterpillars, each and every one! He obviously had a different view. We tried to tell him about the horrible caterpillars; he just laughed and kept on blessing them.

One comforting thought in all this is that something got us to where we are now, this moment. And whether it is a permanent state (soul entity) or an impermanent state

(as the Buddhists suggest), it is life as we know it. And it is pretty amazing.

Everything I have been able to test, vet, and personally realize of what the Buddhists teach has turned out to be true. It is not true just because the Buddhists say it; they say it because it is true! Although I can't say that I remember any past lifetimes or have direct knowledge about rebirth, there is no reason for me to accept all the teachings as I know them, but to assume the Buddhists are crazy when it comes to rebirth. They are the sanest people I have ever met.

[Photo by me, perhaps of someone like myself, who fell into the life of a housefly for one reason or another. Someone asked me: how do they ever get out of it?]

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

October 16, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I didn't get into dharma practice intentionally; it came as a result of my searching for some method or path in my life that would support the flickering experiences of spiritual awareness I kept having. I wanted more of that and less of the obscurations in life that also kept piling up. Plus, I wanted to be used in my life in some good way and did not want to hurt anyone, harm living beings, or harm the environment. Tall order, right?

To that end, I went to hear many kinds of teachers and tried out a number of them as best I could. Just finding a path or teacher I could stand to follow was my first problem, but there was a second (and perhaps even greater) problem, which I intend to talk about here, and that is how to keep going on whatever path we do choose, how not to give up.

For me, any kind of spiritual practice was a lot of work if it involved going way out of my ordinary way of life. I had to find the time, fumble around learning something I knew nothing about, while also struggling to keep the reasons to just quit and walk away at bay. And then there was the fact that any technique that requires rote practice (like development of the simple muscle-memory skills required in beginning meditation practice) can be tedious and tiresome. It is no wonder that many of us find it easier to just give up and allow our practice to slowly drift into the past, probably marked with a bit of a cringe or a little shrug from our having giving up on it. How do we prevent that from happening? I have to say, straight out, that this is, IMO, not an easy problem to

solve, at least for me it wasn't.

In my own case, things were actually fortuitous, even magical. One night, just before dawn, I had a dream of driving to Ann Arbor and meeting this golden being, a Tibetan rinpoche that a friend had told me was visiting Ann Arbor. And I did just that. I woke up from the dream and immediately felt sad that things like meeting a spiritual teacher were no longer on any agenda I had imagined for myself, since now I was a "businessman" and a business to run. But let-down feeling I had at the fact that this dream was just a dream hung over me and I decided I was not about to go to work that day, just on protest for my imagined fate that I had lost such fortuitous or serendipitous possibilities.

I got out of bed and called my friend in Ann Arbor who had first told me about this Tibetan teacher, woke him up, and announced I was coming to see this man, only to find out he was leaving town in three hours and it was a three-hour drive to Ann Arbor. Without a thought, I blurted out (to my own surprise) that I was coming anyway.

With that, I grabbed my wife (who also has a similar dream!) and the kids. Literally, with toothbrushes in our hands, we jumped in the car and drove to Ann Arbor (as fast as we dared) to see if that dream could come true, and we managed to get there just in that nick of time. And there he actually was, the same teacher, this radiant being, from my dream. Both my wife Margaret and I were instantly transported, and we have been working closely with this teacher ever since, going on 33 years.

Now, the point of my sharing this is that it has been my confidence in Rinpoche, my trust in his judgment, and

the sheer inspiration from his presence that has kept my dharma practice going for the 32+ years since I first met him, and little else, certainly not my initial clumsy attempts at dharma practice.

So, I can't just tell you to go have a dream and meet your teacher. I don't know, it might happen. Instead, I suggest that you will need some support, a rinpoche, lama, or dharma teacher whom you trust has your best interests in mind and that you are willing to listen to and, most important, can actually learn from.

Remember, I am practicing Vajrayana Buddhism here, in which the bond (Samaya) between teacher and student is more important than anything else. There are many, many other forms of Buddhism that don't require working this closely with your teacher, so if you have trouble trusting people who are outside your own skin, you may want to look into those possibilities.

The bottom line here is that, for me, the only constant in my own inspiration was my respect, love, and trust in my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. I knew that I did not "know" and I believed he did know what I did not know. Without him, I probably would have wandered off down some other path and still be wandering to this day. He definitely tamed me and made me joyfully obedient to my own best interests. I could not have done it without him or someone like him.

That being said, if you don't have a teacher, don't give up, but if you really care to tread this path, you may have to take things into your own hands, be inventive, reach out, do some research, and try out different teachers. Heaven knows, I spent years trying out anyone who I could talk myself into respecting, mostly to find out that I (for whatever reasons) could not learn

from them.

Trust me, finding a teacher from whom you can learn from is the single most important ingredient in the kind of dharma I practice... in my opinion. And don't be fooled by titles, seeking out the most famous teacher, or whatever. And also don't be afraid of appearances either. If they don't look like what you imagined, have bad habits, etc., look again. The ONLY qualification that is essential is that a teacher has enough realization to instruct you and that you have enough preparation to receive the instruction and to actually get it. The rest is all veneer that may be to your taste or it may not be. It's not about that part of you, what you think you want or have to have.

The teacher that first taught me basic Shamata Meditation drank a whole bottle of Sake while he did so, yet his influence and intense imprint on me remains pristine to this very day. That, of course, was the siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

So, don't be discouraged. Be bold and active in your own behalf and go for what you need. The old adage "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear" is true. In my experience with the Tibetan Karma Kagyu teachers, the single most-important thing in their minds is to perfectly preserve the integrity of the teachings and to transmit them intact to anyone who can receive them. "Anyone" includes you. So, my advice is that we need to work on our receptivity, being ABLE to receive the teachings. The Tibetans have practices to enable this, but then: you would have to actually do them.

I consider having the ability to have a teacher in this life (some-body outside my own skin who cares for my welfare) is perhaps the greatest gift, is itself a sign of

our receptivity. Not everyone can afford to have a real-life teacher appear right in the middle of their life, someone who cares more about you than you know how to do for yourself. For me, that is what a dharma teacher is. For such an event to even be permitted is a great sign and good fortune.

And one last little point. Coming up, for many years I thought I could somehow teach myself, bootstrap myself into realization – that kind of thing. Wishful thinking! Later I found out, and it is written in many great pith teachings that it is NOT possible for us to point out the true nature of our minds to ourselves, no matter how smart we think we are. Otherwise we would have done this... lifetimes ago. No, the Tibetan lamas are very clear that only (ONLY!) a person possessing the realization we ourselves seek can successfully point out to us the true nature of our own mind. I say this not to disappoint you, but to add an exclamation mark to the idea that we all need to have a realized instructor in this kind of work.

SANGE WANGCHUG

November 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I was very sorry to learn today from one of the senior lamas at Karmé Ling Retreat Center in New York that my dear friend Sange Wangchug had passed away yesterday. Wangchug was one of perhaps two people I have met in my life who were not only benign, but guileless. Sange's presence graced any group where he appeared. He was always fun to be with.

In 1985 I invited Sange Wangchug and his wife Tseten to come live and work at our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. Wangchug, a former monk, was a skilled calligrapher, an expert graphic artist, and was fluent in seven languages, including Tibetan, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Hindi, Pali, and Sanskrit. He lived at KTD Tibetan Monastery for some years before coming to our center, and while there he built a scale model of the forthcoming monastery, taught Tibetan language classes, and did all kinds of lettering, including the huge Sanskrit mantras in the main shrine room. He actually created the large Sanskrit mantras while with us.

Sange and his wife lived with us for 2-1/2 years, during which time we translated Tibetan astrology together from the original manuscripts into English, mostly the astrological works of the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. During that time Sange did so many things. I have over 400 original pen-and-ink drawings of Buddhist deities, and all kinds of other dharma graphics. We taught him how to use a Mac computer and Adobe Illustrator, and he soon produced wonderful

dharma graphics electronically. Sange Wangchug also designed and help build the stupa that we have here at our center, overseeing it all, and measuring everything to scale.

When we decided to run a mail-order dharma item business for KTD Monastery from here in Michigan, Sange Wangchug help to design the whole thing, including traveling to Nepal and India, securing the best statues, incense, and all manner of stuff.

Earlier in his life, as a monk, Wangchug had been Omze (chant master) for one of the four regents for the Karma Kagyu lineage. Sange was also renowned for his singing of the Dohas (songs of spiritual experience) of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa, which reminds me of this story.

When it came time for Sange and his wife Tseten to leave us and return to Bhutan, we had a goodbye party with Sange, his wife, Margaret, our friend David McCarthy, and myself. We asked Sange to sing for us one of the songs of Milarepa. He said he would, but wanted the rest of us to sing a song too. We agreed, and so we did. Sange, of course, sang beautifully, David too, while Margaret and I did the best we could. Then Sange's wife Tseten's turn came, and she also sang. We had not considered her much as a singer, because, well, that was Sange's forte.

To our amazement she sang a Tibetan mountain song that struck to the heart and had all of us crying. We had no idea that Tseten could sing like that!

Sange Wangchug went on to become the Minister of Culture for Bhutan (or some title like that). I had dinner with Sange a few years ago and have been in touch

with him by email over the last year. We had a true and genuine friendship. I will very much miss him being here on the planet with us. The world was better for me just knowing he was around.

Here is a little poem I wrote, which I offer to the memory of Sange Wangchug, along with my sincere prayers for his transition.

CLOSE FRIEND

We can't replace,
What there is,
Only one of.

[Photo of Sange Wangchug back in the 1980s, working on his drafting table doing calligraphy or dharma art. Wangchug did the calligraphy for many, many Tibetan practice sadhanas, which we then published. His handwriting was lovely and much in demand. I have many dozens of hand-lettered sheets of the main Tibetan sadhanas which I may make available to those interested. You could frame a single sheet of his calligraphy. It's lovely. Also shown is one of his hand-drawn pen & ink Buddhist deities, in this case Chenresik, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.]



SHOCKING US AWAKE

November 8, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We may not have done enough dharma practice to be able to realize the true nature of our mind at this point, but there are realizations that we can have, and one of them relates to our expectations.

If we can realize that our spiritual expectations are just that, “expectations,” and acknowledge that these expectations are just something that we put together (made up out of whole cloth) based on whatever information we could find, that is a start. And I don’t mean understand this; I mean realize!

As we have never attained enlightenment and therefore don’t know what that actually is like, we have nothing to go on except our own imagination and speculations. Unfortunately, our expectations are not limited to just spiritual experiences. We construct expectations and project them most of the time in almost every part of our life. In other words, projecting our plans and expectations and then reifying them (treating them like they are real, and always were) is something we all do. We are all about it, even though we may be running only on mental fumes.

One of the most difficult (and important) turning points in mind training are the “Pointing- Out Instructions,” where a realized master carefully examines a student and attempts to point out to the student the difference between the student’s expectations of realization (their projections) and the actual realization as to the nature of the mind. The whole idea of the pointing-out

instructions is to point out to the student the actual nature of their own mind compared to what the student was imagining or expecting it to be all this time. By definition, there has to be a difference between the two; otherwise there would be no need for training. Those expectations (and our projections) become an obstacle to actually realizing the mind's nature.

What is more interesting is to extrapolate from this example and to realize it is not only with spiritual expectations that we speculate and build mental castles in the sky. We do it all the time and perhaps have done it all our lives. If we mix that thought with the idea that we habitually conceptualize and reify all kinds of dualisms, like separating you from me, we from them, what we like from what we don't, like, etc. the problem becomes compounded.

The simple fact is that we are habitually dualistic in almost everything we do, and this then points to a picture of our being pretty much isolated from actual reality, at least from realizing the true nature of our mind. The Tibetan Buddhists tirelessly point this out.

If we think about it, most of us are miles away from how reality actually is, living in a virtual reality that we have created out of our expectations and habitual conceptual habits. As mentioned, "dualistic habits" means simply "I and you," "We and them", the "Here and the there," and so on.

For me, understanding this is a good lesson that reinforces the idea that we need to somehow shock ourselves out of our habitual virtual dreaming, projection our expectations on the screen of life and then reifying it, believing it is true. We need to wake up and realize that we live abstractly, dualistically, and

intellectually more of the time than we are aware of. Dharma training is one way of snapping us out of this.

If we realize how conceptual we are, how much we are locked into conceptual thinking, dualistic notions, and on and on, it's no wonder that we can't see through all the layers of obscuration we have accumulated.

If that is true, then the many stories of Zen Buddhist monks doing crazy things with their students, of endless koans to test realization, etc. make sense. It reminds me of the movie "Blade Runner" and the elaborate methods in that film to test for replicants.

Koans, Pointing-Out Instructions, and all of that are just ways to kind of shock us into letting go of our elaborate conceptual expectations and finally simply grasp the true nature of our own mind, the actual reality.

The Buddhist teachings on Mahamudra Meditation are punctuated throughout with various ways to suddenly realize our true nature, whether it be a loud noise, an embarrassment, a sudden confrontation, etc., whatever might take us by surprise and pop us out of our habitual conceptual-bubble into the reality of how things actually are.

None of this is hard to understand. If we grasp how this works, it may help us to be more cooperative in abandoning our expectations (and endless planning) and make way for more natural awareness to arise.

In one dharma teaching I went to, a rinpoche told this story about realizing the nature of the mind. A tulku (rebirth of a famous rinpoche) had been trained in the mind, but for one reason or another, had never managed to recognize the true nature of his mind in his current life. He was still stuck in a conceptual idea of

what that was all about. This had become somewhat of an embarrassment to his monastery as time marched on.

When he would enter the shrine room, all the other monks would arise and wait for him to be seated. Well, on this particulate day, when the rinpoche went to take his seat, as he sat down, quite by accident, he let out a huge fart, heard by everyone. While we here in the West think farts are kind of funny, in Tibetan culture it is considered very impolite to fart. When all this happened, the rinpoche was so embarrassed that the shock of the fart echoing throughout the shrine room in front of everyone caused him instantly to realize the true nature of his own mind. It all came together. As I like to say, many of us could probably manage the fart, but I don't know about the realization.

This story speaks to the value of sudden shocks, surprise, accidents, etc., and why both the Zen and Tibetan Buddhists have precise methods to point out or jar us into giving up our conceptual expectations long enough to somehow snap onto the reality of the mind itself. The process of pointing out the nature of the mind takes a highly realized teacher and great skill, almost a kind of spiritual brain-surgeon.

Here is a little poem about all this:

COINCIDENCE

The farthest distance,
Actually,
Is near,
So close,
In fact,
We cannot see it.

STICKING YOUR TOE IN THE WATER

October 28, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have always wanted to surf the ocean, but living smack-dab in the middle of the U.S. (where we have few waves large enough) did not help that desire much. And recently, the increasing amount of shark attacks would put me off as well. Forget about the fact that I am 74-years old.

When I look around, there are still many things I have never done and still would like to do. And with most of those things, like actually learning to read sheet music properly (at my age), I wouldn't know where to start. My fumbling efforts couldn't hold a candle to what is probably required.

Some of you may feel the same way about learning how to practice the dharma, but unlike surfing, where it does not matter too much if I ever manage it, the Buddhist teachings clearly say that having at least some mind training is crucial to negotiating the bardo realm into which each of us will pass at the time of our death. And they go on to point out that no matter who you are, what religion you practice or do not practice, whether you believe in or do not believe in the bardo, we will have the identical opportunity to pass through the bardo when our life ends.

We can walk to the edge of our current life situation, this moment (even if we are still young), stand on our tippy-toes and peer into the future as best we can and still not see much of anything. If we are looking for a mystery that only we can solve, the bardo has to be one

of them. And we are certain to get there sooner or later. That alone seems to be one good reason to perhaps learn a little more about our own mind. But, as a neophyte, how to do that?

In my own case, reading books about dharma was a beginning, but one that wore out after a while, leaving in its wake a lot unwarranted (and just plain wrong) expectations. It took me decades to unravel those!

If I wanted to, for example, learn to play the piano, some form of lessons would probably be in order. And the key-thing about lessons is who teaches them? With dharma, that's where it gets murky real quick.

No less a meditation master than the young 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, recently taught, and I quote him:

"Given that meditation must by its very nature be a personal, individual thing that each person experiences in their own way, based on their own needs and dispositions, based on their own investigation, I think it must never be commercialized or used for commercial purposes."

That is how precious the dharma teachings are and why the dharma teachers I have had never charged me for their personal advice and guidance. Sure, I have paid to attend large group teachings, to support our monastery, and bring in teachers, but never for personal instructions, which over the years I have had a lot of. It never even came up.

It is my opinion that if you (as Pee-Wee Herman says) "really, really want" to begin dharma practice, you will actually have to be moved enough to reach out and find

someone with authentic experience to guide you. And by “authentic experience” is meant that when that person teaches, you not only listen, but are able to learn from them, to grasp what they are saying. Finding a teacher like that can be a tall order, but if you “really, really want” and need instruction, it can happen. It did for me. But I was looking for it... everywhere.

There is only one “Dharma,” but there are many forms of Buddhism, and some of them don’t require the kind of teacher/student relationship I am describing here. However, doing it on your own (so to speak) is said to take limitless kalpas to make serious progress. A Kalpa is said to be the time it takes for a stone cube 16 miles on each side to be worn away if touched with a cloth every 100 years. In other words, a long time. The same teachings say that it is possible in Vajrayana Buddhism, which involves a teacher and a student (and proper instruction), for the student to become enlightened in a single lifetime or at least in a few lifetimes.

Obviously, I chose the second approach, that of working with a teacher or teachers. In my particular lineage (Karma Kagyu) of Vajrayana Buddhism, while we can study with many teachers, ultimately there will be one and only one teacher who is said to be our root guru (Tsawi Lama), and that is the teacher who first successfully points out to us the true nature of our mind so that we actually get it.

My point here is that you can load up on dharma books, dharma teachings, and dharma teachers, but sooner or later you will need to have one-on-one time with a particular teacher, one who is realized enough to teach you and for you to be prepared enough to get it. That is how we learn dharma, one to one, where the both

student and teacher trust one another enough to work together. That trust is called Samaya. Samaya is a two-way bond that unites the two into one, so that the teachings can (metaphorically speaking) pour from the teacher into the student. What happens in samaya is called “mixing,” as in: the mixing of the mind of the teacher with the student. It is also called “transmission,” but those are just poor words for something that cannot be expressed in language. Here is a poem I wrote years ago about samaya and lineage. It is not a great poem, but it might just help. I find that a poem often can say more than prose ever can.

LINEAGE

There 'is' nothing,
Transmitted,
And,
Nothing,
Ever flows.

A connection,
Simply opens,
In which,
Samaya grows.

And then:
Mixing of minds ...

Extension,
By recognition ...

Transmission,
Through, Identification

In other words:
Empowerment ...

A simple blessing,
Forever green,
That,
Mastering time,
Makes sure that:

No less than,
The same,
Is certain.

This is lineage.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

October 22, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As a kid, aside from nature study, I was all about fiction. You name it. Among my favorites were the complete set of Oz books. Of course there was “Girl of the Limberlost” by Gene Stratton Porter and “Two Little Savages” by Ernest Seton- Thompson, plus the Tom Swift books, The Hardy Boys, and, for sure, those Michigan- based novels by Leo Edwards, “Jerry Todd” and “Poppy Ott,” and the “Mark Tidd” series by Clarence Budington Kelland.

As I grew older, I read more and more extensively, including most European authors and the Americans too. I find it interesting that today I don’t read any fiction at all, none. And I don’t re-read what I read before. No interest. But I do still read, some.

What I read today is indeed, to me, stranger than fiction or more interesting than any fiction I have ever read, and that would be (what did you expect?) dharma-related texts.

For one, although aside from being brought up Catholic, I studied other forms of religion, most of which were over my head or at least put me to sleep, like the sermons in church. I still can’t meet any priest, minister, or cleric without feeling slightly embarrassed for them, this view underscored by every sermon I have had to endure at church, weddings, funerals, and the like. They do go on, but then, so do I in writing things like these.

Perhaps one of the most attractive features of Buddhism is that we are encouraged to ask questions and to test and vet any Buddhist statement or teaching (and teachers!) we come across. And I do.

To make a long story short, the amazing thing is that the Buddhist teachings actually work. These Buddhists are telling the truth and you can check it out for yourself. I have and continue to do so each day.

After reading and studying so many books on religion and a wide variety of spiritual disciplines, searching for that ring of truth, silence was the only thing I heard. Nothing else was coming back

And when I came across the authentic dharma, upon meeting Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, everything suddenly rang true. And it has pretty-much been that way ever since. Every line of traditional dharma that I read or hear and test out has turned out to be true for me. It just works.

I am not saying that practicing dharma is easy; I am saying that if I learn to practice it properly, the dharma works. For me, that is huge, compared to all of the gobbledygook I had tried to reify in my past, tried to make real, only to find it just did not work, at least for me.

That there is anything close to a roadmap to greater awareness is amazing. That the dharma is so gentle and also true is more than I ever dreamed of asking for. The dharma gives the gift of our own mind to us and, as the Tibetans say, the mind is the “Wish-Fulfilling Gem,” the gift that keeps on giving.

Consider this: Our mind, which is all that we know and are, is “The Mind,” that from which our every thought, word, and deed comes from, as well as those of every sentient being from time immemorial. According to the Tibetan Buddhists, our consciousness (as it is now) is out of tune with reality, the true nature of our own mind. Once we are synched with the mind via dharma-training, we are, as they say, good to go. Everything just falls into place. Our now dualistic parallax views begin to come into single focus naturally. It is like focusing a pair of binoculars to one image.

Insight Meditation triggers the collapse of our habitual dualistic-mind concepts, one thought at a time. The whole fantastic edifice of our mental confusion can be reduced to just nothing at all, because that construct is empty of any true existence. Thought by thought, when a thought’s nature is looked at directly, is seen as identical to the nature of the mind itself, clear and luminous.

No matter how many thoughts we examine, and there are potentially billions of them, the result of that examination is identically the same, regardless of content. We can rummage through our thoughts as long as we want and, if we are not seduced into following them, the result of that examination, as mentioned, will always be the same.

The nature of any thought, regardless of its content, is always the same nature as that of the mind itself. The great Mahasiddhas have continuously pointed out that thoughts are to the mind what waves are to the sea. Thoughts are the mind in motion just as waves are water in motion. Thoughts arise from the mind, like those grand spice-filled sandworms in the novel “Dune” do from the sand-oceans on the planet Arakis, and then

plunge back down and disappear.

Currently we are distracted by every thought that gets our attention, seducing us to following its content while, instead, we can develop the habit of learning to look directly at the nature of each thought rather than to follow its content – what it is about.

Thoughts do come. They arise into view and grasp our attention. At that point we can choose to follow the thought, even endlessly, or decline that opportunity and instead look directly at the nature of that thought, at which time it will appear to vanish right in front of our eyes and sink back into whatever part of the mind it came from, leaving us resting in the gap where it appeared.

And that is just what we do: rest in that gap where the thought was and in the nature of the mind which we just looked at. This is part of basic Insight Meditation training.

SUDDEN GAPS

November 24, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

At my recent sojourn at the dentist for the extraction of a wisdom tooth that never made it out years ago, I got to see close-up what kind of pyrotechnics are indulged when things go wrong. Since the old tooth did not want to just come-out, they had to break it into pieces, and perform all kinds of other dental gymnastics.

Although all numbed up, I managed to reflect that this kind of dental activity is in principle little different from what takes place by dharma teachers trying to get their students to break free of their habitual fixations and, instead, grasp the true nature of their own mind.

The simple truth is that while there are standard procedures and protocol for pointing out the nature of the mind, when it comes down to it, almost anything goes. Certainly the Zen Buddhist tradition proves this clearly enough, where stories of Rōshis willing to do most anything to get their student's attention abound.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition this is less obvious, but the existence of "Crazy Wisdom" is a fact, and the problem is no different there than that which faces the Zen Buddhist: how does the guru get the student to let go of their habitual fixations long enough to realize the unadulterated nature of their own mind? It's like mama trying to help the baby find the nipple.

For many years, in the more advanced teachings on Mahamudra, Rinpoche has repeatedly suggested we be especially aware when sudden loud noises occur. It

could be the sonic boom of a plane breaking the sound barrier, the loud backfire from a nearby car, a balloon popping, or even a sudden sneeze that we have.

Apparently, when we are surprised by a loud noise or any sudden event, the habitual baggage of the mind can be caught unaware and, without thinking, drop its fixation for a split second. And, in that sudden silence after the boom, historically, some folks have been able to see the actual nature of their mind and rest in the gap that remains.

This is equivalent to the Zen Master who suddenly slaps the student or hits him or her with a shoe. Being spontaneously pushed outside of our habitual comfort zone can result in a fresh take on things. In recent times, the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was renowned for his use of what is called “Crazy Wisdom,” actions that society might consider taboo or politically incorrect.

My point in writing about this is to point out that the route to enlightenment has many paths, but only one end, which no matter how we achieve it, is identical. Moreover, over the millennia, those paths have more or less settled down into a well-trodden protocol, the ways that work best.

However, I find it helpful to keep in mind that although there are well-proved ways to enlightenment, anything goes that does the job. And all of the teachings, the books, the instructions, the upadesha (pith instructions) are at best designed to get you into the general ballpark of where you can grasp the nature of your own mind. There is always going to be that discrepancy between what the teachings provide and the realization itself, that last little gap that we have to leap across on our

own.

With that in mind, understand that the closer we get to realization, the less that following the instructions will get us the last mile, and the more we must allow the instructions to mold into us and personally fit, like a hand in glove. In other words, there is a point where we must make the instructions our own, relax and make them fit comfortably to us. At that point we give up following the instructions and just allow the realization to take place.

We not only stop trying when we achieve realization, at some point before realization we must stop trying in order to even get there.

We can't help but build up expectations that "It's going to be like this" or "It's going to be like that," and so on. There will always be a difference between our expectations of realization and realization itself. Otherwise, we would already be realized. Here is a little poem I wrote that kind of points this out:

BEYOND MY EXPECTATIONS

Looking at the mind,
It's not what I'd expect.
Expectations can't define,
And you can't expect to find.

That's the nature of the mind.

TAKE A LITTLE TEST

November 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It's pretty easy logic to determine that we don't know what an event like "Recognition of the Mind's True Nature," much less Enlightenment, is like. I mean, we have little to no idea, other than whatever montage of concepts we have patch-worked together in our mind. Of course, we all first build expectations about any forthcoming event and then see how it plays out. If I look back on my family vacations, there is a huge difference between the planning and expectations of a vacation and the reality. They seldom were in-synch. And worse yet are my expectations about this or that restaurant – a horror story.

This is why it is important, as an exercise, to determine (and admit) for ourselves that our idea and expectations of our spiritual goals (recognition, enlightenment, etc.) is something we have entirely made up from whatever contact we have had with books, teachers, teachings, friends, and so on, and that we have NO actual realization yet of enlightenment, recognition, and such things.

If we can do that honestly, we have the ground for at least a realization that we don't yet know what we are talking about, dreaming about, planning, intending to achieve, and so on.

It's worse than that. With something like learning to play a musical instrument and all the practice that requires, we at least can put a CD of our favorite singer on and listen to their music. It helps to keep our own wish to

play music alive. But with spiritual goals and spiritual practice, there is no DVD (or anything) that we can play, see, or listen to, that will show us what spiritual realization is like. None. That is a serious handicap.

Then, it should be relatively easy to understand that at some point in our mind training we are going to have to switch over from what we “THINK” greater awareness (Recognition, etc.) is supposed to be to the actual reality of what it in fact is.

Remember, that the great Mahasiddhas all agree that Buddha Nature, Enlightened Mind, etc. is not something far away, but something that has always been with us as part of our inherent nature, perhaps just too close for us to “recognize,” thus the importance of “Recognition” of the mind’s true nature and other forms of realization.

To achieve this coinciding of our expectations and the reality as to spiritual realization is why what are called the “Pointing Out Instructions” exist. And how difficult that will be for us depends on how large the difference is between our self-made-up expectations of realization are, compared to the reality. In other words, if we are overly imaginative and assumptious, pointing out to us the true or actual nature of the mind may be very difficult. This is why this task belongs to a highly realized lama, one who knows the actual realization him or herself.

If we are very off in our expectations from the actual reality, the task of the lama may be more difficult because we have a greater deviance to resolve. However, the fact of the discrepancy between our expectations and reality cannot be denied. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, at some point we have to own consciously that we don’t know what we are talking

about if we are only going on expectations, rather than actual realization.

So, in summary, in any endeavor, but especially in spiritual endeavors, our expectations are all we have to go on. And, those expectations are something that we just made-up as best as we knew how from what was available to us.

If we consider that a realized lama, a teacher who has realized what we are just preparing to undertake, it is their task to evaluate what the best method might be to get us to drop our expectations and grasp the actual realization we are going for. No wonder that some Zen Roshis use extraordinary means to get our attention, rather than to let us lumber on toward oblivion with our unqualified expectations.

All of the extensive Tibetan practices called the “preliminaries” exist only to prepare us for having the true nature of the ordinary mind pointed out to us by someone who knows what that is. Some of you will just naturally get it, with little trouble, while others (I would be one) have to have it pointed out to us again and again. For example, when I finally completed the very arduous set of practices called The Ngöndo (which took years) and I then asked my dharma teacher what I should do next, his response was “Do you want to know what I would do if I were you?”

Well, I was cornered. Of course I wanted to know. His response was “I would do another round of Ngöndo.” And I did, but this just goes to show you that some of us are hard-cases. We don’t just get it right off, but have to have it pointed out to us until we do get it, while doing a lot of remedial practice in between ‘pointing-outs’. I had to do that.

If you understand what I have written here, it really is not so complicated. We aspire to become more aware. We undertake various practices to prepare for recognizing the actual nature of the mind, plus do whatever remedial practices that required and, sooner or later, we attend a teaching (or an interview) where a realized lama proceeds to point out the true nature of the mind, the “Pointing Out Instructions.” And, like me, if you don’t get it, you go back to the drawing board.

THAT IGNORANCE IS NOT BLISS

October 13, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Note: To me these little blogs can be looked at as exercises in understanding various Buddhist concepts. These views can be found here, there, and somewhere, but gathering them all together takes a lot of time. That is why I hope they can be useful to others. They are to me.]

One of the most remarkable concepts in Tibetan Buddhism is what is called “Buddha Nature,” the fact that, inside, we are no different from the Buddha himself. Within each of us, instead of having something like “Original Sin” to contend with (or to overcome), we all have this clear and luminous Buddha Nature. That’s the good news.

The bad news is that our Buddha Nature is obscured so that we don’t realize that we even have it. This gives new meaning to the Asian image of the lotus flower rising through the mud to bloom on the surface of life. We can all aspire to this, but right now most of us are more or less mired in the dualistic mud of cyclic life, which the Buddhists call “Samsara,” a Sanskrit word that translates as “wandering through.” We all know what that is about as what we are wandering through is the many states of existence of the material world, our repeating cycles of ups and downs, birth, death, and what-have- you.

The sticking point for many of us (when it comes to

learning dharma) is the shift from our habitual dependence on this Samsaric world (i.e. living) with its relative (dualistic) truths to something somehow beyond relativity, which has traditionally been called terms like “absolute” (non-dual) truth or absolute something or other.

For most of us, such a non-Samsaric realm or absolute state is beyond any reality that we know, so we imagine that it is either purely fiction or merely wishful thinking on our part. We hope it is true. Otherwise, we just have to take it on faith that this dualistic world has a non-dual counterpart. This is why “realization” is so important in Buddhism. We have not yet realized the nature of our own mind.

Right now, day-to-day, we live in a world of duality, one with subjects and objects, me and you, us and them, the good, the bad, the ugly, and so on. Duality, dualisms (the separation of subject and object into two distinct sides) has been the target of certain mind-training approaches for centuries, dharma practices designed to help unite and bring these two together, to actually realize them as one and undivided.

Samsara and Nirvana are like that, opposites that are often presented as two sides of the same coin, even reciprocals of one another. In other words, turn Samsara inside out and you get Nirvana, and vice-versa. They are two views of one reality. It’s like a magic trick. But how does it work?

Much dharma training depends on first realizing that we are somehow trapped inside cyclic life (which, as mentioned, the Buddhists call Samsara), much like a closed-loop, a Catch-22 that we are not even aware of. Yet like a hamster on a treadmill, we keep going round and round in this cyclic world of ups and downs, up one day and down the next.

The Buddhist teachings call this “Ignorance” and go on to point out that ignorance is the root of ALL our problems, the fact that we ignore the actual nature of our own mind in favor of whatever distractions happen to attract us. So, the bottom line is that we are not in a state of denial about the nature of the mind, but rather in a state of ignorance of it.

A question that I have had:

Is this ignorance, this ignoring of the true nature of the mind, innocent or are we actively ignoring our own true nature, slighting it, so to speak? For me, initially there appeared to be no simple answer. On the one hand, we are in a state of ignorance as to the nature of our own mind, which is the main cause of our own suffering. On the other hand, many philosophies (non-Buddhist) state that we made a simple mistake or two long ago, and are now actively resisting the truth.

I very clearly asked a high rinpoche if we, once-upon-a-time like Plato would suggest, knew our own true nature and have since somehow fallen from that, which pretty much amounts to the Christian doctrine of Original Sin. But the rinpoche was very clear that this is not the case. He went on to state that at no time in the past did we (whomever and whatever “we” are) know our true nature and then somehow did something to fall away from that nature. Rinpoche’s answer puts this question

in a different light.

For one, it suggests that (aside from whatever karma we have managed to create for ourselves circumstantially) we are indeed innocent of having done anything wrong that caused us to be in the (often confused) state we are now in, Samsara. We have committed no original sin. We never knew and still don't know our own true nature, so our ignoring of the actual nature of the mind is not neglectful, willful, or malicious. Literally, we just don't know what we are missing. However, our habitual state of ignoring the true nature of the mind remains an active habit. We persist in it and even resist changing that habit in favor of clinging to our various current attachments, what has conveniently sometimes been called "The Self."

Our dharma practice starts the moment we decide we want to reverse this trend of ignorance and begin to use our mind to look at and realize its own true nature. In can happen in a heartbeat.

Here is a little poem (a tongue-twister) I wrote long ago about knowing or not-knowing the true nature of our own mind.

NEVER KNOWN

If I know,
I don't know I know,
And I don't know I don't know I know.

I don't know what I would know,
If I did know.
That's how I know I don't know.

So,
I don't know,
I know I don't know,
And I know I know I don't know.

I have never known.

THE BIG SPEED BUMP

October 31, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When it comes to dharma practice, we are always doing better than we “think,” and this is due to the limitations of thinking, not to any special dispensation we have for dharma practice. And the following point is particularly hard to grasp: that, by definition, until we have achieved some realization, all we have to go on is whatever intellectual construct (as to what the dharma is about) that we have managed to cobble together. I write about this often, only because it is the key to so many of our problems.

It is exactly like reading the assembly-instructions for putting some project together: that is, before we realize what is required to do it, i.e. what the instructions are actually about. Until we “realize” the nature of how our mind works, it is all “sounds like this” and “maybe this is how it works,” etc. We don’t know, which means we have not yet even realized what it is that we are attempting to do. It is certainly a Catch-22, but there you have it.

This is precisely why so much emphasis is placed on “realization” in general, and realization of the true nature of our own mind, in particular. Without that “Aha! I get it,” we can’t go very far, and are stuck with shuffling the instructions around, which has to be a form of arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Switching from reading the intellectual instructions on the dharma to the reality they refer to is, traditionally,

not an easy transformation, but it is required if we want to get anywhere. It is not enough to intellectually understand the dharma and it is not enough to even experience the reality of the dharma sometimes and not at other times. What is required is to realize the nature of our own mind upon which all dharma comes from and depends. That's the rub, so to speak.

There are two general ways to accomplish realization: one is a process of trial and error, where, since we don't even know what we are looking for (what the nature of the mind is like) is said to take untold kalpas, an almost endless period of time, while the second way is to work closely with a realized dharma teacher until they can successfully point out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it. I prefer the second, what we might call the express-approach.

It can be important for us to at least understand how this express-mode works. Crudely put, the "Pointing-Out Instructions" is a method of kind of jarring our fixated view loose from our distractions, in this case from our intellectual idea of "realization," until we happen to grasp the true nature of our own mind. And that is called "Recognition," which is a form of realization, but not even close to enlightenment. It is the start of what is called realized practice.

In essence, the Pointing-Out Instructions distract us from our distraction and fixation on our own home-brew expectations (what we think the dharma is about) long enough for the actual realization of what the mind is about to -- how can I put it? -- occur to us, pop into mind, for us to grasp the reality. That is realization.

Our intent may be sincere, our focus undivided, but if we are only looking at our own idea or expectation of

what realization is, nothing will happen other than frustration. You see the problem? Somehow, we have to be encouraged to let go (to be jarred loose) from our fixated expectations so that that we can realize what all of this practice (and our expectations) has been all about.

And this is why we can't do it ourselves. We can't outsmart ourselves, but must depend on a realized teacher to do what is the equivalent of brain surgery, to successfully distract us from our fixated expectations of "realization" and allow the transfer of our focus to the actual reality to take place. What a subtle and difficult task that is! That is rocket science.'

THE CONCEPTION FACTORY

November 7, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It was around the summer of 1959 and I was driving my old 1951 Ford Victoria hard-top coupe (dark-green with a cream top) up 7th Street in Ann Arbor, heading toward Pioneer High School. Hanging from the rear fender was a metal plate that read "Tachs," the car club I belonged to.

Meanwhile, playing on the radio was that heartbreak of a song by the Tempos "Will I See You in September" or "lose you to a summer love." Tears were streaming down my face; I had just broken up with my first real girlfriend and saw no way that relationship would ever heal itself. I feared we would never get back together, and we never did. I had lost her to a summer love. Imagine!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRGLjzFHa40>

Fast-forward to today. It is harder for me to see my current self-involvement because I am still in it, but looking back, what a dream I was wrapped up in back then, sometimes more like a nightmare. My sense of Self at that time was nowhere near realistic, just a patchwork quilt of whomever I looked up to, influences of other people, stuff I had read, expectations, things I hoped for, etc. No wonder that I had no self-confidence. There was nothing of me in my Self. Talk about virtual reality; I was totally involved, fully immersed in the moment, with almost no awareness otherwise.

I'm sorry to say that not all that much has changed since then. Here am I today, still busy most of the time imagining, speculating, creating expectations and painting myself into a corner, as Shakespeare put it, with the "pale cast of thought." At this point in time, conceptualization still seems almost unavoidable. And I am not the Lone Ranger here. Everyone around me seems to be doing exactly the same thing or something similar. It is a mass delusion.

Like a caterpillar spinning a cocoon, these years I wrap myself in more sophisticated concepts and thought so tightly that there is little space or light and no way to breathe. It's this kind of conceptual spinning that realized dharma teachers have to face when we beginners present ourselves to them for help in dharma practice. Where to even begin? Thank goodness that the Buddha already began some 2500 years ago.

We talk of learning to meditate, but obviously most of us need a little something more than that. There are thousands of erudite Asian books and articles on our conceptual condition, but if we want to jump to the chase, it comes down to what I pointed at above, that all our thinking, speculating, and expectations hold us at a distance from grounding ourselves in our own reality, and something inside us knows this and yearns to be free of all this smothering conceptual red-tape. In short: we don't know our own mind. Apparently, for that we need help.

The reason for this blog is to better understand that we don't need just a little relaxation therapy or a bit of stress management, but more like a complete makeover. We are not in touch with our own senses enough to feel rooted in reality. We hunger for authentic experience, to be free of our conceptual debris, but how

to do that?

I have spent over forty years, at first poking around in the various dharma methods of liberation, and later faithfully following the directions of a realized teacher. And while some of the practices seemed at first glance a bit medieval to me, that thought soon vanished as I came to know how primitive I was underneath all of my assumed modern sophistication. I didn't need just a dust-off, but a full makeover. I needed tools to remove the layer upon layer of obscurations I had taken on in my various confusions. I was literally out-of-touch with my own senses, isolated by my own habitual conceptual thought processes. Suffocating is a good word.

When we are diagnosed with a serious or life-threatening medical problem, we seek out the best medical advice money can find and follow it. However, with our own mind and its habitual confusion, we have yet to take our temperature, much less seek out a diagnosis and remedy it.

In the future, all this will change. At that time the world may not be so interested in what college degrees you have as much as to what degree you have trained your mind.

Eventually, there will probably be certificates for various levels of mind training. We can beat the rush by getting that training now. <G>

THE FAMILY DHARMA WEEKEND

November 29, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Something that troubled me when I was learning the dharma and having a family was how to combine the two. In other words, how to include children into dharma teachings and get-togethers? For example, at our monastery in upstate New York, KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) children were not allowed on campus. So, when we would come to the monastery, an 800-mile drive, we would always bring our kids. After all, we never had a babysitter for some 21 years, other than our older kids (my daughter lotis) babysitting the younger ones. We just never had an event important enough for us to leave our kids with someone.

Anyway, every year we would make the 14-16hr trip (stopping overnight with the kids) to KTD, and find a motel down in Woodstock where we could stay and leave them with our oldest daughter lotis. It was tough running up and down the three-mile mountain road all the time. During our trips to Tibet, we noticed that kids and family were an integral part of the scene. Of course this all changed when Bardor Rinpoche began having kids of his own and they were all over the place. Pretty soon after that, kids were allowed on the KTD campus.

In the meantime, our center, Heart Center KTC began having what were called Family Dharma Weekends. These took place out at two cottages that we owned on Horsehead Lake, about 13 miles from our home in Big Rapids, Michigan. We did this for a number of years, and either Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche or Bardor Rinpoche would come and officiate. They often lasted 3-

4 days and whole families would come as well as couples and individuals.

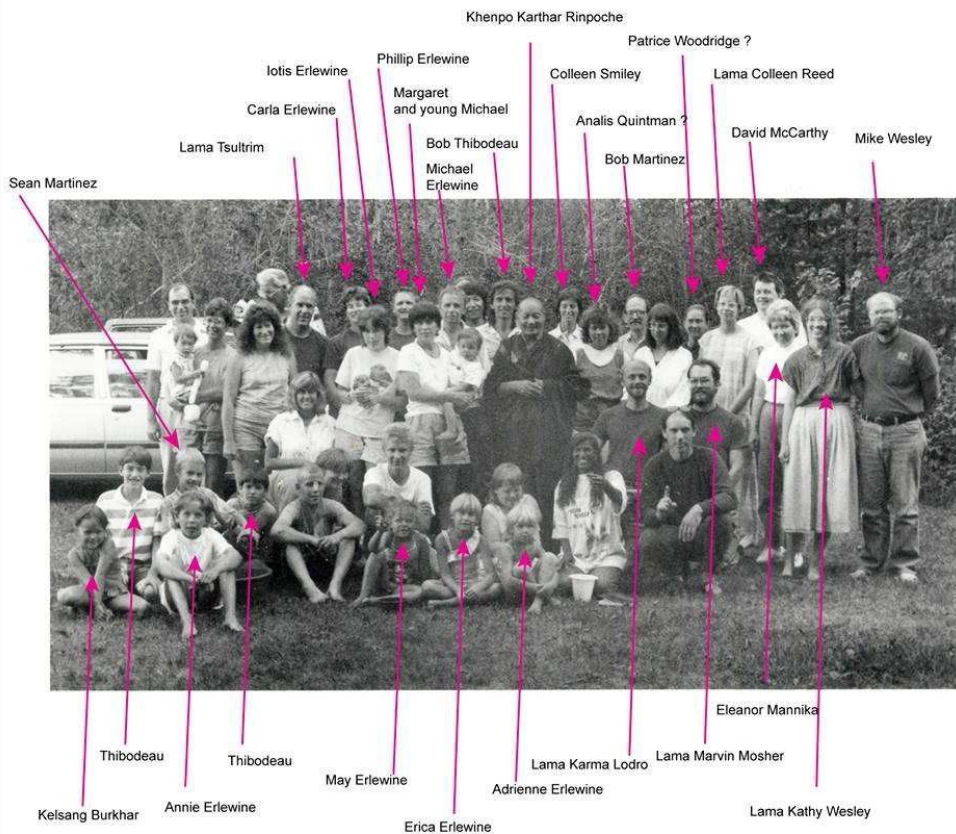
There would be dharma teachings for the adults, lots of things for the kids to do, as well as swimming and boating, games, and really great home-cooked meals.

In cleaning out my files I came across some photos from the Family Dharma Weekend in July of 1987 and I thought some of you might get a kick out of it. At this multi-day event we had teachings on “Tibetan Buddhist Festivals,” including the meaning of the New and Full Moon, eclipses, etc., “Dharma for Children,” and “Buddhism: The Path of Gentleness,” and “The Life of the Buddha,” plus a Manjushri Empowerment “The Lion’s Roar.”

We had a meditation area under a large canopy, and various activities going on. Rinpoche and his translator Ngodup Burkhar stayed in a small cabin, and the rest of us stayed in the larger cabin, or camped out. Some were in motels.

These family-dharma weekends were special events for me that, after they ended, it took time to adjust to regular life again. Here are some photos from that weekend.

Here is a group photo of the Family Dharma Weekend in July of 1987. Not all the Lamas! At that time they were not yet lamas, but it just shows you what happens when you get around a great rinpoche.



This is Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche holding my daughter May on his right knee and Ngodup Burkhar's daughter Kelsang on his left knee. Both girls today are well-known singer/songwriters. — with [May Erlewine Bernard](#).



Here is the gateway to the cottages and the Dharma Weekend.



Khenpo Karhtar Rinpoche waving at the kids in the boats. Either that, or blessing the lake. He did both.



THE HAVES AND THE HAVE NOTS

December 6, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This Samsaric world we all live in is said to be inherently cyclic; we have alternating experiences of feeling up and feeling down. As one of my favorite gospel songs puts it: “You may be up today, but you may be down tomorrow; you never know...”

Although people make a great mystery out of whether or not there is rebirth, if we look for the cause of what has been called rebirth or reincarnation, we don't have to look very far. It is not really a mystery. When we are feeling “Up,” on top of the world, that is when we vow or wish or decide that life is good, as ask to keep it coming; give me more of it please. We desire more and desire is the heart of karma.

We personally desire (and that's the right word) to live and have more of life, i.e. to live forever! Need I mention that on the other end of the teeter-totter, when we are “Down” and feeling slammed by life, we usually bemoan our fate, although a short time before it may have been just what the doctor ordered and, lo and behold, it turns out that we are the doctor! Think on that for a bit.

When we are up, we order more of it; when we are down, we want out of just what we desired a short time before. And so it goes. Here, I want to talk about those things we ordered up and already agreed to do, that now have become something we “have” to do, like it or not.

I often get ahead of myself, trying to rush through

whatever it is that particular day that I think I have to do, so that I can then just be “free,” whatever freedom is. I am faced with this every morning, with what it is I have to do, whether it is take a shower, brush my teeth, do the set of physical exercises I do, open my shrine, feed my dog, do my practice, go to the grocery, and on and on. Some days seem like a never-ending set of chores to wade through, one after another, and to get to where? As mentioned, mostly to get to where I have the freedom to do nothing, rather than have to do something. I am certain that we all have this problem to one degree or another.

It's even more obvious now that I am retired, since when I ran a business I had to do what I had to do at least five days a week for 44 years or so.

Yet, all of these perceived chores were once upon a time things I wanted to do, that I chose to do for one reason or another, things I am grateful to have the privilege to do, and things that I miss the moment I don't feel well enough to do them. How's that for adding insult to injury? And the rest are things I “ought” to do, that are good for me, that I have told myself that I should do, and so on. Sometimes I have to push myself to do those things and at other times life just demands that I do them. Talk about the fallacy of the excluded middle! Where is the happy medium that should be me?

If I get off on the wrong foot, my tasks pile up like those 50-car pileups on the freeway or a row of dominos collapsing. That is a sure sign of a really bad day. It is not freedom to think that I could have no tasks, because I have to (at the very least) live and breathe. For me, freedom is “wanting” to do what I already have to do, but I can't always quite do that either.

“Want” is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. Want can be greedy, but want also can be used in positive ways and is. Here is this basic idea expressed through some traditional astrology to get us started:

Astrologers like to look at what are called the “Triplicities,” also called the Elemental Balance, being which of the four elements (Fire, Earth, Air, and Water) of the 12 zodiac signs the various planets in my natal chart are in. For example, Aries is a Fire Sign, Taurus an Earth Sign, and so on around the zodiac. Years ago, when I taught basic astrology (and about the Four Elements) I would give students two statements about the element distribution in their chart:

- (1) We Do What We Have to Do.
- (2) We Become What We Want.

The skills and talents we are born with are what we literally “have” to do, what we have to work with from the get-go. On the other hand, what we lack or “want” we will never have (if we have no planets in one of the four elements). However, we can emulate or be receptive to that missing element, and we do. In fact, we have no choice. Thus the statement “We become what we “want,” using here the meaning of the word “become” as in, “Doesn’t that dress BECOME her.” Think about this use of the word “become” for a moment.

For example, using the Elemental Balance mentioned above: My natal Sun is in the zodiac sign Cancer, which is a Water Sign. Overall, my birth chart has the most Earth

(4) and the least Air (1), and the one planet I have in Air Signs is my Jupiter-in-Gemini in the 7th House. Jupiter indicates our Life Path or vocation. So, using traditional

astrological interpretive technique, what I most WANT to do (Life Path) is to write (Gemini) for others (7th House). See how it works?

We become or turn toward what we “want” or lack, much like the sunflower turns its head toward the Sun. If we have zero planets in, say, earth signs (Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn,) such a “want” or lack is something that we may never be able to fill, a kind of leak in our soul that will never fully be plugged. In that way, we may have no choice but to “become” what we want, and -- at best – to take on the appearance of what we yearn for, make some effort to fill the void. You will have to think this through and, if you do, you will see that what I am pointing out is true.

There are things we each MUST do in a day, for all the reasons we happen to have. And when they pile up (and we still have to do them anyway), there is certainly a lack of “wanta,” as in perhaps not “wanting” to do them. Some days are like that; I don’t want to do much of anything. But, as mentioned, those “wants” in life are very important. And just like a game of checkers, where we may jump one way in order to then jump another, “wants” can work like that too.

So, on any given day, when my “Haves” outweigh my “Have Nots” (my wants) and start to appear more like chores, I like to take a moment and seek out something I actually want to do and do that. More often than not, fulfilling a want (even a small one) may get me positioned (or more in the mood) to do something I “have” to do, almost as if I really want to do it. And perhaps by then I do. It gets things rolling.

Because, as they say, we become what we want, the future belongs to our wants, not our haves. We bend

over backward in an attempt to fill our wants, what we WANT to do. But our “Haves” are how we reach the future. So, in the midst of the daily grind, when my “have-to-dos” pile up and my wanting to do them grows too thin, I am learning to slow down a bit and do a little something I want to do as a way of lubricating the day.

More important, it helps if I can remember back to when I first set the “I have-to-do this” or that in motion. My desire or will to do something was most pure at that point. That initial moment is worth protecting and holding as sacred. I may not feel like doing something at the moment, but if I remember how it felt when I first set about wishing to doing it, often my respect for that initial moment (if not for this moment now) flags me down from being in a hurry, and allows me to settle into taking my time. In other words, I need to enjoy the flowers as I move along through each day or its just drudgery.

After all, I know how to take my time when it comes to something I “want” to do. And although WANT and HAVE may seem to be mutually exclusive, they are not. The Zen masters make a point of wanting to do with great ceremony what they have to do. What I say (to myself) is: if, as the Tibetan Buddhist state, life itself can both exist and not exist at the same time, then I certainly can learn to want to do what I have to do. Do you understand?

THE INTENT OF THE SHRINE

November 21, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Many years ago, 1980 to be exact, Margaret and I, plus our two daughters Lotis and Anne (all the kids we had at that point), moved out of Ann Arbor and headed north to live in Big Rapids, Michigan. Our main reason for leaving lovely Ann Arbor is that we wanted our kids to have the same experience that we had, growing up in a small town, where children could walk downtown for an ice cream, go to the movies, or whatever, unchaperoned.

By the time we had children, Ann Arbor was already too large to let kids walk downtown unattended. Also, my parents lived in Big Rapids, where my father was the comptroller at Ferris, so we could be near family. Ferris was then a state college, not yet having become a university. As it turned out, the kids had a great small-town upbringing. The main street was two-blocks away, a wonderful creek was within one and one-half blocks, and wide open fields and meadows were only about two blocks, not to mention that Big Rapids sits on the edge of the Manistee National Forest, some 900,000 acres of wilderness.

Being as poor as church mice, we were lucky to find a small house in Big Rapids that we could get a mortgage on for around \$30,000. And oddly enough, there we have stayed all these years. We never moved up the house ladder to a bigger home, mostly because my place of work was less than a block away, so why mess up a good thing. Instead, we eventually added on to the

house and, despite not being a mansion, our house is very comfortable, although perhaps a little funky. What do you expect from an old pre-hippie!

As it turned out, although I had an office at work, I spent all my time at home in a little 10' x 12' room in which I have dwelled for over thirty years. Never enough space, I was forced to become a genius at making room. I wish I had a slow motion shot of how this tiny office has morphed over time, including the years my aging father came and had his desk right in my office, while he did my books. This was his way of finally saying, "Son, you did OK."

Today, this little room houses not only me, but also our dog Molotov, who was once upon a time my daughter May's protector-dog, when she roamed the country hitchhiking and riding freight trains while busking music. "Molly" sleeps here in the office, and sometimes so do I, and we both definitely take naps together in this room. In my office there are three main things. We have my little desk, which supports three computers, a large couch big enough to nap on. That is where we (and sometimes the whole family) watch movies on a flat-screen TV, and last, but not least, stuck in what was once one of those closets with two sliding-door panels, is my little dharma-practice shrine, which is shown here in this photo.

Yes, we have a large shrine in a separate building (a two-car garage that we converted years ago), but I have always been mostly a solitary meditator. Margaret has her own personal shrine too. I prefer having some kind of shine at hand, wherever I happen to spend the most time. So, today I am sharing a photo with you of my office shrine, just because it came to mind. Over time, I have learned (generally) to do what my mind suggests.

This shrine, which is dedicated to Amitabha Buddha, faces west toward the setting Sun, has doors which open and close, a small practice table, and a set of offering bowls. By this time of life I have accumulated all kinds of rupas (statues) of various Buddhist saints and deities, but it was not always that way. In this same little office, many years ago, I can remember having a single small photograph of the Buddha that a friend sent me from KTD Monastery in New York, where we belonged. That was all I had.

Later, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gave us a small statue of the Buddha, and it slowly grew from there. What are shrines good for?

Well, filled with statues (as mine has become) or containing but a single photo of Buddha where we can sit quietly, a shrine is a portal for offering what we have accumulated in the way of merit throughout our day, offered to benefit (as they say) all sentient beings of the three times, the ten directions, and of the numberless worlds. And yes, I offer food, water incense, music, fragrance, flowers, and various waters as I can, as well as a small light

But most important, we offer our most sincere intent and, as mentioned, any and all merit that can be dedicated to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, so that they may benefit all sentient beings and bring them to complete enlightenment. A personal shrine is like Cape Canaveral, our own little launching pad where we feel comfortable dedicating our intent.

Ultimately, physical shrines can help to focus our attention, but putting them aside for the moment, we each also have the shrine of the mind itself. Wherever

we are, home shrine or not, the mind itself is where any real offering is done. The mind is where we connect. For example, we can mix our mind with that of our teacher (or a Buddha) with the three simple Sanskrit seed syllables:

OM, AH, HUM.

[Photo of my own personal shrine in my home office.]



THE LAST DAYS OF THE OLD MOON

October 10, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Just when everything seems it is going right, I get hit with a hornet's nest of a mess. I am not going to drag you through the details, but it was awful, still is. Two things come to mind. One, of course, like it or not I still find myself smack dab in the middle of Samsara, this world of ups and downs. For me, this is one of the downs.

And the second thing is that we are now in those three somewhat wicked days before the New Moon, which comes Monday night a little after 7:00 PM. As an astrologer, I already knew these days, but after meeting the Tibetan Rinpoches, I learned a lot more. Here is one area where the Western astrology and the Eastern astrology have documented the same scenario. They agree.

In Europe and the West, they used to call the three days before the New Moon each month, the "Devil's Days," because those days traditionally were rough, and the dark forces held sway. Hey, they still are dark days. Nothing has changed. And it even gets worse during the three days before the Tibetan New Year, a time during which the Tibetans do all day practice for days, beseeching the fierce Dharma Protectors to protect all of us.

In the Tibetan tradition, it is said that the subtle bodies come into finer alignment during the times of the Full

and the New Moon, when the Earth, Sun, and Moon line up. And while here in the West we divide the lunar month into four quarters (sometimes eight segments), the Tibetans divided the lunar month into 30 lunar days called (in Sanskrit) Tithies. And, for each of those 30 lunar days, they have distinct rituals, practices and things to do and to avoid on that particular day of the lunar month.

And when a lunar or solar eclipse comes along, the teachings say that the alignment of what are called the “winds and the channels,” the subtle bodies comes into alignment even closer – closest. And the Tibetans point out that such days are to be set aside as days of observation, as in “observe the Full Moon Day,” which means monitor your own mindstream. They see these as days of opportunity for spiritual discovery.

I was told that in Tibet, at least in the past, that they did not so much observe Saturdays and Sundays as days off (like we do here), but instead set aside some of these special lunar events, as mentioned, as days for observation. Traditionally, in the East and West astrology, the last days of the old moon (these days now) are days to finish up any business, but not a time to start anything new. In other words, wait it out. Wait for the New Moon, which will mark a new cycle, a new beginning.

So, I am doing just that, waiting it out, biding my time, cleaning up old business (as I can), trying to stay out of trouble, and hoping that trouble cannot find me, that is, any more than it already has.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

October 27, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

To most folks, Tibetan Buddhism is mostly an unknown, which just means they have not tried it and know little to nothing about it. Why should they bother?

To answer the “Why bother,” let me ask you a question. If you are interested in someday getting free of the rat-race of the distractions and obscurations we all are caught up in, how do you plan to do that? Or perhaps you don’t care. Are you even aware of the situation you are in...yet?

Once we realize that, no matter what we do, we are still “uncomfortable” in our life, a euphemism for the fact that we suffer (or those that we love are suffering), it’s like a rash that just won’t go away. We eventually might want to do something about it. That awareness alone is a big step, that we become aware that, try as we might, we just can’t get completely comfortable in our lives, at least for very long.

Of course, the Buddhists are all too aware that the ups and downs of life will never even out. They call this condition “Samsara,” and all the great sages tell us that this cyclic life of happy/sad we are living is ongoing and will never end for you, me, and all other sentient beings.

Once we become sensitive and feel that way, we automatically find ourselves on a search for some broader context that might allow us to better embrace and clarify our particular situation, warts and all.

The word “religion” is such a heavy trip. It is said to have come from the Latin word “religare,” which means to tie or to bind, thus something that ties or binds us. Well, one thing that binds is the “truth,” so religion is that which we are bound to witness or observe. Buddhism is lumped in with the other “religions,” even though it is non-theist and has no eschatology, i.e. no beginning or end times. The Buddhists simply say that there was no beginning and there will be no end... ever.

Certainly, the Dharma is something that ties or binds us. You can't lawyer the Dharma, as in: find ways to get around it. We don't change the Dharma; it changes us. It may take us time to get in step, to get with the program, but sooner or later it will happen to every one of us.

Although the Dharma may wax and wane in a given age, the Dharma, which is identical to “truth” itself, is not something that can ever just die and go away. Like the Pole Star in the celestial sky that guides us on the seas at night, the dharma is the one thing we can count on to see by in the fog of our Samsaric lives.

Now, we may not have yet reached that point, the point where we realize that Samara will never wane, but is always going to be as strong as it is today – full-strength. This is because we create and reinforce Samsara as we go along, moment by moment, year in and year out.

What can and does happen is that we each reach a point where it makes more sense to change our approach or attitude than it does to keep rolling the boulder of our obstacles uphill. The dharma and dharma training represents a way to begin to remove our obscurations, and much like that old kid's game of Pick-

Up-Sticks. We can learn to remove our obstacles, one-by-one, until nothing remains but the clarity of our own unfettered mind. Are you at the tipping point, the point of no return?

THE SIGNS OF MEDITATION

November 8, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In beginning meditation, we may try to suppress our thoughts, to wish they would go away, considering them interlopers, unwanted guests in an otherwise quiet mind. Needless to say, this approach has all the earmarks of a dualistic view and one, like the proverbial tar baby, that is self-perpetuating. The more we struggle with thoughts, the worse it gets.

I used to get a little crazy, sitting out in the shrine room, trying to meditate, with the neighborhood sounds of kids playing, dogs barking, cars honking, etc. filtering in. Pretty soon I was concentrating more on the outside signs than I was the meditation focus. It got so bad that I considered calling the police and complaining about the noise. Then one day, while one of the four regents of our lineage, a very high rinpoche was visiting, I told him about my noise phobia and difficulty meditating.

He pointed out that the kids were just having fun, and that was a good thing. Basically, he said I should include the noise as part of my focus, not try to exclude it and that I should always start where I am, including whatever is happening. I tried that and no longer care what's going around me. That's the kind of thing that rinpoches are good for.

Learning how to allow the mind to settle out, for the mind to come softly to rest like moving objects eventually do (even in a zero-G environment), yet still be mindfully focused, is a hallmark of Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). For most, especially here in the

West, this is what passes for beginning meditation at its best.

As many Tibetan rinpoches have pointed out, meditation is intended to be something more than just another form of relaxation therapy, much more. To cubbyhole meditation in with methods of stress relief (R&R) is not only incorrect, it is an enormous disservice to actual meditation as taught by the Buddha. We not only miss the point of traditional meditation (which is increased awareness and the gradual removal of obscurations), we miss an opportunity to clarify our mind through Insight Meditation, which in most mind-training practices often follows our learning Tranquility meditation. Basic Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is not intended to be our end goal in meditation, but rather just a means to quiet the mind, so that we can attempt Vipassana (Insight Meditation) and, between the two, we can learn to directly know the mind itself.

When asked to explain the difference between Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana), Tibetans often use the analogy of a Tibetan prayer flag, which has prayers or mantras printed on it, typically with a central image of the Windhorse (Lung-Ta), bearer of good fortune. If the prayer flag is flying in the wind, we can't read what is printed on it. Tranquility Meditation is used to calm the winds of our mind, so that we can use Insight Meditation to read the mantras and prayer on the prayer flag, metaphorically speaking.

I made up my own analogy that communicates the same thing. If we are trying to thread a very small needle and have shaky hands, Tranquility Meditation removes the shakiness, so that we can thread the needle (Insight Meditation).

However, what is ironic is that once we have quieted the mind so that we are undisturbed by thoughts (including those still present in our mind), with Insight Meditation we turn right around and specifically begin adding thoughts back into the equation. In fact, the pith instructions say that the only way to cross the desert beyond Shamata Meditation is on a train of thoughts, although not thoughts as you might think.

Beyond Shamata Meditation is Vipassana (Insight Meditation), and with Insight Meditation we come to depend on thoughts themselves for liberation. In this very different type of meditation, without thoughts, nothing would happen. Without thoughts we would have no means to see the nature of the mind, to get beyond the calmed mind, which is only intended as a launching pad for Insight Meditation, and not as an end in itself. The Tibetans clearly point out that the result of Shamata (which is termed Samadhi of one form or another) is not enough. We need to augment Shamata Meditation with direct knowledge of the mind itself through Insight Meditation (Vipassana), and the means to do that (to a large degree) are the same thoughts, words, and language that distracted us in the beginning. Go figure.

Each of us are already expert at following a train of thought, often whatever comes along in the moment, even if it goes into one of those recursive death-spirals of depression or worry. We do this every day and often all day. So, latching on to our train of thoughts is not what happens in Insight Meditation. Instead, rather than looking at the content of thoughts (what we call their 'meaning'), with Insight Meditation, we look directly at the thoughts themselves (generically), regardless of the meaning.

We discover that thoughts, however different their meaning and form may be from one another, all share a common nature. A thought, viewed as the container of meaning, is the same as any other thought. However, to arrive at this realization, it is taught that we need a little (or perhaps a lot) of help from a realized teacher for us to realize that the nature of any thought (every thought) is identical to the nature of the mind itself, just as the nature of waves and the ocean are both water. Thoughts are to be considered as the mind itself in motion, rather than at rest. And this notion is essential to advancing in meditation. This is the gift of Insight Meditation.

Further, once this is realized, thoughts are no longer considered as distracting obscurations, but become like little windows into the true nature of the mind itself, every last one of them. Instead of being distracted and caught up by every train of thought that comes our merry way (the meaning), we learn to look directly at the generic nature of each thought as it arises and, after that thought is seen directly (and proceeds to dissolve), we rest in the nature of the mind like a wave comes to rest back in the ocean. That is the value of Insight Meditation.

THE SKINNY ON MEDITATION CUSHIONS

October 26, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Meditation cushions, the cushions we sit on, may seem like something of an adjunct topic, perhaps a sidebar discussion, or just a blip on the radar screen of what's important in dharma practice, and that's true, at least until we decide to sit on one for a long time, like at an all-day puja or an extended dharma teaching. At that point what follows here may be a little more interesting.

And I am not going for a Ph.D. in dharma cushions. My interest in cushions only goes as far as my poor sore butt demands, which is that I search for something better to sit on (when I have to sit for a long time) than the very hard rectangular cushions that I was first introduced to, which cushions I will get to very soon.

I would not even know how to count the number of hours I have spent sitting on a cushion doing dharma practice, but without even thinking hard, it probably is many, many thousands. So, for those interested, let's talk about our cushions.

I have to confess that my introduction to dharma cushions was not particularly fortuitous, but rather a byproduct of meeting the incredible dharma master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in early 1974. Before that, for me, a cushion was a cushion was a cushion...

Trungpa Rinpoche was very much into sitting meditation, what we call Shamata or Tranquility Meditation, and when he said "Sit!," he meant for a long

time, preferably a very long time, not just for an hour, a day, or even a week, but Trungpa was best-known for his Dathuns, a month-long meditation retreat. All those who have done a dathun please raise your hands.

That is all well and good, but some of his students, quite early on (1974) formed a company, Samadhi Cushions, that made meditation cushions, the first (and best-known) of which they called the Gomden, which in Tibetan, simple translates to something like “meditation seat.” Anyway, the gomden is what Trungpa Rinpoche recommended and at that time Samadhi Cushions was the only place we knew where we could get one. And, being a paraphernalia guy, of course I just had to have one. We all did.

Now, I am not knocking Samadhi Cushions, which is a fine company, but rather I dislike sitting on their idea of a gomden. And I just went to their website and, sure enough, there is a photo of the “gomden” and underneath it the words “For Beginners.” LOL. This has to be funny; otherwise it would be just sad or even cruel. Their idea of a gomden (meditation cushion) is IMO not for beginners or, for that matter, for advanced users either. It is not for sitting. If we had such a thing as a dharma good-health certification, this cushion would never have been approved, at least by me. Yet, it is almost ubiquitous!

Basically, it is a block of very hard foam that is 18” long, 12.5” deep, and 6” high. For one, 6” is too high for most experienced sitters, and “for two,” the hard edges of the foam cuts into the lower part of the legs after even a short sit. Otherwise, it is very well made and comes in a variety of attractive colors. Now, I have a couple of caveats here to march through, so please bear with me.

Of course, I bought into the gomden, simply because everyone I knew was using them, although they were excruciating to sit on for long periods. However, that was before I went to Tibet a time or two. I was surprised to not find anything resembling the Samadhi Cushion's "gomden" in Tibet, and I have been both to Eastern Tibet (Kham) and Central Tibet (Lhasa area), and to a great many monasteries there and in India, Nepal, and elsewhere.

Now, in Tibet I saw all kinds of meditation cushions, which they too call "gomdens," but I don't recall seeing any like the ones Trungpa Rinpoche (or his group) suggested. I did see other hard cushions, but they were always very short (in height), and mostly monasteries had no cushions at all, but instead used long (and I mean long!) rug-like mats on which the monks sat... with no other cushions than that.

When I saw how the Tibetans sat, cushion-wise, I immediately realized that the so-called gomden from Samadhi Cushions was something they (or someone) over here just made up. In Tibet, they were nowhere to be found, and I looked. It reminded me of when my dad, who was not a dharma person, used to tease us (his five boys) when we were young. He would have us recite this mantra-like phrase "O Wa Tagoo Siam" over and over again, and then he would laugh. Of course, we were just kids, so we would recite it over and over, until we finally realized we were saying "Oh What a Goose I Am." And then we laughed too. That was about the degree of Dad's interest in spirituality. Anyway, that was how I felt about being sold a bill-of-goods with the horribly-hard gomden.

My only point in relating all this is to prevent you from having a bad sitting experience. It is hard enough to

learn to meditate without adding physical torture to the list. Anyway, Trungpa's ad-hoc idea of cushions, and the gomden in particular, went out the window after my first trip to Tibet. Almost enough said.

To be fair to Trungpa Rinpoche, he also adopted the Japanese-take on meditation cushions, which really is elegant and also kind to the posterior, so let's look at that for a moment. Trungpa Rinpoche was somewhat eclectic in his approach to dharma when it came to paraphernalia. He tended to fusion when it comes to these things, and he managed to fuse the Tibetan and the Japanese traditions quite effortlessly, resulting in a combination of the two dharma cultures.

He not only recommended the gomden but, taking from the Japanese dharma culture, he also suggested the "Zabuton," which is a large (and soft) mat that can be placed under the gomden. The Zabuton mat typically measures 33" wide, 27" deep, and 4.5" high.

Now the Zabuton is a good thing, and I am quite happy to just toss the gomden to the side and sit on the Zabuton, at least for short-term sitting. However, you will find (at least I do), if you sit a lot, that you need just a little support at the back of the Zabuton, for your rear, to give it a tiny bit of forward leaning incline.

The Japanese use the Zabuton as a large, low mat on which to place other cushions. On top of the Zabuton, the Japanese would put a round "puffed" cushion they called a "Zafu." The Zafu is about 5" to 8" high and about 14" wide. Zen practitioners make quite a show of puffing up their zafus. When you sit on them, they squash down to a few inches, which is about right. I like zafus and can sit on them, but they were designed for the traditional lotus-posture kind of sitting, and not just

for sitting like we might sit at a day-long teaching, you know, shifting around and what-not. Margaret and I used to make our own zafus out of corduroy cloth and Kapok, but that is another story.

The Japanese also sometimes use a third cushion, which is called (for lack of the Japanese name) a “support cushion.” These support cushions are usually jammed between the Zafu and the Zabuton, usually toward the back to give just a little more tilt so that we sit leaning a wee-bit forward.

I mentioned earlier that from what I could see in Tibet, most monks just sat on a carpet, with no other cushion or, if they had a cushion, it was very, very small and flat.

Now, let’s talk a little about my own experience with cushions. My body told me, early on, that the gomden I was sitting on was just not going to work in my case. It just hurt too much. Nature does not have many square or rectangular objects, which is why the Japanese cushions like the Zafu (which are round) make sense. But, as mentioned, they are made for a particular kind of purpose, sitting lotus-style, and not for general sitting. I tend to slip off the zafus, to one side or the other after a while. I know, Zen Buddhists sitting zazen can sit on them all day long, but I am a Tibetan Buddhist and we don’t insist on holding that still.

Now, I have made my own cushions and what-not. An example of what-not would be my rug-remnant cushion, which was a series of rug scraps I bought from my local rug store, and placed then together in ascending sizes to make a wide incline on which I imagined I would sit. And sit I did, until I found it was, ultimately, like the gomden, just too hard or firm. And I bought different kinds of cushions, round ones, kidney-shaped, cushions

filled with buckwheat hulls, and you-name-it. Like the proverbial “Princess and the Pea,” I was just too sensitive in the sitting department and nothing seemed to be comfortable.

What really helped me out was one time at our monastery, when they set cushions out for visiting rinpoches and other dignitaries. I went up, beforehand, and checked out their cushions. Although the shrine room was filled with the hard Trungpa-style gomdens (hundreds of them), there was not a gomden to be seen for the VIPs.

“Hmmm,” thought I. “This is interesting.” Instead, what they were offered were smallish rectangular cushions that were very loosely filled, so that, like memory-foam, they took the shape of your bottom. However, they were not filled with foam, but with something like Kapok, some loose fiber. I didn’t presume to sit on them, but I immediately realized that the 1% got different cushions from the rest of us, and I did feel them, and, after that, I set about making my own.

Now, I am giving you here the skinny on what took me years to figure out, so this history is condensed from long experience and trial and error. The best cushion for me is rectangular, a loose shell of cloth in which is placed (very loosely) a Kapok (cotton-like) fill that does not (no pun intended) quite fill up the cover. Actually, for a little cosmic justice, I took one of the many hard gomdens from our center’s shrine, took the blanket-blank hard rectangular foam piece out of it, and loosely filled the cover with Kapok, so that it now soon form-fits whenever sits on it.

In summary, what works has to be wide enough to fit under any butt (and when we shift around), loosely filled

so that it form-fits, and deep enough so that the slight incline we want to have can be accomplished by the migration of the Kapok within the cover in response to our sitting on it. I take it with me when I go to the monastery each year for our 10-day intensive. This is also exactly what I found that most rinpoches use.

My suggestion to my friends at Samadhi Cushions would take the cover they use for their gomden and fill it about $\frac{3}{4}$ full with Kapok and sell it to folks like me!

What do you sit on?



This is the dreaded “gomden” From Samadhi Cushions, a great company from whom I have purchased dozens of cushion, but this little puppy is just too hard, and everyone I know agrees with me.



This is the Japanese Zabuton, a rectangular mat that goes between the floor and whatever cushion we use. I see that I have the mat in the photo upside-down, but that just says something about my ability to organize things.



Here is the Japanese zafu cushion, the kind used in Zen practice, and good to sit on provided you are sitting lotus-style with legs crossed or loosely crossed. It does not work so well for other types of sitting, where we move around some.



This is a Tibetan-style prayer rug that either sits on the hard floor or, as seen here, goes over the zabuton. They come in all kinds of great designs.



Here is a zafu, on a prayer rug, on a zabuton, and the zafu is fully plumped. My language reminds me of the Lyle Lovett song "If I Had a Boat," and the words "Me upon my pony on my boat."



Here is a zafu after having been sat upon for a while, with some of the “plump” taken out of it, and down to a usable height.



Here is a prototype of my Rug-Remnant cushion, a series of various length pieces of rug sewn together to make an inclined cushion. It proved to be too firm.



And here is the cushion I actually use, which is a rectangular cover, about three- quarters filled with Kapok so that it takes the shape of anyone sitting on it, and has whatever incline we feel we need. You can also make these with very little Kapok for an even thinner cushion.



My cushion, on a rug, on a zabuton.



Just another setup, with a cushion, rug, zabuton, and a shawl.



And here is an entire setup with a Tibetan-style practice table (Chog-Tsi), on top of which sits a piece of brocade where your practice texts (and tools) sit (called a Til-Den), and behind is a cushion, prayer rug, zabuton, and shawl. All ready to go.



And just to punish the harsh gomden, here is a picture of it, without its clothes and stark naked.



This is a photo of our main shrine room at the center.



Here is a corner of the shrine room, with stacks of zabutons and gomdens.

THE STATE OF THE MIND

October 5, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

A few of you have messaged me that my recent blogs are too long to read and too intensive. What's new? It's just the way I write, so I understand if you don't have the time to read them. That being said, this particular blog is really intensive, but still, there might be one of you with the time to read it and respond. If not, c'est la vie. For that one person, welcome!

Once we actually have learned to meditate (and are not still just practicing meditation), why do we have to meditate again and again (like daily) to establish and reestablish a certain state of mind? This includes both Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation), and in this blog it is Insight Meditation I am mostly referring to.

I have often commented about the difference between practicing meditation and actually meditating. They are two different things, although it is common to say "I am doing my meditation practice" and mean "I am meditating." Actually, most of us are still practicing more than we are actually able to meditate, i.e. learning to meditate and making efforts. Actual meditation is effortless.

However, I am going further here and discriminating between conscious meditation (our daily practice) to achieve the result of meditating (which, if we stop meditating, our mind soon reverts to its ordinary state) and what is beyond that, beyond having to consciously meditate. I will get to that down the road here.

The act of doing Insight Meditation each session acts as a reminder, analogous to the bleep on a heart monitor (refreshing itself) at the hospital or the continuing sweep of the on-screen radar-scan, repeatedly showing where the 'weather' is. Insight Meditation is iterative, not recursive. We have to do it each time we want the result.

Meditational iteration, doing the practice over and over to produce a certain state of mind, marks a particular phase in mind training. When this simple iteration becomes infinitely recursive (and thus incandescent like a parachute-flare) is when an iterative technique (daily sessions) is no longer required.

Basic Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is the basis of most Asian meditation training; it allows the mind to concentrate, yet remain calm until we can learn Insight Meditation, at which time we manage to jump-start the process of luminous clarity. I find the clarity of Insight Meditation addictive, meaning that once introduced to a method to achieve it, very much in Pavlovian fashion, I want to repeat it as much as possible. While learning Tranquility Meditation can at first be tedious, Insight Meditation is endlessly fascinating, but it requires constant iteration; we have to consciously do it if we want the result.

However, iterative meditation is like one of those flashlights you wind up, which gives light for a short while. Unless we are actually doing the meditation, our mind gradually reverts to its ordinary state. It can take effort to meditate, although once meditating, the meditation can be self-sustaining, at least for a while (for that session). However, this kind of meditation is not a perpetual-motion machine. As mentioned, we

consciously have to keep doing it.

My original expectation that Insight Meditation is something in itself, some imagined “machine” (divorced from any particular object) seems to have been mistaken. It would seem that Insight Meditation only works in relation to something external like a thought or action, some dualism (subject and object) that can be resolved through the process of meditation. The Tibetan Buddhists would call this a relative form of mind training, which, like Tong-Len Meditation, involves a subject and an object.

Tranquility meditation has an object as a focus to help allow the mind to rest and, while Insight Meditation also has an object, the purpose of that object is to see through it to its nature (which is identical to the nature of the mind itself). Tranquility Meditation does not do this, which is why it, by itself, is not enough. Seeing through or resolving the duality of a subject/object with Insight Meditation produces clarity and luminosity -- illumination and a jolt of energy.

Insight Meditation reminds me of astrophysics, where what is called a gravitational- slingshot (gravity-assist) of an external planet is used to hurl a spacecraft beyond where it could otherwise go. In a similar way, Insight Meditation uses an object such as a thought, etc. as a lens to see into the actual nature of the mind itself, short-circuiting the distractions of our ordinary train of thought. It is a case of the mind looking at itself.

In Tranquility Meditation, the external nature of the object (twig, stone, etc.) is ignored in favor of just using it to assist the mind to settle, a focus. In Insight Meditation, the content of, for example, a thought (what the thought is about) is ignored in favor of using the

thought itself as a window to see into the nature of the mind. I used to tell myself that Insight Meditation was like one of those bug zappers, zapping any thought that cared to raise its head, because the moment we recognize the actual nature of a thought, that thought vanishes. This is why Insight Meditation has a reputation as a “karma killer,” because invoking it correctly can dissolve thought and prevent their karma from being recorded in our mindstream.

The brilliant clarity of Insight Meditation, like striking a match, has to be endlessly repeated until it catches fire incandescently, until what we might call infinite recursion is achieved. That is the value of Insight Meditation, to strike flint-to-steel until a persisting flame is established, after which we are on fire. Hopefully, I will get to that.

Since, in the beginning I first mixed my mind with photography to achieve Insight Meditation, perhaps I mistakenly assumed that there existed a more “pure” form of Insight Meditation that needed no object, no means, such as photography, with its cameras and lenses, etc. And (again mistakenly) I felt my dependence on photography (or whatever) was somehow inferior to Insight Meditation itself – but that idea turned out to be just an abstraction that I imagined. This appears to have been a mistake. The object of meditation (thought, photography, etc.) makes no difference, but still, in Insight Meditation, some object is required.

As they say, it’s all good. It makes no difference what object we use, although some Buddhists offer extra points if you use the image of the Buddha as a focus.

I finally did manage to extract the technique of Insight

Meditation out from the photography and extend that technique to include writing, editing, and other objective forms of activity. Insight Meditation is portable.

However, as mentioned, I still labored under the assumption that Insight Meditation was independent of form, entirely, when instead it was independent of any particular form (like photography writing, etc.), but still absolutely dependent on “some” form as a means to establish itself.

In other words, Insight Meditation feeds on duality, reducing each incidence of subject/object to its inherent nature, which is non-dual -- no subject, no object. The teachings state that the nature of each thought, every thought, is identical to the true nature of the mind itself. That fact is more important than words can express.

Now I see that Insight Meditation is only possible through the means of a form, something to see through (like a lens) into the nature of the mind itself. Perhaps it is similar to our needing a physical body to live! When the iterative nature of Insight Meditation becomes recursive (and thus incandescent), that would be what we call Mahamudra Meditation, which might be roughly analogous to fusion in physics. Thus, Insight Meditation forever verges on Mahamudra Meditation until as mentioned, one fine day, repeated iteration becomes, instead, infinitely recursive and, as they say, the dewdrop slips into the shining sea.

How that takes place depends on what is called the “Pointing Out Instructions,” which will have to be another article.

THE VIRTUES OF IMPERMANENCE

December 11, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Buddha taught that the Self (our self) has no permanent existence; in other words, our Self is not an enduring entity like an eternal Soul. He did not say that there was no Self, which is a common misunderstanding. Of course there is. And some dharma teachers even say “there is no self,” when they mean what was mentioned above, that it has no permanent existence, so semantics (or sometimes poor English) can muddy the water.

That the Self is not permanent, on its face, is perhaps disappointing (and even upsetting), that we (whoever we think we are) are not somehow permanent, and are not an eternal being or soul like we hoped or have been told by various other religions. How could that discrepancy be? After all, most of us walk around as if we are going to live forever, no?

The Buddhists go on to point out that the impermanence of our Self is not a liability, but actually a blessing. And this is because whoever we are deep-down in there is not carved in stone. Because of that fact, we can change our situation by effort and inspiration, and that is the whole point of dharma practice. And this turns on the idea that if we had an eternal soul, that soul (by definition) would be inviolate, unchanging and, in fact, could not be changed even if we wanted to.

The whole nature of Vajrayana Buddhism is alchemical; it is about changing and transforming whatever ordinary conditions we have into gold, into pure realization. By

rejecting the static concept of an eternal entity, what we gain is the flexibility of change – the ability to transform ourselves. In fact, the Buddha would go on to say, like the popular saying, “change is the only constant.” And that means that change itself is what is eternal. So, at least something is eternal. LOL.

The Buddhist statements to the effect that we are not an immutable, eternal soul like we might have imagined, at first glance, is anything but comforting. If the Buddhists are correct, we lose the sense that our Self (and person) will always be around, no matter what we do, a view that popular wisdom finds consoling. If our Self does not survive the trip to rebirth, what the heck does? This sense of an eternal Self is what most folks would like to believe survives, and this is similar to Plato’s idea that we once were eternally pure and just need to get back to that, or the view of Christians that we fell from grace due to what they call Original Sin, and we must repent our ways and reform. The Buddhist view that we are NOT fallen creatures is reflected in this little poem I wrote years ago, which is a bit of a tongue twister:

NEVER KNOWN

If I know,
I don’t know I know,
And I don’t know I don’t know I know.

I don’t know what I would know,
If I did know.
That’s how I know I don’t know.

So,
I don’t know,
I know I don’t know,
And I know I know I don’t know.

I have never known.

The point of the poem is that in Buddhism we have yet to know the nature of our own mind. It is not that we used to know (or ever knew), but somehow have fallen from that. In the Buddhist concept, there was no original-sin and what we feel to be our Self or Soul is not seen as an eternal entity that has somehow fallen on hard times. Not personally being eternal, it would seem that we have lost any buffer or protection from the harsh realities of Samsara that being eternal might offer. There is no permanent place to hide and, it would seem, no one to hide there.

In other words, we are on our own, which the Buddhists would say is just where the Buddha was. Buddha cannot save us personally. He could not touch you on the forehead and you would suddenly be enlightened. He did enlighten himself and we have to do the same. That is what the Dharma is all about, the Buddha's method or path to enlightenment. Enlightenment is a do-it-yourself project and the dharma is the guide to this.

I am not surprised that folks are a little freaked to think that this carefully fashioned ("perfectly good") personality or Self that we have worked on all our life will go to waste and be abandoned at our death. Who are we without that? I mean, our Self is so familiar and home-like. To think that we can never go home again, never be the same or, worse, that there is no "same" in there that we could even be... is disturbing. Who then am "I"?

It reminds me of when, back in the early 1960s, we first heard about LSD and the fact that it was "mind altering." Wow! This stuff could alter our mind and permanently!

That's what we thought. It NEVER occurred to us that our mind was already altered and that LSD could also perhaps un-alter our mind back toward what the reality actually is, i.e. straighten us out. That's exactly what the dharma does and is designed to do, straighten out what is bent in us, our conceptual distortions. I have to laugh, because it was the assumption back then (1950s) that the mind, just as it comes out of the box, is good-to-go. As if!

In Buddhist terms, just "who" we are is something that apparently we will find out over and over again at each rebirth, when we actually recreate our Self from our various deep impressions and karmic residue. How's that working for us right now? Rebirth reminds me of the movie "Groundhog Day," in that we endlessly build our Self from scratch at each birth.

With rebirth, we have to do something quite similar, go through all that womb-stuff, be born, and proceed to gather about ourselves a personality based on the situation and environment that we are born into at the moment, not what we have now. We collage together some sense of Self (from scratch) all over again, only to totally abandon it at our next death. The whole process has the sense of Sisyphus about it, but, of course, that is just what Samsara is all about.

Instead of having some eternal Soul driving (or guiding) us to reincarnate, we have a massive complex of skandhas (like a massive Id), made up of feelings, perception, impulses, and fluctuating consciousness behind the wheel as we work to reflect all of these deep karmic residues to form a new body, a rebirth, and begin gathering a new personal Self (or warm blanket) all over again. Where is the beauty in all of this?

As I understand it from my own learning curve, the beauty here is that if we had an eternal soul, there would be no transformation possible, no movement or change at all. Therefore, if change is the only constant and we are unchanging (eternal), we are going to be sitting on the sidelines taking this all in, unable to effect any change, an eternal prisoner, which is not what the Buddhists suggest is the case. They say that we very much need the alchemy of transformation, the ability to change, and this is what the Dharma provides – the methods.

It is a lot like all those movies where the angel in Heaven is eternal, but makes a deal to give that up and go back down into this world of Samsara to live and to change something down here for the better, knowing they no longer will be eternal. I mean, how many movies are there with that theme? Having personally built one of the two largest movie databases on the planet (AllMovie.com), I know for a fact that is a common theme.

The Buddhist view is that we abandon our personality to the recycle bin before each rebirth, which insures us a fresh start every time. As the old saying goes, “You can’t take it with you.” That would be the Buddhist approach. And we don’t need to be burdened by all of that past stuff we have done. We probably think we will feel naked or be “no one” without the cloak of the Self (our mask or persona), but that is how the Buddhists view it. And let’s not forget that the Self is something we create out of whole cloth, the sum total of our expectations and attachments. Nothing more.

Here in the West we have no experience with and therefore little faith in rebirth, but no matter. The Buddhists state that it is going to happen regardless.

We will be putting our Humpty-Dumpty Self back together again, believe it or not, but it will be an entirely different person (a new puzzle every time), yet driven by some of the same old emotional chaos that we already know so well.

The Self is like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks; take away the last stick and there is nothing remaining, no ground. Like the Wizard of Oz, peek behind the curtain and there is no wizard, not even a little old man. Yet, at the same time, this raft of karmic residue (and skandhas) floats down the mindstream of time, driven by desire, and dipping into matter here and there for rebirth. Any thoughts”

Tomorrow I plan to talk about our taking rebirth as an animal or whatever. Ready for that?

TO FAIL IGNORANCE BY A METER OR A FOOT

October 8, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The above is a line I wrote back in the 1960s and it stays with me today, a reminder on the kind of Limbo I often stumble into every now and again, mostly again. We all know the adage that everything interesting happens in the borderland between any two states of... whatever. That's what a border is, a divider of some kind, be it between subject and object (as in a dualism), or two states of mind, and so on.

I am, so it would seem, too often suspended in no-man's land, neither here nor there, neither fish nor fowl, floating out there, somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea. This seems to be the nature of transitions of all kinds. In other words, I am always in transition or, as they say, change is the only constant. We all are, if we will look.

Because I believe in spontaneity, in living on the edge of the moment, with my eye peeled for inspiration and change, I sacrifice what otherwise I imagine would be stability of one kind or another, not that I have a choice. In my own way, I go begging on the moment as to what is new in thought, word, and deed, because the pure oxygen of inspiration is to be found only in the present.

I love the sheer freshness of now, this present moment, and the feast or famine that depending on it entails. In this regard, I am very much the grasshopper, and not the ant, and have been this way all my life. I have never had any interest in the past, other than understanding what I can from it. I am much more future-oriented, too

much for my own good, and I am toning that back as best I can, to better just be present. Sooner or later, each of us will have to walk back (and balance) our deviation from the present.

Like so many things, we are prejudiced either to one side or another of any concept, in this case the past or the future. And the present seems like such an infinitesimally small fulcrum to attempt to balance on, that it is practically impossible. We are naturally in one camp or the other. And it came as a great shock when I realized that even the present moment was not a place of refuge in time, but rather only a unique opportunity for me to rest in the actual nature of the mind, which is beyond time, beyond past, present, or future. Learning how to do that is the province of what is called Mahamudra Meditation, a form of meditation that I have been studying and practicing for over 26 years.

In review, the past is stale and the future is not yet ripe, so that leaves the present, or so I always thought. However, it was a mistake to think that the present was a place I could escape to. My first true dharma teacher would often recite these lines to me from an old folk song:

NO HIDING PLACE DOWN THERE

I ran to the rock,
To hide my face,
The rock cried out,
No hiding place.
The rock cried out,
I'm burning too,
And want to go to Heaven,
The same as you.

The point of this blog is to (hopefully gently) introduce the thought that, although we can grasp that the past is past and the future is still future, there is also no escape in the present. And the only rest we can hope to have is to rest in the true nature of our mind itself (whatever that is), which of course the Buddhists have been pointing out to us all this time, which nature is just what we have been so steadfastly ignoring.

I know that I was brainwashed by the 1970s's use of phrases like "Be Here Now" (and the like) into assuming that the present moment is somehow a refuge, when in fact it is only a means, which I will now attempt to explain. All of the words and analogies given above may still conceal what I am trying to communicate, so I will present it again as straight-out as I can.

The great adept Tilopa, in his classic "Six Words of Advice" clearly said "Don't prolong the past," "Don't Invite the future," and also "Don't think about the present." He then closed by saying "Right now, relax, and rest as it is."

Because we exist in what the Buddhists call "Samsara" (this cyclic world of ups and downs), the past, future, OR the present can never be either a refuge or a final place to rest. If this is true, what are we to do?

Even though we cannot take refuge in the ever-changing "Present Moment," the "Now" is still the key to this puzzle. We may not be able to rest in the present, but the present is the means through which we can realize the true nature of the mind and rest in that. Obviously, if this were easy, we would all be doing just that.

The historical Buddha carefully laid out a method or

path for doing this, which is typically referred to as the Dharma. It involves learning what is called Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), which calms the mind and gives it mindful-focus. On top of Tranquility Meditation, Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is then learned, which allows us to make use of the dualistic world of change we just mentioned (Samsara) to look through the present into the true nature of the mind itself. And finally, a combination of Tranquility and Insight Meditation, called Mahamudra Meditation (or The Great Perfection) allows us to see through time itself (past, present, and future) and rest in the mind's true nature itself.

An analogy that I use is that of trying to thread a very fine needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation removes the shakiness of the hands, so that Insight Meditation can thread the needle. And the resulting combination of the two, which is called Mahamudra Meditation, allows us to use (and see through) the artifacts of the mind (thoughts, concepts, etc.) and rest in the nature of the mind itself, which is beyond time, beyond the past, present, and future.

TODAY: THE DARK OF THE MOON

October 12, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Note: long blog, not for everyone, but for the chosen few, as in those who choose to read it. I am going to stop apologizing for the length of my blogs (I hope), starting today.]

Today is the last of the three dark days before the New Moon, the darkest part of the declining lunar cycle, when the light of the reflected Sun disappears entirely and cannot be seen. This is the 29th day of the lunar month of 30 days, a time when the Tibetan monks invoke the fierce dharma protectors. We are focusing on it right now because of all the other contextual astrology factors which are forming just now.

I have mentioned in the last couple of blogs something about the astrology of these particular days. Since I have studied astrology for so long (and practiced it too), I could describe this or that particular aspect of this moment, etc. I did a bit of that yesterday. Rather than doing more of that, if you will allow me, it would be much more useful for you if I sketch out something about what astrology can and cannot do for us. I don't believe many people actually know what that is.

Astrology is, at the very least, a calculus, the study of heavenly change, if not an entire language through which we can meaningfully express ourselves and our life. Since it represents the largest objects we know of (Sun, planets, Moon, etc.), it is as good as any other system of measurement or guidance, and probably better than most. The Tibetan teachings support

astrology, big time, provided that we understand that astrology is a relative truth, a truth about our life in this Samsaric world, but one that is by its very nature dualistic; it always has a subject (me or you) and an object (planets, heavenly bodies).

Like a rat caught in an endless maze, astrology (or any other kind of psychological therapy) will never deliver us from the maze itself, which is not meant as a criticism, but a fact. That is the nature of relative truths; they can but guide us this way and that within the maze of life, but never out of it. I consider astrology as a useful preliminary, capable of aerodynamically streamlining us, improving our attitude or approach (how we take the winds of change) and by that helping us to remove unnecessary obscurations. The Tibetan Buddhists also have relative truths and practices, what they call the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries, and they do much the same thing. The Buddhists also make clear, as mentioned, that relative means and truth do not produce absolute results. In general, they are remedial only. They can but prepare us.

The operative question is how do relative truths and methods ever reach the point of becoming absolute truth and methods? Astrology is limited to this world we live in, including the heavenly bodies and their interaction. It offers no absolute truth or methods to reach beyond Samsara, but Buddhism does. What are they?

In Buddhism, it is very simple. Absolute truth is the recognition of the true (the actual) nature of our own mind, not only in the world (like astrology is concerned with), but also on the inside, the mind itself. Absolute truth is absolute because it has no subject or object (we are all in), and it is absolute because it is a realization that, once it takes place, never goes away. It is not relative. It does not change. Relativity and relative truths are constantly changing, leading us here, leading us there, and on around. That's their nature.

THE THEORY OF RELATIVITY

In summary, astrology, as mentioned, is a relative truth. This is not meant as a slight to astrology, but is a simple fact. As mentioned, Buddhism also has relative truths and their practices, practices that help prepare us for stepping beyond relativity, ways of short-circuiting the deer-in-the-headlights stare that is a sign of our Samsaric existence. Relative truths are endemic to this cyclic world of ups and downs.

However, relative truths are more than just a matter of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. They are remedial, helpful, but they are not intended to (and cannot) take us beyond this cyclic world view we are embedded in.

All of the self-help, astrology, psychic, psychological therapies, and so-forth methods are all relative truths. They have no way to resolve Samsaric existence for us and never were intended to do so. Their merit is that, at best, they can help shape our attitude. That being said, how are we supposed to transition to what is called by Buddhists the "Absolute Truth?"

We already mentioned making use of relative truth to

help prepare us for approaching absolute truth, but there is more. Relative truth, when used meditatively, can also function as a means, a window, into absolute truth.

RELATIVE AND ABSOLUTE TRUTHS

You might think that this topic will be boring, but it's not. There seems to be confusion about the difference between the terms relative and absolute truth as used by the Tibetan Buddhists, partly because words and language itself are relative-truths. And they go on to say that absolute truth is ineffable, beyond the elaboration of words, and here we are describing both relative and absolute. It is a given that the definition, "absolute" has no advocate here, word-wise, in this discussion.

It may help to point out (and this is an easy way to determine which we are dealing with) that "Relative Truth" always involves a subject and an object, what are called dualisms. Relative truth very much operates in this Samsaric world of ups and downs that we all live in, so it is always about solving problems in this day-to-day relative world, this world of observer and the observed, me as opposed to you, we and them, and so on. It is very true that relative truths may serve to facilitate absolute truths, but the opposite is also true, relative truth (in some cases) may not ultimately serve our absolute needs. We can be misled as well as be led.

A relative truth, like taking an aspirin, may help us get through the day, help us to get from here to there, to make progress in our day-to-day living, but it will not pull us out of the world of Samsara or solve our relative problems absolutely, to play on words.

However, a move toward an absolute truth will begin to solve our relative problems, absolutely. A relative truth

will only solve our absolute or total problems, relatively, and are never more than a step in the right direction. Thus a relative truth may result in a temporary improvement in our Samsaric situation, but not an absolute change.

In this way, to use a parallel analogy, having a spiritual experience that comes and goes would be a relative truth no matter how “enlightened” it appears, while having an actual realization that arises out of an experience (and remains permanently) would be an absolute truth. In other words, a spiritual experience that perhaps reaches great heights, but a month later is but a memory we have would be an example of a relative truth.

However, a spiritual realization that arises from within experience, illuminates us, and that realization never goes away would be an absolute truth.

Years ago (as I posted yesterday) my dharma teacher explained to me that astrology, something I am very much involved in, is a relative truth, not an absolute truth. As he put it, “Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not its root.” My favorite analogy for illustrating this is that of a sphere, with its surface and its center. A relative truth will enable us to move from here to there around the surface of the sphere, thus enabling us to relatively improve our position in this cyclic world existence we all share. In other words, such a move could (or not) improve our situation, relatively. We may end up better off than we were before the change or move, but are still in the same game of cyclic life with its sufferings, etc. Yet, another (and none-fortuitous) move might find us taking a step back in progress, again, relatively.

An absolute truth or move would be a move from the

surface of the sphere toward the center, a move or change that amounts to an order of magnitude difference rather than a simple shift of attitude or position.

Similarly, in Buddhist dharma practice, there are specific practices for working with our situation, relatively. Tong-Len would be an example of such a practice. There are also practices that are aimed at absolute realization. Mahamudra Meditation would be an example of that.

Relative truth and its practices are considered by Buddhists to be an example of skillful means, a way of adjusting our position in external Samsaric-reality more aerodynamically, so that we can best take the winds of change while we prepare ourselves for taking more absolute steps to enlightenment.

In short, action in this world involves relative truths, a way to get from here to there, so that we can eventually get somewhere more toward the center. Ultimately, it is all about absolute truth and absolute reality, but the steps toward the absolute have to be taken relatively, as confusing as that may sound.

LOOKING FORWARD

All of the mass of thoughts that plague us from moment to moment, the hopes and fears we have, and all that which swirls around us in our mind are not just good for nothing. In fact, they are good for something. Not only that, all these thoughts are crucial to have on hand when we get into some of the more advanced forms of mind-training, like Insight Meditation.

In fact, these very thoughts that torture us now become the means for our eventual realization and

enlightenment. They act as fuel for Insight Meditation, when we learn how to use them. The endless train of thoughts that we too often follow in our distraction are the very means to free ourselves from them.

As the Tibetans point out, thoughts are to the mind what waves are to the ocean. All are water or all are mind. An important part of Insight Meditation training is to learn to stop reading and following the content of our thoughts (what they happen to be about) and instead learn to recognize their actual nature as they arise, that thoughts are just the mind in motion (like waves on the ocean). Instead of an endless source of distraction, thoughts then become the means to liberation from our distraction by them.

In fact, many of the great siddhas clearly state that without thoughts, there could be no enlightenment, because on the road to realization there comes a time when thoughts are our only means to greater awareness. They are the sole fuel for the fire of realization. By identifying their nature as identical to the nature of the mind itself, we weaken and gradually remove their apparent dualism and realize them as one with the nature of the mind itself. As Sir Edwin Arnold wrote in his translation of "The Light of Asia," "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea."

UNALTERING THE MIND

December 21, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have to laugh when I think back to 1964 in Berkeley, California when I first dropped LSD. It was in the bathroom of a little café about 10:30 PM, so there was not much ceremony. And my girlfriend at the time (very short time) had it all planned out for me. We would go to her friend's house, where they had a stereo, and play some kind of mood music. Perhaps they would light a candle and some incense. Well, the incense and candle didn't happen, but the drive to her friend's house and the music did.

The thing of it was, I found the whole approach not what my mind had in mind. Not even near! Instead, my mind wanted to get right down to the nitty-gritty, to where the rubber meets the road, and have a good look. Any idea of steering or guiding this trip went out the window early on. There was no steering wheel and whatever I thought, there I went, which is exactly how they describe the bardo state after death, when we lose our senses and float on out.

I am not going to tell you about my acid trip. I have done that before and in triplicate. Instead, I want to say something about my expectations of acid and the reality. To put it in the mildest and most even tone, the reality was not in the same universe as the expectations. Expectations were where I was coming from, and the reality is where I went, and they are NOT on the same plane or order of magnitude. The reality was exponential in comparison, like almost straight up.

Back then in early 1964, LSD was still new. Hardly anyone I hung with had ever taken it, but the stories about it were already legion. All the druggies, those folks who like to smoke dope (or whatever) had never encountered what they called a “mind-altering” drug, as in permanently mind-altering. And much of acid’s hype was wrapped around that concept of altering the mind. That little cube of sugar was capable of altering your mind, so they said... forever! We couldn’t even get our 1950s-mindset around that concept, not even a little.

In other words, LSD’s rep was that it was a mind-altering trip, one that only had a one- way ticket, with no round-trip. i.e. there was no coming back to where you came from. Trust me, that was duly noted by myself, and everyone I knew. Yet some of us took it anyway. That’s how tired we were of where we were, and how much we wanted out of the 1950’s mindset from which we came.

I have never been much of a druggie. I took acid maybe seven times, only two of which were memorable, but those two were unforgettable. I’m still writing about them today, forty-some years later. And here’s the thing, and this is going to be hard to express and hard for some of you grasp:

All my life up to that point I had assumed (implicitly) that my mind was good to go and had always been pretty much a blank slate, clear and present. It never, never, never occurred to me, even for an instant, that my mind was just the reverse, like all fucked up. I had never had the opportunity to take off my (or so I thought) rose-colored glasses and see things as just as they are. That is what is called a “mind set.” I, along with about everyone I knew, did not know we had a “mindset,” that our mind had already been set for us. If we knew the

term mind-set, it was only very abstractly, just as you are reading about it here, i.e. at some real distance.

So, my first (and subsequent) acid trip did in fact not alter my mind, but just the reverse. It un-altered my mind and made me aware that it had (to my surprise) already been altered and, but for LSD's intervention, permanently at that. So I did not end up in an altered or alternate dimension, but instead got a glimpse of an un-altered dimension.

And I fervently wished that the unaltered dimension was permanent!

Instead, it became something I had to work hard to realize, to uncrease and straighten- out my already altered mind into some kind of organic or natural unaltered state.

I am not suggesting that you run out and take acid. Not in the least, plus those times when we were breaking the mold of the 1950s are long gone. If I took acid today, it would not be the same, because that straight-jacket world of the 1950s was liberated way back then. You can't salt the salt. This is not to say that we don't exist in a world that is squeezing us the wrong way or that how we see life is not more like a wince than a good look.

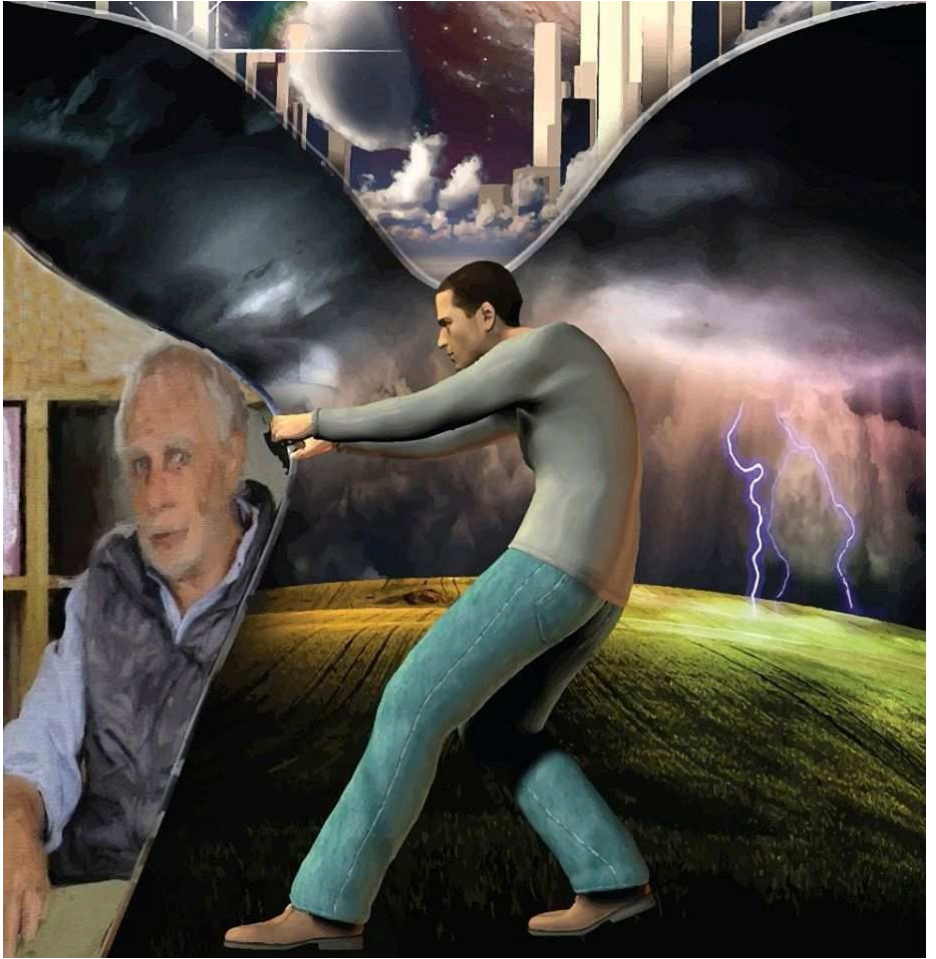
The point of this blog is to make clear that the mind-training methods of the Tibetan Buddhists perform exactly what LSD performed so long ago. They un-alter our mind and help us to experience ordinary or unaltered mind for the first time. And don't imagine that dropping a tab of LSD will hurry the process up. On the contrary, my LSD trip took at least several decades for me to sort it out, and even then it was only with the help of the Tibetan mind-training methods. I remember

hearing the story, when the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche took acid. His one comment was “Nothing happened!” and I doubt that he got a hold of some bad acid. His mind was already unaltered.

In fact the Tibetan methods are way better (and faster) than what I could do on my own, because, while I was working hard on sorting things out I had learned on acid by myself, I did not have all of the correct methods to do so.

What I learned is that our mind is already altered beyond recognition of its natural state, from birth onward. We just don't know it. The Tibetan mind-training methods help us to un-alter it and to eventually recognize our mind's true nature. That is what all of this writing I do is about: recognition!

[This graphic is something I found fun, reminiscent of an acid trip, taking off the blinders and getting a glimpse of my future.]



VIRTUAL REALITY

October 20, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Today there are more and more articles stating that virtual reality is our future. LOL. What's funny to me is that for most of my life virtual reality has been a fact, not an option or a possibility. It is hard to find anything else. And it is never truer than with spirituality and my unflinching expectations of it -- all fabricated.

With any undertaking, but especially with virtually any approach to increased awareness (what can be called "spirituality"), we are going into it blind, armed with little more than whatever we have been able to conjure up along the way. Talk about a patchwork quilt; my expectations were pretty much made up as I went along, picking up a trail of pieces, ideas, conversations, imagination, teachings, books, etc. and imprinting them much like as a kid I used to imprint Silly Putty.

And there are layers within layers within layers of it. And it's still with me, no matter how much I realize it is nothing more than an ignorant hologram; it still has me caught spellbound. I shake my head awake from one part, only to find it fixing itself on some other part of the same image, my imagination and my expectations. My, my, my.

It is not like I ever knew any part of it at all. The entire thing was made up from whole cloth. I know. You have all heard this from me before, but I ask you. Do you know what I am pointing at here?

Meditation is sitting on a cushion, focusing the mind,

minding the mind, training the mind. Perhaps it is spending a day, a week, or a month of sitting. Or, going into a cave, far from it all and sitting. But is it? Is it really? How do you know?

What I didn't understand and often still do not, is that these recipes for spiritual awareness and awakening, these techniques are not even fair blueprints for what is to come. They really don't even get us into the ballpark of the reality. It's more like endlessly striking flint to steel and never getting a spark.

In reality, much of spiritual awakening is nothing more than letting go of and giving up on all our expectations. It is turning away from this special form of idol worship we call our expectations, and wandering out into the pasture of life itself. But it is a special kind of giving up.

Spiritual awakening does not just happen here or there, like on the cushion or in a special place of worship. Of course, it can, but it is more likely to happen everywhere and anytime. Remember, "Realization" is the realization of the mind itself, which mind embraces everything and everywhere and all the time there is.

I have spent so much of my life waiting for my expectations to be fulfilled that I seldom see realization and enlightenment sneaking up on me, unannounced. Literally, I am always the last one to know. Of course, it has to be that way. We are ignorant until we are not.

The fog and mist of a morning that gradually becomes the soft pitter-patter of rain falling all around us, finally turning into a hard rain that dissolves and washes away our expectations until we find ourselves afloat. At what point do we know it's raining? That's an analogy for how it is. Who would'a thunk it?

WHAT IS VIPASSANA (INSIGHT MEDITATION)?

October 14, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the process (sometimes a struggle) to learn all of the terms and techniques involved in dharma practice, we tend to forget the carrot on the end of the stick. For me, that would be Vipassana Meditation and ultimately Mahamudra Meditation.

While it is, more or less, easy (at least possible) to define Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) in words, the same is not nearly as easy with Insight Meditation, which is called in Sanskrit Vipassana. It seems to be beyond elaboration (verbal definition), at least according to the Tibetans. However, it is so important to those of you starting out to at least know about Vipassana that I can't help but attempt to communicate at least a flavor as to what it involves.

Vipassana (and techniques like Mahamudra Meditation) involves learning to use the mind to look at itself, rather than applying the mind to outside subjects like mathematics, botany, or life, or objects that, although abstract, are still external, as in an object that the mind (subject) looks at (object), thus dualistic. In our society, we assume the mind, just as it comes out of the box, is good-to-go, as they say. The Asians take a different approach, suggesting that the mind admits training and actually requires it for certain mental work. So, before we take the mind out for a walk in the world, the Asians suggest that it has first to be trained by taking a good look at itself. A rather crude analogy might be that, before we look at the outside world, we might want to have the prescription for our eye glasses checked out. Another analogy might be that we best clean our own glasses before viewing anything important. Learning

Vipassana Meditation, at least for Westerners (and probably everyone), is not an easy process.

Before we can use Vipassana in our thinking or contemplation, we have to be able to actually do it. You can't fake it. As mentioned, we are used to using the mind (subject) to focus on an object. In that, as mentioned, we assume that the mind is fit for the task, which is an unwarranted assumption according to the Tibetan teachers. As for focusing and basic mindfulness, that practice is what is called Shamata Meditation (Tranquility Meditation), also called Samadhi, which is a generic term for the variety of tranquility meditations.

Here in the West, most folks practice some form of relaxation therapy, which they call "meditation." Basic Tranquility Meditation is not relaxation therapy. And Vipassana, Tranquility Meditation's older sister is not even on most people's radar.

In order to undertake Vipassana, we first have to have a certain stability of mind (Tranquility Meditation) in order to allow the mind to come to rest in-focus on an object, any object or no object at all (there is also formless object. I am sure this is what scientists must do when they contemplate mathematical problems, i.e. have developed a certain stability of mind and mental focus.

However, Vipassana Meditation is different. It is not a relative (and thus not dualistic) meditational technique. Vipassana is non-dualistic; in fact, it resolves dualisms. Instead of focusing on the content of a thought or problem (what the thought is about), with Vipassana we look directly at the thought itself, regardless of its content. In other words, we don't look at the content or a thought or follow a train of thought, as we are used to

doing in ordinary thinking or conversation.

In Vipassana, we look directly at the (generic) nature of the thought, any thought, and the nature of thoughts is not the same as their content. In other words, we don't think about the thought and/or what it means. We just look at it and, I would say, look through it. This process of looking at the nature of thoughts rather than what they are about (their content) is not all that easy to learn. It requires a teacher. When a thought is looked at directly for what it is, rather than what it is about, its response is to dissolve and vanish, much like a wave merges back into the ocean. The thought we look at directly with the mind dissolves back into the ocean of the mind. They are one and the same as regards their nature, just as waves and the ocean are both water.

Vipassana is also an exercise in removing duality, an exercise in the non-dual nature of our attention, kind of like the Heisenberg-principle problem in that by looking at the mind objectively, the very act of our looking affects what we see. Any imagined "objectivity" is still subjective.

When the mind looks directly at the nature of a thought, the thought itself vanishes and the gap that remains when the thought vanishes is notable for its lucidity and clarity. In looking, there is an injection of great clarity (and lucidity) that simply expands the mind. By default, we find ourselves resting in that clear and lucid gap that remains when the thought vanishes. And that special kind of lucid-resting, that expansive clarity and lucidity, makes room or allows the mind itself to become more receptive. There is what the Tibetans call a gap or opening.

Sometimes, when writing while using Insight Meditation,

I feel that in this expanded space/time that Vipassana allows, my thoughts come together in a more natural or intuitive manner. Vipassana gives the mind space and room to adjust itself more comfortably or naturally. An analogy might be the ability to suddenly inject more space into time, freeing up whatever is present, and giving everything enough room to expand and then reform itself in a more natural manner. It is like letting go of an object that we have gripped too tightly, and then taking a new, and more relaxed, grip. The more we look at the nature of thoughts, the more lucidity and clarity result. It is like breathing, and it is cumulative.

We could say that Vipassana gives us room, makes space/time more elastic and flexible, so that when the elasticity contracts once again, everything falls more properly into place. Things come together in a more true or natural manner. By continually invoking Vipassana, these shots of mental adrenalin at some point become incandescent (and recursive) and, like fusion, we have Mahamudra Meditation, the above incandescent process as a natural (and permanent) state of mind. This is what is called “realization,” and it is permanent. It never goes away.

That’s why learning Vipassana Meditation is very, very important for us. By using Vipassana, we can approach any problem and receptively pull its essentiality out of the ether. It gives up its particular secret because we have grasped, generically, the nature of the mind itself, so the particulars just naturally reveal themselves. Vipassana is a perfect example of “A step toward the center resolves all particulars on the periphery.” Through Vipassana, things just naturally reveal themselves and come into focus. That is the idea. That is why it is called “insight” meditation.

Keep in mind that Vipassana is non-dual: When we look with the eyes of Vipassana, we “See.” There is only the Seeing itself and nothing to be seen. We are “all in,” as the saying goes and are ourselves included (and fully extended) in the moment. For me, the fallout of Insight Meditation, when I come out of that moment (or time), is, as mentioned, clarity and luminosity, but the aftermath also includes clarity about whatever I have in mind or am considering. Vipassana is the most useful tool I have ever found for revealing the meaning of the Tibetan Buddhist phrase “The Mind is a wish-fulfilling gem.” Every last thought and invention has come from the mind, and Vipassana is the ideal tool for us to examine the mind itself.

Any questions please?

WHEN THE LEAST IS THE MOST

November 15, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Sometime the least is the most I can do to make a difference in my life. There are days and times when I find it very hard for me to get into motion, to do anything. It's like I am frozen there in time, unable to raise even a finger until something inside me says "Go!" When those times come, what is it I can do as a gesture that counts?

I would suggest to you what the Tibetan Buddhists have suggested to me, which is to make an offering, to offer something of myself, even if it is only a smile, some sign that I am still there. Rinpoche tells a story of a great lama or teacher who every time, while traveling, that he passed a beautiful meadow or stream, he would stop everything (make his entourage wait) and straight-away perform an offering ceremony in which he offered up the beauty of what he saw in the meadow to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that they may bless sentient beings, to the effect that all beings could enjoy the beauty that he was seeing.

Of course, offerings come in all shapes and sizes. A common offering is to light a simple butter lamp and dedicate it properly, or offer a flower or food. Of course, I could bring my wife flowers and offer them to her (which reminds me I have not done that for a long while). That would perhaps be good for me around home, but the Buddhists point out that the best offerings are not about getting something out of our offering, like the goodwill of my wife or kids. Rinpoche points out that there may be some personal gain for us

in such an offering, but little merit beyond that.

Much better, say the Buddhists, is to offer whatever you want (or have) to offer to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that they may bless (and they know how) all sentient beings in a way that will best benefit everyone, and “everyone,” of course, includes us.

Much is made in the traditional texts about the purity of what we offer, like the freshest flower, the best food, the finest brocade, pure gold, and so on. That too can be important, but what is most important of all is our intent when offering. Every offering finally turns on the purity of intent.

If our intent is to gain merit or happiness, the happiness or pride of giving, for ourselves, the results of that offering will be very limited, like just to us. How much better (so the teachings say) if we can, instead, make an offering that will benefit all sentient beings, and who can do that better than the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who have gone before us?

And let me repeat: what we offer has to mean something to us. We have to be moved. It has to be something we wish to offer and we actually need to wish to offer it as a gesture, not just offer it because we think it is the right thing to do. It seems that much of what passes for offerings these days is simply to find the most expensive something or other, something just short of the point where we are harming ourselves by purchasing it, and to offer that. You know, a 14-Karat gold this or that. Giving until it hurts is one way to measure a gift and giving, but in my opinion, not the best way. It is so materialistic to measure everything by money, to have our intent just be that we give until it hurts.

Our intent is better measured by feelings of beauty, compassion, love, and concern that come over us like waves, when we are inspired to offer that love and concern gratuitously and spontaneously. It can happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye; we are overcome by our pure intent and we can offer that. “That” is worth offering and we already ARE offering that, just because it occurred.

As a sign of our intent (when we feel it), we can make an offering by lighting a candle, offering a flower, giving someone a smile or a hug. The important part is that WE are touched, moved, and somehow feeling in the spirit.

Great saints and lamas offer everything of beauty or spirit that moves them, pausing in their day to offer or dedicate what they see (and experience) to the Buddhas, that all sentient beings may feel what they now feel. We too can do that. It is easy, and feels great.

The Buddhists call this kind of offering “Dedicating the Merit,” and it can be done at any time and take place anywhere that we are moved to make that offering. All of the great teachings I have been to, all of the great sadhanas I have practiced or have been present at when rinpoches recite them, all have an offering or dedicating of the merit at their conclusion.

And they all follow a similar form, which I find easy to do myself, just by doing what they do. I simply recite that whatever offering I wish to give (or merit I have attained), I dedicate to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that they may benefit all sentient beings of the three times (past-present-future), the ten directions, and all those beings in the myriads of world

systems.

Heartfelt offering to benefit all beings (and the dedication of any merit that comes from that offering) brings great benefit to all and to us as well. It could be as simple as offering a friendship, with no strings attached. Time and time again, when our Rinpoche is asked what is holding us back from greater awareness, his answer is always “lack of merit, lack of merit.”

I find it is easier (and more effective) to offer what I love and feel, at the moment I love and feel it, rather than to wait until sometime later to dedicate the merit of my actions. Both methods work, but making little offerings along the way, throughout the day, is, as they say, “Meritorious.”

I think that many of us do this naturally, no?

WHERE WITS END

November 4, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Sometime ago I begin to see that meditators don't meditate "on purpose." When we have done enough of what are called the "preliminary practices," meditation is something that happens quite spontaneously and we may even have to scramble to find a comfortable spot to let it happen. Therefore I can well understand that finding a cave or any spot out of the way of the busyness of life makes sense, not because we want to get away from others, but because we need a spot for our internal meditation to play out. Nothing else feels comfortable or we don't feel comfortable anywhere else. And "anywhere else" is not a place, but a position or attitude that we assume trying to get comfortable. It reminds of a pregnant mother dog trying to find a place to have her puppies.

I always thought that meditation was something we did, like "I will now meditate," but that is not it. Meditation is something that at some point naturally happens and, when it does, we have to relax (yet still hold an appropriate position) and just let it run its course. Our own increasing sense of discomfort finds us turning and twisting this way and that, trying to find an attitude or angle, a position and posture that is the most workable for us, i.e. bearable.

Wanting to do something and nothing at the same time might be a fair description of what I am pointing at. Or, the idea that doing nothing is in fact something. Trying to assume the appropriate position to engage the mind finds us aerodynamically placing ourselves so that the

winds of the mind and change can work themselves out through us. There is really no choice.

I am reminded of these new three-gimbal video-camera stabilizers that, no matter how you move them around, manage to keep your focus fixed and in perfect balance, like a gyroscope. That is a good analogy.

The Tibetans use the phrase “Beyond Elaboration,” suggesting that language itself runs out of meaning, that language can only mean so much, that there is something beyond “meaning,” which is, of course, what is called simple realization.

Moving beyond words doesn’t mean running out of words, but (as the words themselves say) running “beyond” words, outpacing them, leaving words behind, moving beyond “meaning” itself.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his "Tractatus Logico-philosophicus" (here quoted by astrologer Theodor Landscheidt) states something to the effect that “language has the same inner structures as the reality of our experience. Language and world are isomorphic. The limits of language signify the limits of the conceptualized world.” How true that is, that concepts are limited, no matter how skillful we are with words and language.

Realization marks the end of meaning, the point where meaning runs out. The fact is that “meaning” itself is limited, finite. The emotional stretch of words and language can only reach so far, beyond which we still are there, but it’s unspeakable. We are dumb for words to describe what has no meaning, no sense. In fact, we call it nonsense, but is it? We can only point at it, perhaps recommend it, but not effectively describe what

is there, and that notion appears perhaps first only as a fluctuating experience, and then finally (like an exclamation point) as a static realization. As they say, it's unspeakable.

There are no words for it.

And, as a brief sidebar on the end of emotions, meaning the point where emotions run out and become ineffective. I have always been a little suspicious of emotional drama, whether writ large and acted out or just greasing the cracks of our sentences. It is true that emotions are the oil that articulates much of our language, the way most identify something as true or not; however, we all kind of know that an emotional plea is no guarantee of truth.

The Buddhists might say that emotions are what they call a relative or dualistic truth, one involving a subject and an object. To use an analogy, emotions succeed in moving us from here to there around the periphery of a sphere, but not toward the center. "Realization" is motion toward the center of the sphere. When we are young, we love emotions, but as we grow older they appear not as convincing, less a measure of anything.

Emotions, whether good, bad, or indifferent, are off-center and karma creating. As mentioned, they oil-up the language, but often could use a good degreaser. Am I saying not to be emotional? Not a bit, as if we had a choice! I am saying be AWARE of when you are emotional. That's what musicians do.

Anyway, these notes on the natural arising of meditation should interest a few of you, perhaps even enough to ask questions?

WHEREVER YOU GO, THERE YOU ARE

October 30, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Well, yes and no. We've all heard that phrase, which is an attempt to bring continuity to our life, but is it even true? If we are a journeyman (or journeywoman) in life, we work with what we have, with what is given us, or as the occultists say with what is "permitted." We pick up where life drops us off and our situation can change from day to day.

What I am asking here is: have you noticed that as to the "There you are," the "you" that is there can vary from day to day? I am not just talking about mood swings, my minor ups and downs, but rather somewhat larger moods or life swings that are more difficult to keep track of. It's a little like one of those carnival rides, where your cab or car goes around in a circle, but the whole ride (all the cabs) go around in an even larger circle. In other words, we are turning within a turning.

Well, my life is like that. I can mostly manage the daily ups and downs, but those large changes or swings I have more trouble keeping track of. Instead, I tend to fall asleep in those larger swings; I get used to one phase, only to be suddenly awakened as another phase of the larger turning rears its head, and this happens over and over again and often as if this is the first time. It's always news when my larger life phase-mood changes.

And even worse, in the new phase that comes on I may realize that I do not like who I was in the previous phase, which really complicates things. So, it seems

that I am either always painting myself in a corner or time after time find myself up a blind alley, one I have to somehow walk back. The saving grace, if there is one, is that after being upset by the shifting sands of time (i.e. the larger changes or turnings), I eventually get hold of myself, stabilize and remember that the only way to handle this is to accept what is happening (how I now am), embrace it, and work with that, even if it means starting all over again, like the movie “Groundhog Day.”

And worst yet, as mentioned, is that I can wake up in the middle of one phase (into what is a new phase) and realize that I do not like the previous phase of myself that I just woke up from. That is not so much fun, but the remedy is still the same: clear my desk of the old stuff, accept how things are, and work from where I am now. I soon turn the new phase into something I am comfortable with. I get with the program. However, it is a little unsettling to have to start over all the time. Yet the tools I use in starting over do get better and better as time goes on. Is that the same thing that happens when we take rebirth?

I am reminded of the poem by William Butler Yeats called “The Second Coming” and the lines:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”

I don't feel that dramatic, but Samsara is characterized as endless cycles, each coming around again, from which we hopefully gain a little knowledge each round. Does any of this register with you?

Here is a little poem I wrote years ago that kind of expresses the above, but it was written before I learned

to handle these gyres within gyres very well, but, still, it has a point.

TIME TO MIND

Lost again in the swing of time,
I agree to forget,
What I find so hard to remember:
This moment.

Always later,
Urged awake by impermanence,
I am back again,
But farther down the road.

Time takes my mind,
In small and larger bites.

The little ones,
I reconnect and can remember,
But the larger gaps,
I can only leap across,
Guess at,
And hopefully learn,
To say more in silence,
Than in words.

WORDS OF ADVICE FROM THE KARMAPA

October 24, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the spring of 2015, while visiting the United States, the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, gave a talk in which he said:

“Outward-looking wisdom is basically knowledge which we acquire through study. Usually our mind becomes learned about everything except itself. We are wise about everything except our own mind, which usually remains utterly ignorant of itself.”

His Holiness the Karmapa then went on to say:

“Therefore I think that the most important thing is to gain the wisdom that is the “Recognition” of the mind itself. I believe that is the basis of true wisdom. We call this ‘knowing one and liberating everything’, because when you gain that kind of insight it is all-inclusive and allows the power or intensity of your wisdom and learning to increase naturally.”

The Karmapa distinguishes between “outward-looking wisdom,” which involves using our mind to examine and study the outside world (going to school, etc.), which traditionally has been referred to as “Knowing everything and liberating none” and inward-looking wisdom, using the mind to examine itself, which, as he phrases it, is “Knowing one and liberating everything.”

The Karmapa is laying it all out for us in very simple language. Here in the West we are brought up with the idea of using our mind to study the outside world. This is

what we all do and most of our professions and livelihoods are based on this approach. However, as the Karmapa points out, the “mind” that we use to study the outside world is “unexamined.” It never occurs to us (nor have we been taught) to qualify our mind, to check it out to make sure it is clear, unobstructed, and, as they say, good-to-go.

Instead, like any other commodity, we use the mind, just as it comes out of the box. This is what is meant by an “unexamined mind.” We never looked it over, much less examined it in any detail. Nor have any of our teachers or mentors instructed us otherwise. We just use it; that’s all.

I believe it was Socrates who said that an unexamined life is not worth living. Well, the Tibetan Buddhists are suggesting that an unexamined mind is not worth using and that we would do well to check out and examine the mind BEFORE we train it on the outside world. This concept is almost completely foreign to those of us living here in the West.

We have never been asked to examine the nature of our own mind. This fact is what the Karmapa is pointing out. What can we do about that? The Karmapa goes on to state:

"Nowadays many people are interested in Buddhism and especially meditation. But they think of meditation as some kind of spiritual therapy, like spiritual massage. They hope that by practicing meditation they will be able to reduce the stress and pressure that they feel in their busy lives and relax. This is fine, but it is not a complete practice of meditation as taught in Buddhism. That requires a more exclusive or intensive training. "

"I think the hope that meditation will put you at ease and make you more comfortable may cause some disillusionment. Actually I think that the intensive practice of meditation will probably make you very uncomfortable initially, because old habits die hard, and in the practice of meditation we are attempting to replace many of our old negative habits with new ones. This goes against the grain of our personalities and therefore will probably be very uncomfortable."

"The aim of Shamatha practice [Tranquility Meditation] is not simply to achieve peace of mind and feel comfortable and relaxed in one's mind. Shamatha practice is actually to improve our minds, and to change our personalities for the better by weakening and finally remedying our kleshas [disturbing emotions]. Some people think the point is just to feel good, relaxed and comfortable, but that is not it. The function of Shamatha is to serve as a remedy for our kleshas."

"It is not enough to practice meditation only in our shrine room sitting on the cushion," he continued. "It is necessary to bring the practice of Shamatha into all post-meditation activities, including our work. It is especially important to be able to apply it when we become highly emotional."

In the above words, you are hearing directly from His

Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, what (hopefully) I have been trying to communicate in my many dharma posts for these last number of years. I hope you find this post useful.

As for some background story, I (along with my family) had the extreme good fortune to visit the young Karmapa in 1997 at his ancestral home (Tsurphu Monastery) high in the mountains of Central Tibet. And I didn't think just to go there on my own. To my astonishment, my dharma teacher for the last 32 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, told my wife and I to go and see His Holiness during an interview. It came out of the blue, and he said we were to go within a month! We were dumbfounded, but went and it opened a door to so very much.

My wife Margaret and three of my kids (Anne, May, and Michael Andrew) went with me and the many adventures and stories of that trip are available in a free e-book if you are in the story mood. The book is also available in paperback on [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-bo.../Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

[Photo of the Karmapa taken by me.]



YOUR “DHARMA CHART,” TRY IT!

November 18, 2015

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Tibetan Buddhists all use astrology and use it all the time. I have yet to meet a monk, nun, lama, or rinpoche that does not at least use an astrological calendar of one kind or another. That is saying something.

It might help to put what astrology can do into some perspective. What we have is a chart of the heavens reflected on Earth, at best a map of who we are and what we can do according to the celestial motions. At one time my company had a database of 30,000 astrologers that we did business with, so I had, one way or another, a chance to get a clear idea as to just what western astrologers do.

What they do most is look into the mirror of their own chart to determine who they themselves are. Most people look into one kind of mirror or another. And yes, astrologers do the charts of other people, but we first test everything on ourselves to see if it works for us, and, sure, we never tire of gazing into that astrological mirror in order to see just who is there. But it is not as simple as a case of Narcissus. As I have said for decades, astrology, like all other soothsaying practices, is an oracle, plain and simple, a talisman or contact through which flow messages about who we are at heart, which we try as best we can.

More important than my contributions as a programmer of astrological systems is something that has yet to be properly appreciated, and that is that I have helped to

introduce a second and a third mirror of ourselves to astrology, and also point out what they mean. With the single traditional natal chart, we have nothing to compare it to other than the character traits that society reflects and tells us we are, which can be pretty grim. If we want a second opinion, we can add a second mirror with our heliocentric Dharma Chart, and a third mirror with our Local Space Chart. If we do, something magical starts to happen.

The traditional (centuries old) astrological view of our natal chart is static; we can look at it as long as we want, but it will never be more than what we can make of it. But add a second and a third chart and suddenly there is perspective, a triangulation, and what amounts to a 3D hologram of who we are (or can be) begins to emerge.

And each of these three charts represents not just another view similar to the view we already know from our traditional natal chart, but a view from another dimension, from other coordinate systems, so finally we have geocentric coordinates, heliocentric coordinates, and Local Space coordinates (azimuth & altitude). And there are still other views to consider if we want, like Equatorial Coordinates as well, and on out to deep space coordinates like the Local System coordinates, Galactic Coordinates, and even Super-Galactic coordinates, all of which can equally be mapped to our birth data. And

they all can be combined one-to-another so that they conflate to show our life as the jewel it is, one with many facets, all pointing to who we potentially are.

I am not trying to drown you here in minutiae, but just making the point that each of these perspectives or chart views has its own meaning and interpretation, and many are inclined (and disinclined) to one another by different angles (planes of inclination), all which further describe who we are, and quite visibly. Where words fail, the simple geometric aspect patterns in the various charts speak volumes at a single glance, and anyone who can see can look at an image.

As for taking astrology with tongue in cheek, as society likes to do, of course that's something for society to give up, but even if we take that disbelief away, there still remains a subtle wary edge about astrology that sharpens the eye, rather than lets it clearly sleep. At least I think so.

And I believe that astrology, for all we can say good about it, is still just what the Buddhists point-out it to be, a "relative" truth, at best a guide on the path of life, and at the very least a moment's entertainment. And, after fifty years of astrology, that which I feel is missing in astrology is very simple, and of no blame whatsoever on astrologers. It is nature of astrology to urge us, finally, to lay the astrological charts and the maps aside, and with all the useful guidance of astrology in mind, to take the plunge into life itself, full bore and straight on.

I look at the astrological charts as I look on road maps, to see who I am, where I am going, and

where I might go considering what I bring with me. And I don't "live" by astrology day and night. Rather, I reach for astrology when I feel I have gone astray or find myself in some place or moment that I do not quite understand. I use astrology to take my bearing, perhaps to reset my sails, and thereby allow my attitude to better catch the winds of change. I also use astrology as a guide to go inward from this endless round of passage on the surface of life. Mark that!

For me, astrology is the handmaiden of the Dharma, and the two can be made to work together like hand in glove. As the Tibetan rinpoches point out, astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga and dharma is its root.

And, as I have many times mentioned, at the tip of the top of all the precious astrological techniques I have known are the Dharma Chart, the Karma Chart, and their interaction. Between these two charts I have managed to learn much about who I am, why I am here, and how I best I might navigate the road ahead. And I have known this for forty years. It has always been my sincere wish that astrologers discover this very helpful technique for themselves, a chart of our Dharma to use in conjunction with the traditional chart of our Karma.

Please let me be clear: It is my study and practice of the dharma that allows me to write much of what I share with my Facebook friends on this blog. But many years before I realized how the dharma works, it was the discovery of my heliocentric StarType (which much later I named the Dharma Chart) that gave me the confidence and certainty that what I felt inside about myself (and who I am) was justified.

Looking only at my Karma Chart (the traditional astrology chart), you would never have known that “I” was there. Of course, I had sensed it, but had no visible sign that would have given me the courage to persevere. The Dharma Chart gave me that. This is an example of the power of astrology in my life.

Here is how you can get your Dharma Chart (for free) right now: DHARMA CHART HERE:
http://www.astrologyland.com/free_chart.../YourFreeChart.aspx

Use the FREE Astrology Chart Wheel in the upper left side of the page, enter your birth day, month, and year (and timed data if you have it). THEN PRESS calculate. NEXT, if you want your Dharma Chart with a brief explanation as to what it means press the HELIO button in the lower right.

OR

If you want a permanent way to look at any number of DHARMA CHARTs (with extended interpretations), here is how to find both your Dharma Chart Type and your Karma Chart Type:

In my downloadable and free e-book “Dharma Chart, Karma Chart,” which is available here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev%20Nov2...>

At the back of that book, starting at page 395, is a table of dates listed by Year-Month- Day giving both your Dharma Chart Number, followed by your Karma Chart Number. With StarTypes, birth times are not necessary. It is enough to know the day you

were born. Instructions can be found there.

Once you have your Dharma Chart Number (listed 1st) and your Karma Chart Number (listed 2nd), then you can look up each one in the list of Sixty Main StarTypes starting at page 232 and read about your particular Dharma Type and Karma Type, respectively.

For example, I was born on July 18, 1941. In the book, I would look up in the table and find:

1941-07-18 05|21

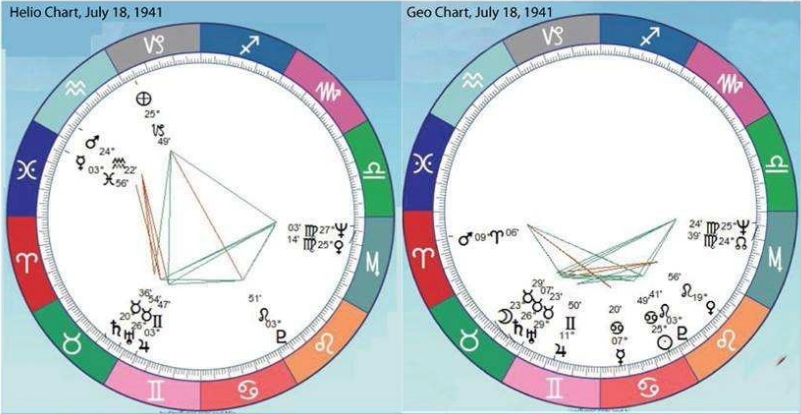
Those two numbers following the year-month-day are "05|21," which translate to Dharma StarType #5 and Karma StarType #21. Look them up in the book and read about each one.

It also would be good if you read the introduction and various areas in the book, especially if you are going to compare your StarType to someone else's.

[The graphic shows both my Dharma Chart (left) and my Karma Chart (right), and their corresponding StarType cards. In the center is a brief explanation of the four many archetypes or tribes of types. It is best to use the above-mentioned book and look up detailed interpretations, etc. Or you can order complete written reports on the Astrologyland.com site listed above.]

StarTypes Astrology





Astronomer's Chart Astrologer's Chart




Sun StarType Card
The Real You

StarTypes

Four Relationship Families

 The Loved One Object of Affection	 The Lover The Caretaker	 Independent Plays Both Roles	 Many Relations Thirst for Experience
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The role of the loved one is the object of affection. Fun-loving, warm, touchy-feely, intuitive, creative, social, the center of attention.
 The role of the lover and caretaker of the relationship. Attentive, aware, organized, analytical, kind, shy, non-assertive, mental, conceptual.
 Can play either role of lover or loved one, depending on the StarType they hook up with. Independent, self-sufficient, self-absorbed, can't think and do.
 Prefers the role of the lover or caretaker, but is not shy as the green cards are. Instead has a thirst for experience, to meet new people, see new places.

Which Role Are You? 
 Your FREE StarType at Astrologyand.com



Earth StarType Card
Your Personality