

Dharma Blogs

2017 Winter



by Michael Erlewine

Dharma Blogs

2017 First Quarter

By Michael Erlewine

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. My thanks to Patti Singleton Williams for helping me to gather this all together. These blogs were from the first quarter of 2017, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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Here are some other links to more books, articles, and videos on these topics:

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| | |
|---|-----|
| TWO TRAINS RUNNING | 7 |
| SHANTIDEVA'S "WAY OF THE BODHISATTVA" ... | 12 |
| DHARMA MECHANIC: HOW TO GET IT DONE | 15 |
| PLACE TO BEGIN WITH DHARMA PRACTICE..... | 20 |
| FINDING A DHARMA TEACHER | 23 |
| SYNCHING TO REALITY | 27 |
| THE SPEED OF AWARENESS | 31 |
| DHARMA: GETTING RESULTS | 33 |
| DOPPELGÄNGER (BODY DOUBLE) | 36 |
| THE SIZE OF THE HEART | 40 |
| SEEING THE OBVIOUS | 44 |
| UNFIXING FIXATIONS | 49 |
| REANIMATION PERSONIFIED | 53 |
| THE HEART CENTER KTC | 56 |
| WHAT DREAMS MAY COME..... | 61 |
| BEFORE WE BEGIN DHARMA PRACTICE | 64 |
| THE EARTH-TOUCHING GESTURE | 72 |
| LIFE'S CENTRIFUGE | 75 |
| THE SUFFERINGS | 79 |
| INTO THE JUNGLES OF NEPAL | 82 |
| BESIDE OURSELVES | 92 |
| KARMA WANGMO – 12 YEARS IN RETREAT | 96 |
| ONE FOR TWO | 103 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALIST | 106 |
| MAKING DHARMA PERSONAL | 111 |
| HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT | 115 |
| IT'S ALL GOOD! | 117 |
| ON A CLEAR DAY | 122 |
| GRASPING FOR AIR..... | 124 |
| REALIZABLE | 126 |
| KARMIC RELIEF | 128 |
| SAMSARA (WORLD OF UPS AND DOWNS) | 131 |
| “SLIP-SLIDIN’AWAY” | 134 |
| MORE ON SAMSARA (SOME SORROW) | 136 |
| THE TERM “DHARMA” | 139 |
| HEY BUDDY, GOT A MATCH? | 141 |
| DHARMA: A RELIGION? I DON'T THINK SO. | 144 |
| “I WONDER, WONDER WHO...” | 146 |
| THE FOREST AND THE TREES..... | 151 |
| SENSITIVO | 154 |
| TIBETAN NEW YEAR -- FEMALE FIRE BIRD..... | 157 |
| THE ANIMAL/ELEMENT CYCLE | 161 |
| PULLING TERMA FROM THE MIND..... | 165 |
| WHAT AN AMERICAN BUDDHIST LOOKS LIKE? | 170 |
| WAITING FOR THE TIDE TO COME IN..... | 173 |
| WHAT IS REALIZATION? | 176 |
| SPARKING REALIZATION | 179 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| ONLY THE LONELY | 181 |
| DO-IT-YOURSELF | 183 |
| DUALITY: A WORLD DIVIDED | 186 |
| CLARITY: LIBERATION THROUGH INSIGHT | 189 |
| LET'S BE FRIENDS | 195 |
| KEEPING SANE | 199 |
| MICRO-RESTS | 203 |
| MIND READER | 206 |
| TURNING THE MIND ON ITSELF | 209 |
| LOOKING OUT FOR LOOKING IN | 213 |
| SEASONAL SECTORS The 24 Solar Sectors | 216 |
| DECONSTRUCTION | 219 |
| EXTENSION | 223 |
| FINDING THE DHARMA..... | 226 |
| CORE LEARNING..... | 230 |
| SPRING CLEANING (and "Mixing") | 239 |
| BREATHING INTUITIVELY | 243 |
| "SEEING" THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY | 246 |
| MAHAMUDRA: THE GREAT GESTURE | 250 |
| EATING TO LIVE | 252 |

TWO TRAINS RUNNING

January 1, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The New Year is hardly in the door and already I am blogging about the hardships of time, death, and aging. Those who are not concerned (yet) with age and all of that, just don't bother to read on. The rest of you, my elder friends, let's talk about it some.

Aside from its many beneficial qualities, the Dharma is also a good hedge against aging, meaning: at some point we ought to prepare for the inevitable, at least a little bit, right? I mean, what's your plan?

There is no doubt that at some point we will plunge headlong into death (and whatever afterlife awaits us) with perhaps a moment's notice; most folks do.

However, I find that whatever of time's evils we have managed to keep at arm's length earlier in life, with age, they all begin to converge like the vanishing point in the architect's perspective, i.e. everything converges on us and the constriction gets tighter and tighter. If you are any different, I would like to hear about it.

At some point I figured out that not only must the show go on but that, eventually, it is going to go on without me. And I have to ask myself how much I want to continue to invest in this impermanence, and why. Hopefully not just to save face or for how it might look socially. We all know the line, "like trying to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic." That seems to be an exercise in futility.

So, the dharma, which may pop into our mind earlier in life for a spot of tea, returns much more gravely later in life as an actual alternative to the ongoing freight train of aging life. It occurs that we might want to step off that train at some station along the way, but what then?

The dharma has been trying to flag me down (and get my attention) since I was in my late teens, occasionally with some success. Yet, I still found it hard to get serious about dharma when I was young, because life was so rich and inviting. Well, so I discovered, that same invitation gradually expires with age, leaving us increasingly exposed to impermanence, and always a bit farther down the track, and you know the old song "... another day older, and deeper in debt."

For many of us, there is a time when we step to the side and out of the rush of life and start to let those in the passing lane go around us. We become ourselves an island in the river of life, an island that itself is also floating downstream, but perhaps a little less eager than before. I love the story of the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when he started a dharma talk to a group with these words..."Some of us will die soon, the rest... a little later." That kind of talk gets our attention, but for how long and to what end? And what are we to do about it?

Of course, there is plenty of fire & brimstone from the world's religions that can put the fear of god in us, but that fear pales by comparison to the realizations that gradually dawn on us with the simple advancement of age. And we can produce those all by our lonesome.

As an astrologer who has counseled folks for many years I can tell you straight-up that, aside from sheer curiosity, the majority of people never sought out a reading unless they were in one crisis or another. We put off the inevitable for as long as we can or, as I like to say "We agree to forget what we find so hard to remember."

And, although I may sound like I am playing in a minor key just now, it is not just for effect. It is not my intention to put a scare into you. Instead, I thought it might actually be good to talk with you about what we can do to prepare for the inevitable, since it is, well, inevitable. In our physical life, when faced with adversity, we take out some insurance. In our spiritual life, a little insurance is also a good thing. And the only insurance that I have found in life, so far, is the dharma.

A line I coined for myself is “The straighter the line, the finer the curve.” If life in Samsara is an endless linear procession that also goes in eventual circles (or cycles), then it will continue long after we are gone. The question I have had for myself is: at what point do I want to step away from this circus-train (which, in my better moments, I know is just an endless show) and take a somewhat different tack? Shall I wait until I am at death’s door and just take what comes or, in the meantime, can I do something by way of developing some awareness of these eventualities? I have chosen the second route, the path of dharma and its awareness.

And the only approach that I have found that works is the path of greater realization. The cataracts of advancing age will eventually physically dim down whatever light we have now. The dharma “Realization” as to the nature of the mind (that comes with Insight Meditation) breaks rank with time and puts time itself in perspective.

What I am suggesting here is that it would be good if the pace of our dharma realization could keep up with the inevitable process of physical erosion by old age. As the hand of time takes away, the light of realization reinstates something of much greater clarity, recognition of the nature of the mind itself. In my opinion, this greater realization is meant to accompany the aging process.

As my first dharma teacher would say to me, many times. We have to choose between being the Cling Peach or the Freestone. With the first, our flesh is literally torn from the pit, while with the Freestone, it just naturally pops out. Not sure whether you can see

the beauty of this metaphor, but I sure did when he first presented it to me.

And the amount of dharma practice needed to help here is very doable, but it takes enough time before the end of the line to prepare properly. I can see why some readers might find this kind of preparation gloomy or a bother, so I don't expect everyone to practice dharma. That leaves the few of you who grasp what I am saying here and have the time and interest to do the necessary groundwork.

FROM SHANTIDEVA'S "WAY OF THE BODHISATTVA"

January 2, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

"May I become at all times, both now and forever, a protector for those without protection; a guide for those who have lost their way; a ship for those with oceans to cross; a bridge for those with rivers to forge; a sanctuary for those in danger; a lamp for those without light; a place of refuge for those who lack shelter, and a servant to all in need."

Wow! Is all I can say, and "As if..." I could do that.

How does such an ability to help come about? It comes about through having something ourselves that we can offer to others. As long as we are in the same boat as others (and not rowing), what can we offer?

Baby Bodhisattvas start out with a concern for others. It may not always appear as all that altruistic, often simply as being overly concerned with others at the expense of their own self-image, but the type is unmistakable. Baby Bodhisattvas may also be overly concerned with what others think of them. The only difference between an unhealthy preoccupation with others and someone who can actually assist others may be having something to give and share. And that can only come through realization of some kind. Is it

not amazing that we can achieve realization without changing a single hair on our head?

What I have to share can't be said in one blog. In the next few blogs I will do my best to lay out some basic principles that I have found helpful over the years in learning and practicing the dharma. At the risk of boring the passersby, I am sharing what I can for those seriously interested in getting really started with learning the dharma. We can do that together.

Being told we should put others ahead of ourselves, as true as that may be, can prove difficult (and even impossible) for those just starting out. We may have already put others ahead of ourselves, but just not in a healthy way. Being able to give involves having something to give; and what would that be?

First, we can't do something for others that they can only do for themselves (like enlighten them), so that is out. Take a hint from the historical Buddha, who left for us not some sort of magic pill or "touch of the hand," but rather the dharma teachings, the path and a method to enlighten ourselves; that and nothing more. We can help others if we can help them to help themselves, i.e. show them the path accurately. But to do that (without grave errors) requires that we have realized the path for ourselves, so it is clear that realization of the dharma (and the mind) is the first order of business for each of us, if only because we have to have something to give.

In the teachings, especially the Mahayana teachings, much is made of not seeking enlightenment for ourselves alone, but doing so to liberate all beings. I have never understood this too well. In my

experience, usually those who “know” like to share what they know, because in itself that is satisfying. The problem, as I see it, is that we can’t give what we don’t ourselves have.

It’s not as simple as giving up our place in the chow line, so that others can eat before we do. Sacrificing the Self in that way does not always work, either. True giving is not simply self-sacrifice; the Self needs to be part of the equation. The Tibetan Buddhists are big on not trying to teach others before you have some realization yourself -- very big.

Running off half-cocked is not helpful and, as they say, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, etc. Of course, just as a rich man may donate, spiritual richness is no different in that regard. If we have it, we share it. If we don’t have it, there is nothing to share, so why pretend? Instead, why not get off the dime, so to speak, and just get on with the realization.

The good news is that, at least in the tradition I work in, those who know, share. I learned early on that my particular teacher was very definitive in what he shared. It was not just talk, but the essence of authentic realization that he did his best to share with his students. Whether or when we got it is another matter. The student has to prepare too and at least turn his bowl right-side-up.

DHARMA MECHANIC: HOW TO GET IT DONE

January 3, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

How do we begin practicing dharma? Obviously, something the Buddha taught or represents resonates with us. With me, it was not anything new that the dharma brought into my life, but rather, when I came across what are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma.” To my astonishment, they were my own thoughts, so I felt very much like I had found my tribe. These four thoughts are called, in the dharma, the Common Preliminaries, and are detailed here, for those who don’t know them.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=266&sid=5f9b930351cab0836acc91027792fac9>

Although Buddhism is called a religion, I never saw it that way. I am not much into organized religion, which to me is almost an oxymoron. Being invited to look at my own mind with greater awareness is not, IMO, invasive. What I found in Buddhism was what I already knew in my heart, just more of it and in much richer detail. How could I deny that? It was everything I already cared for. So, that first step was easy.

The next step, how do we practice dharma, was more difficult. In fact, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the idea of practice never crossed my mind. Buddhism, back then, was basically a philosophy that (along with Existentialism, and the like) we would discuss late at

night, while drinking bad instant coffee and smoking cigarettes. There were no Starbucks or even coffee-shops open late, back then.

About the only dharma practice I knew of in those days was sitting meditation. And Zen was my first extended encounter with the cushion, when I sat in an all-day shesshin with Roshi Philip Kapleau. This was, I believe, in the late 1960s.

It was not until the early 1970s and the advent of the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa in America that dharma as a path was brought home to me, i.e. that the dharma was not just a philosophy to think about, but something to do, a life-path to follow. It was then that the question of which dharma practice arose for me, i.e. what to do at all and what to do first?

Since then, I have done many different dharma practices, and by now have a fair idea of what's out there that we can do, how to do them, and what results can be expected. And this is where I may have some words of advice. The idea of endlessly practicing meditation to achieve a result is real. That is clearly a traditional fact, one that I have experienced. Whether there is an alternate approach is what I question and would like to discuss.

The idea of pondering a Zen koan for many years is also a fact, and a meaningful approach. We do come up against spiritual thresholds that can't be taken by storm and sheer effort, but depend upon actual realization on our part, something we can't just order up. Indeed, there are a lot of folks waiting around that water cooler for a breakthrough as to realization.

In this article, I am not referring to our eventual “realization,” but rather to the preliminaries that lead up to the impasse that realization can present, what to start out with. There is no avoiding preliminary practice, but there do seem to be alternative approaches, priority sequencing, as to what we do first, and other things to consider as well. And that’s what I’m talking about here.

It’s very similar to what we did as boy scouts, starting a campfire with flint and steel. We sparked away until one tiny spark was caught by the kindling and nurtured, protected from the wind, etc. -- very carefully. Just banging away at meditation by rote never seemed to work for me. The concept of nurturing seems of critical importance. Unless we can keep the spark in our practice fresh and alive, the fire can easily go out (or never start at all) and then we are stuck with rote repetition and perhaps no result.

Because of this consideration, as beginners, we want to pick a practice that maximizes our chances of sustaining interest until realization of one kind or another comes along. Otherwise, as mentioned, we can just be spinning our wheels.

As I have shared many times before, it is not easy to find a dharma practice that we can just do straight away, in particular, one that by just doing it will keep us awake enough so that we can keep it up. Rote repetition and maintaining interest don’t go well together. The practice that I recommend (because it works for me) is as fresh and spontaneous as this moment “now” itself. By definition, it never can be day-old, but always is instantaneous. And it is also best, IMO, to have something in the practice that is

self-interesting, crudely put, all about you, and the selfish “you” at that. In other words, a practice that is in-your-face enough to make sense and keep us interested. Learning about our self can do that, and this practice offers that.

IMO, the above two qualities are essential, a practice that is self-interesting and fresh. Otherwise, we are easily bored and most find it difficult to practice by rote with no feedback, or even to find a time each day when we can fit our practice in. And, if we can find the time, the amount spent on practice is usually way too little to fully prime the pump.

So, aside from whatever practice we do on the cushion, part-time, we also need a full-time dharma practice, something we can do off-the-cushion, right in the midst of our daily routine, and one that offers enough practice that it actually adds-up to a real amount of practice that gets done.

And let’s not forget the old “God helps those who help themselves” factor. If you are having trouble with your current practice to the point of just not doing it, then something is wrong and has to be adjusted. If we want to sit and spin our wheels, time will just pass us by, as there we sit. An authentic dharma teacher is also an expert mechanic, freeing us up, greasing our wheels, and keeping us on the road. It is easy to get lost in a pit stop or time out. A few words of adjustment from a qualified dharma teacher and we are back on the road again.

There is no question that this approach is all about having a teacher or guide. Declaring that we don’t need a dharma guide is like, IMO, announcing that we

are going to do our own brain surgery. The Tibetan lineage in which I study and practice (Karma Kagyu) is totally built on the teacher-student relationship, so don't leave home without it.

I will continue this tomorrow, as they say around here,

THE PLACE TO BEGIN WITH DHARMA PRACTICE

January 4, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have two main topics yet to present as part of this series, the first being the particular practice that I feel is the easiest (and most result-oriented) dharma practice to begin with, and the second is how to go about finding a teacher to help guide us. Let's start with the practice itself, which is called "Reaction Tonglen," and we will look to finding a teacher, tomorrow.

I have written about this "Reaction Tonglen" practice many times in this blog and elsewhere, and below you will find a link to a variety of articles about it. The value of Reaction Tonglen, especially for those just starting out in dharma practice, is several.

For one, it is easy to do. You can do it all day long, while you are doing whatever else you have to do. It does not have to be scheduled into your day. It is self-explanatory, which is a bit of a play on words, meaning that this practice reveals the Self continually, helping to remove what needs to be removed, and adding greater transparency to the Self as you go along. It is, in this regard, revelatory.

The practice is also instantaneous and never boring, because it happens in the very freshness of the

present moment. I am not saying it is a perpetual-motion machine, but it is self-fueling or provides its own energy in each reactive event that occurs. And it is not a drain on our resources, but in fact is liberating. If you want to see liberation in a bottle, so to speak, Reaction Tonglen provides that. You can watch it happen in real-time, and after only a short time doing the practice.

Each reactivity-exchange, if done properly, is liberating on the spot, in that it reveals our fears and biases, plus at the same time acts to lessen them. Since each reaction we have touches us to the quick, there is little to no rote-doing of anything using this practice. There is the electricity of our own reaction (cringe, micro-shock, etc.), the becoming aware of our own reaction, seeing what we are reacting to, and finally having it be crystal clear that each reaction is 100% our own. If you want to get Pavlovian about it, a more concise and contained exchange I cannot imagine. It is signed, sealed, and personally delivered by our Self, to our self -- an air-tight case that will stand up in any court of personal logic. In other words, it is literally "self-training" personified.

I know of many other dharma practices, but none so direct, immediate, touching the quick, self-fueling, and to the point as is Reactivity Training. Down the road, Reactivity Tonglen, can be supplemented or supplanted by its big sister, the standard Tonglen practice, but for starting out, it goes from zero to sixty quicker than any method I know.

And please don't confuse traditional Tonglen, with the Reaction Tonglen practice being presented here. These are two different practices. The traditional

Tong-Len (Exchanging yourself for Others, Sending and Receiving) is geared to working with dualism between yourself and the outside world, while Reaction Tong-Len, a variant, is about working with dualism within our own Self. The Traditional Tong-Len is the part of what are called the Preliminary Practices (Lojong), while Reaction Tong-Len is preliminary to the Preliminary Practices. Reaction Tonglen is recommended to be mastered before we tackle traditional Tonglen, if possible.

The theory is that first we balance out our Self, as far as internal dualisms are concerned, and when that is done, we then balance our Self as regards other people and the outside world. I am not going to describe the practice here, because there would be little room for these comments, but here is a link to a number of articles about this practice. Just read there, as much as you like, until you grasp the practice. You can ask questions here and I will do my best to respond.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=373&sid=67413b931ab4349614299a5e63d0f07f>

Over the years there have been many reactivity training machines put out there, some quite scientific, but here is one that takes no investment, uses no machine, is totally portable, continually spot-on, and functions as much as we do.

FINDING A DHARMA TEACHER

January 5, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[It has been bitter cold here in Michigan. I fear for all those animals that are confined to the outside, with no choice. Margaret and I are kind of holed up here in the house. I'm running my car in the driveway once a day to keep it from going dead, and making soups, pies, anything I can think of that I am allowed to eat. Also, finishing up two-days with my granddaughter Iris (going on three-years old), and that has been great fun, but also exhausting, with endless stories being read, games being played, songs being sung, and meals being prepared. And did I mention the weather? Don't think we will get a break from this cold-snap until Monday, so we're hunkering down here.]

I get asked where to find a dharma teacher and how to know if the teacher you find is authentic. I have a few thoughts on this. Of course, you can go to a well-known teacher and see if they will accept you as a student. In my case, I have had to share my dharma teacher of 33 years with, probably, thousands of students.

As for vetting a teacher on your own, here is what I would do. From the moment I met my teacher (actually before, but that is another story), we clicked. I knew that I was in good hands. You may or may not experience that, but one thing that has to be there is

that their dharma teaching, the way the teaching comes across to you, has to connect. That's the whole point. There are said to be, figuratively speaking, 84,000 dharmas, thus 84,000 dharma teachers, and 84,000 types of students.

If what is being presented by the teacher, dharma-wise, is felt in the gut, so that you are inspired, that is a sign that the teacher (and teaching) is working for you. You can't choose a teacher by their appearance, personal habits, likeability, and all of that social expectation. You either can actually learn from the teacher or you cannot. That is the criterion.

If you find that you are learning from a teacher, then you can ask them if they will accept you as a student. Don't be surprised if they are too busy or are already committed. Don't take a rejection personally. If they accept you as a student, then you can work together. If not, keep looking.

If they do accept you, then don't expect that they will do the work for you. That's your job. They can, however, act as a guide, a "spiritual friend," someone you can take your questions to and get a clear answer. In learning dharma, there are so many questions and so many times when we get stuck in one syndrome or another, and can't see our way out of it. A teacher who knows the road can point out how to deal with the obstacle or, if they can't, they can direct us to someone who, perhaps, can.

A teacher is not there just to hold our hand, although they often do, but rather to point out to us whatever in our particular case needs to be pointed out. Whether we take their advice is up to us, of course, but in the

Vajrayana tradition in which I train, one does not pick and choose what one wants to accept in the way of advice from our teacher. One listens and takes their instructions to heart.

Otherwise, the whole point of the relationship is stained. If you know better than the teacher, then you don't need a teacher. If you don't know better, then you do. This spiritual relationship is one of mutual trust. It technically is called Samaya, which is the bond that connects teacher and student. In my tradition, Samaya is considered most sacred, because it alone insures the validity of the relationship. I will give an example.

Anyone who knows me, knows that I am not much on travel. I think twice about going to the grocery store, so that should tell you something. One year my teacher, out of the blue and during our yearly brief interview, told Margaret and me to go to Tibet and see His Holiness the young 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje. When I, in response, stammered out something like that I aspired to do that... one day, Rinpoche replied, "Go this summer, within a month." We went, and we went within a month.

Hopefully, you get the idea. The bond between teacher and student is sacred or should be. It takes both sides to uphold and maintain it. Rinpoche has always done his part; hopefully I have done mine.

I wish that all reading this, if open to it, will find an authentic dharma teacher, someone who can be a true spiritual friend. Such a contact is invaluable. If the dharma is just a casual interest, learning it may be difficult. For most of us, there come times in our life

when some event or loss shocks us out of our normal life-track and there we are, just awake and vividly present. When this happens, our usual Self may be momentarily shattered, but often that seems to be what it takes for us to wake up enough to have glimpses (or actually get the picture) that the dharma is not just an option, but rather an actual path to liberation. As hard as those rough times are, these gaps in our otherwise programmed life are treasured opportunities to wake up and reach out.

SYNCHING TO REALITY

January 7, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In selecting a dharma practice by ourselves, it's like the children's story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," where Papa Bear's porridge was too hot, Mama Bear's was too cold, but Baby bear's was just right, etc. It is the same with dharma; some practices are too abstract, at this point a bridge too far for us to sustain. Others are just too difficult to start out with, and still others are meant to come after the preliminary practices we have not yet completed. And I won't even mention the practices we have done incorrectly or have not been able to bring to fruition by ourselves. Just as we may not be able to diagnose a physically ailment, but a medical doctor can, how are we to know what dharma practice is best for us, without realizing what it is?

As opposed to Spirituality, the mechanics of Dharma are more important than beginners imagine. The main beauty of Vajrayana Buddhism is that it is designed for a student to work with an experience practitioner as a guide. I am sure there are many do-it-yourself dharma practices around, but the lineage I am being trained in finds that working with someone with more actual experience is the easiest (and quickest) way to progress. I have found a teacher who knows what I don't know and has always tried his best to give me good information. Of course, it is up to me to put that information to work and I too must do my best.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, those with more realization than we have are treasured. That is why they are called rinpoches, which simply means “Precious One.” Aside from spiritually being more advanced than we (something we can have little idea as to what that is), basically, most teachings, by definition, are more about the mechanics of it, how to get it done. The experienced teachers know how; we don’t.

Our dharma teacher cannot graft on to us his or her spiritual realization. At most, they can walk us through the mechanics, the method of how to do this for ourselves. In other words, the “how” of dharma realization is a method (mechanics) that can be taught. Otherwise, the dharma would not have survived up to this day.

And, like anything else we learn as a beginner, we will waffle around for a while, until we get our bearings. We literally have to make the dharma our own, adapt it to our life and who we are. I don’t feel this aspect is well understood. We don’t have to apologize for being beginners and, if we spend any energy worrying about looking foolish, we are just making it more difficult for ourselves. The advantage of have a guide, a spiritual friend, cannot be emphasized enough.

In my practice of many decades now, what amazes me most is how personal the dharma has to be for each one of us. Reciting texts by rote may be good for learning, but ultimately the teachings have to be transformed into “our-own-speak” through the process. We have to have some skin in the game and make the dharma our own. In that case, when that is

done, the dharma is (literally) the most natural thing in the world. But this is not a simple task.

Let me give an example. If I want to be a baseball pitcher, I have to learn how to pitch the ball, and everything involved with doing that. Trying or learning to pitch the ball is not the same as just pitching the ball. Concentrating on “how” to pitch is different from just intuitively throwing the ball where each pitch is needed.

Dharma-practice is similar, in that it is “practice,” trying to learn how, but how to do what? Unlike pitching, where we can study books, watch videos, go to games, and so on, with dharma it is difficult-to-impossible to know what the result of our practice should be. There is no way for us to know in advance what greater awareness, much less realization, is like until we have it. Just ask yourself: what is realization?

Dharma instructions, which we follow by rote, are meant to get us in the ballpark of “realization,” so to speak, but there still is that point where we stop “trying” to practice a particular type of meditation and just meditate. We finally realize what all the practice is meant to induce. We get it. That is the “Aha!” that all the Zen teachers refer to. And, at that point, we make it our own and can do it, just as a good pitcher can throw the ball, without “trying” to throw the ball. Spiritual realization is much more difficult to grasp ahead of actually grasping it than is baseball. Even with a dharma guide, it is hard enough.

My point is that moving from practice to the actuality is where we most need guidance, and an experienced teacher can help us tweak our practice until we synch

and lock into the reality of what the dharma practice is all about. Up until then, to a great degree, we are in the dark.

Having spent years without a dharma teacher, and learned little, and many years with an experienced teacher as a guide, it is clear to me that having someone to work with is essential. If you have a trained dharma teacher, you ask him or her about practices. If you have no one around, find someone. Make an effort. You can always ask me questions, publically here or privately by message. I know the basics pretty well, and as long as I am on the planet, I will do my best to answer. If I don't know the answer, I may know who does and can send you there.

THE SPEED OF AWARENESS

January 8, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Awareness can be an elusive trip, looking for it when it is also what is doing the looking. And the speed of awareness, being non-physical (as in realization), is greater even than the speed of light. Compared to awareness, the speed of thought is very slow, so put your money on awareness, rather than thoughts. In more advanced practices, like Insight meditation, thoughts are used not as something to follow the train of, but as portals for awareness. We learn to look right through them at the nature of the mind itself. Awareness is quicker than the quick.

And, like the Sun in the heavens, awareness is always there within us, shining. Through dharma practice, awareness is gradually uncovered, rather than created in any way. It always has been there, in the background. A large part of dharma practice is learning to transfer our fixations on the Self to resting in awareness itself.

As mentioned, awareness, like the Sun, is always shining, but it has been hidden until now behind the obscuring clouds of simple confusion and ignorance. If, through dharma practice, we clear away what clouds our mind, the sun of awareness just naturally shines through.

One of the standard obstacles to awareness includes our grasping for enlightenment, trying and forcing our practice, etc. This is often a large part of what is obscuring our innate awareness. In fact, after a certain point, a major part of dharma practice is allowing the mind to rest just “as it is.” You would think that this would be the easy part, just kicking back and allowing things to settle out, but letting go can be as hard as grasping on.

The point is that we can’t win by effort alone, so stop trying sometimes. There is “nothing” to be done and doing nothing can be difficult when we are so used to fogging our own mental glasses with effort.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not saying don’t practice, but rather also practice letting go.

DHARMA: GETTING RESULTS

January 10, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Once you have made your mind up that you want to learn the dharma (and work with the Buddhist teachings), that is not the end of it. You actually have to then do something, take one path or another, so how do we choose just what practice to begin with when we know almost nothing about the dharma? That's what happened to me.

In the beginning, I did what study that I could on the subject, and I picked out a practice that looked attractive to me, one that appealed to my ego, actually, and found out that you have to be given permission by a lama or rinpoche to do it. So, I set about traveling to the nearest rinpoche I knew, which was a 1600 mile roundtrip in the dead of winter. And I took my entire family with me.

As it turned out, the rinpoche did not give me permission to do that particular practice, but instead pointed out something much simpler for starters. Perhaps Rinpoche could see that the practice I wanted to do was too difficult and that the chances of my stalling-out on it were likely, so he gave me something that I actually could do. I didn't argue with him, but I did point out that I had done astrology for many years and that was "spiritual," so I thought perhaps I could place out of the beginning dharma practices, and get with one of the more advanced

practices. That was my ego talking, of course. How like me!

Rinpoche acknowledged the astrology, and then pointed out that since I did not really know meditation, the fastest way in my case was to start at the beginning and go on from there. Because the rinpoche seemed so straight forward in everything he did, I swallowed my pride and agreed to do what he suggested. If we go back and count the beads of dharma in my life, that decision to take his advice was very important.

Some of you reading this are asking the same question I did: where to begin with dharma practice? It does not matter how old you are; rather, it matters only how sincere you are in your desire to practice, so please note that. We all know that when something scary in life happens to us, like a close call with death or the death of a loved one, we get religion fast, if only for the moment. We stop with the unessential and are happy to have what we have, to be alive and all that. That's a message.

So, I am not trying to scare you when I say that, as mentioned, it is the purity of our intent that determines our dharma progress, not how long we practice or how high a practice we decide we should undertake. As Rinpoche told me, if we are beginners in the dharma, starting at the beginning is the quickest way to any realization. We can progress rapidly from the beginning, but stumble endlessly trying to do a practice we are not ready for.

In the history of dharma practice, results are measured when they result. An alternative to actual

results includes doing a particular practice a certain number of times, say 100,000. Another approach is to do a particular practice for a given length of time, like three years. In my experience, neither of these approaches is a guarantee of any result. I'm living proof. I did the somewhat arduous practice Ngondro, which involved things like 111,000 full-length prostrations on the floor, 111,000 refuge prayers, 111,000 100-syllable mantras, 111,000 Mandala offerings, and 111,000 rounds of Guru Yoga. When I finished all of that (it took years), I told Rinpoche I had finished and asked him what he wanted me to do next. He, in turn, asked me if I wanted to know what he would do if he was me. Of course, I asked him what? And he said "I would do another complete round of Ngondro." That was a shock to the system, but both Margaret and I did another round. That is what it took for me to work through my obscurations enough to finally learn to actually meditate. And the dharma does not respond to brute force, but rather to intelligent activity.

The only way to guarantee results is to get the actual result. And it really helps to have an authentic teacher with whom we can validate our results. Otherwise we may just be fooling ourselves. It wouldn't be the first time. As a rinpoche once said to me, "We are the stragglers, the ones that in all the time up to now have not managed to get enlightened." Yep, that would be me.

DOPPELGÄNGER (BODY DOUBLE)

January 13, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In English doppelgänger translates to something like a “body-double,” and the concept is not nearly as farfetched as it might seem. And the double is the only one we recognize. It’s like seeing our own shadow, but never our actual nature. By “double,” I mean just that, what is not the true or actual. Our double is entirely made up of our expectations, speculations, and whatever else we have conceptually been able to cobble together to get through life. We dream up what we cannot actually find in reality (or we think should be) and then we reify it, i.e. pretend that it is real. We do.

The rather amazing part is that this body-double image, this merely made-up and virtually conceptual image of the world is, unfortunately, the only one most of us know. The reality, what the body-double is based on is, at best, perhaps only dimly sensed or intuited, but certainly not realized, otherwise there would be no body-double, but only body-singular – the true nature of reality. That is what realization is all about, realizing, deconstructing what is unnecessarily conceptual.

And, to me, the stunner is that the true reality, the actual nature of the mind is not somewhere at the end of a spiritual journey, but (as all the wise folks say) is right here and right now, and always has been. In

other words, we are it, but don't know it; we don't realize what we are. It is hard to find someone that you already are, try as we might. It's like the other day, when I looked everywhere for my glasses, but they were right there on the top of my head. Did you ever feel like putting on some music and then realize that music was already playing? That's what realization is like.

However, I'm afraid this concern for a body-double is a little more complicated than that. For one, we continually create and re-enforce the conceptual body-double that we have made-up. It is an integral part of the Self and, while I don't want to be crude, it's like the old saying, "polishing a turd." All eyes are on the conceptual-double, literally defined by our fixations. So, whatever dharma practice we do, one of the desired results has to be transmigrating our identity from the double (the purely conceptual) to the actual. This is termed "Realization" and is the point of literally all dharma practice, to realize the actual nature of the mind, and stop flying blind by depending on conceptuality alone.

However, as they say around here "the fact of business is" that by this point in our life-trajectory, we don't know anything other than what we have made up from our expectations and then proceeded to reify and depend upon. So, it should not be too hard to grasp that somehow, sometime, and somewhere we have to transfer our ID, our identification, from our body-double to the non-dual reality of what actually "Is." Make sense?

This fixation on our body-double is an addiction beyond any awareness of the reality that is right there

staring us in the face. Since we already ARE what we are looking for, it is hard to both look for and find it at the same time, thus the many koans of the Zen Buddhists and the elaborate pointing-out instructions of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists. It is very difficult to distract us from our age-old habitual distractions. We are so addicted to watching our own movie that we would rather watch that just live.

Another subtle dharma realization is grounding our conceptual expectations in reality. Realization is what? What is it that realization realizes? Realization realizes that, just as we merge two apparently separate images in a pair of binoculars, so that there is only one image in actuality, we have to do the same with our dualisms. Yet, with spiritual realization, we don't have two images to work with, but just the one image, and that is a ghost image at that.

And please don't confuse what I am calling the "Body Double" here with the traditional etheric body of the esotericists. Our body-double is just a reflection of the true reality, a reality we have never realized, so that reflection is all that we know. It's like backing into the future by looking at the reflection in the rear-view mirror of reality.

We have to turn all this around and head in the direction of recognizing the true nature of the mind, just as it is. The reflection of reality is just that, a reflection, a body-double, and not the true nature of the mind itself.

KARMA MIRROR

According to the Dharma:
The world just as I see it,
Is my reflection,
A perfect mirror of the mind,
Reflecting karma --
My every thought and action.

Karma is pure result,
The outer reflection,
Of an inner reality,
That once ripened,
Cannot be altered,

No matter how carefully I choose my words,
No matter how right I get my mind,
No matter how close I hold my tongue,
No matter how slyly I take a peek,
I always only see myself peeking.

The world looks back whenever I look.

And clever as I am,
Even I can't sneak up on a mirror.

THE SIZE OF THE HEART

January 14, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[This blog is also available on YouTube as a podcast, here:]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rVcXGN7aCI&feature=youtu.be>

As I mentioned in the previous blog, what I call our conceptual body-double is, among other things, the result of all our study, speculation, imagining, and, of course, conceptualization. “Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink” tells the story of this conceptual metaphor, whatever we have pieced together by guesswork all these years as to our expectations -- what we expect from our spiritual practice. However, with just the least thought, we should know that what we have not realized is just that we have not realized. It is like one of those dreams when we wake up and get a drink of water, only to find out that we are still thirsty and never got out of bed at all. We would have to wake up – become more aware.

And what I find is the trickiest of all, the most subtle of searchings, is that for realization, and here I mean realization of what we thought was already realized, such as our various notions, like our notion of “compassion.” For example, we read the books, we listen to the teachings, we have various experiences,

and they all add up to whatever our notion of compassion is. We hold that (or can't help but have it) in mind. It is all we have, other than compassion itself, which is my point.

And this is the part when the concept of reification has to be pointed out. That notion we formed, for example, our concept of "compassion," is constantly being added to and modified. This is natural, but when we begin to gild the lily, to reify and make what we "believe" compassion to be more real than the virtual conceptual-composite it is, in fact, in our mind, we are then one step farther away from reality. We enter the twilight world of reflections of reflections, where all there is are glimmers of reality.

How to drill down here using just words? The fact is that we are literally beside ourselves, but know our own reality not. Perhaps we will stumble upon the "real," but the great lamas suggest (gently) that this will not happen, not unless that reality is carefully pointed out to us. Maybe then, with pointing-out, we will recognize the actual nature of our own mind, but it will take help.

And here, I am not talking about recognition or realization with a capital "R" but something as simple as our own sense of compassion, whatever that may be. We can do our best to smile like Mother Teresa or whatever we think compassion should look like, but riding shotgun with that emulation is our actual sense of compassion, what it is right now for us. And I find it helpful to remember that "compassion" is not an add-on quality, something that we attach to ourselves or somehow "get." Compassion is an inherent quality of our inner Buddha Nature. We all have it already. It is

right here; we just have to discover and become aware of it.

And when we do, it won't be like whatever textbook definition of Compassion we have enshrined in our conceptuality. That came out of a book or from a teacher or from somewhere else. Real compassion, for us, will be OUR own compassion, something quick, with the taste of blood and reality, something natural that we already know, but have always managed to ignore. Yet, there it is, stubborn as a rock.

My point here, based on what little I know of all this, is that every realization of this minor kind is (by definition) a revelation, not of something out there shining in the sky of our dreamed-up concepts, but rather something here now and close by to us, already a part of us, only too familiar. For example:

I am no Mother Teresa. My sense of compassion (at this point) is not some grand embrace of humanity, but rather I find it (when I do) in the care and love that I put into writing things like this blog to you now and here. Gestures grander than that seem to fail me; small gestures like this I sometimes can manage.

So, my compassion is not what I read about compassion in the texts and books but, at this point, something smaller, whatever I can manage here where I am and with what I have to do. Apparently my compassion is not yet one of just embracing everyone with open arms, except perhaps as an aspiration. Instead, at this point in my journey, it is as simple as embracing these words (as I write) with space enough

that they somehow outwit time, so that realization of what I am trying to convey here may arise in you.

Of course, we aspire to the compassion of the Dalai Lama or the Karmapa, but in real-time we would do well to find what area in our life we quite naturally already have the care, tenderness, and love that makes up our current sense of compassion. What do we care about with the love and tenderness that a mother has to a child? In other words, start with what already is working-compassion and expand from there. As mentioned, we all have compassion already inside us, so we don't have to go get compassionate. However, we have to begin understanding where we just naturally are and compassionate and pick up from there.

I know of what I speak, but I may not be able to speak what I know. Thank goodness for the osmosis of resonance. I know that what I write here may resonate and that some few of you can hear me. Years ago, this little poem came along about expectations.

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.

SEEING THE OBVIOUS

January 14, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[First, an update. Like the movie “Home Alone, I’m here by myself for a few days while Margaret travels down to Ann Arbor to celebrate my granddaughter Emma’s 5th birthday (on Monday) and generally see the family and kin. So what do I do here all by myself?

I bake a pie, that’s what, but not just any old pie. Instead of rolling out a crust, which I hardly know anything about, this crust is made of rolled oats that has been pulverized to flour in the Cuisinart, then mixed with Spelt flour, a little olive oil, and some maple syrup. Unlike a crisp, this pie has a bottom layer of crust and a top layer, just like an ordinary pie, but anyone can make it, including me. The top crust is more like a cobbler.

This pie used up some old frozen strawberries we had around and a few blueberries. I like crisps, but I love pies, and this recipe tastes as good to me as a rolled piecrust. And, best of all, even on my super-vegan diet, I can eat it.

Ever since my recent medical problems, my life of eating has turned into eating for life. In fact, I have had to come up with an entirely new diet and, if I get the spirit, I might just write up some recipes that work for me (they are good enough to eat) for my FB friends who also may have to eat a very simple diet.

But for now, on with the blog, which is also available as a podcast on YouTube. See the link at the end of the article.]

I want to continue with this idea of “compassion,” not the concept of compassion that we have read in books, heard in teachings, or shared with friends, but learning to find exactly where our own sense of compassion is. We know it’s in there. We just have to become aware of it.

I am very much a believer that what we need is always at hand, however obscured it may be by our lack of awareness. Perhaps we don’t see it or, if we see it, we don’t credit it. No one on this planet is entirely without compassion, although it may not always extend to other human beings. Some folks like their little dog or cat, feeling deeply for all animals, but perhaps not so much yet for humans. I am a little like that myself. I love all animals, but some humans are harder for me to understand.

My point here is that we all have a conceptual idea in mind of what compassion is or should be, but it can be lifetimes away from the compassion that we actually exercise in day-to-day life. This is just another dualism that can be resolved into the reality that it is. Living only by concepts is like running on fumes. There is not much to go on, at least in real time.

Trying to reanimate and live a storybook Mother-Teresa sense of compassion that, on that we don’t actually have is pointless. That dog won’t hunt. Much better is to find within ourselves what we are actually compassionate about and work from there. For myself, I have found that practicing dharma without

heart and feeling is mostly an exercise in futility, at least for me.

We all have compassion, but where? It's not that hard to find. Who do you love? What do you care about? Where is it us that we are touched enough by to gently hold and care for other life or even for objects? There is no shame in caring for whatever we actually care about, be it animal, vegetable, or mineral. We all start somewhere because we all ARE somewhere with our sense of compassion.

My point here is that in too many ways our concept of compassion can be more an obstacle than a friend. Much better is to forget about that and actually simply locate in ourselves (and in our life) where it is that we do feel compassionate, where is it that we feel kindness, care, and love -- where do we overflow? It's like divining rod for water. Find the oasis within ourselves where the well of water actually is and drink from that. Let what is merely conceptual dry up and blow away.

Our current sense of compassion (and we all have one) is the starter (in making bread, called the mother) from which our compassion can expand in real-time. The Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche tells a story in his autobiography "Born in Tibet" of watching a tiny puppy be crushed to death (I don't remember the exact account), but forever afterward, when he wanted to touch base with his sense of compassion, he would think of that puppy.

We all have a sensitive spot and finding it is not all that hard. Others often seem to push our buttons easily, so we should be able to locate where we are

vulnerable, what we are compassionate about. This would make a useful practice. Find where we are compassionate, touch into that, get the feel of it, and know what our compassion feels like. It is a place to start. Some of that compassion is bound to rub off on other things, if only gradually. It is a start and it is a place to start.

On the principle that like-begets-like, compassion, as any other virtue or quality, can either stay static or grow and expand. Well, nothing in this world of change is static, so get ready for compassion to grow and spread. If we are afraid that our compassion will shrink and die, guess again. We may ignore our own compassion, but it is an innate quality that only can be discovered, uncovered more fully. It will never go away.

The reason I write this is because I have a hunch that trying to live up to a book-concept of compassion, something conceptually way beyond our immediate capabilities, is a waste of time -- just spinning our wheels. Much better to find where we naturally care, where we already express kindness and love, and take a cue from ourselves to nurture that. Let it grow, spread, and become ever more inclusive.

It makes perfect sense, so I wonder why it took me so long to get around to it? In general in dharma practice, instead of manufacturing various qualities, like sincerity, intent, and a host of other concepts, it makes more sense (and is much easier) to locate where in us, in our life, we naturally have these qualities already operating, no matter how little or inadequate they may seem. "From little acorns, great oaks do grow" is the sentiment I am invoking here.

Start with what is real in us and expand from there.
Start with what we actually feel, sense that, and move on from there.

Being in touch with our out authentic qualities,
however small, is the armor we need to persevere in
practice.

The moral of this story is that it's not what we lack, but
rather what we have, and we have it all right here with
us now. So, of course, it is a problem of awareness,
of becoming aware of what is already ours to use, like
the mind itself.

[This article can be heard at this YouTube link:]

<https://youtu.be/MtKLOdNw-hc>

UNFIXING FIXATIONS

January 15, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[If you want to listen to this blog, click the link at the end of this article.]

When it comes to dharma practice, sooner or later we all have to drive our own car, so to speak. Hands-on living is required to be authentic. There is a point in dharma training where it does not pay to be bashful and shy. As they say, Carpe Diem, seize the day.

It's not that we shouldn't defer to others with more experience than us; we should, of course. That's how we learn, at least in the beginning. But respect for our teachers involves respecting ourselves at least enough to take the plunge, dive in, and put our heart into our practice. Without that, where are the results? Since we are going all the way, we must go all the way, and that means full immersion. And this involves transformation and transmigration, whatever we can agree they are.

Try as I might for a better analogy, I keep coming up with the image of a spider on a web, with all eight of its handholds. To move, the spider must let go of each handhold and take another. Ultimately, this means releasing our fixations on the self, grip by grip, and taking another grip, one hopes with increasingly less fixation. It is a process of elimination. In other words, keep the Self, but lose the fixations. It is not

the Self or what the Self is made up of (our attachments) that is the problem, but the fixating – myopia.

The Buddhist teachings make it clear that what we call the self is a natural phenomenon and not something artificial that can just be removed or plucked out. In other words, we will always functionally have a self, some kind of command center for putting our grocery shopping-list together. Therefore, self-denial, denying the self is not very helpful. The teachings go on to say that it is our fixation on the self that is the problem. This suggests that we can aim for a self to which we are not overly attached.

As mentioned, there is nothing wrong with having a self, outside of our fixation on it. And fixation means just that, fixating to the exclusion of not-fixating. Fixation of any kind is an obsessive attachment (positive or negative) that obscures any clarity we might otherwise have. In other words, it is the energy of fixation, with its locked focus and resulting myopia that is the problem. Fixations are mini-obsessions.

So, tearing out what we are attached to is just another form of attachment, the old tar-baby syndrome from the Uncle Remus tales. As mentioned, it is not WHAT we are attached to (our new bike or car) that needs to be removed, but our attachment to the object of fixation that has to be lessened or removed, the narrow fixation that obscures any wider vision. In other words, we can't see beyond our fixated self.

And I pointed out that it's not that self-denial is wrong; it just doesn't work, but only adds more fixation on the

self from another angle. What needs be done is exactly like what we do with a young child when they begin to fixate on something that makes them unhappy; distract them. There is a whole wide world out there outside of our narrow fixation.

So, our fixations have to be “un-fixed,” so to speak, let go of. It reminds me of the baby who is trying to find the nipple, but here the nipple for all of us is the true nature of the mind that we can’t manage to find. The lama helps us to let go of our fixation enough to allow our mind to rest naturally within itself.

Or, it reminds me of the traditional image of the teacher pointing out the Moon in the sky, but the student, fixating on the teacher’s finger, can’t see the Moon. It’s tricky and finally all boils down to some kind of transmigration or transference of attention and identification from the purely conceptual frameworks we are trapped in to the actual nature of the mind that the concepts themselves attempt to refer to, the Moon, not the finger.

And a self without fixation is just a well-oiled machine, some kind of personal secretary. And the energy from all that fixation on the self is not in itself wrong, but just misplaced, because there it is, just energy trying to come to rest on something. Using the above analogy, our self-fixations are just us focusing on the finger, rather than the Moon – a simple mistake. Dharma practice helps us to let go of our fixations, so that our attention is released and can embrace the true nature of the mind, of what is. As I mentioned earlier, it’s just like the baby, with his head bouncing around trying to find the nipple. Once they latch on, everything is copasetic. It is the same with

discovering the nature of the mind, and we need a teacher to point out just how we can do that.

Audio for “UNFIXING FIXATION”

REANIMATION PERSONIFIED

January 20, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Our future here on the planet lasts as long as we do. It's hard for us not to expect tomorrow to dawn, although one day that won't be the case. Projecting is such a part of life that I'm not sure how to begin deconstructing that habit. Paying it forward has always been the name of the game as far as I know it. We obviously can't go on forever, but how (and when) to throttle back? As long as we live, we have to pay the rent and we have to take the next breath, so counting on the immediate future is pretty much all we know.

As the great lama Bokar Rinpoche said to me when we left his monastery in Mirik, West Bengal, India in 1997, "Tomorrow or next life, whichever comes first." As it turned out, he left this world not long after that.

When things are going well, we can't help but cultivate the garden of life, planting seeds, watching them grow, and so on. When things threaten to end (and time runs out), of course, all of that, as the old saying goes, seems like we have been rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. It suddenly looks so silly.

And life for the aging is without a doubt a Catch-22, on the one hand keeping up with the Joneses, paying it forward, while at the same time recognizing that our future is short and could end at any time. I guess the

future always ends “at any time,” but with age, that “any time” can’t be that far away.

Now, I don’t call these comments complaining, but rather examining what is the reality. And I don’t want to dwell on it, but I am, by definition, dwelling in it. I have stopped starting any new grand projects, and have worked pretty diligently on packing it in, closing up shop, and taking care of what must be cared for. That’s as it should be.

If I have, through age, sidestepped (just a bit) the rush of the main stream and now find myself in somewhat of a more-quiet eddy, isn’t that appropriate for an elder? You can’t expect me to get as excited about the future as I used to. Retirement itself is a statement of what I am describing here.

And if we wind things up suddenly, what is important? I’m not sure that I know, but I instantly know what is unimportant, and that is almost everything. When push comes to shove, I shed attachments rapidly.

I probably can’t remember this story fully, but I think it was a time when my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was with us, and we were talking about all the stories of spirits hanging around their own dead body, trying to contact their relatives, not being sure they were dead, and all of that.

And, if I remember right, Rinpoche said something to the effect that at a certain point, the person who has died is no longer concerned with the life they just left, but rather with the life they are about to be reborn in. They have already moved on and already have other fish to fry.

I'm not sure why that comment affected me and stuck in my mind as it has. Perhaps it is because it underlines that our journey does not end at death. The same desire to incarnate that has got us to where we are now is propelled forward to rebirth, where an entirely new self (and circumstances) is assembled, around whatever remaining desires move us – reanimation personified.

THE HEART CENTER KTC

January 22, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Where have I been of late? I have been right here, doing this, putting together some 36 boxes of material ready to travel to KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) our monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. For years we were a publishing arm for KTD, translating and transcribing scores of texts, putting out dozens of Tibetan-style practice sadhanas, beautifully done, with foil-embossed covers. We also supplied books, cushions, statues, incense, etc. and served as a support for practitioners, shipping from here in Michigan, but as part of KTD in New York. In fact, here is a brief history of some of our dharma activity at Heart Center KTC.

The Heart Center KTC was formed in the mid-1980s; I don't remember exactly when, but Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche agreed for it not to be the "Big Rapids KTC," but rather Heart Center KTC, because that inspiration came to me along with powerful experience of communication, years before (1972). We were not a normal KTC, but actually functioned as a branch of KTD, producing many things for them that, at the time, they could not afford to do by themselves.

What has the Heart Center KTC done? Well, of course we had classes and sitting meditation for many years. And many of the great lamas have been

here, including Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (many, many times) and the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche, Ven. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, Lama Namse, H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche (visited twice), Ven. Traleg Rinpoche, H.E. Shamar Rinpoche (before the split), and of course translators, including Ngondup Burkhar, Yeshe Gyamtso, Ken McLeod, and many lamas. The Acharya who later became Drupon Khenpo Lodro Namgal came and lived with us for quite a while, during which time he was learning English. Many lamas have been here and lived here, including Ben Bennet (Lama Tsultrim), the retreat master now at Karme Ling, and others. Some stayed for various lengths of time. Of course, Lama Karma is like a son to us.

The Ven. Ponlop Rinpoche came and lived with us for a month or more, while we carved out a curriculum for KTD dharma studies. Sange Wangchuk (from Bhutan) came and lived here for some years, where he learned to computerize his calligraphy and help out at KTD Dharma Goods. Wanghuk also produced the large Sanskrit characters in the main KTD shrine room, as well as the first full-scale model of the KTD monastery.

We also brought Dr. Drupjur, an astrologer from Rumtek and he spent many months with us, while he and I worked on figuring out the Tsurphu Astrological Calendar, whose tables were in danger of running out. I later presented our findings to his Holiness the 17th Karmapa in Tibet at Tsurphu, who then named me Tenzin Nyima.

I have served on a number of boards at KTD, and for a while was even the fundraiser for the Monastery.

For many years, the dedicated money for the return of His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa was here with us in a bank account.

We did too many different things to try and list them. Here are a few that I can remember easily. For years, we did many of the various fundraising collaterals (folders, art, etc.) for the monastery. We also did the Refuge Booklets, the Bodhisattva Vow Booklets, KKR's personal seal, and all kinds of printed work for the monastery. Most are still being used. We designed the logo for Zampa Magazine for the Columbus folks.

In 1989, in the main shrine room, Khenpo Rinpoche expressed passionately his wish to fulfill the 16th Karmapa's wish that we have a 3-year retreat. There was not a dry eye in the room. As I left the building and was passing under the window going toward the Tara Shrine room, I realized that only someone like me could help, and so I volunteered to Rinpoche. And so Margaret and I became the main fundraisers (along with the Chinese community) for Karme Ling. At that time Rinpoche gave me his own personal mala, which he had before he ever came to this country, and many years after that. Ngodrup (his translator) was shocked. I have it to this day.

Also, KTD could not afford to help students find practice materials, so Margaret and I, along with Ngodup Burkhar and Sange Wangchuk, and later David McCarthy and Bob Martinez (Chicago KTC)...created "KTD Dharma Goods," which acted as an arm for KTD, as if we were them. We sent both Sange Wangchug to Nepal and India, and carried all the rupas, malas, and practice materials that students

need. We also published many scores of transcripts, and especially a great many Tibetan practice texts in pecha format, with foil-stamped covers, and so on. David McCarthy was in charge for many years and I consider him one of my best friends. This went on for many years, costing KTD nothing. Margaret and I invested more than \$250,000 dollars in this effort.

We also put on the first Family Dharma Weekends here at the center and at a nearby lake. We offered 3-4 of these yearly weekends, where parents, kids, and lamas would come together for a long weekend of togetherness. Empowerments were given, wonderful food, swimming, teachings, and friendship.

Today, the Heart Center KTC has settled into being a KKSG. We still have events, but much of my work is on Facebook, where I have 5000 friends that I blog to, mostly about dharma. Many tell me that what I write is the only dharma that reaches them. I also work with students on a one-to-one basis. I also have free e-books, perhaps 1000 dharma articles, many free videos, etc. My total views, etc. must be over a million at this point.

So, I am forgetting many things, I imagine, but there you have a brief outline of what Heart Center KTC was all about and what we did our best to do. In the lower, right-hand corner of this photo is the logo I designed for the Heart Center in January of 1972.

So, this transfer of material marks the end of an era (since the 1980s) for us, the Heart Center KTC (now a KKSG), where we did our best to help the monastery grow and expand. A few years ago I sent another van with thousands (a whole room full) of recorded

teachings that we had been keeping as a duplicate copy of Khenpo Rinpoche's (and other lamas') teachings.

Our deepest thanks to Marc Ryan for volunteering to drive this material to the KTD monastery near Woodstock, New York.

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME...

January 23, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We can't help but wonder about what lies beyond death, as Shakespeare put it:

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause...

“But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?”

At some point, we will have no choice, but one thing we can be sure, that we WILL go into that “undiscovered country,” as Shakespeare put it, and with a “bare bodkin” at that. I have studied what the Tibetan Buddhists have to say about death, the bardo, and rebirth, as best I can. I'm not a scholar by temperament, but some topics I just can't ignore and this is one of them, so I have done my best to understand what the teachings point out. And since I am now old enough to just one-day up and pass away, this subject means more for me than just casual reading. This is like front-page news.

I know. We each will find out about death soon enough, so what's the point in worrying about it?

There is a point to it, and that is the concern to be more certain and more confident when we go through death and enter the bardo.

According to the teachings, confidence (or the lack thereof) seems to make a difference. The bardo can appear strange and even frightening, so the texts point out. If we are highly reactionary by nature, in the bardo, so they state, there is a tendency to bolt if we are frightened by what are termed the “bright lights” at certain stages of the bardo. Therefore, following the old adage of “any port in a storm,” if we attempt to avoid the bright light and look for a place to hide, we can scurry off into the relative darkness of the nearest womb for rebirth, one that we didn’t intend (or need) to enter. However, they go on to say, if we have some training and confidence in our journey, if we can relax into the bright light (and realize what it actually is), we can take the time to find a more auspicious rebirth or even may merit rebirth in one of the Buddha realms. That, IMO, is a good reason for preparing for the bardo realms.

Obviously, at this point I don’t know any more than I can manage to read (or hear from the teachings) about all of this, but I do know that my experience with a dharma practice called Reactivity Tonglen, learning to tone-down and manage my own reactions on a day-to-day basis, has shown me great results. I have literally toned down my tendency to react impulsively.

More and more of the time, when my knee-jerk reactions surge, I am catching and identifying them as my own before they “bloom,” and just toning them down on the spot. At the very least, my reactions are

very much weaker than they were and will eventually reach a point where they are no longer directly recording karma. This I find very, very helpful in daily life, and it should also be useful in the bardo to not impulsively jump to rebirth conclusions, but instead allow a more natural and considered response to occur. If I can manage this in the here-and-the-now of this life, it should be similar in the bardo. At least, that's how I understand it.

And while I would like to weigh-in positively in the outer world and be a benefit to all, it seems to me that first I have to get beyond my own self and its ingrained reactions, before I can properly interact with the outside world. I have learned from actual experience that toning back my own set of reactions is a good first-step toward the more advanced dharma practices. Until I am able to respond reasonably and naturally to life, it is clear that my mind will continue to be obscured by my own reactions. And I really don't want to take that kind of reactivity into the bardo with me, where so much is at stake.

So, these are some reasons that I recommend Reaction Tonglen. It not only benefits us in this life, but prepares us to not panic in the after-death bardo realms, where I understand it really counts. I am doing this reaction-toning practice myself and doing my best to share this technique with anyone interested. So here is that short video again about the practice.

Dharma Grooves: The Alchemy of Reaction

BEFORE WE BEGIN DHARMA PRACTICE

January 24, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I consider this particular blog important, so I have also made it as a podcast. If you have the time (and inclination) to listen to this, you may get more out of it. Otherwise, here it is as written.]

PODCAST

Before We Begin Dharma Practice

<https://youtu.be/2HqRXvY7jkk>

This rather long blog is for those of you who are ready to begin practicing dharma or those who are already practicing, but are not yet getting the results that would make that practice self-fueling. This is an approach that I know works well because I have done it myself, and it works relatively quickly. I am not saying that this is the only way to go, just that this way works and is within the scope of the average person's ability, given the busy life most of us live these days. Perhaps because we live in very fast-moving times, we need a method that works faster, rather than slower. As mentioned, this practice actually works in real-time enough to keep my interest. It is not at all abstract, not even a little.

As simple as the standard way of learning sitting meditation (Tranquility Meditation - on the cushion

practice) appears to be, it is still fairly abstract for the average American. And I don't mean our managing to sit on a cushion each day, but more about how do we learn to stop just practicing meditation and actually just meditate. That's the rub.

For one (and for most of us), it can take a long time to learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) so that we are just meditating. I also feel it is helpful to understand how the common practice of sitting-meditation ended up being the basic practice we first learn in this country. It is revealing.

According to a highly-trained Tibetan Rinpoche (a khenpo at that), in Tibet, dharma students do not start out learning sitting meditation. Why? Because Tranquility Meditation (sitting) is considered difficult enough that the Tibetans have a whole series of practices they feel that we should go through BEFORE we start sitting meditation. In fact, these practices are appropriately called "The Common Preliminaries." And after that there is what is called the "Extraordinary Preliminaries," and only then is Tranquility Meditation (sitting meditation) generally taught. Why was this not the approach taught here in the U.S.? The answer to this question is important to understand.

As it was explained to me, when Tibetan Buddhism first really began to take hold here in the states (in the early 1970s), the Extraordinary Preliminaries were taught, or at least attempted. However, they are physically so difficult and take so much patience and long practice, that Americans were not having any of it. So, rather than force the issue, Tibetan teachers like the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, put the

Preliminaries on the back-burner and, instead, taught sitting meditation first, perhaps because Americans had already accepted the idea of sitting practice from the influence of Zen Buddhism, which had entered this country decades before Tibetan Buddhism caught on.

They did introduce (to some students) the Extraordinary Preliminaries, but usually after they had folks sitting in Tranquility Meditation, rather than before starting sitting meditation as they do in Tibet, where traditionally they had served as “warm up” exercises before sitting-meditation training. So, in this country, instead of any preliminary practice, sitting meditation was taught, cold-turkey, so to speak, with no warm up exercises. I feel this re-ordering of the practices made it more difficult for Americans to learn to meditate.

And when I say “warm up,” I don’t just mean rubbing our hands together. The Extraordinary Preliminaries are a serious commitment, so serious that no one I know (or few) way back then would do it straight-out. I know that just hearing about it (at first) scared the bejesus out of me. And just to give you a sense of what “serious” means, the Extraordinary Preliminaries, involve doing five specific practices in sequence, each one 111,111 times. So, this did not happen in a day, a week, or a month. Most of us working folks took years to complete it. So, just briefly: the practice involves doing 111,111 full-length prostrations on the ground, from standing-up to lying on the ground with your arms fully extended in front of your head and getting back up again. And with that you recite a Buddhist refuge-prayer 111,111 times.

Next you do a purification practice that involves learning a 100-syllable mantra and reciting it 111,111 times, while doing a specific visualization. And after that, you offer 111,111 mandalas, which involve carefully placing a number of small piles of rice on a copper plate in a certain order, again with a very specific visualization and prayers. And finally, you do what is called Guru Yoga 111,111 times, again with a full visualization and specific mantras. And doing all that, my friends, is not “nothing.”

The takeaway here is that in Tibet they did all of that BEFORE they were introduced to sitting meditation. I am not saying all Tibetan lineages do this, but many do, including the one I train in. It's no wonder that we Americans balked (and no-doubt gulped) when they first heard about the Extraordinary Preliminaries, and we didn't want to do it. Good God! It looked like something out of the Middle Ages. Anyway, that is how it has been explained to me.

The upshot of this approach, reversing the traditional order of practice, is that we go into Tranquility Meditation (sitting practice) without the benefit of doing all the preliminary practices I described above. These Extraordinary Preliminaries are what I like to call “Dharma Bootcamp,” because they very much change you, but are difficult and can take years to complete.

OK. My point so far is that if learning Tranquility Meditation (sitting meditation) has not been a breeze and a solid success for you (meaning that you are still trying to learn it), you might want to consider some of these warm up exercises. That's what I had to do.

With that said, I want to introduce you to an alternate consideration, another route, so to speak.

All of the beginning dharma practices, including the various preliminaries (plus sitting meditation itself) are considered “preliminary” to achieving some degree of realization, by way of an event which is called “Recognition,” i.e. recognizing the actual nature of your own mind. I won’t go into “recognition” here, but I do want to point out something further about completing the preliminaries.

Another practice that is preliminary is called Lojong, and it involves beginning to work with our habitual dualistic thinking, habits such as “Me and You,” “We and Them,” and so on – our tradition of dividing everything into subject and object, as if there were a clear division between the two.

One of the most efficacious practices in Lojong, is called Tong-Len. In fact, it was the first practice that I was given to do and I was told that Westerners took to it very easily. Without devoting too much attention here to Tong-Len, let’s just say it is about removing the duality, the divisions between ourselves and others, as mentioned above. But in just a few words, Tong-Len (which is also called “Sending and Receiving” and “Exchanging yourself for others”) involves willingly taking in all the negativity from others (breathing it in) and sending back to them (breathing out) all of our positive love and goodness. It is a powerful practice, but needless to say, that for most of us who are not Mother Teresa, this practice can be very abstract.

In my opinion, standard Tong-Len itself needs a preliminary practice, one that I call Reaction Tong-Len, and I have described it here many times before, so let's look at the difference between these two Tong-Lens:

The more traditional (standard) Tong-Len is about us making friends with other selves (people as well as with the world). However, Reaction Tong-Len is about first making friends with our own self, before we try to tackle others. Reaction Tong-Len, as its name suggests, is about our own reactions (and reactivity) in general, whether it is reacting to others directly, or to our own internal reactions caused by our likes, dislikes, biases, prejudice, etc., i.e. self-inflicted wounds.

If, as a personality type, we are highly-reactive or over-reactive, and take offense and umbrage at just any old thing, that is like suffering a thousand razor cuts to our psyche each day, all of which are dutifully (and permanently) registered as karma and stored in our mindstream.

Although mostly registered subconsciously, we typically go through (each day) innumerable micro-events involving cringing, wincing, fearing, worrying, etc. In other words, we suffer by way of our own reactions, either directly in reaction to others (and the world), or by (and this is the bulk of it) self-inflicted cuts, thanks to our own prejudice, stubbornness, or simple miss-takes – getting it wrong.

And here is my take on all of this: Before we can undertake something as difficult as the Extraordinary Preliminaries or even the standard Tong-Len, we

would do well to calm down our own reactivity and learn how to stop stirring up the sediment in our mind. And here are some of the advantages of the Reaction Tong-Len practice:

Reaction Tong-Len is almost unique in that no dharma practice I know of (until “Recognition” is reached) is as totally fresh and in the present as Reaction Tong-Len. By definition, our reactions are 100% in the “now,” happening in the present moment, and this is because it is simply becoming aware of our own involuntary reactions, literally as they happen throughout the day. And we can’t stop how we react; they are always fresh, and that is what this practice is all about.

And there is some humor here, in that Reaction Tong-Len involves no one but ourselves, so there is absolutely no one else to blame for our own reactions, but us. Yes, what causes us to react (like someone flipping us off) is not our doing, but our reaction to being flipped off is, as mentioned, 100% ours. We have to own it. There is no escaping this conclusion and this fact is an extreme kindness that this practice offers, compared to having a world of “others” to blame, which we usually have (and we do blame). Here, even we have to admit that these reactions are ours and ours alone.

I don’t know how to say this next point, except that becoming aware of our actual reactions throughout the day is, well, liberating. We have little to no idea how much of our energy each day is tied up in reacting, in cringing, wincing, deferring, attempting to ignore, and so on... whatever it is that we find too hard to take. With even a few weeks of Reaction

Tong-Len, we can begin to see that we are calming down and have more energy because of it.

Another wonderful attribute of this practice is that we can do it effortlessly all day long. We don't have to set time aside to practice Reaction Tong-Len, but can just do it on the hoof, so to speak. And it adds up, big time. Unlike our daily formal practice, where we might squeeze out an hour, but often less, doing reaction toning, we can amass a real amount of practice, like all day long, and that makes all the difference. And you can see the effects of the practice early-on, compared to most dharma practices I have done.

My point is that until we have made peace with our own reactive Self, we will never be clear-minded enough to begin some of the more advanced dharma practices like Insight Meditation or even, IMO, sitting meditation.

I find it helpful to first take care of our own garbage, our incessant reactions and reactionary tendencies, and then, when our reactions are transformed into more appropriate responses, that would be a good time to entertain more advanced practices, like even the standard Tong-Len practice and eventually sitting meditation itself. And here is more information about how to do the Reaction Tonglen practice.

Dharma Grooves: The Alchemy of Reaction

THE EARTH-TOUCHING GESTURE

January 26, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have written recently about the mechanics of dharma training, the fact that what we may like to think of as “spiritual” training, that it is somehow all “metaphysical” and never touches the ground, is misplaced. This kind of thinking goes along with the mistaken view that if we can get enlightened, we will get out of this god-almighty world to a “better place.” Good luck with that!

If that’s our view, then any image or statue of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha of this age, should give us pause, because they show him touching the ground with his right hand, in what is appropriately called the “earth-touching gesture.” It is there for all of us to see. Anyone can see that.

In other words, aside from any “spiritual” intent we have, the rubber also has to somewhere meet the road. Spirit must be made to matter, so to speak, through actual physical contact and practice. It takes a spiritually inclined person to master the dharma, but part of that mastery (at least in Mahayana Buddhism) is not only knowing how to gain realization for ourselves, but also being able to demonstrate the effective techniques to others. So there is very definitely a mechanics of dharma that needs to be grasped.

Even the word “metaphysical,” invokes the physical, so the only thing “beyond “the physical (what we might like to call “spiritual”) is the ability to better embrace the physical. There “IS” nothing beyond physically “what is” except REALIZATION of the physical, if you catch my drift. In other words, if we try to get out of town, so to speak, we just end up turning back around. What is it that the astronaut sees when he gets to outer space that he can’t see from here on Earth? Obviously, it is the fact that they see the Earth. There’s our answer, folks.

It might be helpful to understand the difference between an enlightened being like the Buddha and dharma teachers who have some realization, but are not fully enlightened. The dharma teachers in this world are not all enlightened Buddhas, probably far from it. If they are not enlightened, just what are they? First, I am sure that this varies, because there are dozens (if not hundreds) of types (or views) of Buddhism available.

In general, dharma teachers, while not yet as fully enlightened as the Buddha was, have achieved realization to one degree or another, which in itself is rare. An authentic teacher has realization and is thus permitted (usually by their teacher) to teach. In other words, an authentic teacher knows from “realized” experience what he or she instructs in the way of dharma to others.

My original point is that an authentic teacher has realization enough that he or she not only understands the mechanics of dharma, but also the process of guiding students to success in their particular dharma practices. A teacher with some

degree of authentic realization is what we should be looking for in the way of a dharma guide, someone who can answer our questions and help us move along in our dharma path.

To us, as students, the dharma can appear as quite a mystery, but for a teacher with some realization, they not only understand the dharma conceptually, but have realized what in fact it is all about, how it works, and what is involved. Therefore, they can see how to guide us this way or that way, as needed. That is what I mean by the mechanics of the dharma -- dharma mechanics.

In other words, we don't need the likes of a Dalai Lama as a personal guide; we need, as mentioned above, someone with enough realization to guide us through the various preliminary practices, and so on. And the guidance is just that, guidance. An authentic teacher has "been there, done that," and is able to point out the way to beginners like ourselves. Yes, of course there is a "spiritual" dimension, but it is not "out there" (somewhere else but here), but rather "in here" (and right here), and a lot of it is no different than pointing out where the path is and letting us know when we wander off it, just like we used to have training wheels on our bikes.

LIFE'S CENTRIFUGE

January 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[This blog is also available as a podcast:
<https://youtu.be/-QMhjTesLMA>]

Prior to beginning dharma practice are the so-called "Common Preliminaries," and they struck me to the core on first contact. I found that these thoughts were pretty much what I had been thinking to myself all along about life. Their official title is "The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward the Dharma" and the first three thoughts rang like a bell when I first heard them:

- (1) This human life we have is precious and should not be wasted (I wanted to be used for some good purpose!).
- (2) Life is fragile and impermanent as a water bubble.
- (3) Karma, our every action, brings an equal reaction that defines us, and it is recorded.

That's three of the four. However, it was with the Fourth Thought that I have had to wrestle a bit, and it has many translations, such as "The shortcomings of Samsara," "The Meaninglessness of Samsara," and "The defects of Samsara," Samsara being this cyclic world of day-to-day existence we all now live in, with

its ups and downs, and its endless cycles of going around and around.

And in talking with myself, my take on the Fourth Thought is that it's like a casino. We will never game the system; we will never get all our ducks in a row. And to top it off, the fourth thought that turns the mind is perhaps most often translated simply as "Revulsion of Samsara." Apparently, the devout dharma practitioner becomes fed up and revolted by this Samsaric world.

With that in mind, it is important to note that Buddhist texts point out that Samsara and Nirvana are "connate," two sides of the same coin, reciprocals of one another and inseparable. In other words, the closer we get to reaching Nirvana, the more we find ourselves realizing Samsara. That's what connate means. So, "Revulsion of Samsara" is only as useful as it leads to the transformation of Samsara into Nirvana. And being revolted or thinking that with Nirvana, we will somehow make an exodus from Samsara to some "heavenly" place as an alternative is not an alternative. That is a miss-take.

In other words, there is no alternative to Samsara, other than making a silk purse out of a sow's ear, the sow's ear being Samsara itself. There is nothing beyond "what now IS," other than what isn't, and that, by definition couldn't be much, so here we are, for better and for worse, in the middle of Samsara, with no way out other than realization. And until "Realization," we will remain in Samsara.

Perhaps, the translation "revulsion of Samsara" means to say that we stop fixating on this world of

attachments we live in; it no longer captivates us. Yet, revulsion basically means repulsion, which would be just another form of attachment, and I believe the dharma is better than that. So, what the word “revulsion” may mean is “loss of fixation,” a loss of attachment on our part, etc. That would make more sense to me, but “revulsion,” seems to me like just the opposite of positive attachment – attachment in reverse, but still just attachment.

Samsara is often defined as the endless cycles of experience, going up, going down, and on around. For sure, we all sometimes reach the point where we feel like saying “Stop the merry-go-round; I want to get off.” That happens every time I get stuck in the trough of the low end of a cycle, when I am more down than I am up. I cry out.

Yet, I notice that I don’t cry out when I am at the tip of the top of a cycle and flying high. Then, it’s more like I cry for more of it. “Give me more of it. I could do this forever, and I feel good!” Obviously, that is when we are at the top of the cycle that we desire more lives, more births, etc. Samsara is recursive and self-sustaining; it literally desires to go on forever.

Anyway, that’s the kind of cyclic behavior we exist through, at least where I live. With me, “Stop the train, I want to get off” doesn’t happen too often, but it happens. Yet, here we are talking about revulsion, being revolted by it all. I don’t like that concept; I much prefer not reacting to whatever is revolting, and instead learning to respond appropriately, to roll with it. For example, I have been revolted, but I’m still not enlightened. LOL.

Although I can't quite manage it, the pith Buddhist texts say that the realization of Samsara is Nirvana. That's saying a lot and is exactly what my first dharma teacher (in the late 1960s) taught me, when he would say "Michael, this is hell and we have to make our own little heaven in a corner of it." And that reminds of when a high rinpoche was asked whether a Bodhisattva could be born outside of Buddhism, and he responded that "Of course they could." Buddhism is not a religion, but a path to realization and enlightenment, wherever you find yourself in this world.

THE SUFFERINGS

January 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The Buddhists traditionally often refer to suffering and, list-makers that they are, they note three types of suffering:

- (1) Suffering Itself
- (2) The Suffering of Change
- (3) All-pervasive suffering

(1) The first type, "Suffering Itself" is just obvious suffering, what we all know and consider suffering is, basically a dictionary definition of suffering. They would cite the suffering of birth, sickness, old age and death, as well perhaps the suffering of attachment, what is desirable or undesirable. The sutras state:

"What is the suffering of suffering? It is that which is painful when arising, painful when remaining, and pleasant when ceasing."

(2) The second type, "The Suffering of Change" is just that, the fact that any moment of happiness is bound to end through changing into something else. In the sutras, it is stated:

"The suffering of change is that which is pleasant when arising, pleasant while remaining, but painful when ceasing."

(3) The third type, “All-Pervasive Suffering,” also called the “Suffering of Being Conditioned” is a bit harder to grasp, and this is why I’m writing this blog. It is worth becoming aware of, if not from direct experience, then at least to be aware of its existence, conceptually.

The Buddha said of this suffering:

“The suffering of being conditioned is not apparent when arising, while it remains, or when it ceases, but it is still the cause of suffering.”

This all-pervasive suffering is akin to the “Fourth Thought that Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma” (from the Common Preliminaries), at least in my opinion. The reason the Fourth Thought can be hard to grasp is because we are unaware of life as suffering. Like the old phrase “If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon;” we lack the faculty to see the all-pervasive suffering. We have somehow too coarse a mental mesh and that kind of suffering just slips through the cracks of the mind for us.

What the Buddha is saying is that conditioned existence, the world and life as we know it, including not only its deepest ruts, but also its highest highs, altogether is a suffering. We just don’t realize it.

When I trace the various sufferings down, it all makes sense for a while, but it is clear from the teachings that we cannot help but ignore suffering at the deepest (most subtle) level – all-pervasive suffering. By ignore, I mean we are ignorant of it, because we are too coarse to even sense or feel it. As mentioned,

we don't have a mental sieve fine enough to grasp it, so it falls right through the cracks in our awareness.

The Tibetan teachings say that the difference between folks like ourselves and someone with realization is that all-pervasive suffering to us is like holding a single hair, like an eyelash, in the palm of our hand, which is not a problem. We hardly notice it. However, for a realized person, and especially a Bodhisattva, it is like having that same hair in our eye. This is a standard metaphor in Tibetan Buddhism to describe all-pervasive suffering.

And, IMO, the point to grasp is that this world, driven by our own desires and graspingness, by definition, is a set-up for disappointment, a game that is rigged from the start so that we cannot win. In other words, it stems from nothing more than a perpetual grasping on our part, a reaching for, but without anything ever actually being grasped, thus never any lasting satisfaction, etc. You get the idea.

And I read again and again in the teachings that Samsara for someone like me can seem sweet enough, while for an enlightened (or even a realized) practitioner it is experienced as suffering personified. So, the mysterious "all-pervasive suffering" remains for us a mystery, because we are not refined enough to even experience it. I find that understanding all-pervasive suffering, even conceptually, helps me to see how and why I ignore seeing this life as having all that much suffering. And then again, on other days, no problem! I see it.

INTO THE JUNGLES OF NEPAL

January 31, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[I have shared this adventure story here before, as written out, but I have never told this story live, so here it is as a podcast. And, I have a brand-new audio interface, so my voice is very clear. Let me know how you like the story. Below is the spoken link.]

<https://youtu.be/bpEOybd0FEw>

Though we had originally arrived at the international airport in Kathmandu, we knew little about the adjacent domestic airport from which we were about to fly to Bhadrapur, a tiny town in southeastern Nepal very close to the Indian border. From there, we planned to cross over into India, first to the Indian border town of Karkavitta, and then on to Sikkim, where we were to visit more Karma Kagyu centers. Altogether, five of our family members had elected to go.

We arrived at the much smaller domestic airport and managed to wrestle our own luggage away from the army of touts and pile it near the small office of the Royal Nepal Airlines, with whom we had tickets.

For the umpteenth time, we confirmed our tickets, and managed to weigh our luggage and present it for inspection. As usual, the guards demanded we open this or that bag for inspection, only to tell us to forget it the moment we began to comply. I had no idea what

kind of plane we would be on, only I suspected (from the size of this airport) that it might not be a DC-10. We waited for our flight to be called, with me checking every time any plane was being boarded just to make sure it was not our flight and we were not somehow missing it. Finally, it was time for us to board, and we climbed into the small bus that would drive us out to where the plane was waiting.

We kept going farther and farther out, until we were at the very edge of the airport, passing jets and larger transports and then pulling up in front of a tiny propeller plane that seated maybe 16 people. Gulp.

The small hatchway of the plane had a three to four rung ladder hanging down, touching the runway. Climbing on board, we wedged ourselves into the tiny wire-frame seats. The single flight attendant offered us a tray with cotton for our ears and a piece of candy to help us swallow. With the few people from the bus on board, the pilot climbed in, and we took off at once. I could not see much from the tiny porthole windows, but I could see the Kathmandu valley unfolding beneath us. In about an hour we prepared to land. I looked hard to see the airport, but could see very little. We dropped lower and lower. I still couldn't see a runway, only a grassy field, which, of course, turned out to be the runway. Bumpity bump, we came to a halt, swinging around in front of a small ochre-colored building with a bunch of people in front. Out we climbed.

It was very hot; as my family watched the growing pile of baggage being tossed from the back of the plane, I went to try and find a taxi to drive us the short distance from the airport to the Indian border-town of

Karkavitta, about a half hour's drive away. I was hoping to find a driver who might also take us across the border and all the way to Mirik, in West Bengal. "How far to the border?" I asked one driver, just to confirm. "Which border?" he said. "Why the Indian border, of course." "It's a ten hour drive," he responded. Here was one confused taxi driver, I thought. "The border is no more than a half-hour from here..."

"No." he said, "The Indian border and Karkavitta are at least 10 hours from here."

I didn't get it.

"This is Bhadrapur, isn't it?" I ask. "No, this is Bharitpur."

It turns out Bharitpur is in Western Nepal, some ten hours from the border and in the opposite direction of where we had thought we were going. I began to get excited, and the airport attendant said, in his best Hindu-English accent, "Sir, there is no problem. I can stop the plane"—which had begun to taxi away—"I have the authority to stop the plane." "Do stop it," I stammered. "We have to go back to Kathmandu, right now!" So much for that idea, though, for the plane just took off and vanished into the shimmering heat, leaving us (along with our baggage) standing in a field in one of the hottest parts of Nepal, near the edge of a tropical jungle. What a deserted feeling that was! The Royal Nepal Airlines ticket agent had misunderstood our destination and interpreted 'Bhadrapur' as 'Bharitpur'.

After milling around with any number of Nepalese, all

of whom were trying to speak English—which they could not—we were finally helped by a Brahmin—often the only ones of the Nepalese who could truly speak English.

There was very little we could do, he explained. We would have to wait at least one day for another plane. That was that. I looked around at the sad state of the town we were in. Twenty-four hours here?

Well, I refused to accept that fate...spending a night in this little sweatbox of a town, completely screwing up our trip, and with people waiting for us to arrive later that day at the other end, eventually worrying about us...by God, I would rather spend the next ten hours driving to the Indian border, arriving late at night, but getting on with our journey. I set about hiring two cars (since my family, plus baggage, were too much for any one taxi) to drive us that great distance. We were driven to the local Royal Nepal Airlines office, a single room that was soon filled with onlookers ogling us.

We managed to find one middle-aged man (having somewhat of a wreck of a taxi) who was willing to take us, and, after a while, a young Nepalese driver popped up with a very tiny, but newer, vehicle (he was the only one of the two who claimed to know English, which, it turned out, he also did not). We were determined to go, if only to get out of where we were. I explained to both drivers what we were doing, and that, at all times, we must keep each car in view of the other. We must always stay together. Yes, yes, they agreed. As we started out, the older driver had to stop at his house to get his license and a few other things. We waited out front. My wife, my young son,

and myself had gotten into the larger, older car, while my two daughters, May and Michael Anne, had went in the smaller car with the young driver. Both cars were jammed with our luggage.

As we waited for the older driver, the younger of the drivers kept motioning to me from his car to take the wheel of the car I was in, and just take off, leaving the older man behind. Funny guy, I thought. Then, as the older driver came out with his license, the younger driver started right off, moving toward the nearest main drag. We followed as soon as we could close the doors and get moving; and yet, when we reached the main street, there was no sign of the car with the girls. Looking to the right and to the left, we saw nothing. He had vanished, and, with him, my two daughters, aged 15 and 21—just gone.

Well, we would have to catch up. Our driver took off in the correct direction, but we did not manage to catch sight of the other car, even after several miles. “But I told him to stay in lock-step with us,” I stammered to the older driver, who understood not one word. All he did was throw his hands up in a gesture of futility and say “young driver.” After one or two miles, I was still hopeful, but after ten and fifteen miles, at quite a fast pace, I began to lose hope. Around this time, our driver began to swing into various filling stations and stores, asking if they had seen the other car. Nothing was forthcoming. I was getting quite upset at this point, and began to be more vocal.

At some point, our driver just turned around and we began heading back to the town of Bharitpur, and to the Royal Airline Office. After what seemed an eternity, we arrived at the office and I rushed in and

began to explain to the agent there what had happened. My wife wanted to contact the police at once, but the agent didn't really want to do that. He kept saying we should get back on the road and keep driving, and, if after one hour of driving, we did not find the girls, then we should drive back to his office here (another hour) and THEN he would go with us to the police. My wife was having none of this, she insisted we go to the police NOW!—which we did. Time kept slipping by, with well over an hour and a quarter having passed since we last saw the girls.

The police just went round and round, up and down the line of authority, to no real effect. We probably wasted a good 45 minutes in that office before they once again insisted we drive that one hour west along the road to the next town, and, if we did not find them, then we were to call them from that town and they would institute a major search. In the meantime, they would call on ahead to the next town with the word. This was not really what we wanted, but we had little choice. We headed back over the same road we had just traveled, covering the same ground for the third time, in what seemed like a futile gesture.

On and on the road went, through incredible scenery—tall grasses along a large river, etc. Still, we did not come to the town. And after more than an hour, we were still driving, looking in every filling station, every store—and there was nothing but stores along these Nepalese roads. I was sick with worry at this point, running any number of horrible scenarios through my head. Then, some 54 miles down the road—there, by the side of the road, was the car, and the young driver—and our girls!— all alive and well.

We were so relieved, but I was really pissed at the driver. The girls were worried too, and did not want to ride with the young man any farther. Nothing much had happened. He had made eyes at them, and otherwise tried to impress them. Of course, there was also the fact that he had paid no attention to our instructions. I spoke strongly to him. We decided that the possibility of getting this combination of cars, people, and drivers all of the way across Nepal was unconceivable—we would not try to. We gave up and drove back down that same damn road for the fourth time, this time all the way back to Bharitpur, where we would just have to hole up for the night. Our trip had ground to a halt. Seldom in my life has something stopped me so cold—I really understood, in this case, the word ‘frustrated’.

Back at the Royal Nepal Airline office, I fumed and spouted, refusing to pay the young driver much of anything. Then I arranged to find the most expensive hotel in town—which everyone warned was way too expensive. It was called the Safari Hotel, and rooms there were up to \$65 a night. It sounded like a deal to me. We packed up all our gear, and, along with our girls, headed for the Safari.

Well, the Safari turned out to be a huge resort, with a pool, a vast dining room—the works. After weeks of marginal hotels, we all hopped into the pool and cooled off. And cool was needed, for this was a tropical climate—just plain hot. The entranceways, and even some of the rooms, had geckos (lizards with suction- cup toes) all over the walls, which were great fun to watch catching insects. As we (half starved) waited for dinner to be served—at what seemed to be a very late time, 7:30 PM— we discovered that what

the Safari was really all about was the taking of trips (safaris) into the nearby jungle while straddled atop elephants. Since we had nothing better to do but wait for the next day's plane, we resolved to set off into the jungle the following morning—on elephants! We would start for the jungle at 5:30 AM. It was our first non-pilgrimage act, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Entering the Jungle

And sure enough, at the crack of dawn, there we were, hurtling down the back roads in an open jeep, heading toward the jungle. We passed numerous grass houses and shacks, with the people and animals all around them starting their day; everywhere along the road were flowers and plants, the dawn light illuminating their blossoms. We arrived at some kind of a hotel camp overlooking a large river, on the other side of which was the jungle. We could see herds of deer or antelope moving along the jungle's edge. After being offered tea, we were guided down a path to a high landing where, one by one, several elephants moved in and allowed us to climb into the wood-frame baskets securely mounted to their backs. It was four people to an elephant, plus the elephant driver way up front.

The elephants walked right down to the river, drank their fill, and began to move out into the mainstream. The river was maybe a quarter of a mile wide. As the current got stronger, the elephants turned sidewise (facing the current) and began to sidestep toward the distant shore—this was a little scary! Gradually, however, we crossed the expanse of the river and climbed up the far shore, moving into the jungle

proper. It was good to be high up on the elephant, because the grass we walked through (called, oddly enough, 'elephant grass') was at least a good 5-6 feet high—and there were tigers in this jungle.

The short of it was that we saw all kinds of deer, wild boar, and most important, wild rhinoceros. What an experience! Riding high up on the elephants, we walked right into a group of three rhinos—a mom, a pop, and a 3- year old baby (not so much a baby anymore). There they were, just that close. And, as it was, the elephants would leave the trails to crash on through the jungle itself, blazing new trails by tearing off limbs with their trunks and smashing foliage down with their feet. As they made their own trails, insects and leaves rained down on us from the foliage above. And the elephants would make this deep shuddering sound whenever they smelled something ahead of them in the jungle they were not sure of. The steep-banked muddy narrow streams were forded and, after crossing a stream, the elephants often had to get down on their knees to climb up the other side. I must say, this was an experience I would not soon forget. I sure got close enough to a real jungle; on the way back, I saw a large crocodile eyeballing us as we crossed the river—not a good place for swimming!

After eating breakfast at a camp near the jungle's edge, and playing with giant six-inch millipedes that crawled all over our hands and arms, we were back at the hotel by 10:00 AM. We grabbed our bags and made for airport, there to stand in the heat. The sun was fierce, and I was quickly soaked with sweat, which, as it dried later, actually left a salt residue. At last an air-raid siren sounded to get the cattle off the runway so that the plane could land. As the siren went

off, boys with sticks swarmed onto the runway and drove the cattle and water buffalo back from the landing strip. The plane was able to land, and we climbed aboard, stuffing cotton in our ears. We were on our way, back to Kathmandu to catch the correct plane—the one to Bhadrapur not to Bharitpur! After this experience, though, our two girls elected not to go to India; they wanted to spend the coming week in Kathmandu instead, just doing whatever they felt like. We really couldn't blame them, and although we hated to be separated, we said goodbye to them at the airport.

Back at Kathmandu, a dozen airline officials in three different offices spent two hours running around correcting their original mistake and issuing us new tickets. There we sat—and waited—until we could finally climb aboard another cotton-in-your-ear propeller plane, this time one taking us, hopefully, on to Bhadrapur.

BESIDE OURSELVES

February 1, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[This blog is also available as a podcast:
<https://youtu.be/CVWt1mpUdv8>]

Something I have not written much about, but live with almost every day is staying up to date with, I would like to say, myself, but the “Self” is part of the problem, so I will just say “staying immediate” or fresh. What I mean by that has to do with, as mentioned, “freshness,” about not falling behind my own sense of who I am, so that my intrinsic nature is (despite my attempts to prevent it) coated over with the residue of stifling conceptuality, not to mention simple mistakes that further obscure things..

I know what “normal” is only when I feel abnormal, out of sorts, and not myself. I lose touch and can have trouble getting back to feeling normal. All I know is that I am not quite who I remember as me. I believe the old way of saying this is that “we are beside ourselves.”

In fact, back in the 1960s, when I first became aware of this predicament (due to having a taste of real awareness), only to fall back into where I came out of, but not quite all the way back to ignorance. In other words, we are only a mind-shift away from grace, from feeling like ourselves, of being present again, but

still trapped by our own past. I call this: to fail ignorance, by a meter or a foot. When that happens, I can no longer be blissfully (or even painfully) ignorant and, if you will pardon the purple-prose of this journal entry from 1967, back then I wrote:

"We slide through it all, and with the state of grace I sought to regain now appearing (on and off) and moving in unison beside me, yet not quite within my reach. At my strongest moments, I can offer a vessel, hope for more, and yet perhaps gnash at what I have. The blood is in us all. And I taste blood when time quickens and I am born again. I smack it inside me and laugh the laugh, insane it is, that announces my arrival, and the remembering that I have been here before. I am back! I have found myself again. Only then am I happy; only then can I rest.

"Without this "more-pure awareness," I am mostly lost, alone, and wait on its coming as on the break of day. I hear it breathing and know I am often only steps away from the health of the spirit, from being present, yet I am bound in my patterns, unable to move the least inch to it home.

"And it (or "I") know this. I am trapped in this form, and yet this same form holds all my bid for its favor, trapped so close to the immediacy of Life. Yet, it is everywhere perpendicular to me. If I were stronger, I would come into it and be forever in its hands. More of it... I cannot but cry for more of it.

"It breathes and moves under, around, and over all of me, yet I cannot grasp it. It is behind me, then in front, yet I cannot see it direct. It moves in the corners of my eyes, yet defies my pursuit. I must get back to this

clear state, to “Me.” Meanwhile, the wolves of the flesh howl for my soul, for the beast in us stands forth at every handout and claims the whole. Way be clear to my heart. Open. Open up.”

So, aside from being young, I was aware then of what I am talking about here now, how the sloughing off of our changes piles up, and falls out of date with ourselves. It changes us, coating us over with the glue of conceptuality until we begin to suffocate from lack of clarity, lack of freshness and immediacy.

The Tibetans have many dharma practices that help to burn off and purify the “pale cast of thought,” so to speak, and help us to find the “quick” of where we are, where we live inside and are still alive. Of course, the Buddhists have their version of confession, much like I know it from my Catholic upbringing, but also more.

The idea is to return to the source of what lives in us, to life, and drink from the pure waters of clarity. It is so easy for me to ride away from clarity into the sunset of my own obscurations, nodding-off all the way, and then to not be able to find my way back to that faucet of fresh. It takes work to stay awake, at least in the beginning.

Dharma itself is nothing but the path to ever-greater awareness, a path to follow until the incandescence of realization finally arises. Unfortunately, because of the nature of Samsara (this cyclic world of ups and downs from which there is no escape or respite), we cannot just rest until that event takes place. In other words, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps is the nature of dharma practice until realization (and

liberation) of one type or another arises and is attained.

KARMA WANGMO – 12 YEARS IN RETREAT

February 5, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When I first came to KTD, our monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY, there was no monastery, but only the old retreat house. What was to be the monastery (and main shrine room) was a hole in the ground with some freshly laid cement forms. But I soon learned that out back, behind what was to become the monastery, living in this old shack-like building was this legendary woman they called “Wangmo,” more properly Karma Wangmo, and once upon a time she had the name Susan Joy Albright. There was even talk of her having originally been a motorcycle gal or something like that.

She had been in solitary retreat back behind the monastery for what eventually came to be 12 years of intense practice. Of course, I had never seen her, much less met her. Sometimes, when I would circumambulate the main shrine building, I walk up to the fence behind which was Wangmo’s retreat hut and, like many others, would stop and say prayers to her. I might have even brought her food once in a while. I can’t remember.

Originally, Susan Joy Albright was a Westerner who became a student of His Holiness the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje), and was eventually ordained in 1976 by him as Ani Karma Wango, a

getsulma (novice) nun and placed under the direction of my teacher, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

When Karma Wangmo came out of retreat, I met her when she visited our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. There were all kinds of rumors about what she would do next, stay at the monastery at KTD, tour the centers (which she did), or head out into the wide world, which is eventually what happened. From that point on, “Wangmo” as she is often referred to as, became a legendary figure in our sangha. Sightings or rumors abounded, like that she lived by the ocean in a beach house, that she went to sea in a small boat with only her cat as company, and on and on. Eventually, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche had this to say about Karma Wangmo:

“The Karma Wangmo story is that she would need many things in order to do Dorje Phakmo [Vajrayogini practice]. A situation needed to be put together and we did not have any arrangements at that point, as we were still in New York. I told her to do one hundred Nyungnes [a Nyungne is a 2-3-day practice where practice prostrations, while fasting and not drinking]. She had previously received the Nyungne vow, so she could renew it herself, but she did not know how to make the tormas and things like that.

“She told me she was not going to make the tormas; I asked her if she could offer cookies instead. Apparently His Holiness Karmapa had told her that her yidam was Dorje Phakmo, Vajrayogini, and that she should practice that. She had the empowerment from him. She came to me and asked me to teach her Dorje Phakmo. I told her that she first had to do ngondro and she told me that she had already done a

Drukpo Kagyu ngondro. I told her to do another one. She came back, not more than three months later, and told me that she had done another ngondro and again requested Dorje Phakmo. She then did one hundred nyungnes in a tree house, living on bread and water. She did them straight through, came out, and said she wanted to be taught Dorje Phakmo.

“By that time we were here at KTD. There was this ruin of what had formerly been a cabin. I told her that first, she would have to build a house to do retreat in. I told her to try to get the money to build it and said I would try to get the money to build it and together we would see what we could do. She worked helping an older woman in Woodstock and managed to raise a thousand dollars to re-do the outside of it. The outside was finished but the inside was still a wreck. She said that she did not want to wait any longer; she wanted to go in, and she did not care what the inside was like. She went in. I made her do ngondro again and six months of Guru Yoga.

“For the next seven years she did the outer, inner, and secret practices of Vajrayogini. While she was doing that, probably during the inner practice, she had a strange experience, where she said she heard thunder come from the sky and along with that the words, "You are an incarnation of Dorje Phakmo, and you are the tenth incarnation in the line." At the same time she saw the number ten appear in the palm of her hand. When she told me this I got a little bit nervous and I said that I did not know if she was Dorje Phakmo or not, but I knew she was practicing Dorje Phakmo and that she must continue.

“She continued and eventually she finished Dorje Phakmo and she finished the fire pujas; she then did the Six Dharmas of Naropa for three years and that was the end of the twelve years. After she came out I asked her to serve as the lama of a Dharma center and she said no. She said she did not want to do that, she did not have anything to say, and she did not know how to teach. She preferred to live on the beach and meditate alone. If people wanted to talk to her about practice that was fine, but she did not want to make a big deal about it. She is someone whom you cannot tell what to do. If she wants to do something, she will do it and if she does not, she will not. She is also someone who never fights. If you argue with her she will never get mad, no matter how many times you argue, but she will not do what you want unless she wants to do it.

“She is indescribably diligent. She did one thousand prostrations every day for the whole retreat until she got to the physical exercises of the Six Dharmas, and then she cut down to five hundred a day. She never missed a day; she practiced eighteen hours a day of formal practice without missing at all ever for any reason. She never stopped practicing and she never complained for any reason. It looks like she had some health problems. She broke a tooth in retreat, which must have hurt tremendously, but she never mentioned it.

“... I am confident that that retreat facility has great blessing because of all the excellent practice that was done there for so many years and because His Holiness the 16th Karmapa visited her, H.E. Gyaltsap Rinpoche visited her, H.E. Situ Rinpoche visited her, and many other great teachers.”

In addition, our friend Rachel Marco-Havens had this to say about meeting Karma Wangmo when she (Rachel) was a younger woman:

“My friend Jody would tell me about an amazing woman named Karma Wangmo who had done a 12 year solitary retreat in the cabin out back of the monastery. And prior to that, she had done close to a year of Nyungne retreat in a little tree house down the road. She had just come out.

“Before I met her, I was fascinated by her story. She was a yogini of the highest order and I was to revere her. And then we met... The reverence that grew from knowing her was from beyond what my linear mind could have fathomed from a place of ‘should.’

“Oh... The smile in her eyes and the sound of her voice. She was no stoic hard force to reckon with, but instead a lovely, funny, beautiful goddess with the most amazing sense of humor and grace. I was still a bit resistant (at the time) to organized religion and the idea of White Buddhists living together in a sort of summer camp setting, but my armor was being stripped daily.

“If Jody was the sprite at the garden gate, then Karma Wangmo was the wise Faery at the base of the tree in the woods. I can instantly conjure the sound of her voice. Her willingness to accept and invite me into such a new world held no judgment (even at my own judgment) — only welcoming. Her flair for the unconventional and her eagerness to be as completely full of life is forever inspiring and I feel so very fortunate.

“... She is grace and wildfire and steady love...

“It is very difficult to be a strong, forthright, no-bullshit woman in many places in our society, and Tibetan Buddhism is sure one of those places. She gave me permission to try. One could look around and wonder where the woman’s ‘place’ is in this philosophy.

“Yoginis like Wangmo or ‘La’ as she is lovingly referred to by those closest to her, just by being who they are, inspire practitioners like myself to look deeper into the lineage to find reflections of themselves. And there are many... Yeshe Tsogyal (Padmasambhava’s consort) being the first I found.

“Wangmo-La’s choice to take what she attained in retreat out with into her life ‘in the world’ inspires. You do not have to live in a monastery to live in Dharma. You don’t have to wear robes to share truth and love and compassion. You do not even have to call it Dharma...

“Having that permission meant so much and kept me on my path. Although I did not need permission from anyone, to be myself, I thank her for it. I hold what I have learned from Buddhist study sacred as I live ‘in the world,’ happily.”

Sadly, Karma Wangmo passed away in Mexico in October of 2013. Here is an excerpt of a conversation Karma Wangmo, Margaret, and I had when she visited our center on August 7, 1991. Mostly we were talking about doing retreat and a few other topics, but it can give you a flavor of this remarkable woman. When I met Karma Wangmo in person, I could see that she had great resolve and was fully present, but

with no airs of the cleric or religion about her. None. She appeared normal, fun-loving, bright, and kind.

YouTube Interview Link:

https://youtu.be/e_lpvVRj9vk

And if you want to read a very in-depth interview with Karma Wangmo by Victoria Huckenpahler, here it is:

<http://www.kechara.com/.../recommended-r.../a-modern-day-yogini/>



ONE FOR TWO

February 5, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

As students of the Dharma, we are at least somewhat aware of the problems inherent in dualistic thinking, dividing everything into subject and object, into “we and them,” with all the attachment and bias that goes along with that, i.e. polarization. If we have a subject and an object in our sentence structure, we are in dualistic thought mode, what the Buddhists call “relative truth.” Unfortunately, that mode is totally normal in this world, but it is a cross-eyed way to look at things.

And, if we recognize dualisms (and dualistic thinking) as a problem that we have, we should understand that there are various dharma practices designed to help collapse dualistic thinking into the actual non-dual view that it is. This is typically done through the process of “realization,” realizing that what appeared to be dualistic is in fact, not so. Like focusing a pair of binoculars, the two separate images become one. In truth, there was always only one image there all along. Anyway, realization is like that.

Just how do you plan to go about attaining Realization? Do you have any idea of how that is done? Let’s make that a rhetorical question. And I will try to answer it here. Realization is not enlightenment, but when we manage to achieve even glimpses of realization, that marks the beginning of the actual road to enlightenment.

Let's look at what realization is like. If I point out to you how to turn on a light switch, and you then realize how to do that yourself, that is realization. Realization can be instantaneous and, for all practical purposes, it exists outside of or beyond time. Spiritual realization, of course, is much more difficult because the scope of what is realized is, basically, infinite or at least includes all that we know as finite. Yet, it is doable, but by definition it demands all of us. There is no peeking.

In other words, to "realize" our entire mind is no short order, and it has to begin somewhere. The process is like turning a glove inside out, or whatever analogy you prefer. The whole enchilada (Samsara) has to be transformed, either all at once or, as most commonly is the case, by starting in one corner where we are and transforming from there, a little at a time.

As to how to do this, that can be a problem, because initially we don't know what realization is (or how to gain it), and this is not something we want to (or can) leave to our imagination. Realization is always hands-on, and I have tried (via several blogs) here to point out where IMO the easiest approach to realization can be found. And, of course, that is by working with our own reactions via the practice called Reactivity Tong-Len... reaction-training. And it's so easy to do.

Resolving dualisms that exist in our way of thinking and viewing the world means realizing that the dualism we imagine (or reify) do not actually exist (except conceptually) and that the actuality is and has always been non-dualistic. And what way is simpler than being aware and catching ourselves in our own reactions (liking, disliking something, etc.) and,

instead of further objectifying by separating it from us (or drawing it to us), we realize... WE REALIZE that it is all just us (this whole thing), OUR reacting, etc. And by realizing this, what appeared as two (subject and object) are in reality one – reality as it is. It is all our own reaction and inability to just give it a rest. By tempering our reactions, we can realize this fact and that itself is a form of realization.

Careful attention to our reactions can transform them from involuntary knee-jerks into appropriate responses and clarify the mind of these dualistic reactions. The two become one and we get one for two. We uncross our eyes.

P.S.

A related concept is that “Realization” (Nirvana) is non-dual, but dualistic thinking happens to be the norm in Samsara, by definition. And realization (Nirvana) is like un-crossing our eyes. Realization of the true nature of the mind is non-dual and represents the true state of things. So, in a very real way, the truth (true nature of the mind) represents the future for us through dharma practice. While other things change through the process of realization, the final result we are headed for (Nirvana) remains constant, because it is the true nature of the mind, i.e. the truth. So, in a very real sense, the “Truth” is the future because it will last until then, while that which is not true will fade in the process.

AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALIST

Russell C. Gregory
“The Concept of Place”

February 4, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

The original conversation from April 8, 1973 on
YouTube:

Russell Gregory Part 1

<https://youtu.be/kNhQv8iYyP8>

Russell Gregory Part 2

https://youtu.be/1M0T2Y5_WUU

Russell Gregory Part 3

<https://youtu.be/giKXy1aN0Ck>

Russell Gregory Part 4

<https://youtu.be/lH6NJj0D8g0>

Every college town probably has a local bookstore where everyone who is ‘anyone’ educated hangs out. In Ann Arbor in the late 1960s (pre-Borders), that was Centicore Books, originally on South University Street but relocated to Maynard Street. Somewhere I read that the official title was “Paper Back Bookstore and Centicore Modern Poetry Shop.” It was the South University period I am writing about here. Sure there were other bookstores in Ann Arbor, but this particular one is where both the students and professors bought their books and hung out. Centicore was the place where you might run into Andy Warhol, Norman

Mailer, or John Cage when they were in town.
Centicore was “The” place.

And what made it that ‘place’ was a single individual, Russell Gregory. He didn’t own the store, but he made the store what it was. He knew more about books and literature than any of us, professors included. And he was not simply a walking inventory of book names. He had read them all and could talk to you about them with real intelligence. Literally everyone who read knew Russell Gregory.

And he not only read books, understood them, and could guide any of us to where the best parts were, he also was a poet and writer (journals and essays). It was not enough for Russell to hold forth at the bookstore, he also had years of weekly get-togethers at his home at which all were welcome and great discussions took place. While the above is remarkable, that alone was not what endeared Russell Gregory to me.

Russell Gregory was a living Transcendentalist, just like Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau, the only one I have ever encountered who not only carries that lineage but is able to project it into your consciousness and what a view!

Russell Gregory in the Centicore bookstore pointing out which books on a topic are important and just why is one thing, important in itself, but Russell after hours or off in a corner of the shop actually reenacting the mental landscape of the Transcendentalists, empowering you in its vision is quite another. His ability to make that unique American philosophy actually come to life and live again or continue to live

on was another. Gregory's sense of local history, his sense of "place," was profound.

I am not talking about imparting the history of people, times, and places from a bygone era, but rather a sheer transport into those realms. You are there and those thoughts live again in you, now! Russell had that power and he shared it with those who could receive it, whenever possible. I would say Russell Gregory lived for those moments, because those moments lived.

Personally, he was about as polite and careful in his dress and mannerisms as a human can be and yet he was also able to show you just enough of the edge of what he did not like for you to be guided. He was no stranger to opinions, just very careful to deliver them in such a way as not to be offensive. I wish I had that talent!

In time, Centicore and the 1960s went the way of the world and two brothers name Border took over and launched a completely different kind of bookstore in Ann Arbor. Russell eventually left Ann Arbor and moved back closer to his roots in Ionia, Michigan, where he lived for many years. He served as the editor of the local Ionia newspaper for some twenty years and I wish I had time to research what he did with that newspaper. I am sure it was remarkable. Gregory later worked part-time at Schuller's Books in Grand Rapids, still guiding readers to the best of the best and I am sure occasionally empowering lucky souls in true American ideas.

I can remember one time I was being a little assy and chided him for not writing any poems recently. He

turned and looked my dead in the eye and said:
“Michael, these days my best poems are walking
around Ann Arbor, First Editions.” Enough said. I got
the point.

Russell Gregory passed away on June 11, 2016. He
is one of my few root teachers. This four-part podcast
is an afternoon at our home in Ann Arbor, Michigan
on April 8, 1973, during which he spoke on the
Concept of Place, meaning local environments and
native America. There may be a very few of you who,
through listening to these tapes, can tune into the
transcendental plane that Russell Gregory projected
and share in a living dream that is America.

[Photo of Russell Gregory (left) and me (right) in
conversation at a virgin stand of Michigan pines called
Sailor’s Pines, some years ago.]

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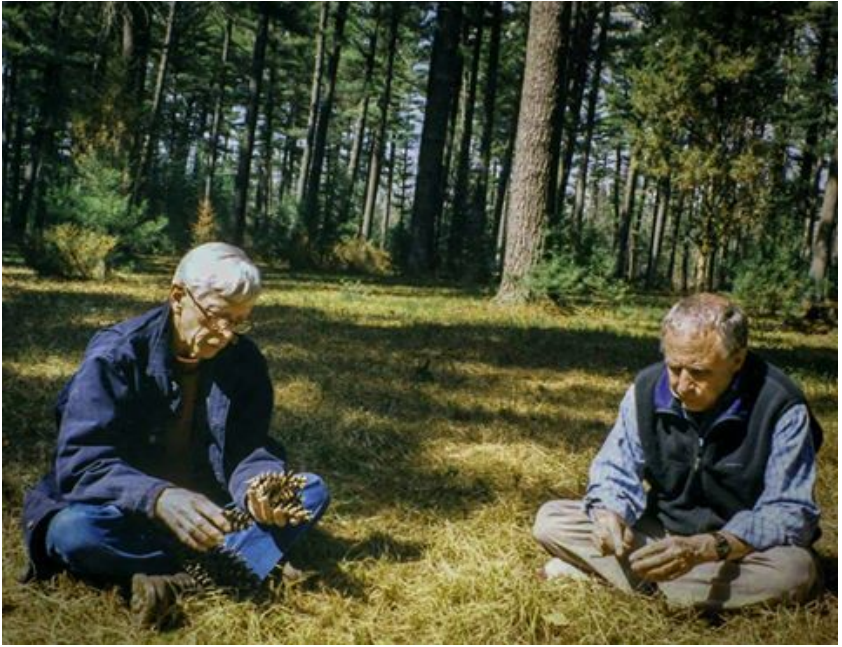
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MAKING DHARMA PERSONAL

February 6, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[A visit from Lama Karma to our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan starting today. See the end of this blog for details as to how you can meet him.]

Dharma is much more available in this country now than it used to be in the 1950s, the 1960s, 1970s, and so on. It is getting easier to find teachers, teachings, and sangha. If I have some good memories and a few stories, it is not because they just fell into my lap. I had to work for the dharma, look for it, find it, and either invite it to where I lived or go where it was. And I did.

Dharma was much rarer back then, but more accessible when found. When I first met the Dalai Lama, he was not so well-known. I saw him in a small group, had the chance to personally present him a white scarf, and so on. I also met the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje) and offered him a set of large bronze/brass offering bowls. These two great lamas had come to Ann Arbor, Michigan, to where we lived, but coming to where I am was not often the case.

When I first met the 17th Karma (Ogyen Trinley Dorje), I had to go all the way to Tibet and see him at his ancestral home in Tsurphu Monastery at some 15,000 feet of elevation. We spent three days with the

young Karmapa and Margaret and I brought three of our four kids with us. Something similar happened when I met H.E. Gyaltsap Rinpoche. I had written to him in Sikkim, India a number of times and he had responded, but no visit to America was forthcoming. I wanted a particular empowerment of which he was the living emanation. So, Margaret and I (and our young son) travelled to India, through West Bengal, and into Sikkim to his monastery at Ralang, where he did indeed give us that particular empowerment. That was a “trip” in more ways than one.

When I wanted to meet the great Siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and spend some quality-time with him, I found myself volunteering to help out, creating a poster for his event and serving as his chauffeur for a long weekend. It was then that he personally taught me Shamata Meditation. And, over the years, many more high lamas actually came to our home and center. Back in the 1980s, all you had to do was to invite lamas and they came. They had time then. Today, they are either older (and travel less) or are so busy that you really have to go to where they are. That they are anywhere in this world is itself a blessing.

I say all this not to name-drop, but to point out that you have to put-out and go after dharma, and not only wait until some happens to come near you. And if you study the lives of the great translators, like Marpa, he made three trips from Tibet to India on foot in order to bring the teachings back to his country. You get the idea of what is required – some effort on our part.

When I returned from seeing H.H. the 17th Karmapa in Tibet, all I could think to say to anyone who asked

about our trip was “If I were you, I would drop whatever you are doing, go to Tibet (where he was at the time) and see His Holiness in person, and then, after that experience settles, go on with your life.” To me, it was that important. It can change you that much.

And folks sometimes remark after hearing that, “You mean His Holiness was that powerful, that impressive?” and I would say to them. Unlike so many gurus, who indeed are impressive, that was not the effect the young Karmapa had on me. What he WAS capable of doing was to make me realize, not how great he was, but how deeply compassionate and pure I was, that is, after you peel away all the crap. I had no real idea who I was and then suddenly I did. Now, that is real power!

Quite early-on I have wanted to be around the Dharma, written, spoken, taught, and in person, and so I made it a priority in my life, rather than a side-bar, an also-ran. Personalities are built from priorities, and it can take decades to come to understand how important decisions or priorities made very early-on can be later. For me, dharma is an example.

The Self is all about attachment, but attachment to “what” is where we differ and find our differences. Of all the dumb things I have done, that decision back then was priceless. For me, the Dharma has made all the difference.

Speaking of dharma, I am off in a few minutes to pick up Lama Karma at the airport, who is here for an eleven-day visit, where we will be doing some filming of various sadhanas or whatever he has in mind.

Lama Karma has done two closed 3-year retreats, back-to-back, and today travels the world giving empowerments and teaching dharma.

Any of you in the Big Rapids, Michigan area who would like to meet Lama Karma, send me a Facebook message here and I will try to set up a time and day when you can meet him. I have known Lama Karma for twenty years, ever since we helped him get out of Nepal, which is another story, which you can read here:

<https://ktdblog.wordpress.com/.../exodus-from-nepal-the-true.../>

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT

February 7, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

After all the mountains are climbed, the rivers swum, and the world encircled, it makes a certain amount of sense that we end up with the last great undiscovered territory in the world, the Mind itself and its “obviousness.” All the great esoteric traditions tell us in unison that the secret is always hidden in plain sight, where we all ignore it.

The revelation of the obvious is the mainstay of all spiritual disciplines, at least the alternative ones. This is because there is no place else to go but here. I get a kick out of the thought that the only new thing that an astronaut sees when he is in orbit is Earth. It is the same with all of the out-of-body stories. If we are in the body, it seems we want out, and if we are out of the body, we want in. By now, that’s traditional, and there is general agreement that the borderline between any two such states is where things get interesting – the fire up front.

Perhaps the Tibetan Buddhists say this most forcibly when they state that Samsara (this cyclic world of ups and downs) and Nirvana (the enlightened state) are connate, i.e. two sides of the same coin. That is a crushing statement. And the obvious corollary is that Nirvana is the realization of Samsara! And the borderline here is the moving fringe of our realization, transforming Samsara into Nirvana.

Talk about mountains high to climb. We don't even get another (and separate) world to rest in, now or ever. There is no escape, so we will have to do it on the hoof, so to speak, right here in the now. Ouch!

There is nothing to it but to do it, and we can wait as long as we want, but it will always outwait us, because, as our future enlightenment, it's already waiting for us and always has been.

IT'S ALL GOOD!

February 8, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have been practicing dharma for many years, decades, but I am not an academic, far from it. I never even got out of high school; that's how much I like rote learning. I depend on common sense to get by and, in my opinion, the dharma is mostly common sense, at least the part I understand. I am sure there is more, but some of it is over my head. I only understand the dharma that actually makes sense to me, but that's been enough to keep learning.

And I have learned not to force things, in particular understanding. There is no point to it. Let me give an example using the term "Compassion." While perhaps it can be done, I have never found forcing or "trying" to be compassionate very helpful. Putting on a happy face and trying to be kind, I understand of course. I'm sure its catching, but I just have never caught it. "Trying to be kind" to me is an oxymoron, but I understand that folks are doing their best, yet it's not the same as actually having kindness. I have learned of another way to develop compassion, which I will share with you here.

There are a number of dharma concepts that involve two separate qualities that are said to be "connate," two sides of the same coin. When one quality arises, so does the other and both simultaneously. Two qualities that are said to be connate are "Emptiness"

and “Compassion.” They go together like hand and glove. Another word for connate is “co-emergent,” meaning the two always arise together.

And while I have trouble “trying” to be kind or compassionate, I don’t have as much trouble with compassion’s connate-partner “emptiness.” And some of these terms are like dominos; you knock over one and it takes down another. This is true of grasping the nature of impermanence; it tends to trigger the realization of emptiness. We all know that theoretically we are impermanent, but every once in a while our mortality actually comes home to us.

For example, it is not too difficult to grasp that Samsara (this cyclic world of ups and downs we live in) is itself empty. We all experience this when someone close to us dies or for whatever reason, some event happens that shatters our self. When that happens, at least for a short time we feel empty and we begin to grasp emptiness. At those times, everything seems empty of the meaning life had only yesterday. Things just go void. That’s what I’m talking about.

Therefore, since emptiness and compassion are connate, when we realize emptiness to any degree, we simultaneously realize compassion, because compassion ALWAYS arises with emptiness. Do you see my point?

While I don’t like the idea of “trying” to be compassionate (without actually feeling compassion), I find that realizing impermanence (and thus emptiness) is something I can do better with, at least to a more significant degree. And, every time I do

realize impermanence and sense emptiness, I seem to be naturally more compassionate, which is what I am pointing out here. Realize emptiness and we realize compassion automatically at the same time as a byproduct. Anyway, this is a way to use any connate qualities.

There are many things that are said to be connate, and they are not limited to two qualities. For example, “Mind, Thoughts, and Dharmakaya” are said to be connate. And perhaps most common, “Awareness, Emptiness, and Lucidity” are connate. What this means is that emptiness arises as awareness and lucidity, awareness arises as emptiness and lucidity, and lucidity arises as emptiness and awareness.

The takeaway from the above is that by developing our awareness, emptiness and lucidity naturally arise with it. With qualities that are connate, picking the one most conducive to our practice will cause the others to arise automatically. If I want to develop compassion, I can try to be compassionate, with all the effort that entails, which can often involve staining the concept with my “trying.” However, by gradually realizing emptiness, compassion will automatically arise, with no effort whatsoever on my part.

Emptiness and Compassion are connate, two sides of the same coin. With the realization of the emptiness of Samsara, compassion just automatically arises. In other words, compassion is not something the dawns on us if we go after or grasp for it, like: “Be compassionate!” Compassion is a byproduct of our realizing emptiness and the realization of emptiness is often sparked by realizing our impermanence and that of the world in general.

As we realize our own impermanence and that the entire world is impermanent, our notion of emptiness begins to arise. As we realize emptiness, compassion spontaneously arises with it.

[This photo (taken by me) is of a rupa (statue) of the Primordial Buddha Kuntozangpo (male) and Kuntuzangmo (female) in union, both completely unadorned and naked. Kuntuzangpo (father-deity) stands for Skillful Means (Compassion) and Kuntuzangmo (mother-deity) stands for Wisdom (Emptiness). The two are and exemplify the term connate. Zang-Po means "All Good" and Kuntu means "Present Everywhere." Kuntuzangpo thus translates to something like "All Goodness," or, as we like to say, it's all good!]



ON A CLEAR DAY

February 10, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

When I was a young man, like many of my friends at the time, I tried drugs, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine...anything to get high, to get away from being normal. And high I got, but I always ended up coming back down. More troubling for me was the fact that, with the exception of LSD, after the high passed, I found that I didn't learn that much from it. It never changed my outlook to any significant degree. I won't go so far as to say that all of those substances are worthless, but basically it was mostly all that was just entertainment. I had nothing better to do.

And it took me a long time to realize that, like the old saying goes, "You can't salt the salt." The mind is perfect just as it is, in its unaltered state...good-to-go, and nothing added to it can be an improvement. Like the optometrist who tries out lens after lens to build a prescription for us to see better, the mind is already 20/20 or 20/15 just as it is. Adding anything at all to it only degrades it. The problem is elsewhere.

It is not that the mind is not clear, in itself, but rather that it is obscured by the results of our own thought processes, our biases, prejudice, attachments, and layer upon layer of conceptual confusion. These obscurations cannot be helped by trying to alter the mind with substance, imagining that we will change other than temporally. The mind is, as the Buddhists

texts point out, already perfect. Instead, what we have to do is remove what obscures the mind from our view, much like the Tibetan analogy that when, on a cloudy day, the wind (dharma practice) blows away the clouds to reveal the Sun. The Mind is that Sun. It's always shining.

In the meantime, like it or not, we are currently fully buffered from authentic reality. Our innate senses are plugged. It's as if we are packed on all sides in huge cotton balls. It is clear to me, and from long testing, that altering my consciousness with any substance only makes things worse. In other words, the mind is clear by nature and cannot be sharpened, except by removing obscurations.

Dharma practice is not about adding anything more on, but rather about taking things away, deconstructing and removing all the foginess we have accumulated since I don't know when. Beginning dharma practice is like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks: after all our obscurations are removed, there is nothing left but a clear view of the mind itself. And the speed of our innate natural awareness is faster than any thought, faster than light itself.

GRASPING FOR AIR

February 11, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I will try to keep this short (or short-er), but we should talk about this. In the suffocating closeness of our own conceptual fog (use your own words), the absolute freshness of the actual moment itself is often lost. We can't breathe for thinking or conceptualizing and we resemble a fish out of water, flopping around and gulping for air.

Whatever we can remember (memories by definition are like snapshots) begins to fade as soon as they are taken. As we all know, things are freshest in this present moment, in the now, but as it happens, we get carried away into the past on our train of thoughts, recollections, fears, and what-have-you. To remain fully present requires letting go, relaxing completely, and not clinging. Any "attachment" and we are destined for the past. If we cling, we sink into the past and are no longer present or barely so. It's that simple.

Whatever we are attached to or fixated on (positive or negative) carries us into the past and holds us down by our own fixation, on what are by that point just memories. Simply letting go (non-attachment) will allow us to float back up to the "now" and breathe the fresh air of this present moment. But that is not so easy to do.

I am using here the analogy of “fresh air;” which stands for the ever-present instantaneous “now,” something that we cannot attain by will or sheer effort alone no matter how hard we try. The least attachment and we get carried away in the present moment and soon find ourselves in the past, clinging to and fixated on whatever thoughts we are attached to.

Remaining present requires complete non-attachment, letting go. As mentioned earlier, most of us are unfortunately (so to speak) gasping for breath, gulping for air as we sink down into the fogginess of our own thoughts -- the past. Simply put, we are carried away from the present by our attachment (or fixations) and end up imprisoned in the past, with little access to the freshness of the moment. We can't let go enough to allow ourselves to be present.

And, as I keep harping on, we are victims of our own endless reactions, spending much of our time reacting in knee-jerk fashion to this, that, and the other thing, if not obviously, then involuntarily wincing and cringing as we go. I point this out because I find it true for myself and am doing something about it. As I cease to react and, instead, learn to respond more naturally, the freshness of the present moment is once again available to me.

Watch podcast about dealing with reactions:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLgs3OogDcY>

REALIZABLE

February 12, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Realization” is invisible, not to us of course, but to others who have not had the same realization. It is also not time-dependent, meaning that while spiritual experiences are time-dependent (they come and they go), once “Realization” occurs it is permanent. It comes, but does not go. Back in the early 1960s we used to worry about the rumor that LSD permanently altered the mind. Well, spiritual realization does just that, and the alteration is an enhancement. In fact realization it is not only speedier than thought, but faster than the speed of light -- instantaneous. In other words, it's not physical.

We all know the old saying “If you lack the faculty, you can't see the phenomenon.” If we have not had a particular realization, obviously we don't realize it or like the old Dylan line “You don't know what is going on here, do you Mr. Jones.”

And just as the particular realization called “Recognition” by the Tibetans (being the recognition of the true nature of our own mind) is an unforgettable event, by definition, so it marks the point where dharma fuels itself from that moment forward and launches us on a magical mystery tour that can only end one-day in enlightenment.

My point is that “Realization” with a capital “R” (as in “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind) is strictly individual and can’t be shared with others who have not had it, even if we want too. We are stuck with being content with the clarity of our own mind, because any realization that comes our way will be invisible to anyone less-realized than we are. In short, realization that we have (that remains unrealized by any others) will be invisible to them. Realization has to be its own reward, which indeed it is. Of course, those who have had the same realizations that we have will realize what we know and can help and guide us.

A side effect of Realization (of the “Recognition” variety) that is a blessing is that it is self-recognizing, self-propelling, self-fulfilling, and all manner of other “self”-related descriptors. For in reality, it marks the end of the Self as we know it and the beginning of our using the self as an enlightening agent, despite itself, so to speak.

In summary and to rephrase: duality ends at “Recognition” and, although dualistic tendencies may linger, it’s more like a train leaving the station; whatever remains of the Self finally gets on board, gets with the program. And from then on it is: “Second star to the right and straight on ‘til morning,” the long road to enlightenment.

KARMIC RELIEF

February 13, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

It's not the actions that we perform that are the problem, but rather the seeds of our intent that are sown and recorded as karma, and not once or twice a day. There are an inconceivable number of seeds each day that, intertwined with one another, form the thread of our ongoing life desires. Like time-release capsules, the traces of this karmic "intent" make sure we are always reaching, grasping after, and firmly attached to this life, and not in a good way.

And, as with all dharma, the key to understanding and doing something about this is greater awareness on our part. And the first step is to remove our existing obscurations as much as we can. And here is a key thought:

The easiest way to remove karmic traces is to stop recording them in the first place, i.e. not record any more of them. The not-so-great news is that karmic traces, once recorded, are not easily removed and tend to remain until they ripen and cause us still more obscuration. Therefore, the smart money is on removing the causes of karma BEFORE they arise. Don't worry about what you have done; instead, worry about not adding any more to the pile.

And it helps to be clear that while getting rid of those so-called deep-down stains (like our full-blown

kleshas -- anger, jealousy, etc. -- is very difficult for beginners, it is fortunate that there is a type of karmic trace that is relatively easy to remove, and I have written about it many times in blogs like these. It has to do with our moment-to-moment reactions.

We react all the time in what are called involuntarily “knee-jerk” reactions. Some days, it seems that almost anything sets us off. And I am not talking about reacting to someone blowing their horn at us at a crosswalk, but rather the almost infinite number of micro-reactions we endure all the time. If we could measure the amount of wincing, cringing, and grimacing we do each day (without even realizing it), we would have enough energy (or lack thereof) to seriously slow us down, and it does.

“I don’t like the tie you are wearing. Your nose is too big and your voice too loud. I don’t want to brush my teeth. I don’t feel like cooking dinner,” etc. The list goes on and on and we do this from morning to night, and even in our dreams!

Almost all beginning dharma practices are “purificatory,” meaning they are about removing obscurations so that our awareness can see more easily “what is.” Until we thin out what obscures our mind, realizing the nature of the mind itself is very difficult.

And, while we can start out trying to remove our dualistic habits with the outside world, the “I and the Them” in life, I have found it much easier to first start out working with dualisms within our own self, events that we can actually do something about because they are our own reactions. So, once again, here are

links to a video (and texts) about this process of toning back our reactions as a precursor to “Realization.”

Questions are welcome!

Watch podcast about dealing with reactions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLgs3OogDcY>

SAMSARA (THIS WORLD OF UPS AND DOWNS)

February 16, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[A note on my talk at Grand Valley University. It went well. A lot of fine young folks were there and they were very attentive and had many questions.]

Samsara is the Buddhist term for this life in which we find ourselves and it has been described as our world of ups and downs that we continuously cycle through. Samsara does cycle, of course, and cycles are just circles extended through time. And circles have no discernible beginning or end point. In other words, they are endless and the Buddhist teachings so are the cycles of Samsara. This world never started and will never end. And we are in the middle of it.

These cycles of ups and downs remind me of the classic gospel song by “The Mighty Clouds of Joy,” which I include here for those with open ears:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtXoWx-yzZU>

The longer I live, the greater impact the endless confusions of Samsara make on me. It is beyond my imagination. When I behold what’s going on around me, like spreading circles, it starts with me, and then my family, my friends, and extending farther and farther until the entire world is embraced with something close to chaos.

We like to joke that we will never get out of this world alive, but we perhaps should laugh even louder that we will never get off this merry-go-round world of rebirth ever... no matter how many lives we have to live in it. I don't see an exit door, other than the Dharma.

Even when I am not suffering, someone close to me (or close enough) is suffering and often big-time. And beyond that, there are folks I don't know that are suffering, and whole countries too. My point here is not to complain or simply diagnose, but rather to help make clear, as the Buddhist teachings point out, that this world we live in, my friends, is in fact endless. It's like one of the toys my grandkids play with when they are visiting; you push it down here and it pops up over there, without fail.

So, of course, after too many years of staring like a deer into the headlights of Samsara, I have slowly begun to do something about it, and so can you. No, I am not free of Samsara, if only because there is no other place to go. As my first dharma teacher would always say to me, "Michael, This is it! We have to make our little heaven out what is here." There is no "other" world.

And the higher Buddhist teachings say the same thing, and I found this initially very hard to accept, that there is no place to escape to. Nirvana (freedom from Samsara) is nothing more (or less) than transforming Samsara itself, because Samsara and Nirvana are connate, thus co-emergent – two sides of the same coin. There is no back door to Samsara, other than realizing the inseparability of Samsara and Nirvana. And that, my friends, is a tall order.

How to go about doing this is what I write about here and why I write is because most of us are in the same boat. We are all in Samsara together. It reminds me of this old saying:

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.”

“SLIP-SLIDIN’AWAY”

February 17, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Before we know it, just living itself becomes a project, something to plan out and then wait for, as in wait to live. It’s come to that. LOL.

And health issues vie to line up to bring you down or set you back. Life lately has become a series of setbacks that finds me always scrambling to get normal, to get back to the way I once was, which of course is now history. Just gone. It reminds me of the Paul Simon lyrics, “The nearer your destination, the more you’re slip-slidin’ away.” Ain’t that the truth. The future becomes lookin’ back and lookin’ back is a future that will never come again. It would be sad, if it were not so funny. I hated the term the “new normal,” when I first heard it, but now it’s just fine, and quite accurate.

So, right in the middle of trying to get back to even is where I find myself. That’s where I am and perhaps will remain. This health thing is ridiculous. I can’t catch up to being well. I start an exercise program, over and over, and then something goes wrong so that I can’t keep it up. I love the analogy, which I have offered here before, of the architect’s vanishing point, where all the lines grow closer and closer until they all meet in a single point. And it is more than ironic that this is called the “vanishing point,” because when we finally reach that point, we vanish. And while that is

something, the increasingly closing in of all the lines makes living claustrophobic, narrower and narrower, until we just vanish. LOL.

So, who is fooling whom? It has been almost a year since all this started, so by now I have a running joke. And, as usual, I am completely confident that I will actually reach normal (albeit a new-normal) very soon. I have been saying that for months and I say it now. Meanwhile, I've decided I can't wait any longer to just start living again, but had better do my living while I can, right?

So, I'm trying to do just that. Here is a photo I shot today, in the middle of (for the moment) all kinds of drugs (mostly pain killers), and now some antibiotics to make sure I don't fall off the planet. And I'm quite happy, happy to be alive, for each day, and the peace of mind to live in that day. I'm glad for family and Facebook Friends. I do miss my dog.

MORE ON SAMSARA (SOME SORROW)

February 18, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I grew up without knowing of the Tibetan Buddhist concept of Samsara as an endless closed cyclic system; to me, as with most of us, the world was like we all know it, just what it is. The idea of “Samsara,” that this world is a system that we will never game, did not occur to me until Buddhism introduced me to it. And it took a lot of testing on my part to determine for myself if the Buddhists were on to something or not. As it turned out, I have to agree with their view, and a surrogate American saying that is similar is “You will never get of this world alive.” That much I figured out, early on.

The problem is that we are so darn close to Samsara that, as they say, we can't see the forest for the trees. We are smack-dab right in the middle of Samsara and there is no way for us to back up or back out of it far enough to get a handle on it, or to even fully take in the scope of our involvement. Here we are, all squashed into Samsara, with our noses pressed up against the glass.

Then we are told that there is nothing outside of Samsara, no place to go or even get to, but that instead, we have to work as-we-are within the close-quarters of Samsara to transform and realize Samsara itself as Nirvana. I say that we are in a pickle and need first to better grasp our situation and

then, right in the middle of it all, begin to transform it by realizing it as Nirvana. How on earth do I do that?

I don't mean to be vulgar, but it reminds me of the old saying, "Now that I finally got my shit together in one place, I can't lift it." It does seem like trying to bootstrap ourselves out of the middle of nowhere into nothing. Here we are in the midst of it all, with no alternative, and not even any real outside perspective. And, given that, we have to solve this equation all by ourselves or, if we are lucky, with the help of others who are a little further along the way. This is where the Tibetan Buddhists have been so helpful, so kind.

Anyway, I get it. I see that there is no place to stand and just look on, and that no one can do for me what only I must do for myself. Given that, it comes down to priorities and like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where everything depends on which stick is removed first and the order in which the others are then removed. How do I do that?

When I cast around for priorities, and I have studied this problem, it all comes down to a matter of awareness. It is hard to even be enough aware (and harder yet to maintain that awareness) of the Samsaric situation we all are in. Yet, like setting up dominoes to knock over; unless we have a clear plan, a solution won't work. And clarity as to our situation is just what we don't have, so what is the first step to take?

All of the various preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism are purificatory, meaning they help to clear away our mental obscurations, so that our native awareness can shine through and be present, so WE

can be present. Depending on our practice trajectory, the old chestnut “Horses for Courses” suggests we pick the best horse for a particular race course. Here we want the best purification practice considering our particular kind of obscurations. Seek out someone more experienced in these practices for advice. That is what I have done. Of course, I feel we can’t go wrong by starting to work with our own involuntary reactions to whatever life serves up. Here are some of those links:

Watch podcast about dealing with reactions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLqs3OogDcY>

THE TERM “DHARMA”

February 19, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I can't imagine how many years I used the word “dharma” with little to no idea what it meant. It probably started in the late 1950s, perhaps even with the title of the Jack Kerouac book “Dharma Bums.” What was that word “Dharma” all about?

I had probably heard that word used in a hundred ways (mostly in books), so had managed to form some idea of what it meant to me. Mostly I knew it was precious; at least it was precious to me, but more than that I hardly knew. You could fairly say that my life has been about learning what the word dharma means.

And dharma means many things; the word is older than Buddhism itself. In Buddhism, it is accounted one of the three jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha), and it is often just stated that dharma is the teachings of Buddha, which is the same thing. Buddha taught the truth, the truth lasts, so the truth and the dharma are identical. Therefore, dharma is the truth, at least for me.

If we look up the word “Dharma” in a Buddhist dictionary, Dharma means what is established or firm, something like the law, as in the law of gravity, not human law. In other words, dharma is the ultimate truth or the basic principles that order the universe. If

you ask a dozen people, you may get a dozen answers.

So, the Dharma is that which actually lasts. And we all know that the only thing that lasts longest is the truth. We could say that the truth is the future, because it will last until then. Dharma and the truth is the same thing. Dharma is functional truth, a path or method.

They say that the only constant is change, and that only change is permanent -- unchanging. The "unchangingness" of change would be an example of something that is dharmic, and it is the second of the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma," "Impermanence," change being "impermanence" itself.

We are in the middle of Samsara and perhaps want to build a raft from whatever lasts longest, even if it turns out to be change itself. In this constantly-changing world, where change is the only constant, what then is the dharma? It's obvious that the dharma cannot be anything that opposes change, but just the reverse. We have no choice but to embrace change. In fact, learning to meditate involves completely resting within change.

We can't stop change, but we can realize that change is a constant -- constant change. Realization is a force in itself, the power to realize what is. We can get out of the way of change by not opposing or resisting it, because obviously it is we ourselves that are changing. What else could we be?

HEY BUDDY, GOT A MATCH?

February 21, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I love the traditional Tibetan image that lighting a single match can end the darkness of innumerable eons. It reminds me that we can start right where we are and do what we can. And it does not take a special place or a special time to make a difference. I have proved this to myself over and over again in my life. I am sure that by now you are tired of my talking about what I have done, but that happens to be what I have had to work with so far and at least I know what I'm talking about.

I had a profound (for me) spiritual experience back in the middle 1960s, in which I had a bit of what they call a "Direct Voice" experience. Yes, I "heard voices," but it was just something internal that was speaking to me directly. The upshot of it was: that moment was the last time that I thought of myself in something like the third person, and the beginning of realizing myself in the first person.

And, part of that direct-voice communication was that I would not need to travel, but that my own would come to me, so wait for that! That was part of a lesson I have been shown repeatedly that we can start where we are and create a mandala as vast as the world itself, without touching a hair on our head. In other words, right now and right here is perfect, not to mention that it is what we have on hand.

I won't bother with multiple stories of how this concept has been true for me. Hopefully, just one story will do. It started in the late 1980s, in this same tiny office, sitting behind this same old desk that I'm sitting at tonight. This is where (and that was when) I decided to create the All-Music Guide, a guide for those wanting to listen to the treasures of our popular music and it covered all recorded music from 10" records onward. And mind you, as mentioned, I was in this tiny town of Big Rapids, Michigan where I still live today, at the very desk I am sitting now.

And, as these stories often go, people laughed at me when they heard that there was this one guy, somewhere out in the Midwest, in a town nobody ever heard of, who dared to call his home-brew project the "All-Music Guide." These were well-known music critics. Yet, many of those critics who made fun of me ended up working for me or at least doing some work for the guide.

When I sold that company, we had 150 full-time staff and over 500 freelance writers working for the project. And I did the same with all recorded film and movies (All-Movie Guide), and other things like rock n' roll concert posters (ClassicPosters.com), etc. Today, the All-Music Guide is still the largest collection of music discographies, biographies, albums, tracks, sound-samples, etc. on the planet. And in the process, together my staff, we changed how music criticism was done up to that point, moving from a few experts telling us what to listen to, into the All-Music Guide, which did not compare artists to one another, but only showed for any given artist, which are their best work. I could go on and on, of course. As time moved on, I became an archivist of popular culture and even was

flown to NYC to receive the Yahoo Life Award, which back then actually meant something.

My point here is that I did all that in a tiny hole of an office, in a town somewhere in the Midwest, against real odds, and without anyone's permission but my own. And you can do the same.

I cannot express how powerful putting one foot in front of the other can be. And I endorse the old saying "one-percent inspiration and 99-percent perspiration." All that is required is some focus, the LOVE of what you are doing, and the persistence not to take "no" for an answer or be persuaded to give up by ne'er-do-wells.

We can literally light up our life by kindling our love for what we are doing and just sticking to it. I believe anyone can do this, if they will. Of course, no one will do it for us. We have to do it ourselves. For me, it was easier than doing anything else, if that makes sense.

And IMO, the epitome of such self-fueling projects is the practice of Dharma. Nothing is more worthy, more self-fulfilling, or brings greater results for us (and for others) than becoming more aware and putting that awareness to work in the world. So, light a match, end the darkness of waiting, keep the match burning, and light a fire of your own.

DHARMA: A RELIGION? I DON'T THINK SO.

February 22, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Even as a little kid I had the recurring thought that I did not want my life to be wasted. I wanted to be used up for some good purpose. I'm sure I am not alone in this aspiration. I mean, who wants to waste their life?

Nor did I know (back then) of what the Buddhists call the "Common Preliminaries," being the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma." Or, that the "First Thought" is "This precious human life."

It was like reading my own mind when I read that First Thought. And the same thing happened when I read the Second Thought (that turns the mind), which is the idea of "Impermanence," or, as the Tibetans put it, "This life is as fragile as a soap bubble." Of course, as a young kid who studied little else other than Mother Nature, I had seen firsthand how fragile life is by watching the lives and deaths of the insects and critters I loved to observe. And so it went with the all of the "Four Thoughts."

So, my introduction to the dharma was nothing like a list of commands or imperatives that I should follow. In fact, perhaps most amazing is that I never saw the "Four Thoughts" as even religious, you know, "churchy," "preachy," or commanding, but as simple statements of fact as to how this world is that we all live in. And to this day, I don't consider Buddhism as a

“religion.” It’s not. Rather, I see it as a statement of how things just are, physically, psychologically, and mentally.

For me, the dharma complements any religion that we might practice because, for the most part, the world’s religions don’t address using the mind to look at itself, neither do they properly teach us how to meditate. Buddhism is a kind of spiritual toolkit that ought to go along with any religion.

In my case, the dharma has been more than just wise words or a philosophy. As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out to me back in 1974, the dharma is a method and a path that we can actually follow. It’s as organic a life-view as any that I know of

For those who want to read about the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” here are some articles:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=266&sid=4139c8676fee4c48d0cd6587dcb62062>

“I WONDER, WONDER WHO...”

February 23, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Before I go into this blog, how about we listen to the Monotones sing their song “Book of Love.” This is the kind of music I used to dance to in the late 1950s. I still am amazed and grateful to have grown up through the birth and flowering of rock n’ roll, not as someone listening to old music, but hearing it fresh on the radio for the first time. What a gift.

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

I must warn you that this blog is a bit of a ramble. It is more like a stroll than an on-topic article, so please bear with me. I have been wandering and wondering...

Life is getting so sophisticated these days that we may tend to hide whatever we don’t know and are wondering about. Yet I still wonder about all kinds of things. The same is true of the word “awesome.” It seems we have forgotten what that word really means, like being in “awe.”

And then there is the old blues lyric, “lots of people talkin’, but mighty few people know.” For sure, lip service is being paid all over the place, but I don’t know for what or why anymore. As the philosopher Hegel said (and you know I like this quote):

“We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.”

We are all looking, but at what or whom? It seems fewer and fewer people are living life so that there is something to be seen. Public life is ever-more show-business personified, a host of actors who provide us with something to look at. We must not have enough on our own, so we are watching people on a flickering screen act out life. And I'm right there with the rest of them, taking it all in. LOL.

It's like we are being led farther and farther out of (and away from) our body, but led to where? I guess the answer is that this leads to viewing the body of life from the outside and from more and more of a distance. IMO, to a large degree, life-regret comes from failing to live enough to know for ourselves what we are talking about. And I like to point out (I have before here) what it is that astronauts (those that leave the body of Earth) see in space that they cannot see here on Earth. And the answer, obviously, is that they see Earth in its entirety. Full realization of the mind is the same general idea.

In my life, I spent my early years (until I was in the 6th grade) outside of town, stuck between two large farms. And, perhaps for lack of anything else, I studied nature. And perhaps my own penchant for “doing things” comes from the way my mom potty-trained me. She told me that she used to say over and over to me, “Do more. Do more,” so much so that until I was quite old, I called poop “Do more,” and only later, to my embarrassment, discovered that no one

else did that. Anyway, I became (perhaps at mom's suggestion) quite the doer.

Sometimes, I wonder about all the passivity in modern life, like "watching" movies, "listening" to music, "reading" books, as opposed to actually doing more stuff ourselves. It seems so, well, passive, but there is a ray of light there, which I will now mention. Take movies for example.

In my own case, as a movie critic (who founded one of the two largest movie databases on the Internet) I used to intensely watch movies very carefully. You didn't want to talk to me while I watched a movie. I was too busy following the plot and I felt like I picked up on it all. And to me, it seemed that others around me missed much of it by their inability to pay attention. That tendency has waned in recent years and, while I still watch movies, I no longer am that particular as to what I watch. Why is that?

I believe this is true because I am no longer primarily following the movie plot, but rather using the movie more as a window into the mind. And I wonder if this is true for many movie watchers, music listeners, and book readers. If I don't care so much about the plot anymore, why do I still enjoy watching movies? For me, that is the key question.

No-doubt, this answer may raise a few eyebrows here, but I believe that the most common form of meditation for Americans is watching TV, because no matter how much is taking place on the screen (the plot), we are holding our concentration very still in order to watch. And I am not kidding here.

Trust me. Concentrating on TV-watching is also a training all in itself. My question is: how do we put that kind of concentration (that almost all Americans have to a high degree) to a good use and somehow extract the mind-training component and redirect it. All I have to go on is my own experience watching movies.

With me, these years, watching a movie (in whole or just a part) is a way of looking beyond the plot. Yes, I still follow the plot, but it just goes by and is no longer that important to me. Like any other object of meditation, the movie plot is more a touchstone than the reason I am watching, as strange as that idea may at first seem. I am aware of the plot, but it is not the main event, so what is?

Like Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), the calming of my mind is why I watch movies. And, in that calmness, intuitive thoughts and insights about my life more easily arise and they bring a certain clarity and lucidity to the mind (and my life) that is beyond any plot. And that kind of clarity is why I watch movies.

Note that what it takes to watch movies is also true for reading books or listening to music. And, in casting about for pre-made skills that we all have for training the mind, what I have just presented comes to mind. And, while I have more formally practice Insight Meditation throughout the day in what I do, it occurs to me I continue it in the early evening when I sit down and watch a movie.

I know. This may sound crazy, but look before you leap to conclusions please. Check it out for yourselves. And, as mentioned at the beginning of

this blog, we are just talking here, just out for a mental stroll.

THE FOREST AND THE TREES

February 24, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees, as they say. So here is a brief general overview of dharma training.

Implementing the dharma requires that we first calm the mind so that it is tranquil. Then, secondly, when the mind can rest evenly (like when the sediment in a pond settles), we then look directly at the clarity of the mind's nature, something up to this point we have never been able to see.

All of the many dharma practices are about one or the other of these two steps, with more practices concerned with that first step of calming the mind and removing its obscurations. So, we calm the mind until we can see it clearly enough to recognize its actual nature, and we then proceed to expand that realization. And we rest in that realization.

There are hundreds (if not thousands) of methods to help relax and calm the mind, some traditional and others not so. If the mind is upset and obscured by attachments, miss-takes, and so on then, by definition, seeing clearly is not possible. So, the first order of business is to remove whatever obscures our inner vision, so that we can see clearly.

This can take a little or a long time, since it depends upon actually clearing the mind of impediments. We either do the work or we do not. We know how or we do not. And it helps to have someone with more experience as a guide. As the mind becomes clear, we automatically begin to see the nature of the mind and how it actually works. A major turning point in our training comes when we first recognize the true nature of the mind and stop focusing on our attachments. Appropriately enough, this is called by the Tibetan Buddhists “Recognition,” while the Zen Buddhists call this “Kensho.”

Kensho or Recognition is not enlightenment, but rather a realization of the necessary ground upon which Enlightenment is possible.

Much of the preliminary practices amount to the very mechanical removal of whatever obscures our inner vision, allowing our mind to simply calm down and come to rest. By mechanical, I don’t mean removing material dust from our eyeglasses, but what is to be removed is mental and psychological debris.

And signs of success in removing obscurations are as simple as that we can begin to see clearly. When the greatest amount of our obscurations are removed, there is the event mentioned above called “Recognition,” where an authentic teacher manages to point out to us how to stop focusing on our distractions and we begin to identify with the mind itself for the first time.

“Recognition” is a revelation or, perhaps more correctly termed: a realization, one that marks the end

of the preliminaries and the beginning of our real training, the actual road to enlightenment.

The wonderful thing about all of this, in my opinion, is that the dharma is no respecter of persons. Anyone can become enlightened, smart or dumb, big or small, etc. It makes no difference. All we have to do is to do the work. Often an image of an eight-spoke wheel is used as a symbol of the dharma. And Buddha is said to have turned the wheel of the dharma. This is a fitting image, provided we don't think the wheel is going to roll along without our effort. The dharma wheel is more like a wheel that we crank by hand. If we don't turn it, it doesn't turn. If we do, it does. It's that simple.

SENSITIVO

February 25, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Since I have been wondering a lot lately, here is one wonder I will share. And this happens a lot. It has to do with the things I love and what happens when I share them. And this is true when I share music, books, poetry, and especially films with others.

I guess it's because we are all a lot more a part of each other's minds than we know or than we can admit. What we hear, read, and see for ourselves when we are alone is not the same when we share it with another. I would, of course, like it to be a good thing when I share something I love, which is why I try to share it in the first place.

But that same music that I know so well, that I have listened to so many times, and that is so delicate or perfect to my ears, does not sound the same when I listen to it with another. And I have done this for many decades, trying to show to others what I find so lovely about a piece of music or a part of a piece of music.

And it's even worse; usually much worse, when it comes to movies, and it seems I never give up at trying. A movie that I just love, that brings tears to my eyes, that moves me just so, is something that I want to share with family and friends. However, it seldom seems the same when we watch the movie together than when I watch it by myself. And it is not because I

have seen it before or have seen it too many times. For example, I just watched Bradley Cooper in “Burnt” (a movie that I love) for maybe the sixth time or so. Tonight I watched it alone and it was as perfect as the first time I ever saw it, or even more perfect because I know better how (and what parts) to savor. For me, what a perfect film! But that’s just me.

I cannot ever recall showing this movie to others (and I have many times) and feeling the same way about it as when I am alone. It’s like I not only share the movie, but also share in how they see it. I do my best to ignore that many folks just want to talk through movie or that they cannot concentrate and are often looking away at the best parts, and so on. I have to discount all that because it is beyond my control.

And I’m right there with those I am watching the movie with, and for the entire flick. And often, instead of blissful as I remember it, now it’s more like torture, working our way through to the end. And this happens all the time or at least much of the time.

It’s the same with sharing music or books, and I find it almost impossible to share poetry that is read aloud. So, I wonder just what is that? What kind of group mind do we share and what are the limits? Where do I end and you begin? I can’t seem to enjoy it unless my friends do too. It is clear as day. And it makes me question my own sensitivities. It seems I am way too easy on what I hear or watch. And yet I am a critic (or was) by trade, so it’s not that I lack a critical faculty.

Perhaps I just get carried away too easily or that I have too active of an imagination. You tell me. Yet, I can say this in my own behalf: I never had the

protection of even a high-school diploma, so I have had to live my entire life by my wits and above all by my sensitivities to music, art, movies, and what-have-you. I have made my careers work by means of these same sensitivities. So, I'm not just "insensitive."

Now, I'm not saying this is particularly scary, but it does point to our being on our own when it comes to sharing what delights us. It is clear when I watch a movie that I love and it is suddenly seems dull, enervated, boring, or whatever. That's not me, because when I watch the same movie (again) by myself, there it is as I always see it, moving and pristine.

Or, perhaps I am just too easy to please and that everything seems OK with me, while others are more particular. Indeed, this is something I wonder about. And I share a lot with folks here on Facebook. Some of you must resonate to what I share and others just not. Anyway, I wonder about all of this.

TIBETAN NEW YEAR -- YEAR OF THE FEMALE FIRE BIRD

February 26, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

In the Tibetan and Chinese calendars, 2017 is the year of the Female (Yin) Fire Bird starts on February 26, 2017 at 10:00 AM EST, but is celebrated as “Losar” on the day after the New Moon on Monday February 27, 2017. Here is some background.

The Tibetan New Year (which is called “Losar”) does not start on January 1st as does our Western calendar year. Instead, the beginning of the year in Tibet is a fluctuating point that (in general) starts on the day after the New Moon that is nearest to the beginning of February. Yet even that is not written in stone.

For example, the Tibetan and Chinese New Year celebrations can differ by an entire month! Even the two most popular Tibetan-style calendars, the Tsurphu (Karma Kagyu Lineage) and the Phugpa (Gelugpa Lineage) can, on occasion, differ by one whole month! It can only differ by an exact lunar month because no matter which system you use, the Asian year begins on the day following a New Moon. For those of us used to calendars being absolute, this can be very confusing. How can New Year be off by an entire month?

For example, Losar, the Tibetan New Year is celebrated on the day following the day on which the actual New Moon occurs. The point here is that most Tibetan almanac or calendars are geared for group practice. Here in the West, many solitary practitioners keep to the lunar calendar and observe the time when the actual lunar day changes, which would be Sunday, February 26.

We have a similar problem with the definition of the twelve lunar months as defined by the Chinese, the Phugpa tradition (Dalai Lama and Gelugpa Lineage) and the Tsurphu tradition (the Karmapa and Kagyu Lineage.) These three systems do not always agree on Losar, the Tibetan New Year, which marks the first month of any year. The one thing they all agree on is that the point of the New Moon marks the start of the year, but which New Moon? These three systems can be off from one another by an entire month, and sometimes are. The Phugpa system is the most divergent from the other two, with the Tsurphu system generally agreeing with the Chinese New Year, but not always. Of the three of them, there are always two that agree on the same date and one that is one-month different, and never three different dates.

You and I are not going to solve this for the Tibetans and the Chinese, so the most we can do is note it and not be surprised if we discover that two different astrological calendars for the same year have the start of the New Year on different dates, one-month apart. Since so much depends on when the year starts, you can imagine the problems.

2017: THE FEMALE FIRE BIRD

Here are some traditional attributes for those born in the Year of the Fire Bird.

“The Fire Bird has a short memory and many desires, managing to excel when it comes to lying and killing. They have many ideas, and delight in promiscuity. They fear being harmed. Their average lifespan is 65 years and they will face six obstacles.”

YEAR OF THE BIRD (in general)

Some general attributes for those born in the Year of the Bird”

“It is easy for the bird to lose his possessions, legacy, inheritance, what-have-you? They are always advising others, but seldom take their own advice. Possessing a very strong sexual desire, they always need company. They like to be neat and clean, and don't require much sleep. They are prone to blindness. They love style, dressing up, and tend to smile a lot. They enjoy walking and stylish movement. Good with friends. Current Day: A good day for healing and the preparation of medicines, agriculture, helping others, business, and making requests. Not a good day for festivities, celebrations, making gifts, good acts, or any rituals for removing negativity.

Ok. Any of the above traditional interpretations sound familiar as a description of what we see going on around us. I will let you decide that. It is already obvious that this is a pivotal year for the United States.

I also include a card I designed for the Year of the Yin Fire Bird, often pictured as a rooster, but this year a

phoenix is perhaps more appropriate. For those who want to read more about Tibetan astrology, which I have studied, here is an 827-page book I wrote on the subject.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Astrology.pdf>

As for the card I posted in a comment, it is one of some 13,000 individual cards I designed years ago during a period of several very difficult years when to calm my mind, I created thousands of cards describing astrology and many other esoteric topics. Some of the sets of cards were repeats, because I did them over when I was not happy with them. One of those sets was the sixty-year cycle of the Tibetan/Chinese element-animal combinations. The Year of the Yin Fire Bird is one from that series.

THE ANIMAL/ELEMENT CYCLE

February 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I got as messages some questions about the Chinese sexagenary cycle, the sixty-year cycle of the 12 Animals and the 5 elements. In particular, some of you are confused by the equating of Yin/Yang with Female/Male. And they wonder how this can be the Female Bird Year and show a rooster. This is traditional, that female is equated with Yin and male is equated with Yang. The Chinese animal/element cycle was adopted by the Tibetans as part of their astrology, that part being called Jung-Tsi – the part coming from the Chinese. The other part is called Kar-Tsi, being more of the mathematics, which came from India.

So the Year of the Female Fire Bird might be easier to grasp if we say the Year of the Yin Fire Bird and show you the traditional rooster. The understanding that the male in Chinese astrology can be Yin or Yang, like female-male (Yin) and male-male (Yang). That idea. This year is Yin Fire Bird. Here is some general information about the sixty-year animal/element cycle.

The Sixty Year Cycle

The sexagenary or sixty-year animal-element cycle is a cornerstone of Tibetan astrology and is part of Jung-Tsi, Tibet's astrological heritage from China. This sixty-year cycle combines two cycles within itself,

the 12-year cycle of animals (Mouse, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Bird, Dog, and Pig) and the cycle of the five elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water). This cycle is also called the Great Cycle of Jupiter. In this cycle, the 12 animal signs follow one another in strict sequence, with each animal sign taking one year, and these are paired with the five elements, but the elements are repeated twice, so that one element is the same for two successive years. It may be easier to just look at the graphics as shown below.

Sixty Element-Animal Combinations

As you can see each year the male and female polarity alternates. The 12 animals rotate in strict sequence, while each of the five elements persists for two years, and then rotate to the next in the element series. These 60-year Tibetan cycles are measured from the year 1027, the year that the Kalachakra teachings are said to have come to Tibet, although the similar cycle from the Chinese version of this cycle marks the year 1024 as the start. The difference is three years and that is why the list above starts with the year of the Female Fire-Hare, rather than the Male Wood Mouse. In any case, the difference in starting points does not change what animal-element combination goes with which year. At the close of each sixty-year cycle, the entire cycle begins again. Below are all sixty animal-element combinations along with an Astro*Image.

More detail and an interpretation for each of the sixty combinations can be found in my book on Tibetan Astrology, which is a free download here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Astrology.pdf>

In the above book are translations directly from the Tibetan. Please note that some of the statements appear very matter of fact, like that you will live 75 years, etc. Tibetans take these with a grain of salt and understand them to be general statements that give a flavor of what this combination is all about.

[The sixty cards were made by me, along with thousands of other cards illustrating astrology (and the esoteric studies), including Tibetan and Chinese astrology. I made all these cards during a rather dark period I was going through, to kind of cheer me up. These cards follow the traditional graphic images as described, as best I could do with just simple art.]

PULLING TERMA FROM THE MIND

March 3, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

One of the more fascinating aspects of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism is the concept of “terma,” dharmic teachings hidden in rocks, caves, or just within the mind itself. And accompanying terma, of course, there has to be tertons, those who are capable of finding terma. It reminds me of those paleontological discoveries where they break a rock in two and out pops a fully-formed fossil of this or that creature.

As for “mind treasures,” precious teachings or ideas hidden in the mind itself, it does not take much thought to realize that every last idea, invention, inspiration, and even thought and word we speak or think comes out of the mind itself. The Tibetans call the mind the “Wish-Fulfilling Jewel,” and for good reason. So, in some respects, we are all tertons, totally capable of mining the mind for its treasures. In fact, we do it every day, as best we can. But with training, we can do it very easily.

I became more aware of the power of terma after I accompanied my dharma teacher of 33 years (he is now in his nineties) to Tibet and China. In China we spent something like a week at Mt. Wu Tai Shan, a set of five sacred mountains arranged in the shape of a number-five die, you know, four mountains in the

shape of a square, with one central mountain in the middle.

It was at Mt. Wu Tai Shan, so Rinpoche explained, that astrology is said (in the Buddhist tradition) to have entered our world system. And it came from the great Bodhisattva Manjushri, who emanated there in the form of a youth. And from the top of his head, so the legend goes, the 84,000 astrological dharmas poured out and became known to this world. In fact, as it is told, humans so loved the astrology that appeared, that they began to somewhat ignore the dharma, which then caused Manjushri to recall (and take away) all of the astrological dharma, which was very disappointing to Earth's inhabitants.

Then, Guru Rinpoche (sometimes called the "Second Buddha [Padmasambhava])" is said to have interceded with Manjushri, asking him to please reinstate the astrological teachings. Manjushri finally agreed, but with the condition that he would hide the 84,000 astrological dharma as terma in various ways around the world so that, like timed-release capsules, they would appear in our world a little at a time. And especially they were hidden as mind treasures within the mind itself. They are still very much there.

As an astrologer of more than 50 years experience, of course I was thrilled to be able to travel with Rinpoche to Mt. Wu Tai Shan (along with other students), where we visited all five of the sacred mountains. In fact, we went to the top of all five peaks and offered puja and dharma practice. We also spent time with a very famous terton, Tsikey Chokgyur Lingpa Rinpoche, whose picture we took when we visited him (shown here). Anyway, the story of our visit goes on, but the

point of my sharing part of this with you here is to mention briefly the effect that visit had on me personally.

The trip itself, for me, was rather difficult physically and otherwise (I always get really sick at high altitude, which during this visit peaked out at about 16,000 feet), but when I returned to my home, a strange thing began to happen. All of this astrology began to pour out of me and with no real effort, or with no more than my normal amount of effort, which usually is a rather intense amount anyway. I am quite active, definitely a member of the Karma Family – activity.

Somehow, perhaps osmotically, from that trip to Mt. Wu Tai Shan, I seemed to have picked up the ability to more easily find astrological terms from within my own mind. It literally just magically appears, and for a while more as a tsunami than a trickle. As I continued to work on my dharma practice, the easier it was to intuit from the mind itself.

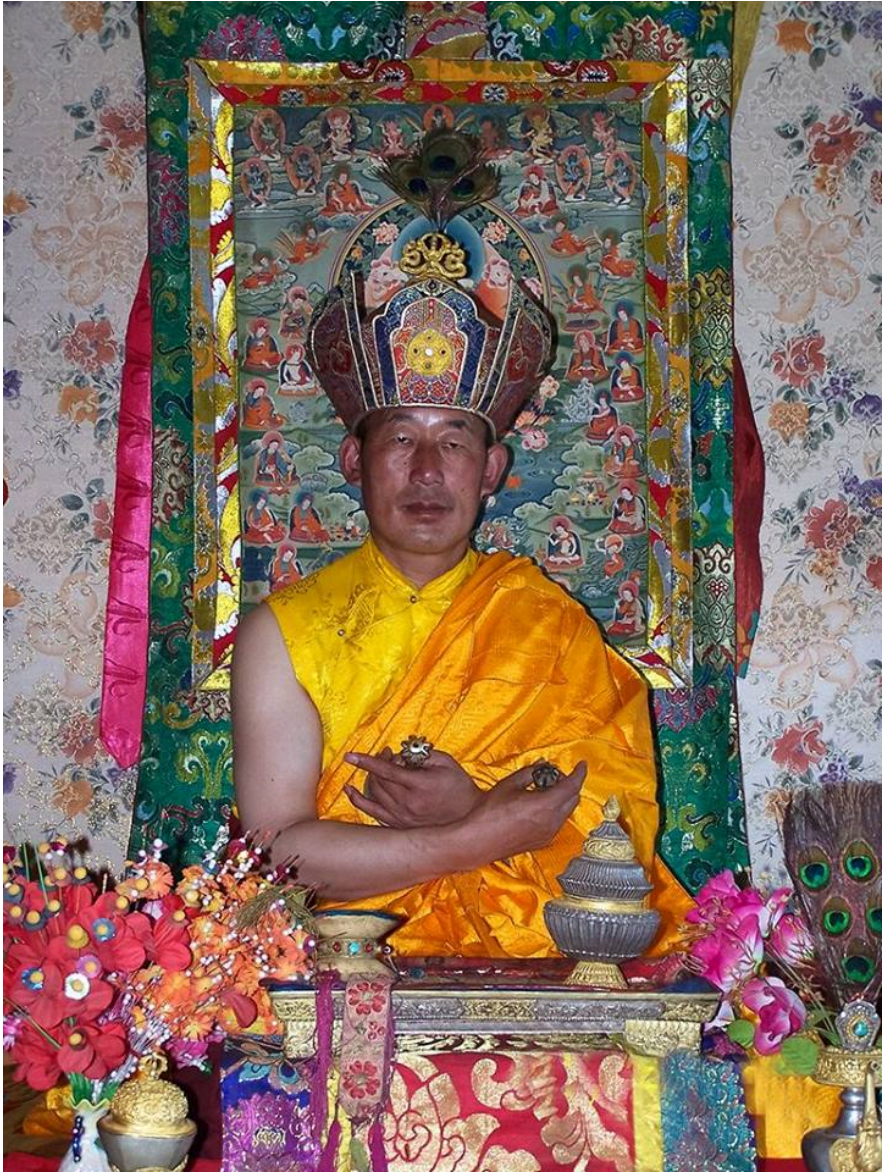
I had always been a little loosely-wrapped when it came to out-of-body experiences in general, and had already intuited or pulled from my mind many different astrological teachings, and this was years before my trip to China. But after that trip, the blinders, so to speak, were off. I did not have to do much to tap into the various treasures in the mind.

Long before, I had for the most part stopped reading and studying books and, instead, had learned to look directly at the mind itself for ideas, insights, and new techniques, astrological and otherwise. I have tried to explain this to others, especially to astrologers, but

most prefer to learn from books rather than directly from the mind itself.

So, I guess I want to go on record here in pointing out that, IMO, it is far easier to learn to mine the treasures of mind directly for ourselves than it is to study and try to reflect from books and study on the true nature of the mind. It's like trying to live life while looking at it in a mirror. I don't want to discourage study, mind you, but rather to encourage working directly with our own mind. Yes, you will find it as new and different, but it effectively removes the middleman (relative truth), so to speak, and presents us directly face-to-face with true nature of our own mind.

[Photo of tertön Tsikey Chokgyur Lingpa Rinpoche taken by me or a member of our group.]



WHAT DOES AN AMERICAN BUDDHIST LOOK LIKE?

March 4, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Well, I guess for the answer to that we have to someday have a look in the mirror. That thought was brought home to me when a high rinpoche was asked the question about the future of doing our practice either in Tibetan or in Tibetan translated into English, and he said: “Your own enlightened American teachers will write new practices in English.” Period, end of story. I hadn’t thought of that.

It was only then that I began to fully grasp that the whole Tibetan Buddhist culture, as fascinating as it may be, is just a wrapper for the dharma. There is no reason to continue a foreign culture once the dharma takes hold here. Of course it will eventually all be in fluent English and probably freshly minted at that.

Those Western students, like me, who were exposed early-on to Tibetan Buddhism are so imbued with the Tibetan system that it is hard for us to imagine how the “kernel” of dharma will appear, once the trappings of Tibet are discarded. And don’t look for others to be an example, for someone to do this for us. We each will have to do this for ourselves, little by little and bit by bit. We will have to ourselves become what we are looking for. Imagine that!

And making Tibetan Buddhism our own does not mean making “Tibetan” Buddhism “our own,” but rather making the dharma in Tibetan Buddhism our own, transforming ourselves into American dharma practitioners. And here the traditional image of a snake shedding its skin makes sense. The Tibetan trappings are just the envelope or gift-wrapping the teachings came in.

I have been struggling with this for some years, finding the courage and directness to stop looking in the rear-view mirror of books and teachings to learn the dharma and, instead, look directly at the mind itself. Why have a middleman? I have had the best teachers imaginable, so I have no excuse.

It is my opinion that perhaps most difficult is the transformation from being a bystander and student (watching all of this take place) as opposed to seizing the day and the time. i.e. making the dharma my own.

We talk and read that the dharma is a process of transformation. What does that mean? There is only our self to transform, which up to now we have never done. As long as we believe that dharma belongs to another culture, we don't have it. We have to find it here in the midst of our self and situation.

And this is not a trivial task. The dharma is not meant to be intellectual, nor will it work to operate the dharma from a distance. It would be like trying to drive a car from the back seat. Dharma is totally hands-on (and first-person at that), something we must entirely make our own and literally take control of. Dharma at a conceptual distance is an oxymoron, a non-sequitur.

It is hard to convey, but the idea of taking possession of the dharma is what I am talking about here, or like being possessed by dharma. The outer shell, whatever we have been thinking, imagining, wondering, hoping, practicing, etc. about dharma just falls away, much like the chrysalis of a butterfly breaks open and we emerge, totally transformed - galvanized. This is what is meant by the statement that the dharma is a process of transformation. "WE" are transformed. We become the path that we ourselves are on.

Words begin to fail here, but the image of the lost-wax process in making statues of the Buddha comes to mind. In that process, the empty form of the statue is filled with wax and a mold is made. That would be the wax of our preliminary practices, all our understanding and intellectualization. Then that wax is melted out of the mold and replaced by copper, bronze, or even silver or gold. And the mold is broken open and all that remains is a statue of pure gold. And so it is with our own transformation.

The naturally organic aerodynamics of the dharma eventually trim away all that cannot remain of us until we are the pure dharma-differential itself, plus, of course, our own karma. This process begins when we achieve what is called "Recognition," being recognition of the true nature of the mind ("Kensho" in Zen).

Some articles on "Recognition" can be found here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

WAITING FOR THE TIDE TO COME IN

March 5, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Here in America, we may not yet have a tradition of caves in which to meditate, but when it comes to the vast emptiness of this land or the sense of the American wild-west, all that is fresh and still very much with us. You can be sure that, even if we manage to attain a little realization, no one will mind or even notice. One thing that is almost totally invisible to most others is any realization we have that is greater than what those around us have. If you lack the faculty, you can't see the phenomenon. Americans don't ignore on purpose; they just generally ignore and are ignorant of the dharma or any realization of it.

If, as the 16th Karmapa suggested, America is a very fertile field for dharma, we probably are still tilling the soil. Who knows when the seeds of enlightenment will ever take root and we will grow our own masters? In that sense, it is very, very quiet here in this country. When my family and I brought Lama Karma Drodhul to America in 1997, the very first thing he said when we arrived at the San Francisco International Airport was "No monks!" He was used to being surrounded by monks in every direction. Here, there were relatively few, like about none.

And it remains unclear to me whether the conditions here in the U.S. will require diligent dharma

practitioners to appear as monks in robes or not? Various experts estimate that it takes the dharma some 300 years to enter a country and establish itself. Given that time frame, it is still quite early-on in America. Just as in rebirth we form (and gather around us) an entirely new self and persona based on our parent's genes, the particular situation into which we are born, and our own past desires and karmic traces, so will the dharma in America arise based on the land itself, the times, and the particular situation and need for dharma in this country.

We can't grow plants without first having ground that is tilled well enough to support them. And we are not at the harvest time yet, not even close; perhaps we are only barely at the time when seeds can even be sown. It could be that we are just tilling the soil in the same way that the various preliminary dharma practices (purification practices) make it possible for us to eventually learn Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation. I can't help but have questions.

Often, the way we tell it asks a lot and we can't help but hear in our own declarations that there is still a question embedded in what we thought was an answer or statement. Do we respond to the question in a declaration or just pass on by? Does it go without saying or should we say it again?

My point here is that the seeding and awareness of dharma is a long story and journey. If we are in a hurry, we might better just relax and find clarity in the moment. IMO, the joy is in the process, is certainly not attached to our expectations of results. And by that I mean that the joy is in the dharma itself, the

very freshness of the moment that it offers. It is the extreme clarity and lucidity of the dharma that keeps us awake and aware. Is it not?

The dharma is never “learned” and complete, because it is not just a result or end in itself. Rather, the dharma is the process of becoming ever more enlightened or realized each moment and each day. And, if we strain too hard into the future or drag our heels back in the past, the very freshness of this present moment is dampened or lost. We get burnt out. It is up to us to be reasonable in our expectations.

Like pulling wool or making thread, through realization (not understanding) we spin the dharma out of the ether and into our very essence. Like waiting for the tide to come in, it is going to take a long time, but what a joyous process.

Eh Ma Ho!

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.

WHAT IS REALIZATION?

March 6, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Our ideas of enlightenment are, at best, skewed and mostly just absent or not accurate. They are just ideas and not themselves the realization they refer to. No amount of understanding is realization. Harder to understand, but just as true, no amount of experience amounts to realization. As the upadesha (pith teachings) state: “Out of the midst of experience, realization can arise.”

And of course “realization” is just the tip of the iceberg, and not in any way what is called enlightenment. “Realization” is the point where our path toward enlightenment can begin. And realization is not so much a state as it is a process. It is the “process” of realization that results in eventual enlightenment. In other words, while it is wonderful to realize this or that, realization as a continual process is the habit we want to have (and will need) to become enlightened.

Our eyes may be open or opening, but we best keep our head down and keep on breathing. The “oxygen” we need for realization is not a one-time pill or a pool that we eventually reach and bathe in, but rather, like breathing, something we need to do moment by moment and 24x7. Realization is more a stream than an end-state. If we persist in imagining realization as a place to get to or something to achieve, we are

missing the boat. Instead, realization is the means or path to enlightenment, the way we get there.

We are told that realization is permanent and there is no walking it back, but what we may not know is that realization is also a stream or means. Realization can start small, but it eventually encompasses everything and this by the definition of “enlightenment.” Yes, it is a one-way street (cannot be reversed), but it has to be traveled to the end. How to keep going on the path is what is being pointed at here.

If we focus on the immensity of the undertaking of enlightenment, we are almost sure to lose energy, if not lose our way entirely. Like living, where we must breathe in and out, one moment at a time, realization, as mentioned, is a process that must be maintained or else it just stops in its tracks. That’s the whole point of the “future” and the “past.” If we lean too far into the future, we are trying to rob the cradle (sadism), and if we are dragged too much into the past, we are soon stuck in the mud of our own history (masochism).

This is why, traditionally, the present moment is so important in spiritual training. It is our ticket to ride. Like a jerky clutch on a car, endlessly alternating between the past and the future is not the solution; instead what we need is the smooth even flow of realization and its lucid clarity. “Give us this day our daily bread”; in other words, a little (but constant) stream of realization and we can make the long trek through innumerable lives to enlightenment.

An analogy: I sometimes think of enlightenment as a large round field of dry grass, in the center of which is dropped a match, that first bit of realization after the

preliminary practices kick-in. And the fire from the match burns from inside, outward, in all directions, increasingly encompassing more and more of the field, with an ever-moving ring-of-fire (fringe) – the path of realization.

So, while it is popular (or even traditional) to conceive of realization as a state of mind, it is a state that is ever increasing until enlightenment is attained. And the process of realization (be it a trickle, a stream, or an avalanche) is part of a constant expansion of our realization, a bit at a time. Realization is a continuous stream of lucid clarity that not only makes navigating the path to full enlightenment possible, but holds our interest totally throughout the whole journey.

SPARKING REALIZATION

March 6, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Like everything we learn to do that involves practice of any kind (including dharma practice), it can be a long journey from making an initial effort at something and mastering it enough that it becomes almost automatic, what is called “muscle memory.” This can be especially true with practicing dharma. It is hard to practice something that we don’t know through actual experience what the result we are going for is like. This is always true for any type of spiritual realization.

What do we know about spiritual realization before we have realized it? If we are honest, the most we can know is that we don’t know, but at least that’s a start. Practicing dharma, like practicing meditation, is not meditating. It is exactly what the words suggests, “practice,” and little more. There is no shame in non-knowing, but we will never know realization if we think we already do. The fact is that most of us don’t know. That is why, at least in the lineage I belong to, we have authentic teachers to work with us.

And by authentic, it is meant that in order to instruct us, an authentic teacher must have realization of one form or another. That’s what makes them authentic, the ability to know the difference between realization and conceptualizations. We certainly don’t.

The fact is that, by definition, when it comes to realization, until we have “realized” the nature of how the mind works, we can’t know what the state of “realization” is. It is a classic Catch-22, and the only way around this circular maze is through the help of an authentic teacher, someone who already has enough realization to guide others. This is why in Vajrayana Buddhism, the bond between teacher and student is so important. Our realization depends on an authentic teacher pointing out to us the nature of the mind so that we actually recognize it.

This is not to say that there are no other paths to enlightenment. There are, of course. The difference, according the Vajrayana tradition, is that the bond between teacher and student makes the journey to realization very much faster. An authentic teacher is the guide and the student is guided, step by step. Otherwise, without a teacher, it is trial and error, a matter of guesswork, one that can take a very, very long time – like eons.

So, as they say, choose your poison. We can surround ourselves with books and texts and dig in, but the teachings point out that we should plan on many lifetimes of this kind of effort -- innumerable. With the lineage I train in, we begin by working through the preliminaries to remove obscurations that obstruct us from seeing beyond our self, and eventually train closely with an authentic teacher who guides us to recognize the true nature of our own mind, after which we have what we need to proceed on our own.

“Look Ma, no hands!”

ONLY THE LONELY

March 7, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Everyone wants to be recognized for who they are. However, there just don't seem to be enough "recognizers" on the planet for all the folks that are waiting to be recognized, not enough finders for those who want to be found. Imagine that!

Perhaps we are not going to be "found" because we have to find ourselves. And even more true, and here is the irony, when we finally find ourselves, others will no-doubt recognize us at the same time. Now, that has to be some kind of mystery or at least a koan.

There is a loneliness to modern life that I believe is more psychological than real. It is just a bad habit, that one most of us indulge in. As the great Greek philosopher Parmenides said so clearly, "Being Alone Is." If indeed we have eternally been alone, then we ought to be used to it by now. Or, as the great jazz pianist Les McCann (with dirty sax by Eddie Harris) laid down in this classic tune "Compared to What?" If you have never heard this, you have missed something. If you like bluesy jazz and your life permits it, take time to hear this out:

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

In that tune are the words "Trying to make it real, compared to what?" That is too funny for words. I am

also reminded of the journals of the graphic artist M.C. Escher, where he constantly complains about being so alone in his genius. This goes on and on, and then, much later in the journals, he finally lets slip a thought to the effect that yeah, he's so lonely, but it's so refreshing! LOL.

So, if you are waiting for someone to find you in your aloneness, good luck and please don't hold your breath. At best, we may find a rinpoche or dharma teacher, someone who will show us how to realize the nature of our mind, but there seems to be no cure for loneliness other than to realize you are not lonely and never have been. And this is only because, as Parmenides pointed out, there is no other "being." That is what non-duality in Buddhism is all about. It is the sense of duality itself that is not real. There is only one, and not two. Never has been. We have been crossing our own eyes and seeing double all this time.

As mentioned earlier, if you want the cure to loneliness, first see about recognizing the nature of your mind and then tell me you are lonely. There is just no "other" out there who is going to find us or from whom we can be lonely. There is only realizing the truth of "One." We have no trouble saying there is "one truth," which is the same as saying the Truth of One. Not two, but one. Check it out.

DO-IT-YOURSELF

March 8, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Dharma practice, at least as I know it, is not a paint-by-numbers kit. Yes, we each have to do-it-ourselves, but we don't do it all alone. In Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, the student works with a teacher, and while that thought may just roll off the tongue and go in one ear and out the other, its import is crucial.

I don't want to get too serious, but if we are fussy about choosing a heart or a brain surgeon, selecting the equivalent of a mind surgeon is even more essential. Just as a medical surgeon ultimately determines the success of the operation, it is no different when it comes to pointing out the nature of the mind. We either get it or we don't. To my understanding, there is no in-between. If we are a genius, then perhaps we have a wider latitude in selecting a dharma teacher, but if you are like me, slow on the uptake for this kind of spiritual learning-thing, then IMO we need a skilled individual, what is called an authentic teacher. And here "authentic" means one who (at a minimum) has realized what we are trying to realize.

Therefore, the bond between an authentic dharma teacher and a student (called "Samaya") has to be immaculate. Otherwise, it won't work. This is not to say the relationship is "personal." While I imagine it could be, in my experience it is not. I don't have

coffee chats with Rinpoche, yet I trust him implicitly to look out for my spiritual welfare until I can learn to do that for myself.

I trust Rinpoche to tell me if I am barking up the wrong tree and, when he does, I take his advice. I don't argue with him or attempt to put words in his mouth as it relates to me, but I have learned not to ask questions unless I really want an answer. One funny example of that was when, after finishing Ngondro (a difficult practice for me taking several years) I asked Rinpoche what practice I should do next, and he turned to me and asked me if I would like to know what he would do if he were me, and I said, "Sure, what?" And he said to do another Ngondro. Gulp, and so I did.

My point here is that the samaya (bond) between an authentic teacher and a student is not casual, not trivial, and certainly not one of equals. I am not Rinpoche's peer. Just the opposite; I am his student. I don't run what few jokes I know past him or attempt to tease or banter with him. No sir. I am just grateful that such a being as Rinpoche even knows who I am and is kind enough to work with me directly. Otherwise, I would be trying to figure out what is behind door number three, and the likes of that.

My respect, admiration, and love for Rinpoche is not what I would call warm and fuzzy. It is more like awe and deep appreciation for the kindness that he has shown me. It is like no other relationship I have ever known.

The job of a dharma teacher is to help us move away from flying in circles (via our zoned-out cruise control)

and actually getting somewhere by manually taking over and flying our own vehicle. We can surround ourselves with books, teachings, podcasts, videos, etc. on the Dharma and learn what we can. Yet, in the end, without an authentic teacher with some realization to work with us, we will literally sit there forever trying to understand conceptually what the dharma is all about.

We assume that we can figure anything out, but that does not work with spiritual realization. It is like trying to do a jigsaw puzzle without knowing what the picture on the puzzle even looks like. Or, perhaps working on a crossword puzzle where the puzzle itself morphs with our every entry. Even worse than that, the pith teachings say achieving “recognition” of the mind’s nature without instruction can’t be done. Period, end of story.

Unfortunately, everything we need to know can’t be taught to us all at once. I suppose it happens, but reading the spiritual biographies of the great Buddhist masters demonstrates a lot of work by almost everyone, including the Buddha himself. And all preliminary dharma training points to the event called “Recognition,” when our root teacher first successfully points out to us the true nature of the mind, so that we get it. It is after “Recognition” that the long process of realization begins, which eventually (perhaps after many lifetimes) leads to enlightenment.

Realization is not only a sudden state of mind, but a continuous (continuing) process that keeps us awake and on track through the long journey to full realization and enlightenment.

DUALITY: A WORLD DIVIDED

March 9, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There is little clarity if our eyes are crossed. It takes clarity to see the lack thereof. We can't see our own obscurations because they are what are obscuring our vision. What is this "Clarity" that the Tibetan Buddhists keep referring to? How does it differ from our common concept of clarity?

A poem I wrote some time ago immediately pops to mind about the difference between prose and poetry, where I suggest that prose is like carrying water in our hands, while poetry is like drinking from the faucet. To me, that is like the difference between common clarity and the Clarity that results from Insight Meditation; it is like night and day.

The Buddhist texts usually mention clarity in the same breath as luminosity, because the two terms are considered connate. "Connate" indicates that these two terms always arise together, like two sides of the same coin. So, when we say "Clarity," we always mean clear and luminous. And when we say luminous, we also mean clarity. Perhaps "lucid" is the best conflation of the two terms. But that still does not IMO make what I am trying to explain clear enough, so let me try again.

Spiritual Clarity is like a laser beam that, once locked onto, immediately becomes a conduit for an

uninterrupted flow of what we could call “Certainty.” Of course, these are all just words; they cannot convey the actuality. At best they can but point to it, so let me back up a bit.

The type of Clarity I am pointing at here is a product of Insight Meditation, part of traditional training for Mahamudra Meditation. This clarity is a byproduct of the collapse of dualistic thinking, what the Buddhists call “Relative Truth.” When we start to see through our own dualist habit of putting everything in terms of “we” against “them,” that form of conceptual thinking starts to break down and release its essence, much like grinding herbs with a mortar and pestle.

What remains is the immediate presence of non-duality, the mind looking at its own nature, which requires no reference whatsoever, only an introduction. No middleman is needed or even possible.

It is Insight Meditation and its clarity that opens the door to recognizing the actual nature of the mind itself, and it is actually a form of realization, rather than just more conceptual (dualistic) thoughts about something. When realization is actually grasped (or attained), it never goes away and you can’t walk it back. Realization is permanent.

Insight “realization” is like a particle beam or rail-gun, meaning that everything is energy that, moving in parallel, heads in the same direction, a one-way trip toward enlightenment, with every step as more enlightening than the last. It is like fusion personified, a real-life perpetual-motion machine. I can’t get more analogical than that.

I agree that it is hard to put into words, but perhaps you get the idea! It's a lot of hard work and stumbling in the dark until we reach the point where we recognize the actual nature of the mind. After that, it does not matter whether we are brainy, middling, or not that intellectual. With the help of an authentic teacher, once we have grasped the nature of the mind, the hard part is over. Although we are not then enlightened, we do have some realization, which means we realize how the mind works and, equally important, that we, just as we are now, can work it. That is certainty.

Reading about it here may be helpful; maybe not. What could be important is whether we can take our mind off our normal distractions long enough to actually go for it and do what it takes to remove enough of what obscures our mind so that we can begin to see for ourselves how the mind works. That process is what the Preliminary Practices of Tibetan Buddhism are all about.

Here is some further reading on the Preliminary Practices:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND
<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

REACTION TONING
<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

CLARITY: LIBERATION THROUGH INSIGHT

March 11, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

This is a sequel to the previous blog and is even longer, so I apologize. Since there were no comments on that blog, I don't expect much more here, but there might be one of you that benefits by it. Obviously, questions would be welcome.

In yesterday's blog, I compared our common idea of clarity with the "Clarity" that results from Vajrayana Insight Meditation. They are very different. Having practiced Insight Meditation myself, I can assure you that there is every reason to want to reach that kind of Insight-Clarity in everything we do, because it is a "Stellar" clarity, but we have to be taught how to do this and be able to actually learn it.

And, in my experience, Clarity of this type has to start by realizing something particular that we do, before it can expand to just anything we do or everywhere. And the particular clarity that results from Insight Meditation is so telling, so striking, that it rapidly becomes the reason to do just about anything at all. It is a place to rest our mind, absolutely, meaning that it is a direct conduit to the nature of the mind itself, something that up to now we have never experienced.

All I can say from my own experience with the type of "Clarity" that results from Insight Meditation is that it is extraordinary, like nothing I have ever known prior to

experiencing it. And by “Clarity,” it is meant an unequivocal certainty and clear seeing, devoid of any doubt about whatever the mind is focused or trained on. It is analogous to a clear signal with all subservient noise instantly removed. Not silence, but other than the signal itself, complete silence. It’s not fuzzy. And that kind of certain-signal is very comforting and affirming, and I should add that it is very addictive in a good way. In other words, once tasted, this lucid clarity is never forgotten and, moreover, causes one to move mountains to find it, stabilize it, and maintain it.

Although instantaneous complete-realization is said to be possible, like “springing full-blown from the head of Zeus,” that is not how realization appears to most practitioners, i.e. all at once. And keep in mind that “Clarity,” the byproduct of Insight Meditation, arises as non-duality, i.e. no second thoughts.

Insight Meditation arises with the collapse of the duality that we usually see as the world. The Buddhists call our ordinary dualistic-conceptualization “relative truth” and define it as whatever has a subject and an object, like: I am in here and you are out there. Through Insight Meditation (Vipassana), our habitual dualistic way of seeing the world begins to collapse and the lighting-flash of non-duality arises to replace it.

It does not usually (although apparently it can) just happen all at once, but rather more commonly one activity (or another) of our life begins to open to this non-dual clarity, and, as we stabilize, the process eventually goes on from there.

Above all, “Realization” is a process that can and has to be expanded and extended from wherever it first occurs to other areas of our life, until virtually all of what we are and do is realized. It is a hallmark of Insight Meditation that any initial realization we have is just the beginning, never the end of the process.

This special Clarity pokes a hole through our dualistic habits to where we can see clear insight, much like a pinhole camera. And we can peep through that hole and experience non-duality until such time as we learn, by extension and expansion, to develop and attain the same realization of non-duality throughout more and more areas of our life. We learn to let the non-dual clarity take over.

And realization is permanent, so that pinhole will always be there from that first moment it appears onward, and we can go and look through it whenever we want. And with some folks, it can remain like that, our personal peek at or taste of liberation. However, with instruction, the same pinhole can be expanded to include more and more of what we do each day. And that’s the point of “process.”

“Realization” is actually an extended process, totally dependent on OUR effort and diligence. It is like turning the wheel of the dharma with a crank. It will not turn unless we ourselves crank it. This is particularly true when it comes to Insight Meditation and the Clarity that it produces. As mentioned, it is like a pinhole camera, where to begin with we have a single hole through which we can see clearly. If we want light and clarity, we have to go and peek through that hole.

The process of fuller realization is often a long and arduous process, but a necessary one. Since our original realization always comes by way of some specific means or activity, that activity becomes sacred to us, if only because it is through that activity that the clarity of realization first appeared. If we want true clarity, we perform that activity, whether it is saying mantras, performing a particular puja, or washing the dishes. We Americans do this though a thousand means every day. We just don't realize it. That's why realization is so important.

It takes time for us to discover that, while our initial realization came through this or that particular activity or means, it is not restricted to that. Like separating the baby from the bathwater, it eventually dawns on us that Insight Meditation (and its Clarity) is portable. We can take it with us. And, once learned, the same technique or process can be applied here, there, or wherever we want.

That is what is meant by extending or expanding realization. And it can take us a long or a short time to learn to port the technique of Insight Meditation to other things that we do. In my case, I first learned Insight Meditation, not while sitting on the cushion, but by looking through a camera lens. It just happened that way. I can explain why, but it would take another whole blog. And, for a long time, the only way I could achieve the Clarity of Insight Meditation was by picking up a camera, going outside, and taking pictures of nature. Otherwise, my mind was totally ordinary. Only when I did photography was it in any way extraordinary. So, of course, I loved photography.

Therefore, if I missed the clarity of Insight Meditation on a daily basis, which I did, I had to go out and photograph. And I did and I did and I did. I became a pretty good photographer through the process. However, over time, and with the help of a lama-friend of mine, I also very gradually learned to separate the clarity of Insight Meditation from the photography and to transfer the clarity-technique to others things I did in a day. This took time, perhaps a couple of years, maybe a little less, but it eventually did happen. It was a natural evolution, but it could be sped up by study and proper instruction.

After some time, aside from photography, I could do Insight Meditation with writing, with thinking, and on and on. In short, the extension and expansion of this clarity technique IS the PROCESS of realization. So, as I have pointed out, while “Realization” is often described as a state of mind (like a snapshot), in reality it is more of an ongoing process (a movie) than anything static.

It is the “process” of realization that goes on until Enlightenment, a self-sustaining process in which each additional expansion of realization makes us more confident and certain of the eventual outcome – enlightenment. It is a one-way street, but it is up to us when we travel it. We actually have to GO to enlightenment.

So, the overview here is that we first do the preliminary practices (Four Thoughts, Lojong, Ngondro, Deity Practice, etc.) until such time as, with the help of an authentic master, we achieve “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind, which itself is a form of realization.

From that initial realization (recognition), it is then up to us to extend and expand our realization to include more and more of our life and activities. And, while there do seem to be quantum leaps forward in grasping all of this (they just happen), much of our progress takes a lot of practice, but not to be confused with what is called dharma practice prior to "Recognition."

The practice being pointed at here involves learning to integrate the Insight Meditation technique in more and more of what we do, which involves mixing our (non-dual) mind with whatever we do until it becomes automatic. Realization ultimately spreads and continues until full enlightenment.

LET'S BE FRIENDS

March 12, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Here on Facebook I have 5,000 friends and (so I am told) almost 900 friend-requests that I can't honor because of a lack of room. So, I am not exactly friendless. I even have some actual old-friends from the past, although I don't see them as much as I would like to. So, I do have friends.

I know, family don't count as "friends," but I am friends with my family, nevertheless. Which leaves my dharma friends, and I do have some, folks that, like me, go back 30-40 years, although we are not in the same boat. Many of them have now become lamas, and some two or more times a lama (many 3-year retreats). Are they my friends? Sure, but respectfully so. I tend to not hang out with them much. Which leaves my main teacher, Rinpoche. Is Rinpoche my friend?

And I get some flak here on Facebook for not being friendly enough myself, for not affirming comments enough, and so on and etc. My view is that although I don't "hang" with Rinpoche, that he nevertheless is my good friend. IMO, the fact that he shares the dharma with me is about the kindest and friendliest thing anyone can do.

If you mean by friends, "misery loves company," sure, I know how to do that too, but what's the point? I do

my best in these blogs (and other writings) to point out and share the difficulties I have had learning the dharma. I make a point of that because I consider it helpful to know that we are not the Lone Ranger when it comes to stumbling along.

No, I don't send out Christmas cards, nor look for any. I hope that is not seen as unfriendly. I don't send out cards on Buddha's birthday, either. I do have Santa's address at the North Pole. In my life, along with my family, I consider my dharma and spiritual teachers (I have had a few) the most important influences in my life.

One great influence (and early teacher) for both my wife and myself came in the form of an African-American Unity minister from Detroit. I met Lotis Wilder just before the birth of our first child in 1972. She was to be our teacher in so many ways. Lotis was a woman in her fifties. I don't think there is an easy description for what she was or did. She was a very strong believer in what she called "Divine Love."

I can't forget that she once said to me "Michael, call me if you need me; if you don't need me, don't call me." That took a while for me to grasp, but she was right. I have not had teachers who are into small talk. And they are not unkind for not meeting me at the local coffee shop to catch up. As mentioned, what could be friendlier or kinder than helping me to wake up to the actual nature of the mind?

And speaking of Lotis Wilder, I might as well tell a story about meeting her and this is indicative of teachers I have learned from, in general. There was a lesson for me here.

I met Lotis Wilder as part of a radio show in which I was asked to interview another astrologer, and he had brought Wilder along with him for God knows what reason, perhaps for moral support.

I thought nothing out of the ordinary when I first met Lotis Wilder and she began to give an account of how she had removed a tumor from her own body. Ok, I said to myself, and I went on with my own thoughts. There were several of us listening. It was live and on the air. When she had finished her account, everyone gathered around were remarking at what a powerful story they had just heard. At this point I realized that, although I had felt the emotional power in what this woman had said, I could not remember one single word of it. Not a one.

I had not been listening to her words at all. Instead, I had been looking deep, very deep within her at her feelings or emotional state, call it her subconscious. And, as I gazed, I saw that she was so very expressive and so careful not to let the world know how deeply she had been hurt and had suffered.

My heart went out to this soul for certainly did I understand the state of her being. I understood so very well indeed. I felt that I could help this person to become stronger and to bear her inner sufferings out into the world, for she had so much love inside her, if she could only realize that her ideas and the thoughts that she presented to others, that she felt so important to maintain, were not really important at all.

The sheer immensity of her very being dwarfed anything her intellect had to say about it. This is how I met one of my life teachers and need I tell you that it

was many, many months before I could stand to realize that much of what I saw in her was part of my own self reflected in her long-gone mirror. She was able to reflect in its entirety my whole personal drama without a ripple of confusion and I saw inside myself how it was with me, although I thought I was seeing her and how it was with her. We worked together for many years. Margaret and I named our first-born child lotis after her. "lotis" is a Greek word that means two almost opposite meanings, will and desire.

So, this was a lesson for me that higher centers, more realized beings, are reflective, like mirrors. We see ourselves in them, while lower or equal centers (peers), are more magnetic (or charismatic) folks that demand attention (but can also be teachers) are probably not, for us, teachers. I am not saying that teachers have to be aloof, but in my experience they are not chummy, you know: warm and fuzzy. They are not my drinkin' buddies, not that I drink anymore. However, they are there for me when I most need them.

KEEPING SANE

March 13, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Something that fascinates me is looking at what we already have going for us that we are not aware of. If we have been here lifetime after lifetime, and this world we live in is the compounded result of all our societal efforts to survive and thrive, then what habits are already imbedded in the way we live that are parallel or might substitute for properly trained meditation, if any?

In other words, many (if not all) of the methods of training in meditation have not just sprung up with no antecedents. The truth as to the nature of the mind has always been within each one of us, so has that truth tried to reveal itself in ways over the centuries other than straight-ahead Buddhist mind training? Are there natural ways of meditating or resting the mind that have arisen, and are perhaps already somewhat functioning, that we can become aware of that might make learning a more disciplined method of meditation easier?

We all have to start somewhere and I found the process of learning mediation initially difficult. Of course, I find any learning process difficult, so I am the perfect person to be looking into all of this, because it has been so hard for me. The Buddhist texts paint this Samsaric world we live in as one of endless distractions, turning us every which way but

loose, as to recognizing the actual nature of our own mind. If we are almost totally distracted by whatever is “bright and shiny,” then how do we un-distract those distractions?

There doesn't seem to be, at least in my experience, a one-button solution that blows all of our distractions away with one huff or puff, allowing us to suddenly recognize the actual nature of the mind, although I believe that could happen. It just did not happen to me or to anyone I know. So, what does happen?

What can happen (and does) is much like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where we very carefully remove stick after stick (one by one) from a pile of sticks, without further disturbing the pile. There appears to be no magic bullet. If our mind is somehow “infinitely” distracted, how do we remove those distractions and get our full attention back? In other words, the process apparently is gradual. It takes time and attention.

All of the so-called “preliminary” Buddhist practices are essentially purification practices, meaning that they are about removing obscurations (what obscures our awareness) rather than accumulating more or adding something new. We want to take away what hinders our seeing so that we can finally see the true nature of our own mind. Voila!

I don't know of any bulldozer way of doing this, where we can remove our obscurations “en masse.” The closest practice to that is what is called Ngondro (The Extraordinary Preliminaries) and most Americans are hesitant to take on such something that difficult. So, that leaves us with lesser practices that give lesser

results, but ones that still give us enough results to be encouraged and keep going.

Since I spent over thirty years just doing these preliminary practices, I at least have a fair overview of what they entail. And I pretty much did them by rote, as I was told to do, and most more than once. And while that approach works, it is difficult in that the signs of success were not that easy to see and they took a long time. With that in mind, I can't help but look around for ways that I believe might give you better feedback and still get the job done.

Something that I found (for me) totally necessary is to get regular feedback (positive feedback) while I stepped through what can only be described as fairly rote methods of practice. Just as I did not continue learning to play the piano (to my mom's disappointment) because I could not hear myself playing music, I feel the same is true for dharma practice. We need to visibly see the results of our practice, so "Show me the results!" is a reasonable request, IMO.

As I have written here many times, the very best and most effective (and easy-to-do) method to practice dharma is Reaction Toning, using our own involuntary reactions as a means of liberation. It is an effective, somewhat instantaneous, usefully-cumulative (and unavoidable-anyway) method to greater awareness.

Reaction Tong-Len can be done at any time and all the time, at home on the cushion or in the process of the day, so no time is wasted. By definition, we are aware (or can be) of our own reactions, and that's the key to this practice. And the results are very swift-to-

come compared to ANY other practice I have done. I won't go into the details here, but this link points to many articles that describe it. We are never too old to practice with our own reactions, so you might like to check it out.

MICRO-RESTS

March 14, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have long been a strong believer that watching TV is as close as most Americans come to stabilizing their mind, physically, since we can't really take in a movie if we jump around too much. Locking our gaze in order to focus on a movie demands some of the more difficult-to-learn technique used in basic Tranquility Meditation. And I'm not joking. Of course, following the content of the movie, the train of thought, neglects the benefits gained from resting in holding a fixed position, but it is still there. Nevertheless, this is a training almost all of us have, and to a marked degree at that. It is possible that we can learn to use our TV mind-training for something other than entertainment.

There are many things that we do in a day that we enjoy and that we do just to please ourselves. Just what does "pleasing ourselves" mean, other than the obvious? If we look carefully, we will find that these moments of happiness, calmness, and rest do take place and they add a little sanity to what can be a long day. In fact, they are necessary for most out, some time out, even if it is by the nanosecond.

And while we all rest at night, I believe we also cat-nap through the day as well, in what are something like nano-naps, split seconds of peace and rest that, while obviously not contiguous, are in fact somehow connected together subliminally as a line-of-rest, mini-

time-outs that we depend on and that we may be unaware of, but that add up to basic sanity.

It could be as simple as that ray of sunlight that comes through the window and lights up the kitchen floor, or singing an old refrain that pushes us beyond the rat race of our daily goings-on for the moment. The great poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called these little vignettes “inscapes,” because they were our way inward toward the nature of the mind itself, an opening into pure rest or release.

And while there often is not much that we can do to slow down the helter-skelter of a busy day, like a rock climber on a sheer cliff face, we can manage to climb out of it all a moment at a time. And just as the day is a number of linear events, so too the train of our inner inscapes add up to a very precious vehicle that helps to carry us across the turmoil of the average day. Check it out. We all do it, and as much as possible.

So, if we are already imbibing these internal micro-rests (and everyone does it), how do we grasp the technique, expand, and extend it so we can “appreciate” like this more of the time? Of course, the first step is to become aware that we already can do this.

Beyond that, we are into the territory of dharma training, where we systematically set about removing our obscurations a bit at a time. That’s what I practice and perhaps you can see why. There is no reason why each of us cannot do this, given a little effort. And the results we get are permanent.

I have presented dozens of articles on the various preliminary dharma practices, and I highlight what I feel is the easiest and most rewarding one to start with, at least in my experience, “Reaction Training.”

REACTION TRAINING

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

MIND READER

March 15, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We punctuate the endless stream of our busy thoughts with a series of micro time-outs, whenever we can manage it. They amount to a substratum or sub-channel of restful clarity that we dip into. We don't have to be a trained meditator to do this; we all do it right now, but just lack much awareness of it, although if we learn to look carefully we can see the inner relaxation that results from it. What is needed is enough awareness to expand and extend these micro-rests to the point where we can do this at will. That is exactly what meditators do once they have recognized the nature of how the mind works.

It takes time to allow our intuition to push subliminal information into our attention so that we can actually see it. And it takes relaxation on our part to allow it to float up so that we can remain aware of it. We have to be still.

Furthermore, it takes undivided attention for this to take place, unlike divided attention, which is where we have a signal (what is coming up that we might want to see) and a lot of noise (any kind of distraction). To put this another way: where normally we set some sort of "watcher" or mindfulness component as an overseer, with undivided attention this is not possible. We have no second thoughts. We are, as they put it, "all in." In other words, we can't see clearly and have

second thoughts at the same time. The kind of clarity I am referring to is all-encompassing – no peeking.

Whatever “micro-rest” moments we may have can be carefully uncovered, gently unwrapped, to reveal their nature in the undercurrent, which is much like an underground canal of lucid clarity. This is the value and goal of Insight Meditation (Vipassana), to rest in the moment entirely. It reminds me of the point in a bobsled run when, after we jump in, when we pull in our arms and put our head down. Nothing hanging out.

I found it important to recognize that the results of Insight Meditation are not something that we manufacture through the process of meditating, nothing new that is added on. Instead, Insight Meditation is a process of uncovering what has always been right there within us, and to which we ourselves dip into as we can, although at present perhaps mostly unconsciously. We have to train the mind to relax and allow our intuition to speak to us.

And it has been pointed out that we already have a myriad ways to defeat the overwhelming massing of facts each day that obscure our intuition, if only for a nano-second at a time. Insight Meditation requires that we can focus our mind with awareness, while simultaneously being at complete rest

We focus on resting, which sounds like an oxymoron, but it can be done. By deeply resting in a focused manner, we allow our own inner clarity to bubble up or appear, bathing the tiredness of moment-to-moment linear time with soothing lucidity. Clear seeing

absorbs our distractions through the sheer clarity it offers. It distracts our distractions back to clarity.

Insight Meditation is “certain” lucid-clarity, devoid of all the noise and distractions that we normally suffer. We know that all the answers to any questions we have are in the mind, because it is from the mind that every invention, idea, concept, thought, and word in the world came from. So everything we need to know is right there in the mind, waiting for a chance to reveal itself, if we will allow it.

And we do this by learning to let our mind rest deeply enough that whatever is trying to rise to our conscious awareness can do just that. We all can all learn to read the mind. After all, that is what the term “mind reader” is all about.

TURNING THE MIND ON ITSELF

March 16, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

From early childhood we are taught to use the mind like an instrument to get things done. We learn reading, writing, and arithmetic through the use of the mind, and everything else that we study. The mind is like the computer or iPhone that we use every day, just another tool. We don't know how the iPhone works either.

However, and there is a "however," very few of us have ever been taught to use the mind to look at itself. It never occurs to us and, until rather recently, there have been no classes or instructions. Mind-Training 101 is not in our classrooms.

In short, we use the mind to learn arithmetic and the like, but we don't use the mind to study the mind itself. Yet, in other countries (like Tibet), mind-training is part of the standard curriculum. It's been customary in this country to label mind-training as "spiritual" and thus veil it from being used practically in everyday life. "Spiritual" as a label is a moving target that changes with the times, but basic Tibetan mind-training techniques can apply equally to sacred or mundane matters. It is simply a technique.

In the course of a life, most of us learn dozens of techniques, some of them requiring great skill. We all should know by now how difficult that is for us, since

we have done it. Mind-training techniques are very straight-forward as techniques go, with the one exception that we have no way of knowing what the result might be like until we actually realize it. With playing music, for example, we can always put on a CD and say, that's what I someday want to sound like.

But with realization techniques, there is no CD, DVD, or anything else that can give us an actual preview or sense of what the results of realization will be like. So, in a sense we are practicing in the dark, on trust, faith, but with no clear sense of the results we are trying to achieve. Think about that for a moment, please.

And this is why, in the Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the role of the instructor or guide is so important. An authentic teacher has already realized what we are attempting to realize, and they can see when we are barking up the wrong tree and gently point us in the right direction. It is this feedback loop that can be so important when it comes to mind training. In fact, the pith texts say that recognition as to the nature of our own mind cannot happen without an authentic teacher. Period.

So, for those Westerners who have been raised without any mind-training instruction, when using the mind to investigate itself, we have our work cut out for us. If we suddenly had to learn to read, memorize an alphabet, but words together, and grammar and so on from a foreign language, we would have a real job on our hands. Even those of you who have learned a second language from scratch know what I am pointing at here.

And yet we are talking about learning to recognize and properly use the mind itself; you can count on it taking some real work on our part. So, the mind may be a language we never learn to even parse, much less speak. If we actually want to know our own mind, it will take more than lip service or spending a few minutes a day on the cushion, and going to church on Sunday. We are actually going to have to listen-up, find the best teachers we can, and seriously work with them. I had to do just that myself.

I started out just giving mind-training a once over, scanning through a few books, and trying to sit on my own, well, sort of. That didn't do it. Then I got a little more serious, sat Zazen for an entire day, and then continued to do what I could by myself. I could go on and on here, telling you about how I learned a little bit here and a little bit there, but nothing that added up to what I could call a result. And this went on for perhaps fifteen years or so.

And then in 1974 I happened on a couple of authentic masters in the same year, H.H. the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje) and the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Getting authentic instruction made all the difference and I soon found myself an insider, rather than on the outside, but I was not sure how I got there. By "insider," I mean that I had taken the dharma to heart and identified with it. Suddenly, it was a part of me, but I still knew next to nothing about it.

My journey from that state to some actual results took another 31 years, but I finally managed to get some grasp of the teachings a few years after that. Back then, any teachers were few and far between, so I was mostly on my own. Today, there are more and

more teachers who are able to guide us, at least through the beginning stages.

So, if you decide you want to learn the mind itself, as opposed to just using the mind to do something or other, I have a large amount of reading material and videos at the links below, that's if the way I present things is something that rings a bell with you.

LOOKING OUT FOR LOOKING IN

March 17, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

There is one area that we as Americans have apparently never explored. We have climbed Mt. Everest, been to the Moon, plumbed the depths of the oceans, etc., but somehow managed to miss or avoid the greatest adventure of them all, realizing the nature of our own mind. Yet, it is the primary tool or window through which we view and experience all of the above.

I can't explain why we have missed looking at the mind itself all this time, because I don't know exactly why, but I do know that as a society we have. And I know that my own experience and journey into mind-training has been difficult, to say the least. For me, absolutely, it has been a voyage of discovery of an unknown land that I never imagined existed.

Even back in the late 1950s, my introduction to Buddhism was as just another (one of many) philosophies, something to talk about. Of course, in the 1960s I fiddled with learning meditation, but for some reason I didn't like the whole idea of it, having to learn some rote technique. Then, there is the fact that I had no idea what it was about. It was not until I began to meet the Tibetans themselves (in 1974) that it was brought home to me that here was a path, a method of enlightenment, and not just something to

think and talk about. And that came as a surprise.
“Who woulda’ thunk it?”

Once I understood that the dharma was a path, my question was how do I walk it? How do I practice something that I have no idea as to what the result actually is? Of course, I could read about enlightenment, and it sounded good, but I didn’t have a clue about what it was like experientially. And aside from meeting in 1974 H.H. the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje) and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and each of them blew my mind, what do I do next, like for instance, on any given today?

I met these great teachers and was inspired, but they were not around Ann Arbor, where I lived, so there I was, totally alone in figuring all of this out. I had nowhere to turn except back to books. Going and sitting in the corner on a cushion for a while each day and practicing, pretending to meditate, had no results. Nothing happened, other than I felt a little embarrassed just sitting there, doing what? I had no clear idea.

This went on for something like nine years, a time during which I read, studied, tried (sort of) to practice, not to mention guru shopping with every “spiritual” teacher who came to town, searching for something that worked. Then in late 1983, I met a Tibetan Rinpoche with whom I connected and vice-versa. Finally, I had a connection, but still there was the 800-mile drive connecting us, but it was a start.

The idea is that someone like the Dalai Lama (whom I also met before he was that well-known) is a great teacher, but who has access to him other than

through books and videos? What I needed was a teacher who actually had time for someone like me and who personally would answer my questions and work with me. I found that in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who is now in his nineties. I have been with Rinpoche now for 33 years. He has helped me more than I could have imagined or can put into words here.

The point being that with something as ephemeral as realization and enlightenment, where there are probably every kind of wrong path but only one right path for each of us, we need some direction if we want to get anywhere. Back then, I didn't even know how or where to begin.

Today, there are a lot more resources, scads of books, videos, and many more teachers capable of at least guiding us through the beginning practices. An analogy might be its like we try to read all of the books on a topic, but never took time to first clean our reading glasses. Therefore, everything is seen "through a glass darkly," so to speak.

We find it just too hard to read the dharma from the book of life, not because it's not easy-to-read, but because we have not bothered to clean our glasses, to first remove the obscurations from our mind. Here are a couple of places to begin:

The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

Basic Reaction Training:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

SEASONAL SECTORS

The 24 Solar or Seasonal Sectors

March 18, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Since we are approaching Spring, it might be interesting for my astrological friends to look at another part of the Tibetan/Chinese astrology. Inherited from Chinese Astrology into the Tibetan system are the 24 solar terms or seasonal indicators, starting with the moment that the Sun reaches 15-degrees of the Tropical Zodiac sign Aquarius, which is usually somewhere around February 4th or 5th. Unfortunately, here in the West we don't pay that much attention to the seasons, since we no longer farm, but just noting the 24 seasonal sectors I find useful for prompting me to actually look outside!

These solar terms mark the beginning (zero degrees) and the middle (15-degrees) of each zodiac sign, using the tropical zodiac. Traditionally, they were carefully paid attention to. I have designed a set of tarot-like cards to represent the 24 solar sectors. Read the top and bottom text of each card to get the idea of the sector. They are pretty obvious.

Zodiac Point Season

15° Aquarius - Coming of Spring

00° Pisces - Rain Water

15° Pisces - Insects Awaken

00° Aries - Spring Equinox

15° Aries - Clear and Bright
00° Taurus - Grain Rain
15° Taurus - Summer Starts
00° Gemini - Grain Full
15° Gemini - Last Planting
00° Cancer - Summer Solstice
15° Cancer - Small Heat
00° Leo - Great Heat
15° Leo - Autumn Starts
00° Virgo - Cooling
15° Virgo - White Dew
00° Libra - Fall Equinox
15° Libra - Black Dew
00° Scorpio - Deep Frost
15° Scorpio - Winter Begins
00° Sagittarius - Small Snow
15° Sagittarius - Great Snow
00° Capricorn - Winter Solstice
15° Capricorn - Slight Cold
00° Aquarius - Great Cold

More detail for each of the 24 seasonal combinations (and a lot of others) can be found in my book on Tibetan Astrology, which is a free download here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Astrology.pdf>

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DECONSTRUCTION

March 19, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Too many borders are what literally make dualistic conceptuality so confining. Spiritual liberation starts with removing the borders, deconstructing the dualisms, and (analogically) letting the drops of mercury, so to speak, cling together.

Loneliness results from separation, plain and simple. We paint ourselves into a corner conceptually; we dualistically pull some things to us and push the rest away. In other words, loneliness is like pinching ourselves. We feel loneliness by conceptually separating ourselves from others and the world. We throw up a wall, thus assuring the experience of loneliness until we stop doing that.

We all know the old phrase “We are our own worst enemy.” Well, that old saying is true. We do it to ourselves and it is a slow form of suicide, this hurting ourselves through feeling separation. Not someone else doing it to us, but we doing it to ourselves. And it seems that we don’t know how to stop doing it.

Preliminary dharma practice is all about removing barriers, breaking down walls, letting the more fluid life itself flow together, just “as it is.” Since it already is “all-together,” we are in fact correcting our own habit of separating everything through our conceptual thinking. As we deconstruct our dualistic habit of

pitting ourselves against everything “out there,” we realize the continuity that has always been there and it is a great relief. This is what is called “letting go.”

One trick of loneliness is that we think we want to reach our peers, but our peers are busy doing just what we are doing. Even if we could meet up, what is there to say, except perhaps, “Hello?” Whatever knowledge or wisdom we have will not help our peers (or vice-versa), but there are many folks who are just beginning that would welcome some guidance, some attention from someone more experienced, like perhaps we are. Getting satisfaction from peers is an oxymoron. Satisfaction comes only from the process itself.

The great turning point in dharma practice (and the point that all beginning dharma practice revolves around), as I have come to understand it, is the moment that (with the help of an authentic teacher – someone who knows) we recognize the true nature of the mind for the first time. And since “Recognition” is not just another “experience,” but rather the first major realization, it does not just happen and then go away like experiences do. Realization of any kind is permanent. It remains with us forever. It is not an exaggeration (but a fact) that all dharma practices up to that point are preparing us for recognizing the actual nature of the mind.

And, after “Recognition,” our practice changes and we set about expanding and extending our realization from there all the way to full enlightenment, whatever that is, but we know that for most of us it is a long ways off.

Since “Recognition” refers to the recognition of the natural state, which has always been right here in front of us (and within us), obviously it takes a little nudge or jar from an authentic teacher for us to grasp it. It is too close to see. After all, that is what all those many koans are about in Rinzai Zen, where their word for Recognition is “Kensho.” My way of explaining this to myself is that “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind reminds me of those old figure-ground paintings we used to see, where within one image is embedded a second image, one that is very, very difficult to see until it is pointed out. After finally seeing it, we can then recognize that image every time we look at the painting.

And someone can point it out to us, just as an authentic teacher is capable of (if we are capable of receiving it) pointing out to us the true nature of the mind, so that we can get it. That’s the whole idea, right there.

So, each of us can figure out where we are in this scenario, either working toward Recognition, or we have had recognition and are working with it. The beauty of it is that we can’t fake recognition any more than we can sneak up on a mirror, because we either have it or we need to have it and should be finding ways to get it.

“Recognition” is not just a continuation of what went before, but an absolute break with dualistic conceptuality and the realization (for the first time) of non-dualistic reality. In fact, if we wish to go further than preliminary practices, we need that non-dualistic realization, and if we have not actually realized it, we are just stuck in the same dualistic view we have

always had. There is no gray area here, and we cannot go further without it. In that sense, recognition is a great equalizer. Ultimately, we can't fool ourselves, although we certainly try.

This is not to say that when we recognize the true nature of the mind that everything is realized. Not so. Usually, through a specific practice technique we achieve recognition, and that remains permanently true for that particular technique. However, if we want to universalize and expand that realization, it is up to us to extend that realization to other areas of our life. And this becomes part of our main practice (or our only practice) from that point onward – extending realization.

EXTENSION

March 21, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Extension, which is very similar to “Mixing,” is a key component that once (with the help of an authentic teacher) we have recognized the true nature of the mind, we can practice. Simply put, we can’t extend what is not there, what is not permanent. It has to be invariable, and it’s a process of discovery rather than one of creating something new. This puts the spotlight on experience and the fact that experience always comes and goes. It’s a moving target and in order to have “extension,” we need a fixed target. Therefore, extension revolves around what is called “Recognition,” being the recognition of the true or actual nature of the mind. Recognition is a form of realization of what is. As mentioned, experience is impermanent, variable, always coming and going. Only realization of the mind itself is permanent; however, what is permanent about that is the realization of impermanence.

The problem or interesting thing about realization of any kind is that since there is the whole world of the mind to be realized, our point of entry or first realization can be, literally, anywhere and through anything. As far as I understand, realization seldom arises completely and all at once with full enlightenment. Most of us start with a glimpse of realization and expand it from there.

What seems a paradox about realization is that while realization is permanent, it is not usually all encompassing at the start. In other words, first there is a particular glimpse of realization (usually through a particular window or technique) and that window or technique is permanent, like a peephole, and will always work for us. However, the rest of the world outside of that technique remains as ordinary and unrealized as it always was.

The upshot here is that while we have a particular technique that works, whether it be a mantra, a mudra, a series of practices (or whatever), if we want to revisit the special clarity that comes from realization, we find ourselves performing that particular technique. So, the problem becomes how we can gain the same kind of clarity and realization through using other techniques. This is called extending or expanding our realization, and it is usually a long and arduous process, but one that is totally necessary and very rewarding.

However, we know relatively so little at the time of first realization, other than that if we rub our tummy and pat our forehead in a certain way, this special clarity will result. What we don't know about is how to extract the baby from the bathwater, how to universalize our realization by performing other techniques that get the same clarity. To resolve this takes confidence plus practice and, most important, any results are totally dependent on our actually doing the extending and expanding. If we don't act, we could wait forever to universalize the ability to realize more and more of what is.

So, right now, we are either involved in the Preliminary Practices, preparing for the event called “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind, or we have achieved Recognition (a form of realization) and are busy expanding and extending that realization. If we wonder or have any question as to whether we have achieved “Recognition,” then we have not. Recognition of the true nature of the mind, even the glimpse through a particular technique, is “without a doubt” – functionally beyond any doubt.

If we “think” we have achieved recognition and proceed onward in that vein, nothing will happen. We will be unable to expand and extend (or even repeat) the particular realization, because there was none. Instead, all we have is another will-o-the-wisp experience that is transient. It comes and goes. On the other hand, “Recognition” is similar to what in Western occultism is called the “Ring-Past-Not,” a point beyond which we cannot go without actually going beyond. The traditional advice is to concentrate on the preliminaries (Four Thoughts, Lojong, Ngondro, Deity Practice, etc.) until an authentic teacher points out the nature of the mind to us so that we get it and confirms our realization. Actually, if we have Recognition, we should not even need confirmation, because that is confirmation itself.

FINDING THE DHARMA

March 22, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Although I had read about Buddhism, mainly Zen Buddhism, as early as the late 1950s, it was not until 1960 that I did anything about it. That was when, inspired by the books of Jack Kerouac and the Beat poets, I dropped out of high school and hitchhiked to Venice West (Santa Monica), California where I did my damndest to follow the life of a Beatnik. I lived right on Venice Beach in a legendary Beat art-gallery called the "Gas House," where I slept in the basement in an abandoned walk-in freezer -- on the wooden racks.

At the time, I thought for sure that I was an artist, and I sketched portraits and painted with oils. Like the Beats, I did my best to stay "down" and to be cool, but really I was so enthused to be out and on my own. I hung out with some of the famous Beats of the era, like Big Daddy Nord, Tamboo & Mad Marge, Taylor Mead, and so on. I also stayed in North Beach, San Francisco and had hitchhiked from Ann Arbor to New York City some ten times. I was part of the Folk-Music Revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1961, along with my friend Perry Lederman, I hitchhiked with a young Bob Dylan. We stayed in the Village and hung out at the Folklore Center on McDougal Street and places like Gerde's Folk City at night. It was all happening. I hung out with folkies and

musicians like Joan Baez, the New Lost City Ramblers, “Ramblin” Jack Elliot, the Country Gentleman, and so on.

In 1964, I spent most of the year living and working in Berkeley, California, where not only was LSD appearing (Sandoz), but all kinds of different spiritual disciplines were popping up in the Bay Area. And I was absorbing it all. Berkeley and San Francisco turned out to be ground-zero for The Sixties, which more officially started in the summer of 1965, with the forming of the Grateful Dead in San Francisco and my own band (The Prime Movers Blues Band) at the end of that same summer.

And so, when I returned to Ann Arbor from Berkeley after 1964, although I didn’t realize it, I was filled with what turned out to be spirit of “The Sixties” and had finally laid to rest the flame I carried for the Beats, a movement I had so desperately tried to be part of. It had already flickered out. The Beats were so “down” and I was anything but. I had done my best to get on board, but that train had already left the station. I could not revive it.

From the Beats I had learned poetry, art, literature, dance, jazz (and classical music) and all kinds of philosophy – especially everything European. It was folks around my age, call us “pre-hippies,” who introduced the Hippies to most of what they know about the liberal arts and, as the time transformed itself into “The Sixties,” we would-be beats soon gave up our Ingmar Bergman films (and everything dark and European) for sunshine, dancing in the streets, and American movies. If the Beats were about late nights and cool, the Hippies were about sunlight,

drugs and spirituality. The times there were “a changing.”

However, it was not until the late 1960s that I met dharma teachers like Roshi Philip Kapleau, with whom I sat a little Zazen. Again, this was in Ann Arbor. But it was the year of 1974 that dharmically changed me forever; that was when I first actually met some of the great Tibetan Rinpoches, face-to-face and eyeball-to-eyeball.

In February of that year I met the Ven. Chögyam Rinpoche in Ann Arbor, Michigan and served as his chauffeur for a long weekend, also designing the poster for his teaching there. And then in August of 1974, I met H.H. the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje), while he was visiting Baba Muktananda at his ashram in Ann Arbor. Later, in 1976, Margaret and I personally met H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama in a casual setting and offered him a Khata (the traditional Tibetan white scarf). By that time, the sheer presence of the Tibetan masters had initiated me into their form of Buddhism, just by meeting them. They were so totally present.

However, it was meeting Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, when he personally took me into a room and spent an hour or so teaching me sitting meditation (and hanging out with him) that sealed the deal. Trungpa made it clear to me, once and for all, that dharma was not something to read and talk about, but rather a process, a way of living, and finally a path we each could walk. I have never looked back.

For the next several years I tried to practice dharma, and to read up on it, but mostly I was busy

discovering astrology for myself and building my company Matrix Software, the 2nd oldest software company still on the Internet. According to an article written about me for Red Herring Magazine, the only software company older than Matrix was Microsoft.

But the proof of the pudding (so to speak) came in 1983, when I met my root dharma-teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. I have told that story before, but I could tell it again if there is a need. I had been learning and practicing the dharma seriously since 1974, but from the moment we met Khenpo Rinpoche, both Margaret and I doubled-down. We were his students and he was our root teacher. And in this wide, wide world, we had found each other.

So, there you have the skinny on how I became increasingly involved in the dharma.

CORE LEARNING

March 23, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I have always been intrigued by the statement that while we each have to enlighten ourselves, we don't have to do it alone. No one can turn the wheel of our own dharma path for us. We have to actually do this ourselves. However, that is not saying that we have to do it alone. There are others doing this too; in fact everyone in existence is struggling with this in one way or another. So, in our "aloneness," we can have help by way of guidance, but how do we tell who can really help us?

Since I grew up being trained in natural history, carefully observing the laws of nature, I was hesitant to accept just anyone who said they were my teacher or who the public schools put in charge of me. Even as a young person, I looked for some sign that that a teacher was authentic. And what did I know? Not much, I will admit, but apparently enough to expect a would-be teacher to communicate with me in a way that actually made sense to me. If they made no sense, I guess I just tuned them out, because obviously I couldn't make sense of what they said.

As a kid, I was not rude, aggressive, or insulting about it. Instead, I just stuck with what did make sense to me, which usually was something I was doing at home after school, and more often than not it involved studying nature in one form or another. I was not

aware that I was learning more from Mother Nature than I was in school, but I was. Moreover, I followed nature's law, not the social laws or conventions. And no, I was not an "outlaw," either. I just (naively perhaps) put all my trust in nature's laws (because I could see that they worked) and never found social laws all that authentic. However, "Nature" was authentic every moment – even riveting.

As I became a young person, it became more (and not less) difficult to find authenticity in my teachers. And I was not out to expose or criticize the "inauthentic," either. I just didn't want to take the path of inauthenticity, because I could find nothing there to follow. And so, for twelve years of schooling, I was still mandatorily present, but also absent. What then did I cling to and follow? Well, as mentioned, I paid close attention to natural law, including the fragility of life and its impermanence. If I was not yet so aware of my own impermanence, I was very aware of impermanence in nature.

I would only have to go for a morning walk along a road and watch the countless earthworms trying to cross from one side of the road to another on the tarmac, to witness impermanence. The rising sun soon fried most of those earthworms to a crisp and they never made it to the other side. I will try to pick them up, one by one, and carry them to other side (and still do), but it was almost hopeless. And some worms were crawling in the direction of the road, so they had no chance whatsoever.

Having studied nature closely since I was six-years old, by the time I was in my mid-teens, I was quite aware of "how it is" in this world. Civilization, of

course, tries to put a pretty-face on it all. And it's not like putting lipstick on a pig, because nature already is perfectly just exactly what it is, and I noticed that too. But the frankness of nature was not reflected in society; far from it. I found society, in general, confusing to me and also itself confused. I did not know which clues and signals to follow, so I didn't. By default, I followed my own train of interest, because at the very least, to me it was authentic.

What is remarkable is that I went through twelve years of schooling without learning much of anything. Yes I learned to read and write a little; that was good. But my math skills never materialized, and so on. I had to learn them, later, on my own. If a teacher had any "authenticity" in my eyes, I learned. If they were rote and business-as-usual, I did not learn from them. It was that simple. Yet, the fact that I did not learn had the possible benefit of leaving me a little bit like a "tabula rasa" – a blank slate. I didn't learn much, but at the same time I wasn't too marked up from my experience, because I was mostly absent in mind while at school, lost in my world of after-school activities, mostly studying nature.

So, what education I have, I have mostly taught myself. And that includes spelling, grammar, and writing, not to mention many whole disciplines. I could go on about all of that, but my point here is that how do we know what is authentic and what is not? I pointed out that for myself, Mother Nature was authentic. She played no favorites and was crystal clear in her every move. That's how life actually was, is what I thought.

And, if schooling or the social world in general glossed over facts like impermanence or winked an eye about this or that reality, I was not consoled. Even as a kid, I already knew better than that, and so if they did that in front of me, they immediately lost credibility. And It seemed to me like they were playing with fire. My first dharma teacher taught me that “We don’t break nature’s laws; they break us.” Then he might cite the law of gravity as something we don’t “break,” etc. As the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa liked to say, “What goes up, comes down.”

I am probably rambling a bit here, but my simple point is that in order to know what is authentic, we have to have something to compare. For me, it was nature and the natural way it is. I didn’t know enough as a young child (or a young adult) to be cynical. I simply couldn’t find anything to follow in what many of my school teachers told me; it defied the common sense that Mother Nature so clearly taught me. What’s the point? Who is fooling whom, and why?

Since this is already getting long, as it turned out, my search for life teachers found me, as a naturalist, very at home with Mother Nature, but I also yearned and sought for a “natural” teacher among the people I met, a living human that we in tune with nature’s laws. And, I might add, I never had a grandfather on either side, because unfortunately they had already passed on. So where did I find living people who had incorporated nature’s savvy?

As it turned out, I spent many years studying the great blues players. I could hear the authenticity, first in their music and later by interviewing scores of them in-person. I have published a number of books on

music and three on “The Blues” in particular, including the award-winning book “Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals,” which covers how the two great blues festivals in 1967 and 1970 not only presented electronic and country blues to White America, but was the first large-scale chance for hundreds of blues players to meet with each other all at once and be formally appreciated by mainstream society.

First attracted but the authenticity in the blues music, I soon found that came from authentic experience, the residue of which was the wisdom of their person. The great African-American blues players became some of my life teachers.

And later, when I met the Tibetan lamas and rinpoches, they too became my teachers, because their dharma and the dharma of Mother Nature are the same. In fact, as a lama pointed out to me, there is such a thing in Tibetan Buddhism called the “Lama of Appearances,” where Mother Nature in all her appearance is considered an authentic teacher in itself.

In summary, my authentic life teachers have been the great blues musicians, especially from Chicago, and dharma teachers, in particular the Tibetan Vajrayana lamas and rinpoches. For me, they are authentic and I can safely learn from them, and have.

A TABLE FOR WHOM?

March 24, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I'm trying to wake from my winter slumber after being all locked-in for many months. No, I can't open any windows yet, so those warm spring breezes will have to wait a while. But I can walk outside without ice on the ground. Well, there are some patches of snow. And, although it is still very cold at night (and in the mornings), the temp does eventually get above freezing and, if there is sunlight, it can almost feel warm outside. I like to sit along the side of a tall fence, facing the sun, after the sun warms it up. Even then, the air is still cold, so I don't usually sit outside too long. Yet, I'm out!

Right next door to our house is the Heart Center, our dharma center. Originally founded in 1972 as a communion center, meaning a place to commune and share with one another, for many years it has functioned as a dharma center, first as the Heart Center Karma Thegsum Chöling, and more recently as the Heart Center KKSG (Karma Kagyu Study Group).

The house has seven bedrooms, so it sleeps a lot of folks and, over the years, so it has. Many years ago, it was constantly filled with visitors and permanent residents. Some even came unannounced for a visit and stayed for years. Let's see... we had a mathematician/astrologer who helped to develop Brown's Lunar Theory for NASA (which helped put a man on the moon). And there was a full-blown swami,

and another guest was a Sanskrit scholar, and yet another, the main astrologer for the Hari Krishna movement. There was also a jazz critic, and many others, most of the above lived there together at the same time. So, it was a full house and a wild time.

Mathematician/physicist Bob Schmidt (who later became an astrologer while at our center, so he told me) and his wife Ellen Black lived here for some years. And the list of astrologers who have visited and stayed at the center would fill this entire blog -- hundreds.

On the dharma side, we had many distinguished lamas and rinpoches, including two separate visits from His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, and a visit from His Eminence Shamar Rinpoche, Thrangu Rinpoche, Traleg Rinpoche, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, Bardor Rinpoche, Ponlop Rinpoche, Lama Namse, Lama Karma Drodhul, Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, Lama Lodro Lama, Lama Tsultrim Gyaltzen, Lama Tsultrim Yeshe, Ken McLeod, and many other dharma teachers. And, of course, there were many, many visits from our root teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

And various members of our dharma staff lived in the Heart Center, including David McCarthy, Bob Martinez, and others. We ran KTD Dharma Goods for many years as an arm of our monastery that translated, transcribed, and published dharma texts and provided meditation support for the KTD sangha. This is a whole story in itself.

However recently, there have not been many dharma teachers traveling and visiting our centers in the U.S.,

although Lama Karma Drodhul comes and teaches quite often. I do most of my dharma sharing online these days, via Facebook and other sites. And, although the Heart Center is pretty much as it was for all those years, the old dining area had kind of morphed into a large office area, and sadly, since we no longer had folks living there, the large dining table and chairs went into storage.

Well, in the last little while Margaret and I decided we miss the look and feel of the dining room, which is where for all those years so many meals were shared (including with our kids), that yesterday we took the matter in hand and changed all that. With the help of some college students, we moved out about a ton of stuff and moved back in a very elegant cherry table and a set of eight lovely chairs that we had in storage.

This fancy table and chairs is the residue (remains of the day) of when we moved briefly to Ann Arbor about 16 years ago to sell one of my businesses (AMG – the All-Music Guide and All-Movie Guide), still keeping our home here in Ann Arbor. Those were the years when I made a lot of money and then lost most of it. The table and chairs remained, but have been in storage.

Well, the dining set is out of storage and in the Heart Center, where I hope it will be happy. Not sure when (or even if) we will use it, perhaps for special dinners. We certainly could not let grandkids get at it... yet. They are already busy marking up the large table in our own kitchen area, and that is fine with us. But this new addition to the center will be reserved for we are not sure what.

Margaret and I decided that, at least for now, the dining room is more an “objet d’art,” something just to look at. Yet, we like to see out of a dank storage unit and getting some light and air. It reminds me of the Clint Eastwood movie “Josey Wales,” when Chief Dan George pulls a piece of rock-candy from his pocket and, holding it up to the light, says, “It’s not for eating; it’s just for looking through.”



SPRING CLEANING (and “Mixing”)

March 25, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

“Spring Cleaning.” Is it in our genes or is it something in the air of spring? Nature is starting over (at least here in temperate climates in the Northern Hemisphere), and I guess I am trying to follow suit. Throw out the old, and make room for the new.

Today Margaret and I walked down to Mitchell’s Creek, a local stream about a block and a half from our home. We sat on the bank using some old plastic milk crates that were there and watched the water flow by. Meanwhile, spring is trying to come. I also drove out to the woods to some temporary spring ponds and listened to see if the frogs were out yet, and they were. The tiny Chorus Frogs were in, well, chorus. So it’s all happening.

The temperature will reach a high of maybe 59 degrees today and it’s partly sunny, but also, of course, partly cloudy. When the sun is out, that feels great. When it’s not, a little chilly, but I’m not complaining. Winter is pretty much done. My skin and body needs some sun.

As for me, I have been working next door in our dharma center on the old dining room. It feels good to restore something that has drifted off course from what it once was. It looks great for the funky room it

has always been, but it was the scene of so many years of dinners with a full table, and our kids in the mix too. Our children grew up surrounded by many different (races, creeds, colors, etc.) kinds of people, not to mention their being bounced around on the knees of lamas and rinpoches.

Not sure what to do next with the space. I'm not interested in filling up the rooms with tenants like the old days, with all that involves. Perhaps we will find a college student who wants to live in the center in exchange for helping to maintain it.

Changing the subject, I am surprised at how many days I wake up and have no idea what I will do that day. For sure, I'm not about to take off traveling, so this is all in the mind. Yet, more and more, to the degree that I live in the present, I don't think about the past and have less and less expectations as to what the future will bring. At my age, the future, which once was far now seems near.

Take this blog: I usually have no idea what I will write today to post tomorrow -- no safety net. And I don't believe in forcing anything, but just trust that something will intuit itself into my consciousness and I will write on that. I have learned to trust my intuition. So, here I am, in this moment, writing about writing.

It's like pulling or spinning wool into thread. An impulse to write comes. It just pops up, and from that intuition a narrative gradually appears as I am writing. And let me be clearer. At first a desire to put things into words or perhaps better said, a desire to use Insight Meditation arise. Only then do I seize upon a subject to write about. And I don't drum that subject

up, but rather wait for something intuitively to arise and then act on that.

It may help to know that writing is very much a part of dharma practice for me these years. That was not always the case. I had to learn to mix Insight Meditation with writing until, when I wrote, I was also doing Insight Meditation. They were the same. This is called “extension” (or mixing) and it took quite a while before it became spontaneous and just natural for me.

In dharma practice, the term “Mixing” is important to understand, so I will give a common example, using my relationship to my teacher, Khenpo Rinpoche. Every year, Margaret and I travel to upstate New York, in the mountains above the town of Woodstock, where our monastery is -- KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra). We attend an annual 10-day teaching on Mahamudra Meditation that started in 1989.

Seeing Rinpoche in person each year and sitting with him, morning and afternoon, for ten days is the highlight of the year for me. I am always the very best me when I am with him, in his presence and within his mandala. I just like who I am with him. And after the 10-day intensive, driving back to Michigan was always like trailing clouds of glory do I go, and once back home, always against my wishes, I revert to my ordinary self pretty quickly. But that changed.

After a strong awareness event, and while doing a particular form of dharma practice called Guru Yoga (and a special version at that), I began to learn what is called “Mixing,” learning to mix my mind with that of my guru, my teacher. This took several years of

serious practice. And, as a sign that this practice actually worked was one year when I went to the 10-day teachings, of course looking forward to being in Rinpoche's mandala, and so on.

However, this particular year, when I was with Rinpoche, it was exactly like just being with myself at home. Of course, I was thrilled to be with Rinpoche, but when I left that year, I felt no difference between being with Rinpoche and just being with myself. I had never felt that way before. When I got home, I was just the same inside. And it has been that way ever since.

I am not saying I was like Rinpoche (of course not), but that, through mixing my mind with his, I had begun to touch into the same mind that Rinpoche was already in touch with. And while I am always glad to personally be in Rinpoche's presence, I no longer feel I have to "try" to get closer to him or that closeness to Rinpoche alone is the key to awareness, like something might rub off. Instead, I focused on practicing mixing my mind with the mind of the guru.

Today, even though we are 800 miles apart, I feel close to Rinpoche. For years, it seemed that I could never get close enough to Rinpoche, to be with him long enough, get into his skin, etc. With Mixing (after some years), that vanished and I no longer feel I have to be near him physically, but that both he and I have mixed with the mind itself. And that is, as I understand it, "Mixing."

BREATHING INTUITIVELY

March 27, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Something happened. It was years ago now, and I have described it here often, so I will spare you that. For me, it was a spiritual breakthrough, but to my surprise, it didn't happen on the cushion. It just happened quite naturally, which I had never imagined. Why did I ever think that all dharma realization had to happen on the cushion? LOL.

Dharma (and its result) is much more natural than that. Realization happens when the conditions are right. I never properly understood that until then. And there is a lesson to be learned in this fact, and that is: the dharma is a direct reflection of what is (or vice versa). And, although when we begin to practice dharma we learn various techniques, these techniques are just a push to get us moving, and not an end in themselves.

Put another way, dharma and its realization are all natural. The dharma practice techniques we learn only bring us up to warp speed, after which we have to relax, bend with the wind, so to speak, and learn to go with the flow. Ultimately, to achieve any realization, we don't do anything other than to let go and get with the program that already is (and always has been) happening. So, in a typical dharma practice, we concentrate our focus mindfully until we have the muscle memory to automatically maintain that

mindfulness, and with that mindfulness held, we then rest in the clarity and lucidity of the mind itself. That is the general idea, mechanically, but we have to do it naturally and with no effort.

As I learned, “we” don’t decide when we will have a glimpse of realization. We have no way of even knowing what “realization” is, until we actually realize. It’s like feeling in the dark, a real Catch-22. Or, another way of looking at it is that the process of realization is like learning to breathe spiritually, much like babies take their first breaths. Either way, we are suspending our dependence on conceptual thinking and learning to breathe intuitively. It is not like the conceptual thinking that we have done all our lives up to this point. For one, there is not self-consciousness.

Anyway, if I have your attention, when this first realization happens, which is called “Recognition” of the mind’s true nature, it changes us or marks a point when we are changing that is, as mentioned, a form of or the beginning of realization. We begin to realize, but not conceptually like we are used to, but rather, intuitively. That’s what realization is, non-dual, non-conceptual intuiting. Self-consciousness can’t go there, but we can be there nevertheless.

The beauty of all this is that while we cannot know more (go beyond the limits) than “what is” (like mentally get our arms around it as we are used to doing conceptually), we CAN know all of what “Is” (including the limits) through just being it. This, indeed, is a key concept, not just for realization, but for life in general.

In summary, in order to embrace reality up to and including its limits, we have to stop watching and instead just go and be the whole thing. There is a technique to achieve this, but ultimately also a choice, as Shakespeare's Hamlet said, "To Be, or not to Be."

“SEEING” THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

March 28, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I guess my love affair with great camera lenses started in 1956, when my dad loaned me his Kodak Retina 2a to go on a summer-long trip with a bunch of kids my age. And it has kind of continued ever since then, although for many years it was only just limping along. Then, about ten years ago, it got a real shot in the arm when, without realizing it, I managed to mix my dharma practice with photography, quite by accident.

I have described that particular dharma event probably too many times already, so here I want to at least touch upon the aftereffects of that spiritual experience, not only on my photography, but on my camera gear and particularly my interest in fine lenses. I usually reserve my photography comments for photo forums, where I am quite active, but sending a little of this information this way can't hurt.

Putting film cameras I have had aside, and looking at just the digital, I have had Nikon Coolpix cameras early-on, but my first DSLR (2001) was the Nikon D1x, followed by a string of Nikon digital cameras like the D100, D200, D300, D700, D3x, D7000, D7100, D800E, and today I use the D810. I have also played with other brands and models like the medium-format Mamiya RZ67, the Sony A7R, A7s, A7Rii, Sigma Merrill, the Pentax K3 and K1, the Fuji GFX, and

currently with the Hasselblad X1D 50c. And there were also some technical cameras, like the Rollei X-Act 2, Novoflex BALPRO T/S, Cambo Actus, and others. That's roughly it for cameras. However, for me, cameras only exist for lenses. Lenses are my main thing.

As it happened, metaphorically speaking, lightning struck some ten years ago when, to my surprise, I managed to mix my dharma mind-training with my photography during what was for me a very rough time in my life. It just happened. And I was completely into it before I even realized what took place.

One result of all of this was an extreme sensitization when it comes to lenses. It was a natural evolution that involved mixing Insight Meditation with photography and, once again, for a while I didn't know quite what was taking place. On the equipment side, I would take my questions to various lens experts on some of the Internet photography forums, only to have them never quite understand me, and even put me down. I had to figure it out myself.

What I was discovering was that my quest for ever sharper lenses led me to better understand what "sharpness" really was. It has no standard definition, but is said to be a combination of sheer resolution and acutance. And photographers like to throw in the term "micro-contrast" to distinguish lenses, another term without any strict definition. I won't bother to explain all of the above terms, but you can look them up on the Internet if you wish.

What I was trying explain to photographers is that, in my experience, lens sharpness ultimately depends on

how highly corrected a lens is as regards various things like spherical and chromatic aberration. Those various aberrations caused any “sharpness” to be degraded by color-fringing, etc. in, to me, an obvious way. I won’t bother with the story of how I rammed my head against a wall trying to get some skilled photographers to acknowledge my point.

The net result of all of my photo work was to gravitate toward lenses that were ever more highly corrected. These are called apochromatic (or just “APO”) lenses. Sure enough, remove the various aberrations and distortions in a lens and you have what I call “sharp.”

Even legendary lenses like the Zeiss 100mm f/2 Makro-Planar lens, which is revered for its sharpness, is not well-enough corrected. Yes, it “sharp,” but it also has enough chromatic aberration to make it mostly useless for my work. In other words, I had that lens, but never used it. I would try, but was turned away every time by the ugly green and purple fringing that appeared as “halos” around the border areas where differences were contrasted. How come everyone did not see this as I did? That is how I was thinking.

After a long while, I finally found some kindred souls, skilled photographers, who saw the ugly fringing as I did and who also stayed away from lenses that were not well-enough corrected. Trying to find a camera on which to mount these highly-corrected APO lenses has not been an easy task. I personally like Nikon and find the Nikon D810 DSLR the finest camera I have ever used, mainly because of its base ISO of 64 and a somewhat usable LiveView screen. I never use the optical viewfinder.

I have made several forays into the Medium Format world, the type of camera used by most fashion and landscape photographers, but I have become even more familiar with Large-Format lenses and what are called technical cameras, cameras that use a bellows and a focus rail. As of today, I am currently exploring the new Hasselblad X1D medium-format mirrorless camera to see if its lenses are “fine enough” for my eye. They might be.

The propellant that drives all this photography interest is dharma rather than any pure photographic interest. It was a surprise to me that fate chose to confer some little dharma realization on me, not on the cushion like I always expected, but out in meadows at dawn, crawling on my belly in the wet grass, and carrying my camera, lens, and tripod. I was trying to photograph tiny critters, focusing with extreme interest and loving it, when, whoosh, I fell down the rabbit-hole.

What is called “Insight Meditation” came together for me through photography and it took me some years to disentangle any realization I had from the process of photography. I am kind of permanently bonded to that process. And, although I continue to expand and extend my realization as best I can to other areas of life, photography remains my touchstone when it comes to realization, my first love, so to speak. When I look through a fine camera lens I am not just looking at the subject, but also resting in the seeing itself.

MAHAMUDRA: THE GREAT GESTURE

March 29, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Mahamudra Meditation is the pinnacle of meditation practices in the Tibetan Buddhist Kagyu tradition, and I understand that Dzog-Chen and Maha-Ati are similar practices (in terms of results) in other traditions. If you look up Mahamudra on the Internet, you will get translations/definitions like “Great Seal” or “Great Symbol,” perhaps better called the “Great Mudra,” meaning something like the “Ultimate Gesture.” The great seal of the mind is stamped on all appearances. In fact, all appearances are sealed by the actual nature of the mind.

Grasping the nature of the mind is essential for a practitioner of the dharma, if only as our ante-in to a successful practice. How do we use the mind to look at the mind? And what kind of reach is required to achieve that? There is no place beyond the mind where we can stand and look at the mind, so we will never get our arms around it. We can't know what is not there -- what is beyond what “Is” -- but we can know what there is, and exactly. That fact opens up the door to liberation, IMO.

To repeat, we can't get beyond what “Is” in order to see what is, yet we can “know” what is. I don't know what your idea of “know” is, but here it is not meant to know intellectually, but more in the biblical sense, but not sexual. We can't know the mind fully through

concepts or by using the intellect. As mentioned, we can't reach outside or beyond the limits of the mind in order to better grasp it. There is no purchase or as they say any "there" there.

The best we can do (and this is enough) is know the mind through realizing it. Just as we can't drive a car without being in it, so we can't know or realize the mind without fully being it and that takes all 100% of us, with nothing left to serve as an overseer. It is a journey, not a state, a question of "To Be or Not to Be". In other words, just as we cannot see ourselves, yet we can be ourselves 100%. And we can very much realize ourselves as reflected in the mirror of the dharma, the Great Seal of Mahamudra. So, we can "Know" through realizing the nature of our mind.

EATING TO LIVE

March 30, 2017

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Cold day, with hail-like rain before dawn as I made my way to the indoor track of the local university at 6 o'clock in the morning, which allows seniors (for a dollar) to walk there from 6 to 11 a.m. I walk each weekday. Lately my brother Phil meets me there and we two brothers walk together for a couple of miles. Then, later in the day, if the weather is decent, Margaret and I walk what we call the "Four Elements" (Fire, Water, Air and Earth), being four steep hills in a local cemetery that we climb together. That's another almost two miles.

This is my physical regime, if some health problem or another doesn't intervene and prevent it. Food is (and has been) another major factor each day. Since my various heart and other problems, my diet first turned vegan on me, and then moved into the passing lane and went right past what vegans eat. Lately, it has been getting still tighter, what I am allowed to eat. It's less and less, but still more than enough. It's like the parable of the loaves and the fishes.

Early on I grumbled about the food, but I am well beyond that by now. It doesn't help and, anyway, who's listening? It's alright because believe it or not, it's good for me and for my health. Who would have guessed it?

I am not a dummy, except about things like being too smart for my own good, which isn't even being smart at all. And, I know that there is a big difference between being smart and being intelligent. For instance, a wound smarts. You get the idea.

No matter how restricted my diet gets, I figure out some way to get around it and, before I know it, I'm back to eating too much food, with too much oil, and just too much "too much." I'm like a rat in a maze that has only one way out, and you can bet that is the end of "Too Much" food. All other exits are, well, exits from this world. So, you have to have a sense of humor to grow older. I'm doing my best.

And to add just a little irony to the mix, at every turn I find myself turning back toward my training in Macrobiotics, which most folks know nothing about or worse, think it's like eating only brown rice. Actually, it is about balancing what foods you eat, thus eating for life, eating to live. Novel idea!

And, as I have mentioned here before, back in 1969 I designed the company logo for Eden Foods, the last reasonably-sized organic food company that is not owned by the conglomerates. Back then, I was also asked (as an astrologer) to pick the date for Eden Foods to open, which I did. They are still growing strong.

So, old smarty pants here has run out of tricks to avoid healthy eating, and finally (albeit slowly) I'm turning toward what brings health instead of away from it. Finally, it is not only the easiest way, it's the only way that's livable. OK, given that, I will perhaps take it. It reminds me of this old (but true) story that I

tell from the years when I made a living doing astrology readings.

A local prostitute came for a reading. She went on and on about how horrible it was to be a prostitute. When, after a long time of listening to all this, I suggested that she get some other work. Her response was, “Oh no, I could never make this kind of money doing anything else. Period. End of story.

Well, I thought about it for a bit and finally said to her, “Well, if you are serious about never giving it up, you might as well quit complaining and put your heart into your work.” I feel the same way about food. I am tired of outwitting my own good health, in order to have one more fling at food. You know, one more plate that is too big, too much, too rich, and too bloat.

I feel I am finally cornered myself and am going to sit down and have a “Come to Jesus” talk with myself about just eating what makes good sense. Imagine that!

[The logo I designed for Eden Foods back in 1969 and the original poster I created and silkscreened for them.]

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